

Murray, Kelly ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1192-4327> , Rushton, Helen, Gorry, Gillian, Stanley, Kirsty and Sorlie, Clarissa (2016) Social media: creating communities of research and practice. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 79 (4). pp. 195-196.

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Social media: Creating communities of research and practice

British Journal of Occupational Therapy 2016, Vol. 79(4) 195–196 SAGE Publications

DOI: 10.1177/0308022616631551

Social media has become part of everyday life. By January 2015, over 3 billion internet users had set up more than 3.7 billion active social media accounts (Kemp, cited in Davis and Voyce, 2015). Social media in a professional context offers occupational therapists a powerful communication tool, one they have embraced enthusiastically. An increasing number use it not only to support their continued professional development but also to promote their research among their peers and across international health care networks. There is enormous potential for enabling contact and interaction with colleagues, policy makers, researchers and professional organisations on an equal footing. Recently, even traditional health care organisations, such as the National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom, have facilitated the use of social media by health care professionals, no doubt assisted by its cost efficiencies with reduced cost for time and travel (Lawson and Cowling, 2014). Academic and research organisations likewise recognise that social and online media enrich academic life, whether through using Google Scholar to build research citations, Slideshare to distribute conference presentations, or online groups to collaborate with colleagues.

For practitioners in 'non-traditional' settings and lone working roles, online communities offer connection with other occupational therapists outside their immediate working environment. Furthermore, in providing a greater diversity of role models and improved access to resources and information, social media conforms to the dynamic 'developmental networks' that are shown to nurture professional development, especially in early years careers (Dobrow and Higgins, 2005). Networks such as LinkedIn groups (over 100 'occupational therapy' related groups at time of writing) and Google hangouts provide informal, often very active and international, forums for profession-specific discussion and networking. National occupational therapy organisations such as those in the United States, Canada and UK host a variety of online membership groups and Facebook pages. They are often instrumental in building an online informal community of practice that encompasses clinicians, students and academics.

Twitter is increasingly utilised during conferences, broadcasts events and responses worldwide 'as it happens' and can enhance a speaker's presentation through a projected real-time commentary (Grajales et al., 2014), and seems a natural home for international professional discussion. Social media thrives on informality but need not imply unstructured or 'unprofessional' communications. The UK-hosted #OTalk, a weekly Twitter chat (or 'tweetchat') focused on planned topics relevant to occupational therapy and occupational science, has been particularly successful in sustaining a series of 'hosted' sessions led by volunteers from the profession. Other regular tweetchats with relevant content include the multiprofessional @WeAHPs, and the Twitter feeds of occupational therapy membership organisations. Twitter for professional use can initially seem daunting, but is invaluable for

extending professional reach, and offers an ideal forum for focused, pre-planned discussion, contacting peers and announcing and sharing research. For example, the OT4OT movement (OT4OT, 2015), since 2014 recognised by the World Federation of Occupational Therapists as an international advisory group – social media, includes a diverse range of online ‘4OT’ groups on Facebook, with asynchronous discussions across a range of clinical and academic practice areas, moderated by a global community of occupational therapists.

While some have healthy concerns about professional ethics when using social media in a work context, there is reliable guidance specifically for occupational therapists: McNamara and Molineux (n.d.) and College of Occupational Therapists (2015), for example. A separation between ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ online social media presence is advisable where possible, and always read the terms and conditions for using a particular tool. But the positive impact of professional online communities of practice should not be underestimated: the 2013 Patients First and Foremost report highlighted the #OTalk and #WeNurses Twitter chats on professionalism as actions for cultural change (Department of Health, 2013: 31).

Embedded in the research environment, social media is a natural promotion tool. Many researchers share news of publications via Twitter or Facebook, but fewer make an informal podcast or videocast about the research and post it on YouTube with a link to the online published article. For British Journal of Occupational Therapy authors, SAGE – like other publishers – offers a variety of platforms for promoting their published research and support and suggestions for authors on how to draw on social media to promote their article and so increase usage and citations to it (SAGE, 2015). But institutions and researchers also see the value of ‘social academia’ for research development, through peer communities, shared resources, blogging; changing the way that researchers ‘meet’, collaborate, and publish (for a reading list of resources, see LSE, 2015).

When choosing technologies to support professional development, adopt the same critical eye you would for any other research. For those less experienced with social media use, joining a Facebook or Twitter discussion group and simply ‘reading along’ for a while can be a good start; do not expect all communities to meet your needs. For anyone engaging in professional development or research it is important to acquaint yourself with online ‘etiquette’, security and privacy, and to remember that participating in social media is ‘public’, whether in online discussion with your peers or to the world at large.

In terms of future public engagement social media should continue to be harnessed to improve the transparency and visibility of the profession by hosting discussions in public online spaces. Online, easy access to stories that demonstrate the diversity and relevance of occupational therapy practice and research from varied perspectives, including those from outside of the profession, contribute to support innovation and raise awareness of the potential of the profession, and can extend the reach of its research to an international, multidisciplinary community. Finally, as you log in to Twitter, remember you are in control: it need not take all your time!

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