

The Use of Social Media to Enhance Academic Careers | 1

In June 2019, I had the opportunity to attend a conference, “Writing, Publishing, and Social Media for Healthcare Professionals,” sponsored by Harvard Medical School and the Massachusetts Psychological Association. The conference was interesting and educational. The most enlightening aspect was information presented on the use of social media to enhance health professionals’ careers. I like to think of myself as a moderately technologically savvy person; however, when it comes to social media, I am a digital baby, a dedicated Facebook stalker, who rarely posts any information. Nevertheless, the topic captured my attention because I recognized the enormous impact of social media in dissemination of scholarship, collaboration and networking.

Why Social Media?

Social media allows impact and visibility through exposure to a large audience, control of your message and a stage to advocate for your prospective. As a Department Chair, I am often in the position of mentoring and guiding faculty who are seeking promotion and tenure at various points in their careers. The achievement of promotion and tenure usually involves the demonstration of excellence and impact in the areas of teaching, service and scholarship. Traditionally, scholarly activities for promotion involve the production of high-quality scholarship and sharing the work via dissemination in peer-reviewed journals and presentations at national meetings. These activities eventually result in opportunities for national recognition and the development of a reputation for high-quality, impactful work in a particular area. Although faculty still need to follow this road map, the message from the conference was clear: In today’s world the traditional path alone is not sufficient.

Elsevier, a major participant in publishing and information analytics, reports that “more than 2.5 million scientific articles are published each year,” and “it has never been more important to ensure that your article stands out.”¹ Faculty interested in promotion and tenure need to take control to ensure their message gets out in a timely manner to an appropriate audience. Social media allows for the design, distribution and collaboration of material that can be measured.²

Social media includes social networking sites, which are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.”³ Social networking can be earned (“exposure obtained by earning your way onto another’s platform”), rented (“a presence or content you control but lives on someone’s else’s platform”) or owned (“any channel where you fully own the connection to your audience”).⁴ Owned media include your website, blog and e-mail list, assuming they live in a domain that you own. Owned media provides an opportunity to develop your own audience. Rented media includes Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram etc. These sites provide opportunities to collaborate, network and post your latest accomplishments, which can include research findings, articles, images, videos and audio recordings. Earned media such as an interview on a podcast gives you instant access to an existing audience. However, the downside is that you need to be invited. Academic careers are impacted when faculty understand and utilize all three types of networks.⁴ According to Elsevier, “every day scholarly articles receive thousands of new mentions across social media, news and blogs.”¹

Where to Start

Social media presents opportunities as well as challenges for academicians. It can seem overwhelming to learn and navigate as well as time-consuming to maintain. That said, many institutions have dedicated staff to help faculty efficiently and effectively use social media. Elsevier has provided extensive information on what you can do to get your article the attention it deserves.¹ Embracing social media as a means of career enhancement may seem foreign and disruptive to many. Using more traditional methods of building a career may initially seem more comfortable. However, faculty and mentors need to be open-minded and aware of the current landscape. Opportunities that arise from social media use may take years to achieve by more traditional means. It is a disservice to the faculty members we mentor to not explore all avenues that may be beneficial to their careers.

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