Demystifying Social Media

A "social media presence" seems like a hacky thing, alternately for the flashy, hip set or for younger generations we don't understand. It can be off-putting, like the term "networking" is to so many. When we recoil from these phrases, we feel concerns about being our authentic selves, about navigating social spaces, and about the moral ambiguity of putting ourselves out there in the hopes of recognition. Foundationally, though, social media participation and networking are each ways of building community. Cast in this more positive light, we can reflect on what communities and relationships do, how they work, and how online venues like Twitter can extend community-building work we are already doing through other means.

This guide uses sociological research to explore what we might want or expect from participating in social media and outlines some basics about constructing a social media post.

Why build an online community?

Social networks provide personal and professional support

We all need people to encourage us, get nerdy with us, and empathize or organize when we face barriers. It might be hard to find these people in our existing communities. Online networks can help! Whether face-to-face or online, sharing specialized information helps us develop close-knit social networks [1] that can provide the support we need. And they don't need to be online-only; you can meet up at the next conference.

Social networks let you listen to conversations in your community

People in your communities are passing around new ideas and opportunities. Some information is broadcast widely, and sometimes information only passes person-to-person. On social media, you might hear different conversations or find information your other networks aren't passing to you.

Social networks let you contribute so others can hear you

When you have something to say, you need to to find people who will listen to you. You don't need the attention of a key influencer. You need a broad group that is ready to be convinced and who will amplify your message [2, 3]. The best way to be heard is through communication directed to people you think could use your new idea [4]. If this group is broader than people you already know, then you need friends, and friends of friends, to share your ideas and break you out of your circle [5, 6, 7]. Online networks work well for sharing widely and letting people you know bring your ideas to the attention of people you don't know.

What works well online?

Social media is a venue to work on both **public scholarship** - communicating and collaborating with public stakeholders about your scholarship - and **scholarship in public** - doing your work where it is visible and accessible to the public [8]. In both cases, you are trying to communicate and contribute to a community. What works well will depend on 1) what you are interested in sharing, 2) who your online audience is, and 3) what the online social environment is like [9]. Try thinking through these questions:

➢ **What about your idea makes it a good fit for sharing on social media?**
    Have you made something others can use? Can you summarize your idea in a few phrases or an image?

➢ **What about the online audience makes them a good audience for your idea?**
    Who are you trying to connect to, and are they already participating in the online community? Is it easier to reach them online than via other means?

➢ **What about the social environment of social media makes it a good place to share your idea?**
    Do you want others to be sharing and spreading your idea? Are you okay with sharing in a publicly visible space? Do you want to start an online conversation that others can jump into?

Mechanics of a Tweet

A social media post is a type of communication that includes both technical and text aspects. The main components are: the main body text, non-text attachments, links, mentions or tags, and hashtags. For simplicity, the following explanations focus on Twitter, but these are generally applicable on other platforms as well.

Main text

The main body text of a tweet is a place for you to share text content. On Twitter, this is where there is a 280 character limit, including spaces and punctuation. You can also repost (retweet) someone else's tweet, with or without adding your own text.

Non-text attachments

Attachments can be many things. They are useful for including an image of text that is longer than can fit in a tweet (like an abstract), or a cool figure from your research, or a GIF, or a selfie with your new friends at a conference. Don't forget a description of your media, to help your content be accessible to all users.

Links

Links are added into the main text of your tweet. They count toward your character limit, but they will get shortened behind the scenes if they are too long. Links can send readers to content elsewhere, whether yours or someone else's.

Mentions

Mentions use "@" to identify other users and mention them in the text of a tweet. You may want to pull another user into a conversation, so they can see or respond, or perhaps you want to spotlight someone else for your community.

Hashtags

Hashtags are part taste and part function. Hashtags can be clicked by users, which pulls up other content that uses the same hashtag. In your tweet, do you want people to click on the hashtag or not? If you want people to click, then you are using it for function, to link to other content. If you aren't interested in people clicking the hashtag, then you are using it for style and expressing your personality. Functionally, hashtags as links are ways for you to call out to other discussions or to organize your own content. Someone might use #HigherEd or #AcademicTwitter to join in to conversations on these topics and flag their tweets to followers of these hashtags. Used this way, hashtags are like keywords that give a clue to readers about what your audience is for a post. Someone else might want to connect all their tweets about a specific project or theme, like using #nsfRED. Using the same one on multiple occasions creates a timeline for other readers.

References

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