Podcasts can 'level the playing field' for researchers looking to break the mould and share accessible findings.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/08/20/viva-voce-podcasts-researchers-level-playing-field/

Viva Voce is a website platform that allows social science researchers to set up five minute podcasts about their research. **Gemma Sou** *argues podcasts are an ideal medium for early career researchers as social media tend to mirror the academic environment, with CV-like publication lists and stratified networks. By literally giving researchers a voice, findings can be brought to life and a more level playing field for researchers can be established.*

I'm a PhD researcher and an aspiring academic. Like many involved in social science research, I've incrementally built up an online presence. Sites include Linkedin, Academia.edu, my University of Manchester profile page and a Twitter account that I regularly forget to update and am often bewildered about what to tweet (see Salma Patels' 2012 blog post about social media sites for academics). A few friends have profiles on ResearchGate or have set up personal blogs on wordpress, so there are always these options waiting in the virtual wings for me. So you might think that the 'academic social media market' has become entirely saturated and that there couldn't possibly be room for more. Alas not, and please allow me to tell you why I decided to create Viva Voce, which allows researchers to podcast their research.

First, online Goliaths such as Linkedin and academia.edu are excellent for researchers to extensively document their research and achievements. However, they are in effect, virtual CVs that encourage researchers to list all of their publications, experience, skills and the kitchen sink. This has great appeal and utility, particularly for potential employers wanting to supplement a job applicant's interview. However, it effectively mirrors the academic environment, which rewards researchers with a longer list of publications. This marginalises early career researchers with naturally fewer publications and experience and also steers attention away from innovative research that may not have produced many articles, books chapters or conference papers as of yet.

A second reason is because networking on these sites (with the exception of Twitter) is predominantly based upon who you know (or 'May Know' according to Linkedin), who you have met or who you have worked with. Again, this marginalises researchers with a smaller network and does not use the topic of research as the conduit for networking or increasing the amount of people that are exposed to your research. The third reason is because these sites are text heavy and not very accessible or exciting. The result is that research is being cocooned inside academia and beyond the interest of the general public.

In a very humble bid to address this, I started to play around with wix.com as a fool proof web design platform. I showed friends and my PhD supervisors the beginnings of Viva Voce, and they all gave it the 'thumbs up'. This kick started a megalomaniac mission to develop it further and beyond my academic department. I tentatively launched the site on June 21 2014 and have since gained a partnership with Social Science Space – SAGE Publications in California, been awarded the University of Manchester Social Enterprise 'Do It' Award and an unexpected and very belated love of Twitter.

In a nutshell, Viva Voce allows social science researchers to set up a sub 5 minute podcast about their research and experience that is accessible to a non-specialist audience. It's designed as a platform for 'researcher equality' because the 'playing field' is levelled to a podcast and a short profile, with direct links to up to two of your publications, personal websites, Twitter ID, and e-mail. As such, the podcast is the 'taster' that encourages people to click on the accompanying links and learn more about you and your research. Each user profile is visible on three keyword pages and a discipline page, which gives greater exposure for the researcher, encourages

interdisciplinarity and ensures that the topic of your research is at the heart of your profile.

Image credit: Microphone Sequencer (Pixabay, Public Domain)

In the beginning I relied on bombarding friends with e-mails and not so subliminal comments to get them to record themselves. Now I've started to receive submissions from people in other Universities and who heard about Viva Voce through means besides my 'bullying'. Last month 1600 people visited the site. This is really encouraging and I love hearing about the diverse research that is taking place. Only yesterday I listened to the latest submission about facial transplants and how this affects a person's sense of identity.

At this stage I'm trying to raise finance to pay a professional web designer to improve user utility. The most important feature is for users to be able to sign up and edit their profiles as and when they like (I'm currently formatting them myself which is very time consuming). Other features include: a messenger service for users; an advanced search tool; and the ability to like and share individual podcasts. I've raised £2000; however, there is approximately £4000 more to go. In a bid to chip away at this I started a Kickstarter fund and will apply for a 'Knowledge Exchange Impact Acceleration Account'. I've contacted several well-known research councils, but they are unable to financially support Viva Voce as I'm a student (can you hear the tiny violin?).

I'm extremely optimistic about the use of podcasts because academia is a slow 'industry' and often only a few people hear about your work. With a podcast the focus is on your research topic and you can quickly share your results. Findings are also made more accessible and engaging for people outside of the academic bubble, and who are often directly applicable to the results. In addition, social science research can become sanitised when researchers are left to summarise their findings in a few lines. By literally giving researchers a voice, findings become more exciting as people are allowed to animate their findings and bring character to their research, which I think does more justice to the research that they carry out.

I'm chairing a 'Podcast your Research' session at the Royal Geographical Society Conference, August 29th. Please come along to learn more about the site or to set your own profile up. The following podcasts are examples from the Viva Voce platform.

Jason Luger: Creative Singapore: Paradoxes and Possibilities (The Geographies of Cultural Activism in an Authoritarian City-State)

Human Geography, King's College London and the National University of Singapore (jointly)
Keywords: Activism, Artists, Comparative urbanism

Simon Chin-Yee: Defining Policy: Climate Change Adaptation Governmental Policy in the Republic of Kenya

Politics, University of Manchester
Keywords: Africa, Climate Change, Governmental Politics

Helen Underhill: Political Learning in the Struggle: A study of Egypt's Diaspora

IDPM, University of Manchester
Keywords: Diaspora; Egypt; Political Learning

Anna Laing: Territories in Resistance: Struggling Towards the Plurinational State of Bolivia

Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow
Keywords: Bolivia, Indigeneity, Politics

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