

Greater use of social media gets science, scientists noticed, study says

November 6 2014, by Chris Barncard

Here is an idea worth following: "share" for tenure; "like" to get cited. Academic researchers are turning to social media more and more, according to Dominique Brossard, and not just to post family photos or crack wise via hashtag.

"I've been in [science communication](#) for a while now, and I am really seeing a change—especially among the younger scientists—in their willingness to share their work," says Brossard, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor of life sciences communication.

It's the venue for that sharing that has inspired work by Brossard, fellow UW-Madison professors Dietram Scheufele and Michael Xenos, and their colleagues.

This fall, the group published a study in the journal *Journalism & Mass Communications Quarterly* showing a connection between "h-index"—a measure of the quality of a researcher's work and influence—and whether the scientists interact with reporters and get mentioned on Twitter. Doctoral student Xuan Liang served as first author on the paper.

Attention from reporters is good news for h-index, but couple that with attention on Twitter, Brossard says, and you see a more pronounced spike in reputation.

"If you talk to reporters and you tweet about your research, your work is more likely to be cited than people who do one or the other," she says.

As many as 30 percent of the members of the faculty at UW-Madison are using [social media](#) at least three times per week to find news and insights about science, according to a survey that supplied evidential heft to a piece penned by collaborator Sara Yeo, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Utah and a recent graduate of the UW-Madison Life Sciences Communication Ph.D. program, for the October issue of *The Scientist*.

That sort of activity hasn't always been encouraged. Research can be time-intensive work, and any distraction from scholarship can draw criticism as a waste of a precious resource. Brossard hopes a new understanding of the relationship between research and communicating with the public can change that.

"What this shows us is that sharing your science with the public is not hurting the science by stealing time," she says. "If the goal is to encourage people, ultimately to be productive scientists, and if directors of labs are discouraging people from engaging in this activity, they're actually hurting the science itself. Because people who do this are cited more often in scientific journals, they're making science accessible to broader audiences at the same time."

Social media use is rising in other professional circles as well, according to Xenos.

"As in other areas, such as politics for example, social media was once met with skepticism but is increasingly part of the culture," he says. "Just like it became the norm there, our research shows it may one day become the norm in science."

Flip the connection between social media attention and h-index on its head, and it's still worth taking to heart.

"The counter argument is that it may be just the other way around—that it may just be the big names that get mentions," Scheufele says. "But then, the lesson should be that the most successful people in your field are also the ones that are good at getting outside the ivory tower. That should be something to emulate."

At UW-Madison, Brossard sees the sort of institutional encouragement she has advocated in talks to academic groups and at the National Academy of Sciences' Sackler Colloquia (organized by Scheufele, among others) each of the last two years.

"You don't have to look any farther than the UW-Madison website," Brossard says. "You see an 'in the news' section with media coverage of research, and you see a section for Twitter and Facebook and Instagram."

It's not just the institutional website that is changing.

"Everything is changing. The scientific publishing industry is changing," Brossard says. "Very traditional publications are embracing social media, and evidence is piling up that this method of communicating should soon seem traditional to scientists."

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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