

Social Media for (Academic) Economists

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Introduction

During my first morning in Ithaca this week, I remembered an exchange I had with one of my office mates during the first year of my PhD.

When I asked my office mate what she wanted to do after she finished her PhD, she said: “I want to be a housewife.”

Now, there is nothing wrong with wanting to be a housewife. My mother chose to be one while my brother and I were boys. But when my office mate said that, I thought: “What an inefficient allocation of resources!” A PhD is a bit of overkill for that chosen profession.

Introduction

To a certain extent, I think a similar point can be made about getting a PhD only to write articles in peer-reviewed journals.

You are making a huge investment in your education by attending grad school. It would be a grossly inefficient allocation of resources to limit yourselves to writing journal articles and the occasional book.

Sure, your knowledge is deepest when it comes to your own narrow research topic. But you will have spent enough time in school that you can also think deeply about other, (closely) related topics.

Introduction

“Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.” – Matthew 5:15.

I believe all of us should spend some time contributing to public goods by helping people think through social problems in your area.

This is especially true for those of us whose research is publicly funded—and whose isn't? With more and more Americans questioning the value of a college education, we have a duty to show that universities play a much broader role, and to put knowledge in the service of society.

Introduction

There was a time when academics put knowledge in the service of society by writing op-eds and popular-press articles, or by serving in government for short amounts of time.

But often, those opportunities (e.g., *New York Times* op-eds, serving on the Council of Economic Advisors) were the exclusive preserve of faculty at top-tier universities.

The Internet – that most democratic of institutions – has leveled the playing field by giving a voice to everyone who has something reasonably smart to say.

Introduction

My career has greatly benefited from my use of social media. Two examples of great opportunities I have encountered as a direct result of my social media involvement come to mind:

1. I spent the last two mornings working with Tom Pepinsky in Department of Government on a paper whose genesis is an exchange Tom and I had on Twitter a year ago.
2. A coauthor and I are currently collecting four rounds of quarterly data on the production and consumption of quinoa of rural Peruvian households in Peru as a consequence of a blog post I wrote in early 2013.

So when Linden asked me to give a talk on social media for economists, I told her I would be delighted to do so.

Outline

1. Twitter
2. Blogs
3. Other Social Media
4. Concluding Remarks

Twitter

Twitter is probably the easiest social medium to get into.

You can choose to be as involved as you want—from following people you are interested in and not tweeting yourself to engaging in the conversation by tweeting actively.

The nice thing about Twitter is that it allows getting a real-time feel for what people care about. It's how I got the idea for my food prices and food riots forthcoming AJAE article.

Twitter

Many people find Twitter overwhelming, and increasingly so the more people they follow.

I like to think of it as a doctor checking a patient's pulse: You don't have to check Twitter constantly. I check Twitter hourly when working. That's sufficient. The important stuff gets retweeted over and over anyway.

Interacting with other academics on Twitter can also be rewarding. The big payoff, however, is that it allows connecting with people who work in your area but whom you would otherwise not meet (e.g., people in government, NGOs, think-tanks, other disciplines, etc.)

Twitter

Because your level of involvement is up to you, the cost is largely up to you.

There are also other potential costs in terms of reputation. This means not tweeting while drunk, when angry, and apologizing when you are mistaken.

On Twitter as in the rest of your life, you should strive to treat others as equal and be nice to them, and leave them better off than they were when you met them.

Twitter

A note about etiquette: The most despicable thing you can do on Twitter is trawl for followers by following people—and immediately unfollowing them as soon as they follow you back.

If you want people to think you're an ass, that's a good way. Those people only want to boost their follower count, and aren't interested in the exchange of ideas.

But you don't need to follow everyone who follows you back. My rule is to follow fellow academics, or people whose bio makes me think I should be following them (this means you should have a bio that describes who you are and what you do).

Blogging

Host your own blog, e.g., <http://www.marcfbellemare.com>.

This means not using Blogspot or WordPress or any other hosting site, because sooner or later, using those will limit what you can and cannot do.

There is no use in promoting a blog on Twitter, Facebook, Google+, etc. if it only has few posts. Wait until you have at least 10 substantial posts before you start promoting your own blog. There were 152 million blogs out there in 2013. My hunch is that at least 75 percent of those are abandoned.

