ACADEMIC SUPPORT TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION
WITH PLYMOUTH UNIVERSITY

#03 Communicating about your research online

Typically you will be offered a number of opportunities for communicating about your research online. In fact you may experience these as demands or requirements rather than opportunities! Examples are the blogs/web sites of your research funders (if any), your wider research project or team, and your department or centre. Take these opportunities – they are great practice for communicating about your research to a wider audience.

Tips for communicating online

- Consider your audience: other researchers will want detailed explanations and links to your evidence, while public stakeholders will need key points and a chance to visualise what your research means to them.
- Include different media: long pages of scrolling text are not appropriate online. Consider what a video, image or voiceover could add (see our briefing paper on using multimedia resources), or a data visualisation (see our briefing paper on data visualisation).
- Include links: exploit this unique benefit of online communication by linking to more detailed reports, references and data (leaving your text uncluttered), and to other research that you think is relevant. People you link to are more likely to link to you, especially if you notify them that you have linked to them and why.
- Use colour: you may be constrained in your visual design if you are using an institutional or other proprietary platform, but do make colour work for you. Consider using colour for bullet points, headings, and graphics, either matching the style of the whole site or giving your research a clear colour branding within it.
- Use keywords/tags: these help users to find the material they want, especially on large sites, and also allow search engines to index and bring users to the site.
- Cross-link: publicise new posts using twitter and email, and cross-link your online locations (including social/professional networks) to save effort updating and to bring more users to your latest work.
- Make time for updates: update your blog/website whenever you have an important new finding, reach a milestone, speak in public, produce a report, have a new idea, or you have an interesting conversation (see below). Key highlights with a link for more details.
- Set up public conversations: any time an interesting conversation emerges with another researcher, make sure you both post your sides of the discussion and comment on one another's posts. It makes for more interesting reading than one-sided opinion pieces and encourages others to comment.

Creating and maintaining your own site

When it comes to authoring your own website/blog/wiki the options are to host it on your own server, use a platform offered by your university, or use a public hosting service. Assuming you do not have the time and expertise to consider the first option, using the university's platform offers you the credibility and authority of the institutional brand, a clear 'home' and context for your research, some technical support (usually), and advanced functionality within the chosen product (sometimes). There may be reasons of data ownership and security which make the university's home platform desirable or unavoidable (see below). Using a third-party platform offers independence, greater choice of product, more control (you don't have to work through another person to set up and maintain your site) and portability (you can take it with you). Finally, you need to consider how much filespace you will have available and whether the host platform can, for example, host large video or data files, detect and support mobile devices, or serve streaming media.

Other Issues to consider are:

Data security and ownership

Using a third-party platform to host research data can – theoretically – raise issues over who owns the data. This is an additional consideration when deciding whether your research web site/blog should be hosted by the university or a third party platform.

Data protection

Collecting data from individuals as part of your research will require ethical clearance from the appropriate ethics committee. Ask your research supervisor about this process. If you want to make public data you have collected from individuals – such as video, audio and photographs – you must ask them to sign a specific consent for this at the same time as they consent to this data being held and used for research. Note that consent to make public is separate, though it can be requested on the same form. You must keep all consent data alongside the data itself and you should have a take-down policy if anyone objects to their data being used at a later time.

Large media files

If you are planning to host and serve large media files e.g. video you will need a specialist service to do this, again either hosted (talk to your university's Information Services department about this) or public, in which case you may want to consider uploading these files to a specialist service and linking to them.

Web design and authoring tools

Three popular open source systems for creating and managing web content are Wordpress, Drupal and Joomla! Adobe's Dreamweaver product, though not free and now somewhat old-fashioned, remains a good choice for people with graphic design skills who are not interested in coding or hands-on content management.

Blog authoring platforms/software

Blog, from the term weblog, = a website in the form of an online journal, often including reflections, opinions, and personal material. Readers can comment on posts and entries typically appear in reverse chronological order. Typical tools are:

> Blogger
> Tumblr
> Typepad
> WordPress

Wiki authoring platforms/software

A wiki is a series of linked, collaboratively authored web pages, typically providing authoritative information. If you are simply contributing to an existing wiki you will simply use these authoring tools when you log in to the wiki. However, if you are hosting your own wiki then you will need to consider issues such as cost and ease of maintenance.

> Confluence – user friendly and feature rich but not free to install and host
> PBworks/PBwiki – free for small-scale users and widely used for educational wikis
> Tikiwiki – originally for building wikis but now includes content management

There are also public wikis in many subject areas – Wikipedia is the largest and most general example – where you could consider authoring a section on your research. The advantage is that your research gets a wider audience than it would on a separate wiki, and you are contributing to the ideal of open public knowledge. However, your research team may prefer to maintain clear ownership of your ideas and results.

Additional information

As a researcher you should be aware of your responsibilities with respect to, amongst other things, IPR, research ethics, information security, data protection and mobile computing. If you need advice please see the Plymouth University *Research Degrees Handbook* and ask your research supervisor for guidance.

Further resources

See our briefing paper PLYM 02 Digital Profile

Useful tips from Writer Unboxed (general) on writing for an online audience

Resources on blogging for researchers, collated on Bundlr

Guide from the LSE on using Twitter in academic research and teaching

Vitae/Open University Handbook of Social Media for Researchers