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# Sharing knowledge at a research university: experiences from the London School of Economics

## Book section

**Original citation:**
Williams, Sierra and Gilson, Chris (2018) Sharing knowledge at a research university: experiences from the London School of Economics. In: Zorn, Annika and Haywood, Jeff and Glachant, Jean-Michel, (eds.) Higher Education in the Digital Age. Moving Academia Online. Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, UK. ISBN 9781788970150

This is the post-print version of a chapter In: Higher Education in the Digital Age. Moving Academia Online. Annika Zorn, Jeff Haywood, and Jean-Michel Glachant (Eds.). Cheltenham, UK, Northampton, MA, USA. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2018.

The published formatted version is available at: https://www.e-elgar.com/shop/higher-education-in-the-digital-age

# Chapter 8 - Sharing knowledge at a research university: experiences from the London School of Economics

Sierra Williams and Chris Gilson

## INTRODUCTION

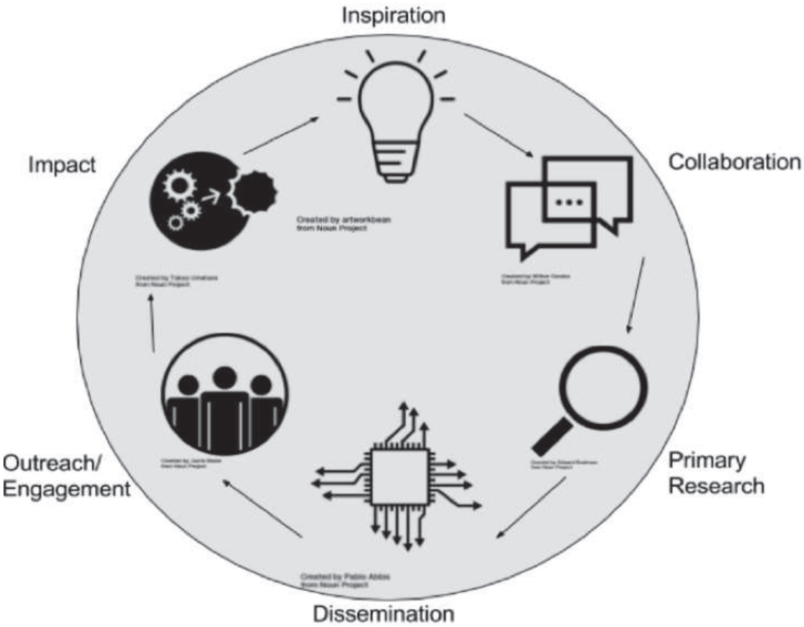
Digital technologies offer universities a number of new challenges and opportunities, as is apparent in every chapter of this edited collection. Higher education is certainly not immune to the redefinitions of our digital landscape. From student recruitment to online learning, the digital world continues to shape and change (perhaps in some instances even 'disrupt') what a university is and does. Taking centre stage amongst this digital revolution is how universities and their academic staff communicate their value, broker their knowledge and expertise and engage externally with new public audiences and spheres. Where previously academics primarily communicated via the pages of academic journals, books and monographs, their scope for engagement – both internal and external – has been vastly increased via digital technologies and social media.

Against the backdrop of digital opportunities in higher education and the growth of interest in boosting the impact of academic research, research staff at the London School of Economics began experimenting with coordinating their own academic blogging platforms in the mid to late 2000s. In this chapter we look at why new technologies came to play such a vital role in shifting approaches to research communication and what institutional strategies and tools were specifically adopted by the LSE during this time. We end with a look at how blogs and social media are being used to give better visibility and impact to researchers' work and what can be done to sustain this effort going forward.

## DIGITAL SCHOLARSHIP AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH COMMUNICATION

Academic research, still one of our universities' primary involvements and activities alongside teaching, depends on effective and efficient communication and is, thus, uniquely placed both at the forefront of advances in information communication technology and at technology's behest. As such, the lessons learned on research communication in the digital age and how universities are responding to the challenges of adopting new tools and technologies are essential for understanding higher education today. To understand the role of new technologies in research communication, it can be useful to take a step back and consider the many different, sometimes overlapping activities that research communication encompasses. In Mollett et al. (2017), we reference a lifecycle framework for modern research, which encompasses Inspiration, Collaboration, Primary Research, Dissemination, Outreach and Impact (Figure 8.1).

All of these elements are integral to the research process and, crucially, all of these elements are highly social processes. Whilst universities are involved in hosting and facilitating all of these aspects to some degree, Dissemination, Outreach and Impact, have received considerably more attention from administrators and decision-makers in light of heightened pressures for publicly-funded research to demonstrate firm outcomes in society – the so-called Impact Agenda visible in higher education assessments such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework and Excellence in Research for Australia.




