

# Choosing the best online platform

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## Abstract

Social media is a powerful tool that enables forage-livestock researchers and Extension specialists to connect with a wide audience of producers, Extension personnel, colleagues, and industry partners. This presentation in the thematic session on “Understanding the role of social media and digital resources in forage education and promotion” will provide an overview of popular social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) and discuss how to transform impactful research and Extension programming into effective social content before leading into the panel discussion.

## Introduction

Social media is a powerful tool that enables forage-livestock researchers and Extension specialists to connect with a wide audience of producers, Extension personnel, colleagues, and industry partners. This presentation will provide an overview of popular social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) and discuss how to transform impactful research and Extension programming into effective social media content. Choosing a platform can be a daunting task, so the pro’s and con’s of each platform are discussed below. This discussion is briefly summarized in Figure 1.

## Facebook

Facebook is the best way to connect with the more “traditional producers” and a broad general audience. In the Southeastern United States the typical producers are 55+ years old and generally male. However, many people maintain a Facebook account for casual scrolling even if they use another platform for sharing their own content.

Facebook is the easiest place to post existing Extension or research materials with minimal editing. Users are not limited by space or characters. This platform allows for easy sharing of links to external content such as peer-reviewed manuscripts, Extension publications, or YouTube videos. The biggest challenges with this platform is its inability to reach a younger (under 30 years old) audience and limited geographic scope (with respect to your home country). People have to follow you or your page before the content will reach their Facebook feed.

## Twitter

Twitter is more often used by industries and businesses, so it is possible to have more of a global reach. It moves very fast which leads to viral trends but also the likelihood of missing out on critical content trends if users do not access the account at least daily. Trends are driven by hashtags (i.e. #IGC2022) which allow the algorithm to push your content to the Twitter feed of potential followers. It is also important to tag other users to drive interactions (i.e. @AmericanForage).

The biggest limitation with Twitter is the 140 characters on a single tweet. Users are also limited to four images and only usually 45 seconds for videos on the platform. It is possible to continue tweets in a “thread”, however single tweets can be retweeted out of context. Sharing links to external content is possible, but not always visually appealing and can be easily glanced over.

## Instagram

Instagram is most popular with users under the age of 40. It is very photo and video driven, so content has to be visually captivating to drive interactions. Much like Twitter, hashtags and tags are critically important for the algorithm to push your content to the Instagram feed or reel of potential followers.

Captions are allowed with unlimited characters, but they are not highlighted in that only the first lines are visible in a light color ink under the image. Users can include a link to an external publication, but it will not form a hyperlink for easy access. This is why screenshots of publications or one-pagers do not perform well.

## YouTube

YouTube is most often used now as a repository for recording Extension presentations, vlogs, or similar content. Any video length is allowed and it is easy to copy a hyperlink to post in virtual newsletters, Facebook posts, and more. YouTube is fairly simple to use, but the biggest challenge may be if institution requires closed captioning for accommodating users who are hard of hearing. There are services to help with this, but free services are not 100% accurate for users with an accent.

## TikTok

TikTok is the most recent social media platform where forage education is being used, although it is very limited at this time. It is very popular with a wide range of users, mostly because the algorithm can quickly curate a “for you page” that incorporates your interests. The biggest challenge is that videos need to be under one minute for all features to work (stitches and duets), but recently the platform began allowing longer videos for viewing and commenting only. Like Instagram, captions are not highlighted and users cannot directly add hyperlinks. Users can choose to automatically download the published TikTok video and post to other platforms.

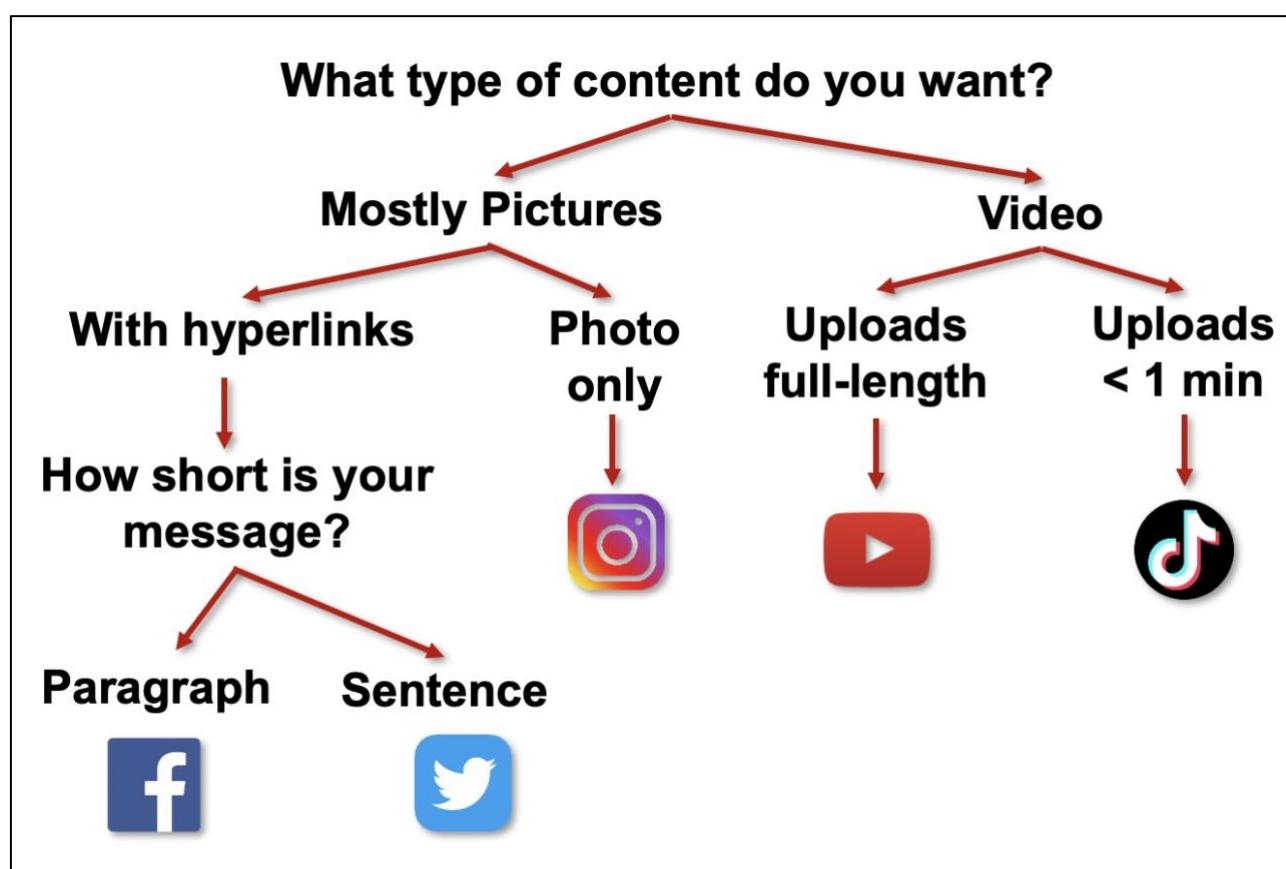


Figure 1. Decision tool for delineating most popular social media platforms used in forage research and education in the United States.