

Stop Fixating on the Size of Your Audience

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So many of our conversations about social media revolve around statistics: two billion Facebook users, 1.5 billion YouTube users, 800 million Instagram users. On a single day we produce 525 million tweets, upload 54 million photos, and watch five billion videos. It is the size of those audiences and the scale of the activity that prove so enticing to academics keen to descend from the ivory tower.

Those of us enthusiastic about social media make this argument a lot: If you're trying to get your research "out there," social media is something you cannot avoid or dispute. These free, accessible tools hold out the promise of liberating research from the confines of the journal system, with its highly restricted audience. For all the potential downsides, there is growing acceptance within academe that Twitter, Facebook, and the like are important tools for ensuring the public relevance of scholarship.

Yet we need to tread carefully here. A preoccupation with the immense size and reach of these platforms risks distracting us from the more mundane — yet more meaningful — ways we can use social media to build small but solid relationships with the nonacademic world. It is those relationships that will ensure our research makes a difference beyond the ivory tower.

Trouble is, many scholars seem to think the huge scale of social media means they are talking to a vast undifferentiated public whenever they post anything. In reality, most of the time we are connecting with only the tiniest subset of potential readers. It might be flattering to have

hundreds, or even thousands, of people be dimly familiar with your work. However, it is the deep relationships — by necessity with small numbers of people — that will allow your research to make an impact.

Clearly it's difficult to be heard above all the noise on social media. Facebook tells you how many people saw your recent post, and holds out the promise that more would see it if only you would pay to have its readership "boosted." Likewise on Twitter, since the introduction of its analytics dashboard, you can see the same sort of data, showing that only a slice of your followers will see any one tweet, though, again, you can pay Twitter to ensure its visibility.

It can be dispiriting to dwell on the reality of how limited our impact actually is on social media. But that realization helps move us away from the false sense that these platforms make our words accessible to many millions of people. What matters much more than publishing something is its discovery. As the internet theorist Ethan Zuckerman has put it, "the ability to publish without the ability to be discovered is an empty promise."

Once we recognize that a tiny minority of users will discover our social-media posts — with even fewer actually engaging with them — it's easier to focus both on the audience we do have (Who are they? What do we know about them? Why are they interested in our work?) and the one we would *like* to have (Who are they? And how can we use social media to build relationships with them?).

Answering those questions involves framing social media in a much more strategic way than simply seizing on it as something academics must do in order to get our research "out there."

One of the things that I, as a sociologist, find most interesting about social media is how our experiences of it are saturated by numbers. We constantly encounter measures of our popularity, responses to our activity, and representations of our wider networks. We can easily feel overwhelmed by the data. It promises so much, implicitly framing our online activity as something that can be optimized in order to ensure we are using our time effectively. But what do the numbers really mean? And what are they actually telling us to do?

The obvious temptation is to seek to increase our followers and get more engagement with our content — locking us into a potentially endless upward drive toward social-media celebrity. In other words: It is extremely easy to take these numbers far too seriously.

The temptation to do that, many would argue, is deliberately built into the platforms themselves. The media scholar José van Dijck describes it as the "popularity principle" — in which our worth is reduced to our online popularity, as measured by the fairly crude metrics of follower counts. Popularity tends to be self-reinforcing on platforms built around that principle because, as Van Dijck puts it, "the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and hence want to connect with you."

No doubt some readers are scoffing at this point, imagining themselves to be above such trivial concerns. But are you?

Think about what happens when you decide whether or not to follow people you stumble

across online. Have you ever become interested in someone simply from the briefest look at their Facebook or Twitter profile? Judgments of the person's online popularity probably played a role in your reaction.

Conversely, there might have been occasions on which certain Twitter feeds seemed subtly unimpressive in some immediate yet inarticulate way. Take another look and consider why that might be. Were those seemingly dull feeds following many more people than were following them? Had they tweeted thousands of times without accruing many followers?

Social-media environments are busy and distracting, particularly on a microblogging platform like Twitter, often leaving us falling back on unconscious cues rather than considered judgments of worth. We can claim to resist the siren song of online popularity, but few regular users are entirely immune to it.

What is true of people on social media is even more true of ideas. The visibility of ideas expressed online depends on the reactions they provoke. Unfortunately, the architecture of social-media platforms doesn't differentiate between ideas that are circulating because of their intellectual merit and those circulating because they appeal on a baser level.