*Source: Adapted From Mollett et al. (2017) – Sierra Williams CC BY 4.0.*

**Figure 8.1** Research lifecycle

Alongside the Impact Agenda, new digital innovations in scholarly publishing in the form of digital-first and openly available research outputs have placed additional attention on adjustments to research communication. Questions began to be asked by senior university administrators around the world about: First, how digital technologies could be employed to provide more people access to research; and second, how universities could leverage digital technologies to demonstrate that research is relevant to society.

It is tempting to see these questions and shifts as reflective of a new digital academia, where access, inclusion and the democratization of knowledge stand as the guiding light forward, opposed to the isolated ivory towers and dusty journals of yesterday. And while there may well be significant benefits to these transformations, university leaders' focus on efficiency in outputs and outcomes owes at least as much to the 'new public management' trends in public sector reform than it does to networked and digital affordances. From the 1980s, new public management approaches in the UK focused on improving the performance of public administration bodies by adopting private sector management models (Rhodes, 1994). Indeed the language of outputs and outcomes have dominated corporate communications models dating at least back to the early 1990s (Macnamara, 1992). Again, this is not to suggest digital engagement, social impact and access to research are neoliberal traps or unworthy ends but, rather, that the language of digital revolution serves many different purposes in today's higher education landscape.

It is important to note that university administrators now have little choice but to determine how best to react to academics who engage in blogging and other social media activities. More than a decade on from the launch of major social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook, such activities are becoming ubiquitous in the academic sphere; administrators no longer have the power of veto – if they ever really did. Instead, administrators must choose between doing nothing and offering assistance and guidance for their academic staff who are keen to engage in social media and blogging outreach activities.

The confluence of corporate communications efficiency, the social remit of academic research and the proliferation of easy-to-use digital platforms is the landscape in which academic blogging emerged. This environment opened the door to a number of opportunities for how research could be communicated, including the medium, form and style.

Although academics had created the World Wide Web in the early 1990s in order to facilitate research communication between and among colleagues, maintaining a website required a degree of technical knowledge which largely confined this practice to a handful of particularly technical disciplines (Berners-Lee, 1990). But by the late 1990s and early 2000s there were a number of free blogging service platforms which significantly lowered the technical bar of entry. Using a service such as Wordpress, Blogger and, more latterly, Medium, individuals could now set up their own blog in under an hour and post new entries without having to know a lick of HTML or other programming languages.

Fundamentally, a blog is a regularly updated website written in an informal style. But there are a number of other important differences between the two as Table 8.1 illustrates. Perhaps the most important distinction between the two is that blogs are dynamic while websites, on the whole, are static entities. Websites are sources of information that tend not to change on a regular basis: staff directories; corporate policies; manuals and other important resources. Blogs by contrast can (and should) change on a monthly, weekly, daily or even hourly basis. This in and of itself means that blogs lend themselves towards being an outlet for news or commentary on current events or trends.

As mentioned, blogs have significantly lower barriers to entry compared with websites. Blog platforms are almost entirely web-based with little or no technical knowledge required to establish and maintain them. Websites generally require more specialist knowledge for their creation and operation and often specific non-web based applications are required.

| **Blog** | **Website** |
|---|---|
| Regularly updated | Static |
| Interactive, community building | One-way |
| Commentary and insight | Transactional information or news |
| More informal | Often formal |
| Very easy to publish new content | Dedicated CMS program needed, e.g. Dreamweaver |
| Easy to do at low cost | Quality=cost |

*Source: Authors.*

**Table 8.1** Characteristics of blogs versus websites Blog Website

Given that anyone, by definition, can start a blog for little and no effort, what then marks out academic blogs as different – and trustable? In sum, evidence. Like journal articles and other academic outputs, academic blogs, be they from one author or part of a multi-author blog collective, are almost always backed up by some form of evidence. This may be in the form of a peer reviewed academic study by the blog’s author which has already been published and then linked to, a new study’s preliminary findings or the accessible work of other authors.

In terms of blogging strategy, from an institutional point of view, universities which wish to encourage their academic staff to blog have two options: Either direct them to outlets which can host their own work such as multi-author blog collectives or provide training on how to set up their own externally hosted blog; or establish and host their own blog platforms. The LSE has chosen the latter tactic, and with great success.

## INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES AND TOOLS ADOPTED BY LSE

Academic blogging at LSE started, unsurprisingly, in the Centre for Learning Technology (now the Learning Technology and Innovation), part of the Information, Management and Technology academic service division responsible for working with colleagues across the School to promote the integration and use of technology in teaching, learning and assessment (see http://lti.lse.ac.uk/about/). Blog posts on the CLT blog date back to 2005 and early use was primarily internal link sharing on the Virtual Learning Environment, primarily for staff use (Lingard, 2005). The blog is still in use today and remains a knowledge-sharing mechanism for staff and students. Importantly, this blog provided the Wordpress infrastructure for blogging at LSE to easily scale.

In 2010 academic blogs, while not rare, were mostly the domain of individuals working alone, rather than institutionally-based or sponsored offerings with dedicated editors. It was against this backdrop that the London School of Economics' Public Policy Group (PPG) perceived a need for an academic 'referee' for the various policy and political debates which were occurring in the lead up to the 2010 General Election. To fill this need, the LSE PPG approached the CLT for help with launching a platform, *Election Experts*. This would be a daily updated resource for students, the media and other academics providing evidence-based election commentaries from a wide range of academics, both from within and outside the LSE.

The *Election Experts* blog was a resounding success and, as a result, further funding was found and the blog became the *LSE British Politics and Policy* blog: the LSE's first foray in a public-facing blog aimed primarily at dissemination of academic work. It was also the first blog to be situated in an academic centre as opposed to an administrative division. One full-time editor was employed 'to raise the level of debate about the coming election by publishing evidence-based commentary' (Mollett et al., 2017: 7).

The primary motivation behind the Public Policy Group's decision on a blog format instead of a more traditional academic website featuring election-based research was audience. What the PPG required was a neutral space for the mediation of academic work with wider public audiences. According to analysis by Bastow et al. (2014: 54f), LSE Public Policy Group researchers supporting the public-facing blog and authors of the *Impact of the Social Sciences*, the 'footprint' of academic work varies largely by discipline, with social scientists visible in relatively fewer 'mediating' spaces than STEM researchers in traditionally academic spaces. Thus, *the LSE British Politics and Policy* blog aimed to be part of this mediating landscape – in between a more mainstream journalistic format and a traditionally academic format. Political scientists' work (and indeed social science as a whole) is certainly visible in online spaces, in formal government and civil society reports and particularly in traditionally academic spaces like library repositories and academic journals, but a blog format could be seen as more explicitly accessible in its departure from static academic websites and its more informal, regularly updated format.

The style of this politics blog followed other commentary-heavy political blogs of the time. Due to the significant number of views for the blog during the run-up to the election and over, the British Politics and Policy blog continued to feature regular updates on political commentary written by academics and its readership grew to reach 200,000 visitors in its first year. The Public Policy Group launched six additional public-facing blogs over the following five years:[1]

● European Politics and Policy (EUROPP);

● LSE Review of Books;

● Impact of Social Sciences blog;

● USA Politics and Policy (USAPP);

● LSE Business Review; and

● LSE Brexitvote.

Each blog remains staffed by one full-time editor or a combination of parttime editors. Funding for these roles has been sourced through a variety of short-term streams including, research project grant funds, departmental matching and fixed knowledge exchange and impact funding.

Drawing on the ease and availability of blogging platforms and the broad mission of the London School of Economics ‘to create and share knowledge addressing major social challenges’, public-facing blogs were found to be both feasible and strategically aligned. With minimal overhead costs and the ability for the infrastructure to scale easily, academic blogging could be technically-provided and institutionally-supported with minimal campaigning. Having a few well-positioned allies around the School, both on the academic side and the administrative side gave enough space early on for the blogs to grow year on year.

In addition to the support for academic blogging efforts by individual researchers and universities, there has also been criticism and backlash. The biggest issue that the LSE blogs faced early on was convincing an already overstretched research community to contribute their time and expertise to writing an 800-word piece. In the early years of the LSE blogs’ operations, many academics had little no experience writing short form blog or op-ed pieces. In these cases editors had to work closely with potential authors to train them in the art of writing for blogs and to assist them in using a different type of approach to that used in more traditional academic outputs.

With no formal recognition in place for knowledge exchange through academic blogs, there were, and still are, few career incentives for academics to write informally and generally on a topic of interest. In some cases, academic researchers are punished for appearing ‘too public-facing’ and, by extension, less serious than colleagues focused on conference papers and formal academic publication. For many colleagues, academic blogging was just one more additional burden on top of a heavy teaching workload and professional responsibilities such as writing journal articles, conducting peer reviews and attending conferences.

