

Research impact is primarily measured by publication in high-ranking journals, the majority of which are in English. This narrow measurement focusing on scientific journals, together with exclusionary language policies, impedes knowledge sharing and raises the question: Do the dominant scholarly communication systems serve the public good?

As important as it is to publish in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals, impactful research should equally be measured by assessing the extent to which researchers connect with or share their knowledge with the public they serve. After all, through taxes, the public's money contributes to funding research conducted at our universities. Therefore, researchers have a public duty to inform, share and foster better understanding of the challenges facing societies.

Recent public health crises have brought into sharp focus the importance of making accurate and timely communication available in a way that is accessible and easy to understand. In 2018, the South African government clambered to respond to public concerns following the listeriosis outbreak. More recently, governments across the world are scrambling to contain the spread of misinformation, as fear and panic set in following the Covid-19 outbreak.

This latest global public health crisis should encourage us all - especially those within the research community - to pause and reflect on the role of researchers in making their work more accessible to the public.

Social media presents one way to do so.

In an increasingly digital world, social media plays a meaningful role in higher education every day. The breakneck diffusion of information made possible by rapid technological advancements means that news can reach more people in record time. Similarly, through digital platforms research can be made accessible to assist governments and communities to better understand the crises they face.

At the same time, the speed with which news is shared and consumed means that misinformation can equally be spread with similar ease. Yet by viewing social media as part of their research dissemination mandate researchers can help combat the spread of misinformation.

Importantly, as vehicles for communication, social media platforms offer useful tools for presenting research in attractive ways to the public - and policy-makers - by packaging it creatively and using language that is simple and easy to understand. Used effectively, social media platforms can help researchers share their knowledge more widely and help promote understanding of science by putting research into the public domain. These platforms can also encourage interaction between researchers and the communities they serve by disrupting the one-directional process of educating the public, and encourage a more dialogue-based engagement.

Beyond the need to inform the public about research outcomes, the scale and complexity of the problems we face today demand that we integrate technical (scientific) knowledge with local knowledge. This requires developing better links between the scientific community and the public. So the immediacy and interactive nature of social media can contribute to strengthening the integration and interaction between scientists and the general public.

As the University of the Western Cape celebrates 60 years of bringing to light the struggle against discrimination to help build an equitable society, it remains our duty to champion the right to knowledge by promoting the dissemination of research for the public good.

How social media can tell the world about university research

Journals are the usual way to get academic research known. But social media connects more effectively with the general public



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