

Social media for researchers: Opportunities and challenges

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Patai: How are researchers using social media and does this fit within a Māori Kaupapa framework? There are so many tools, what are the best tools to use?

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Answer:

Recent studies indicate researchers are increasingly using social media at all points in the research cycle, usually in ways that complement traditional practices, and that the best tools for time-poor researchers are those that are accessible, quick and easy to use (Cann, Dimitriou, & Hooley, 2011; Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research, 2010; Procter et al., 2010).

With an emphasis on collaboration, participation, interaction, and networking, social media fits well within a Māori framework kaupapa. Maintaining and building relationships are important cultural values and social media tools can complement face-to-face communication within Māori and indigenous communities.

How are researchers using social media?

It is useful to clarify what is meant by social media, and the similar term Web 2.0, in the research context. Research can be broadly defined as "the production, use and consumption of information and knowledge", underpinned by the social interactions and collaboration of everyone involved (Cann, et al., 2011, p. 15).

Web 2.0 refers to the internet based applications and services that allow end users to generate content and collaborate, while social media

describes the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, experiences, and perspectives. Social media can take many different forms, including text, images, audio, and video. These sites typically use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis, and vlogs to allow users to interact. (Cann, et al., 2011, p. 46)

The Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER) conducted an online survey of 2,414 researchers who use social media tools, in 215 countries (2010). They found researchers use social media tools at all points in their workflow from identifying research opportunities, finding collaborators and support, identifying literature, collecting and analysing data through to managing research and disseminating findings.

Rather than being a replacement for traditional channels many social media tools serve a particular purpose at different stages of research. The CIBER report (2010) identified eight categories of social media tools, with three proving the most popular. Collaborative authoring tools were used by 62.7% of researchers, conferencing tools by 48.3 % and scheduling and meeting tools by 41.0% of researchers.

Other tools included those for social networking (27.0%), image and video sharing (23.2%), blogging (14.6%), microblogging (9.2%) and social tagging and bookmarking (8.9%).

Opportunities and Challenges

Social media tools enable researchers to communicate, network and share documents with many people regardless of location, and at little or no expense. Researchers can build relationships and keep up to date with people involved in their areas of interest. This encourages discussion, debate and engagement within their community.

Researchers can also discover, filter and share information using networks of experts in a field to help deal with information overload and find relevant information. In an interview, one of the lead researchers on the CIBER study, David Nicholas said participants in follow-up focus groups indicated good papers increasingly turned up in social networks. They were even beginning to question peer review, saying “it’s more important to contact and connect with loads of people than simply pay homage to one or two authorities” (Howard, 2011, p. 2).

While most researchers still favour traditional channels for disseminating research findings (books, journals, conferences, etc.), in some disciplines scholars may want to disseminate protocols or primary data without undergoing unnecessary and lengthy peer review. Social media tools provide a useful platform to do this.

Social media may also provide a publication outlet for researchers who have difficulty getting published in high ranking journals (Harley, Krzys Acord, Earl-Novell, Lawrence, & King, 2010), or who feel frustrated by the tight controls of senior scholars and publishers over traditional selection and dissemination of research (Howard, 2011). This may be a risky strategy on one hand, but may assist in raising your research profile. For example, promoting your research by posting links to your articles on blogs, Twitter and LinkedIn can drive readers to your article, potentially increasing the number of citations (Cann, et al., 2011).

How does social media fit within a kaupapa Māori framework?

While further research is required on how Māori use the internet, Vivienne Kennedy (2010) suggests the use of websites and online networks are becoming increasingly popular tools to establish and maintain connections with whānau. Although communication and relationships are more important than the tool, the internet can work synergistically to complement the importance of face-to-face contact.

In the context of research, benefit to society and engagement and partnership with the community underpin the important philosophy of universities providing support and collaboration for community-led projects. This fits well with a Māori kaupapa approach where research is driven by the needs of the Māori community, carried out by Māori and centred on appropriate cultural practices and values. A joint research relationship between the community, research provider and research supporter provides a useful model that is collaborative in nature and seeks to empower and transform iwi (Williams, & Ormond, 2010).

Te Wehi Nui (<http://tewehinui.com>) is an example of an innovative website that enables Māori communities to engage with te reo and stories about local history. Contributing to language revitalisation efforts, the website is designed as a repository and guardian for the resources and knowledge of four tribal areas in Northland. Funded by the Foundation of Research, Science & Technology, research was undertaken by a team of academic researchers from the James Henare Maori Research Centre at the

University of Auckland and the website was developed through collaboration with the local Māori communities. The team collected audio, video, images, research papers, waiata and stories over two and half years. The resources are presented back to the audience so they can easily view and discuss content about their heritage, ancestors, local history and identity. Visitors are encouraged to register and contribute their own stories, videos, documents, audios or images. In this way they become part of an extended online community contributing to the knowledge base of the four iwi groups.

What are the best tools?

Social media tools can be used in a wide variety of ways, for many purposes. Ultimately the choice of tools depends on a number of factors such as the required functionality, personal preferences as well as time and digital literacy skill levels. The CIBER report (2010) found the main driver for social media uptake was collaboration with researchers from other institutions, reflecting the need for cheap and instant forms of communication. This was followed by personal initiative, involving trial and error. Innovators and early adopters were more likely to use social media, while a lack of understanding of the capabilities and benefits of the tools constitutes a significant barrier.

Interestingly the most popular tools in the CIBER report were the most common household brands like Skype, Google Docs, Youtube, Twitter, Google Calendar, Facebook, LinkedIn, Delicious, Slideshare, Flickr, etc. As social media novices, we trialled 10 social media tools to collaborate on this article and were interested to compare our experience with the research.

Immediately we were struck by the range of tools available and decided to trial only the most common tools we knew or had read about. With limited time we chose tools that were free, easy to use, required minimal software downloading and would let us share links and documents. Although we created a generic email account and tried to use the same user name and password, in the end they varied slightly for each site so we highly recommend keeping a record of them.

We trialled various bookmarking sites like Google Bookmarks and Delicious. However, we preferred Diigo (<http://www.diigo.com/user/Web4research>) which let us quickly save websites with one click, as well as highlight text and save our own annotations. We also liked LiveBinder for the visual way websites are presented in binders.

Without the added incentive of distance, and with little time, we were not motivated to continue using free web-based citation sharing tools like Citeulike, Mendeley and Zotero. As we were on the same network we found it easier to store references in a locally saved EndNote library.

We easily created a simple website using Google Sites, but in reality we only needed to collaborate on and share a document. Although Google Docs was easy to pick up, we preferred the Windows Live SkyDrive as it gave us free access to the Microsoft Office suite over the internet. This had the added advantage of Microsoft Word which works well with EndNote.

Our experience confirmed the best tools were those that were intuitive and easy to use, especially if they were familiar and required minimal or no downloading of software. There were many other popular social media tools we did not try which can be found at:

- Social media: A guide for researchers: Links and resources
Links and resources are available on their website: <http://www.rin.ac.uk/node/1009> or as a pdf, http://www.rin.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/links_and_resources_0.pdf
- 10 ways to increase usage and citation of your published article using social media:
<http://www.sagepub.com/authors/journal/10ways.sp>

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