To overcome these barriers, the LSE blogging team extended invitations to academics from not just one institution. At the LSE we have had the benefit of being the ‘early adopters’ of academic blogging, but there are now many excellent university-run blogs in the UK: UCL, Nottingham, Manchester, Exeter, Oxford, Queen’s University Belfast, Bournemouth, KCL, Queen Mary, all host blogging content. And there are even more examples of department-run blogs not hosted on university servers.

[1] Since 2010, the LSE has launched a number of other multi-author edited blogs outside of the Public Policy Group.

But quality and regularly scheduled updates from these blogs can vary. In an age when most universities have social media profiles, it seems strange that there is such a variable and limited presence of university blogging platforms. Only one of the above mentioned universities links to their blogs from their homepage. At the LSE, where blogs have been an active feature for years, we are still working on how to build a sustainable network across the School.

## HOW BLOGS AND SOCIAL MEDIA CONTRIBUTE TO HIGHER EDUCATION VISIBILITY AND IMPACT

So how can universities understand the actual successes of their digital platforms? A significant barrier to the development of academic blogging at the LSE has been the lack of consistent funding sources. While many individual academics and communications professionals in the sector recognize the importance of digital engagement, if we do not develop an understanding of what these efforts are delivering, these activities will largely go unrecognized and unfunded. As we have explored in the previous section, digital media platforms are shaping the outputs of research dissemination – from blog posts to videos to data visualizations. But while the containers for research may have changed, it is the outcomes that remain of primary importance. Given the digital change universities have undertaken, it is now vital for university communications teams to understand what this change has delivered and, equally, what it has not.

At the LSE, we can group the benefits and successes of our university run blogs in three areas: professional development, the extension of academic values and widespread research communication. At a time when academic staff are under considerable funding and administrative pressures, academic blogging through university-managed blogs at LSE offered a unique opportunity for professional development and online learning. Writing for general audiences and sharing on online platforms are skills like any other and university blogging structures created supportive spaces for colleagues to learn these skills. The success of the blogs at LSE can be measured by their ability to train staff in a range of online communication styles beyond the journal article and conference paper.

With the provision of training, the LSE blogs were able to develop audiences for its evolving content. By supporting these blogging spaces, the LSE reaped the benefits of a significant driver of web traffic. Currently, the LSE receives over 20,000 unique visits to its blogs each day. One in nine hits to the LSE website go to one of the blogs (Arrebola and Mollett, 2017). The university has proven its ability to function as a primary content creator and by prioritizing accessible forms of research communication, can organize its platforms to proactively inform public discourse.

A less obvious success of the LSE blogs is the way they have been able to prioritize and amplify academic values. University blogs are mediating platforms that bridge the world of research with our everyday issues. Digital media offer unprecedented opportunities for universities to be content creators. Rather than feeding a 24-hour news cycle, academic blogs can prioritize rigour, data replication and in-depth perspectives. Complex ideas are given the space and support to thrive and through the active maintenance of these university-run digital spaces, primary research is reaching wider audiences in information-rich ways. The LSE blogs proved researchers themselves could play a more primary role in sparking conversations beyond their research's appeal to narrow research news cycles.

Though discussions about research impact tend to focus on public outreach and research's role external to the academy, effective research communication through blogs and social media is also appearing to play a role internally. In fact, 2013 analysis of academic blogs suggests that the intended audience of most academic blogs is actually other academics (Mewburn et al., 2013). The time-saving benefits of 1000-word academic blogposts to 8000-word paywalled journal articles may be clear, but it is less clear how widespread blogs and social media are being used in the academy for research communication purposes.

For researchers already on social media, content from academic blogs and LSE's blogs in particular are shared widely. Research by Ke et al. (2017) published in PLOS ONE looks at what URL domains scientists share most frequently (Figure 8.2). Though scientific domains are limited overall, the blogs.lse.ac.uk domain is amongst the top listed scientific URLs, performing better than traditional publisher domains like Taylor and Francis and Springer. Though the conclusions we can draw from this are limited, the fact the LSE blogs have grown to become a top shared source in such a short amount of time compared with the other domains is a stated success in and of itself.

## CONCLUSION

By exploring the particular developments behind the public-facing blogs at the London School of Economics a clearer picture emerges of why universities are turning towards digital engagement. There are a number of factors shaping the simultaneous embrace of and resistance towards academic blogging and social media, including the university administration's own developing understanding of its impact and public benefit. The success of the LSE blogs in gaining widespread visibility in a relatively short amount of time can be attributed to the growth of interest in online experimentation amongst its academic staff, alongside institutional alignment with a focus on impact and research outcomes.

