

doi: 10.1111/1753-6405.12656

Changing the knowledge translation landscape through blogging

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Using evidence to inform decisions is universally acknowledged as essential for good policymaking, while at the same time it is recognised as far from perfect.¹⁻⁴ Consequently, the process of translating research into policy, including the efficient and effective communication of research to policymakers, is a regular topic of discussion.⁵⁻⁸ This creates a need to disseminate research in a format that is easily found and accessed and that suits the needs of policymakers. However, there are a number of structural barriers to the efficient communication of research. In this commentary, we argue that overcoming these barriers will involve structural changes in how we in academia use and value different forms of communication.

Historically, academia has placed considerable emphasis on peer-reviewed publications over other communication methods. This emphasis is continually reinforced by the fact that career progression and grant success are frequently determined by derivatives of the research article, with the basic units being the number of articles, the journals in which the articles have been published and the number of citations those articles receive.⁹ Adding to this is the fact that the peer-review process is also highlighted as an important tool for quality control of research.¹⁰ Both of these biases persist despite their well-recognised flaws, such as that citation counting does not take into account the nature of the citation,¹¹ journal impact factors are misused and lack transparency¹² and peer review generally fails to screen out poor quality research.¹³

The emphasis on peer-reviewed publications has meant that they have become a goal in and of themselves, and not just one indicator of research dissemination. Consequently, structural barriers to effective research translation have been created. For instance,

the volume of publications has increased dramatically in the past 50 years, with no sign of this trend slowing,¹⁴ making it a daunting task for policymakers to find the information they need. Further, peer-reviewed publications often do not contain the information that policymakers need,¹⁵⁻¹⁷ lacking crucial information such as costs and factors effecting generalisability. The timeliness of peer-reviewed publications has also been identified as problematic, a problem created by the often lengthy peer-review process.¹⁸ Even if policymakers can find the information they need, a further barrier is created because much of the peer-reviewed literature is locked up behind paywalls, with access dependent on expensive subscriptions or one-time purchases.¹⁹ Additionally, academics tend to see knowledge translation as an important process but not a personal priority,²⁰ expecting research to traverse a pipeline and permeate policymaking without requiring any personal action beyond publication of research findings.²¹ It is little wonder then that policymakers have reported relying more heavily on other sources of evidence.²²

The challenge for academics is to be public intellectuals who use social engagement to work with practitioners and policymakers to influence social change, and to consider such social engagement such as blogs and articles written for the popular media in the assessment of a scholar's contributions.²³ Blogs are one avenue of communication that has the potential to overcome many of these barriers. Blogging could be considered part of an online ecosystem – a system of interconnecting and interacting social media platforms that empower researchers and practitioners to connect, share and collaborate.^{24,25} This ecosystem makes it possible to rapidly disseminate information – bypassing gatekeepers and paywalls that

are commonplace in traditional publications – and communicate directly to the intended audience without the time delay of traditional print publications. The online ecosystem also encourages a multidirectional flow of information, allowing practitioners or researchers to engage with policymakers, community groups or non-government agencies, enabling ideas to percolate. This represents a marked change from traditional peer-reviewed publications, which were unidirectional. The multidirectional nature of the online ecosystem provides an opportunity for researchers, policymakers and practitioners to interact through, for example, debating key issues, seeking clarification or further information, establishing new relationships and influencing or reshaping research questions or policy processes.

Our definition of blogs includes those that are fully self-published through to those that are journalist-assisted, such as Croakey²⁶ and the Conversation.²⁷ Blogging is a relatively new paradigm of research communication that de-emphasises the traditional role of the journal by complementing it with real-time academic communication.²⁸ Academic blogs are generally linked to research reports and articles, are written in accessible plain English, travel well through platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Google+, and are often read by academics outside the author's immediate sub-field and discipline, potentially pulling new audiences to both the research and associated publications. In short, blogging is a tool for interactive discourse that need not adhere to the conventions and rules of any other medium – whether academic in focus or not. Such a discourse has recently been recognised as critical to realising the full potential of research for the health of the public.²⁹ Blogging allows for engagement to be recognised, rewarded, and measured through dynamic social interactions³⁰ and the use of social bookmarking tools such as likes or shares. But, like any new skill, mastering writing for the public requires commitment, courage and a lot of practice. It is only through removing or reducing the structural barriers mentioned above that researchers will be encouraged to spend the time to learn this skill and improve engagement between academia and policymakers, practitioners and the community at large.

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Blogs, given their format, allow the communication of key messages to a broad audience, including practitioners and policy actors in government, non-government agencies and the private sector – and often for no cost. They tap into academic expertise when relevant, publish glimpses into ongoing work ahead of more formal journal article publications, and allow timely publication of findings in clear language, yet with due regard to methods, issues and quality of evidence.

As for measuring the dissemination of a blog, there is a myriad of tools available that provide easily accessible quantitative metrics that would permit and enable recognition and legitimisation by institutions. Such metrics could sit alongside the traditional metrics associated with peer-reviewed publications, providing another avenue to judge the dissemination and impact of research. Lockley and Carrigan, for example, suggest that blogging as a form of continual publishing can maximise research impact by increasing one's 'academic footprint' across the full range of potential platforms.³¹

For blogs to contribute to reducing the barriers we noted above, structural changes are needed across academia. We feel it is time for universities to re-evaluate their scholarly communication practices. Drawing on new technology such as blogging to expand the range of platforms used in academic communication needs to be a university priority. There is no doubt that academic blogging fits very well alongside formal academic publishing, increases impact and facilitates the effective transfer of knowledge. With some funding organisations now asking for policy relevance of research and assigning a weighting in the assessment criteria for grant and scholarship applications, it is timely for more academics and their institutions to embrace the blogging movement.

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