# Social media making academia more user-friendly

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Dr Deborah Russell and Dr Cat Pausé. Credit: Massey University

Ivory tower tweeters, Instagrammers and bloggers are using social media to break down barriers and make academic research more accessible to everyone, say Massey University academics.

Taxation specialist Dr Deborah Russell and Fat Studies researcher Dr Cat Pausé, both feminists and avid social media practitioners, are advocating for greater recognition of the value of what they call "sociable scholarship".

A paper they've co-written on the topic: Sociable scholarship: The use of social media in the 21st century academy, has just been published in the inaugural issue of the Journal of Applied Social Theory.

Academic search and resource sites Google Scholar Citations as well as ResearchGate and Academia.edu – all designed for hosting and sharing new research – reflect how the Internet has changed the nature of academic research over the past 20 years, opening it up to make it more accessible and accountable, particularly to those the research is often about, they say.

## 'Social scholarship' more accountable, more personal

The advent of social media has changed the game even further, as more information is communicated and shared across non-traditional platforms to more people, contributing to broader conversations and public debates.

Another impact is that marginal voices are able to challenge research conventions that they may feel misrepresent their experiences and views, say Dr Russell and Dr Pausé.

And when it comes to language, forget the complex, jargon-heavy traditions of scholarly writing – intellectuals are adopting a simpler, informal and more personal style that is a winner across social media platforms.

In the article they say social media "have broken down the distance

between scholars and the larger world, enabling lay people to become active participants in the construction of knowledge, through offering ideas and data, recounting experience, and engaging critically with academic research."

"Academics no longer operate from the safety of ivory towers: they are able to engage with a much wider audience, in a conversation rather than a lecture, through the use of Twitter, Tumblr, blogs, discussion forums, etc. These Web 2.0 tools have broadened academic spaces, enabling the participation of different voices, and addressing the academy's commitment to social justice."

Dr Pausé sees herself as primarily a scholar who also uses social media, while Dr Russell sees herself as a blogger who from time to time reaches into formal scholarship. Engaging in social scholarship has, they say, fostered a "creative and fertile tension, resulting in both more scholarly research, and more engagement in communities beyond the academy."

The pair, friends as well as academic colleagues, first raised the issue of how social media was having an effect on academic research at a Vice-Chancellor's symposium in 2011. Six years – and loads of tweets, posts, shares and likes later – they felt the time was ripe for an academic report on the topic.

## Fear not, social media won't rule your life

Many academics shun social media, fearing it would be too time consuming as they observe younger people constantly checking for updates, notifications, tags, posts etc. But Dr Russell says while it doesn't have to be all-consuming, social media may not suit every academic.

What's important is to work out what your goal is and to match it with the appropriate platform, says Dr Pausé. "It doesn't have to take a lot of

time – you can put up Facebook posts or a series of tweets relatively easily, in ten to 15 minutes a day."

"You've got to garden it, you've got to keep on looking after it all the time," says Dr Russell, who left her teaching position at Massey's Manawatū campus recently for her new role as the Labour Party candidate for New Lynn. Commitment is required, but it's also fun crafting a clever, smart or funny tweet – whether on a personal or an academic matter, she says.

They predict that a few decades from now, most academics will be using social media as part and parcel of their work because they have grown up with it. Being an academic can often be insular, and social media enables you to connect with others working in the similar field and provide new opportunities for research projects and knowledge sharing, they add.

Being active on social media has reaped academic benefits for both researchers. For Dr Russell, a Twitter conversation led to her writing a book on taxation as part of Bridget Williams Books' essay series. Dr Pausé has made international contacts from Kenya to Cairo in the field of Fat Studies through her Access Radio podcast.

Dr Andy Towers, a senior lecturer in the School of Public Health, is another avid social media user at Massey. He says the benefits to his academic work in applied research include connecting to and sharing information and ideas with public health policy decision-makers, researchers and non-governmental organisations outside academia.

Twitter – as well as ReseachGate and LinkedIn – provide him with important links to a wider range of contacts that enable him to keep up to date with public health debates and policy evolution. Through social media, he has been able to widely publicise his recent research, including

a published study of older drinkers and a blog for The Conversation – an online commentary and news site written by academics for a general audience on topical issues. His Twitter activity has lead to his being contacted to write blogs for British health networks and advise UK academics on alcohol research in New Zealand.

Global connections thrive within and outside academia through social media, say Dr Russell and Dr Pause. "A scholar waking at 7am in New Zealand can join a conversation that started in New York at midday, and later, her contributions will be read by others in Australia and then India and South Africa and London. Conversations span the world. If a conference is taking place in London, Twitter streams enable researchers who cannot fly to the other side of the world to participate, 'listening' to what is being said, and offering immediate comment."

**More information:** Sociable scholarship: The use of social media in the 21st century academy. socialtheoryapplied.com/journa … jast/article/view/29

Provided by Massey University

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