Disseminating your work and increasing professional networks: writing blogs and using Twitter

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Abstract

This fifth article in the writing for publication series aims to provide guidance on disseminating your work and increasing professional neworks through using social media. We will outline a range of different ways in which nurses can write about their research and focus on writing blogs and using Twitter to grow your professional networks and disseminate your work. Increasingly health professionals are using social media and online resources to communicate with each other; advantages include connecting with interested others worldwide and being able to access an audience far beyond that they can access locally or at a conference.

Terms: blogs; Twitter; social media

Introduction

We have written previously in this series about the many ways in which research is disseminated, by using different formats such as journal articles and conference posters (Albarran and Dowling, 2017; Dowling and Albarran, 2017). Social media is an integral part of people's lives, with some engaging as much with online communities as with those in 'real' life (Kozinets, 2015).

The NMC issues guidance on the use of social media and the importance of understanding the risks inherent in blurring professional and personal lives (NMC, 2016) and, increasingly, there are articles that advise nurses on how to use social media (see Chinn, 2012, for example). Box 1 highlights some ethical and professional issues that nurses should be aware of when using Twitter and responding to online postings. A professional social media 'presence' and profile is becoming more important in many ways and is likely to be of interest to potential employers and collaborators (Wilson et al, 2013).

There are many ways in which the use of social and popular media can be of benefit for nurses and nursing. Health professionals are using a range of media to let others know about their research or other professional developments, to network with each other and with relevant organisations and to 'support health education, deliver health promotion messages, enhance professional development and employment opportunities, and communicate within political forums' (Wilson et al, 2013). The NMC (2016) highlights the potential opportunities for accessing support networks and resources for continuing professional development (CPD). For example, one recent study reported how Twitter has was used as part of assessed element for undergraduate students, who also found it useful for taking advantages of learning opportunities (Jones et al, 2016). Social media also 'places nurse leaders in a visible and accessible position as role models' (Moorley and Chin, 2016:516). These ways of writing are usually less formal than journal publications and include blogs and writing for online publications. In this paper, we explain in general how these formats can be used and then look in more detail at how nurses can use Twitter and blog writing.

How can research and other work be disseminated online?

Social media in all forms are used as methods in research projects or to provide research information to participants - see INVOLVE, 2017 for examples of how social media has been used in public involvement projects (Facebook, Twitter, Skype, YouTube, blogs, mobile phone technologies and interactive websites are some of the methods described). They are also used to disseminate the results of research and other projects. There are a range of social media engaged with by nurses, including Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter. Some are felt to be more useful than others, with Twitter probably the most professionally useful (Chin, 2012); our focus is on this type of use rather than on use in research. Twitter enables communication, in a very short form, with many others and thus enables access to a very wide audience, potentially worldwide. It is sometimes called 'microblogging' (Watson, 2012). Through 'following' others on Twitter and by being followed, connections and communities of interest can be built. Twitter is easy to use on smart phones and tablets as well as computers. Tweets can contain links to other forms of writing, such as blogs, journal articles or websites, as well as photos or videos. Getting started with Twitter and using it as a nurse practitioner or researcher, are discussed further below.

Blogs are a longer form of writing but also one that is very accessible; they are published in a variety of ways, some of which are very public (accessible to anyone via the internet) and some of which are more private (seen only by a closed group). Blogs have increasingly been used to disseminate information to patients (and students) as well as to improve communication within teams and professional groups; 'blogs are great places to find case studies of interventions or to query other healthcare professionals about their experiences' (Watson, 2012:217). Blogs can be 'owned' by an individual (who will usually undertake all the writing themselves) or by a group or organisation (when the writing might be shared by several people; perhaps with individuals invited to write posts due to their expertise). There is usually an opportunity to comment on blog posts, which also enhances their use as a way of communicating with other people in your field.

Another form of writing that is becoming more common is that of popular journalism, written by academics. *The Conversation* (https://theconversation.com/uk/health) is one example of this; pieces are written by academics (working for universities or research

institutions) for the public in a range of categories, including 'health and medicine'. A quick search on *The Conversation* website for this article, using the word 'cardiac', gave many pages of results with relevant articles. Although these pieces are written in a journalistic style they often draw on the author's own research; some are opinion pieces. Nurses working in academic or research roles could consider this kind of writing. The *Huffington Post* online publication is also increasingly used by academics to write feature blog posts, often drawing on, and promoting, recently published research.

How can I blog about my work?

Obtaining key information before you start

You may already know where you want to place your blog or you may need to do some research before you start. Sometimes journals have online blogs, about special issues or topics of interest to the journal readership; you can offer to write a blog post if you are interested, or you may be invited. Blogs may be about personal experiences or may be more issue-focused – the *Nursing Times* hosts a 'Reader's Blogs' page ([https://www.nursingtimes.net//opinion/readers-blogs?blocktitle=Readers'-Blogs&contentID=20297)](https://www.nursingtimes.net//opinion/readers-blogs?blocktitle=Readers'-Blogs&contentID=20297) with wide-ranging content covering current political and clinical issues as well as personal accounts relating to nursing issues. If you are not sure, email the contact listed on the Blog page for more information; they may want a synopsis of your idea or a sample of your writing before you send a full piece. You may want to set up your own blog, individually or as a team and there are blog hosting platforms that can help with this.