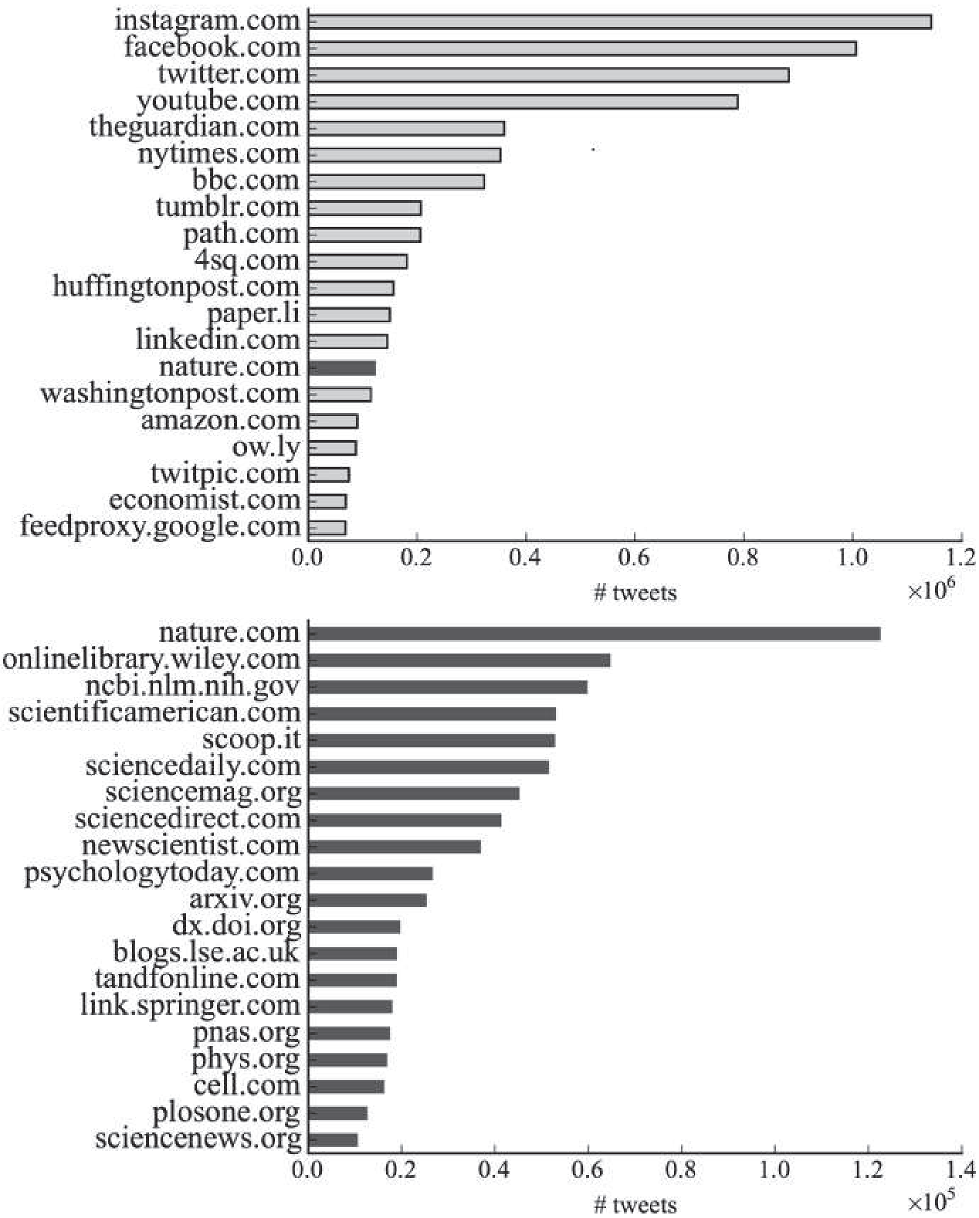





**Figure 8.2** Top 20 domains used by scientists from ‘A systematic identification and analysis of scientists on Twitter’

The future success of the LSE blogs and university-managed academic blogging spaces more widely rests on how institutions balance this relationship between the experimental and collaborative spirit driving the uptake of digital media in universities and the administration’s need to manage risk and deliver efficient communications outcomes. Taking the LSE as one case study, the benefits accrued are worth the effort. In an ever changing landscape, the challenge remains for universities to support the diverse, collaborative digital efforts emerging from research and learning spaces and adapt their institutional structures to accommodate such experimentation.

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