Blogging

Post regularly, even if it's just to post the abstract of a new working paper or to link to a cool thing you read in your area of interest.

Readers who do not use RSS will tire of not finding fresh content every time they visit. Make sure you keep it fresh. It's a good idea to establish a list of ideas to blog about (and keep adding to it) well before you launch your blog.

Blogging

Write in very short paragraphs.

For me at least, there is a considerable difference between reading something on paper (or my on Kindle) and reading it on my computer screen. I write blog paragraphs the way I did when I wrote for my college newspaper.

Limit yourself to 500 words per post. My variant of Maimonides' Rule: If a post exceeds 500 words, split it in two. That's one fewer idea you need to look for for your next blog post.

Blogging

Write about what interests you. It's what gives your blog its own personality. Unless you bring in a great deal of value added, don't feel like you have to blog about a given topic just because everyone else does.

It is difficult to find your own voice. I'd say it took me at least two years of blogging regularly. There is nothing sadder than economics bloggers who are not Tyler Cowen write posts titled "The Culture that Is ..." and "Markets in Everything: ..."

Be yourself. The blogosphere (as much as I hate that portmanteau) rewards originality and authenticity.

Blogging

Be generous with attribution and links.

As with plagiarism in research, there are few things more disheartening in social media than working a few hours on a great post only to see someone make the same point somewhere else without mentioning where they got the idea.

Don't be that person. Religiously note where you got your ideas.

Blogging

When you finish polishing a working paper and are ready to circulate it, blog about it.

Of course, the reader should know that it's still a work in progress, and that it's subject to change. But I've received many good comments on my forthcoming AJAE paper on food riots when I first talked about it, after I'd finished writing the working paper version.

Likewise, I have generated a lot of buzz about new work that way (e.g., my work on why members of Congress vote for the farm bill with Nick Carnes).

Blogging

When one of your article gets published online, blog about it.

Explain in layman's terms why this is important work. Be a bit more speculative. Include the stuff that was left on the cutting room floor.

This gives you a chance to discuss what the paper does more informally (and in many more words) than the abstract does, and so it increases the chances people will read your paper and cite it. This can only be good for your career. Citation counts matter.

Blogging

But don't self-promote too much. It becomes painfully obvious when someone started a blog just to sell books or promote their work, and no one likes a braggart.

This is something I think I've done well: In a recent EDCC paper, McKenzie and Özler (2014) study the impacts of economics blogs. A skeptical reviewer asked them whether economics blogs only existed to promote the blogger's work. Turns out I am on the lower end of the self-promotion spectrum.

Blogging

Similarly, if your blog becomes widely read, avoid the cult of personality.

There is nothing that turns off readers faster than an academic blog that becomes all about the person doing the blogging.

People will come to your blog because of what you have to say about topics they are interested in, not because of how cool (you think) you are.

Other Social Media

I have little to say here. I use Facebook extensively (as many people in this room surely know), but I mostly use it to keep in touch with friends, share lighter/more risqué stuff than I would on my blog, and share my blog posts when I publish a new one.

As for Google+, I think it's safe to say at this point that that dog won't hunt. I only know of one economist who only shares stuff on Google+.

As for LinkedIn, most academics I have discussed LinkedIn with think it's light on intellectual content. I personally do not understand it's usefulness and deleted my profile.

Concluding Remarks

I think using social media to disseminate your research is part of the “service” component of our job, which I like to think of as having three parts: (i) departmental, college, and or university, (ii) professional, and (iii) public service.

In my case, social media has led to invaluable opportunities for research and professional development.

So when used somewhat wisely, social media can be a tremendous boon to your career.

Concluding Remarks

More importantly, I think my using social media has significantly improved my research in two ways.

First, it has helped clarify my thinking about specific research problems, which has made me a much more effective writer when the time comes for me to write papers.

Second, it has provided me with a number of research ideas by getting me to think about topics I normally would not have thought about.

Concluding Remarks

When studying the history of science, we often read about how famous scientists (e.g., Descartes, Leibniz, Newton) kept a very active scientific correspondence with other researchers.

Social media – Twitter and blogs, mostly – is the modern-day equivalent of that scientific correspondence. The fact that it opens our correspondence for anyone to read forces us to be clear, concise, and rigorous.

You can choose to be an active participant by harnessing the benefits of this technology.