What is the aim of your piece of writing?

Writing a blog post is different to writing a journal article. If you are not familiar with this type of writing, read some blogs before you start (independent research Helen Kara's blog is a good example: [https://helenkara.com/blog/)](https://helenkara.com/blog/). Another relevant example, is the Thesis whisperer https://thesiswhisperer.com which is dedicated to the process of writing a thesis, but provides a collection of blogs about writing, presenting and getting published. Blogs need to be written in Plain English and to attract the reader with an early 'hook' that indicates what the blog will be about. This includes the title, which must be both engaging and tell the reader what to expect. Blogs often have pictures, or other images, and usually contain weblinks to

information held elsewhere. Blogs are usually relatively short (around 750 words) but they can be longer; if you are writing for an existing blog look at other posts and seek advice from the blog owner.

How can I use Twitter to enhance my work?

Setting up a Twitter account and getting going

Setting up a Twitter account is very straightforward; go to www.twitter.com and all you need is an email address and to create a password. Add a picture and some information about yourself (you are more likely to have followers if you do this than if you remain completely anonymous). How much information you give is up to you; however, it's quite common for people to make it clear that they are tweeting in a personal capacity and not on behalf of their organisation or employers (even if you are primarily tweeting about your professional interests). Then you are ready to go! A good way to start is to search for people/organisations to follow (see Box 2 for some ideas), based on your professional and other interests. If you are worried about what to Tweet yourself an easy way to get going is to 'retweet' what others have said, if you think it's interesting and other people would also be interested. Quite quickly you will gather followers of your own and in turn you can follow people back, thus increasing your network. If there are people whose work you are interested in you can chat directly with them, either via Tweets or by contacting them with a personal message.

What can I Tweet about?

As you become more confident you can send your own Tweets, rather than just retweeting. It takes a little while to get used to expressing yourself in 140 characters but it's easy to get the hang of; you can add links as well, to take people elsewhere to see more information. What you Tweet about is up to you but if you are using this in a professional capacity you might Tweet about new research you have heard about, items of interest/relevance in the news, local or national events in your area, or clinical developments. Tweeting from conferences is increasingly used, this can both connect you with others there as well as more widely in your network and with people around the world. Dowling has tweeted from many conferences and finds it a useful process – at first, she was nervous that she would

lose attention and miss the presentation taking place in front of her, or that she would misrepresent what was being said. In fact, distilling key points into 140 characters is a good discipline and helps concentration. Conference tweeting is also useful if you cannot be at a conference in person – following people who are there and who are tweeting regularly is a great way to know more about what is happening. For other examples of how Twitter has benefited, see Box 3.

Joining Twitter chats

Joining others on Twitter for focused 'chats' about topic of current or professional interest is another way to use Twitter, and increase your visibility. Twitter chats usually take place at a defined time and using a hashtag (#) as an identifier. Participants chat in real time about areas of interest to the group, with often a specific topic for a chat advertised (via Twitter) in advance. Popular nurse chats include #NurChat and #WeNurses. More information can be found online, such as at www.wenurchat.co.uk. Participating in Twitter chats can also be used as evidence of CPD for revalidation purposes (see Moorley and Chin, 2014; RCN, 2017).

Conclusion

Previous articles have focused on different ways of getting your research published and disseminated. The methods of social media discussed in this article can be helpful in increasing the reach of your professional work and open new networks nationally and internationally. Engaging with new approaches to dissemination is becoming essential to maximise visibility and promote greater interaction with likeminded professionals and members of the public, however understanding the conventions and processes is essential for success.

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Box 1: Ethical and professional issues when using Twitter and responding to online postings

- Always be polite and professional in your communication.
- Remember that what you write may be seen by many people who do not know you and that from this they will form an impression of you.
- Presume that what you write, even with strict privacy settings, may be seen by many others and be available permanently.
- Do not become involved in any kind of personal abuse or criticism of others – and report this immediately if it happens to you.
- Make sure that you are familiar with the NMC's guidance on the use of social media, as well as any policies in place in your workplace.
- Make sure that what you write does not breech confidentiality in any way.

Box 2: Ideas of who to follow on Twitter (to get you started)

@WeNurses	Connecting nurses on Twitter to share information and ideas
@bbchealth	Health features from the BBC
@BJCardiacNursing	British Journal of Cardiac Nursing
@theRCN	Trade Union and Professional body for nurses
@NursingTimes	News etc. from Nursing Times
@NurChat	Fortnightly nurse tweet chats
@nmcnews	Nursing and Midwifery Council
@bancccouncil	British Association for Nursing in Cardiac Care

Box 3: How Dowling (@sallyjdowling) has used and benefited from Twitter

- Connecting with
  - other researchers working in her area;
  - others, non-academics, working in her area.

- Increasing her profile, nationally, internationally and within her own organisation.

- Meeting people interested in the same research topics in real life, after having met them on Twitter.

- Developing research collaborations and writing for publication with people met on Twitter.

- Being invited (via Twitter) to
  - speak at a conference
  - chair a session at a conference

- Promoting events she was involved in running beforehand, and tweeting from these events while they were running.

- Tweeting from conferences has increased networks nationally and internationally as well as leading to meeting more people at the conferences themselves.

- Making new friends and many new connections.

- Becoming aware of new publications, research events and job vacancies as they become available.