Scholarly ideas often exist slightly uneasily within that environment. There are many examples of social media being used to great effect by individual scholars and by scholarly organizations, but the pursuit of visibility as an end in itself is in tension with a commitment to scholarly virtues like evidence, nuance, and objectivity.

If we take measures of our online popularity too seriously, we will confront ever more temptations to step back from academic ideals — stripping away caveats or expressing ourselves more polemically in pursuit of a bigger and bigger audience. It might be valuable to do that in some cases, particularly if it helps our ideas reach audiences that would otherwise be inaccessible to us.

However, social media carries risks for scholarship, and many of them hinge upon these popularity metrics. It might be impressive to have a lot of followers on Twitter, but what matters for research impact is who those people are and how engaged they are with what you are doing.

That entails getting to know people and building relationships, as opposed to simply using social media to throw our research out into the world in a scatter-gun way in the hope that someone somewhere will somehow put it to productive use — an approach that I have come to think of as the "impact catapult." It assumes we are locked up "in here," within the ivory tower, producing valuable knowledge that would make a difference to the world if only we could get it to the people "out there," in the real world, who need it.

That's been a longstanding problem for academics. Social media seemed to offer a solution, allowing us to fling our research out into wider society where grateful citizens could eagerly put it to use. But if we are focused only on slinging it out there and boosting our numbers, it becomes very easy to ignore more important questions, like:

- Who, exactly, do we think is interested in our work?
- And why, exactly, do we think they would find it useful? Glossing over those questions poses some practical problems for scholars. It's nice to assume that there's a potential audience, waiting for research like ours without realizing what they're missing. In truth, not only might people *not* be interested in what we're doing, they might be actively hostile to it. What to us can seem obviously well-meaning, intended to ameliorate social problems, to others might seem intrusive, unethical, or wrong. Alternatively, it might just seem boring or pointless.

As the sociologist Jamie Woodcock observed: "Researchers often attribute a level of importance to their own research that is not shared by others, assuming that because they spend so much time on it others will want to know all about it, too."

It isn't the easiest thing to ponder but being honest, at an early stage, about the limits of the audience for your work can save you from being blindsided when you attempt to engage with people online and are met by a muted, or even negative, response. Furthermore it helps ensure you are using your time effectively — seeking the proper audience to have the most impact — rather than wasting time talking to the wrong people about your research that could be better spent conducting it.

Figuring out your audience might sound like an onerous undertaking, involving substantial market research. However, you already have the means if you are connected via social media.

Skeptics have been known to query why anyone would want to know what other people had for breakfast in the morning. Yet it's precisely that level of ephemera that can facilitate what the blogger Leisa Reichelt calls ambient intimacy: What might seem trivial to an outsider can, in fact, be a means to "get to know people who would otherwise be just acquaintances."

Reichelt's point is a much broader one but, for a scholar, this feature of social media can be a powerful tool within your public-engagement strategy — at least if you leverage it correctly. It illustrates how engagement doesn't have to be a time-consuming interaction. It is possible to learn a great deal about your current and potential audience through the low-key insights that social-media connections give rise to. Here are some prompts to get you started:

- The who: Who are your potential followers and readers? What do you know about them? How can you learn more? What can you learn *from* them? Who are the key gatekeepers?
- The how: What social-media platforms do those people use online? What sorts of interactions and connections are possible on those platforms? Can you use a similar approach to reach all of those followers? Or do you need targeted appeals?
- The why: What can you help them understand? What problems can you help them solve? Would participating in your project matter, or be useful, to them?
- The what: How much familiarity do you have with various platforms? How much time do you have each week for social media? What existing connections do you have to the people you hope to reach? What existing activity or content can you repurpose to

connect with more followers?

Trying to reach people who might be interested in your work can be a full-time job in and of itself. So be realistic about how much time and energy you're willing to devote to the task.

The real gains often come when social media supports and supplements relationships that began offline — for example, at an academic conference. Communicating informally on Twitter or Facebook can build trust and understanding that consolidates those relationships, even if they are few in number. Those are the people who act on your research, as well as interact with you as a scholar.

These platforms are interesting, exciting, and powerful, but they're not a panacea for public engagement. If we fall into the trap of thinking they are, we're likely to miss out on the subtle benefits they can bring as we strive to make a difference with our research.