

Engaging with the new media—“How do I get retweeted by Obama?”

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On 16 May 2013, a University of Western Australia PhD student/University of Queensland research fellow, John Cook, tweeted reference to a project final report: “The overwhelming #consensus among scientists is rapid #climatechange is happening & man is the cause #TCPsks.to/tcpaper.” The project report was accompanied by a YouTube summary. The Twitter post was immediately retweeted by, amongst others, Barack Obama who on that day had 31,541,507 followers. The requests for interviews by US media outlets quickly followed.

High bandwidth and the virtual universality of internet access have spawned a media revolution. In addition to a proliferation of digital radio and television channels, the explosion of social media presents particular challenges for any organization wishing to develop a holistic strategy for engaging with ‘the media.’ As graduate education leaders, we ask ourselves, “Should I write a blog, get a Twitter feed and build a following, set up a Facebook page and amass ‘likes’ and ‘friends,’ get a LinkedIn account and ‘connect,’ produce and publish YouTube videos or even set up a ‘channel,’ etc.?” It is tempting to plunge into each new medium, concerned to stay ahead of the wave lest failing to do so will mean failing to reach audiences and losing an edge to the competition. But what is the most effective way to share our messages with the public?

There are two essential elements to developing a strategy for engagement with the media. The first is to develop a good understanding of the messages that you wish to communicate and the intended recipients of those messages. The second is to develop an understanding of the nature of the media available for the transmission of messages, to recognize their effect on the message, and to accommodate.

Naturally there are many messages we may wish to send, but there are some we can probably all agree on. Much of our communication strategy is concerned with conveying the value proposition of graduate education. Our message is that graduate education is both a good private and a good public investment. Graduate education produces educated people who ask questions and have the skills to go about finding answers. More than this, the research conducted by graduate students, even while in graduate school, drives innovation in every field of endeavor. The wider message is to promote the value of the research conducted in universities, and the structures that support it.

Who are the intended recipients of this set of messages? Increasingly, the intended receiver is the investing public—those who through their taxes, fees or endowments contribute to the funding of universities and/or who through their votes continue to promote higher education and publicly funded research as a community responsibility. We may also want to reach those who in the future will employ our graduate students and those who will themselves choose to become graduate students.

Perhaps the most effective communication of these messages occurs where a connection is successfully made between the research done by graduate students and the public’s concerns. The best messages are those that appeal to the public imagination and/or seek to answer questions of current interest. Those from the UK and Australia will recognize the ‘research impact/knowledge exchange’ agenda here.

Traditionally, the transmission of messages about the value of research to a wider public audience is initiated via a press release. Professional journalists then take this as a basis for an article to appear in a magazine or journal. Follow-up interviews initiated by a journalist may result in print, radio or TV pieces. It is assumed/expected that a large proportion of the target audience is tuned in and will get the message. The initial message is managed for the medium and for the intended audience, and control is generally in the hands of the journalist and editors. However, the current proliferation in available channels and the ability of the potential audience to select and individually tailor their own news feeds seriously challenges this model. Social media in particular allow for the unconstrained editing, reception, reconfiguring and retransmission of any message; indeed, it may rely on this for its success. The university official research press release is not dead, but it is limited to a frame that assumes a controlled and orderly presentation of the message.

Harnessing the power of social media, while at the same time providing some insurance against its ability to transform the message, requires a dual strategy. The first is to empower a larger number of ‘transmitters’—the goal is to encourage all researchers in the academy to take some individual responsibility for ‘socializing’ their research, to become their own press agents. The second is to provide a reliable and accessible source of an authorized version of the message.

Be your own press agent—the Three Minute Thesis™ Competition (3MT)

The Three Minute Thesis™ (3MT) competition was developed at the University of Queensland in 2008, and in 2011 was extended to a trans-national competition (Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji) (Skrbis, 2012). PhD students are given just three minutes and allowed one slide (no animation, no props) to present their research project. The constraints provide a good framework for training particular skills very useful to engaging with the general media. These include the ability to produce a clear and concise summary of a research program and its results and to present this to a general audience in a way that captures their attention and interest. 3MT competitors are regularly interviewed on radio, and some have taken their presentations further. Two Australian 3MT contestants have gone on to win the PhD Comics 2 Minute Thesis competition. For example, Sarah Ciesielski’s (University of Melbourne) 3MT presentation (Sept. 2012) is available on YouTube (1,635 views) alongside the animated PhD Comics version (60,343 views) (The University of Melbourne, 2012). Sarah’s presentation is linked on the official Melbourne School of Graduate Research Facebook page (927 likes) and she presents a promotional video on the University of Melbourne official YouTube channel (817 views).

A Reliable Source—The Conversation (theconversation.com)

The Conversation is an online news journal founded in March 2011 with the financial support of four Australian universities and the Commonwealth Scientific Research Organisation. It provides an open access platform for academic staff and graduate students to publish articles of general and topical interest. Editors work with the academic authors, who retain control of the article, to produce pieces describing research or providing expert opinion on issues of the day. The Conversation attracts over 500,000 unique views per month. For example, The University of Western Australia (UWA) has 116 published authors; the most widely read UWA article has 41,500 views, has elicited 152 comments on the site, has been ‘tweeted’ 33 times and liked on Facebook 38 times. The most widely read UWA PhD student author has 14,000 article views (and is ranked 14th of all UWA authors).

What new communication skills are required for the new media? The skills are not new skills, but perhaps we can do a better job in developing them. The skills required to deliver crisp, clean and catchy summary statements, as Twitter feeds or three-minute YouTube videos are little different from the skills required in writing titles for papers, abstracts and project summaries (e.g., on grant applications) or pitching a research project in front of a conference poster. The added skills lie in understanding the new media and adapting messages to the new formats. In this domain, our graduate students may be our best teachers.

References

Skrbis, Z. (2012, October 11). A thesis in three minutes: Making research accessible. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <http://theconversation.com/a-thesis-in-three-minutes-making-research-accessible-10080>

The University of Melbourne. (2012, September). 3MT Sara Ciesielski Learning to be sherpa: Children, language and culture on the roof of the world [Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXsYJRbXrj0#024>