Early Career Members

Professional Online Presence and Social Media

by Marta R.M. Lima

Social media has become a valuable tool in our professional lives for networking, finding collaborators, outreach, and more. Despite some limitations, the benefits of using social media for professional purposes far outweigh its shortcomings. In fact, the total lack of online presence can be detrimental. Paraphrasing what has been said before, if you don’t manage your online identity, Google (or other search engines) will manage it for you. So, go for it! Own your identity, express your personal brand, and network. For more information on developing your personal brand, see [https://bit.ly/2OVIRq6](https://bit.ly/2OVIRq6). Following are some suggestions to maintain a professional online presence.

Take Control of Your Online Presence

The first and most important thing you can do to take control of your online identity is to create a public profile showing professional achievements, such as your publication record. This may feel like shameless self-promotion because the quality of your work should speak for itself, and therefore, there is no need for these marketing strategies. Well, this is not entirely true in the digital age that we live in. For example, you may have noticed when searching publications online using your author name, many works you did not author bundle together in the search results. This is not ideal if you want to be recognized for your work. Therefore, having a curated online profile is an ethical way of self-promoting, or better said, of communicating your professional self and owning your online identity.

The easiest way to start may be by creating a profile on a professional networking website like ResearchGate or LinkedIn. You can also make information from your ORCID<sup>1</sup> profile public. Ideally, your profile should rank among the first positions in the results list when your name is searched. It is very likely that your name will be Googled at any stage of your career by a myriad of people: collaborators, students, and potential employers, to name a few. An online profile allows centralizing all the professionally relevant information that is already scattered over the internet: educational background, current and past appointments and affiliations, publications, awards, etc. Importantly, it should contain a summary describing who you are, i.e., why you do what you do, what your interests are, and what impact you want to make; in brief, what distinguishes you from other professionals with the same education and skill sets. Keep your audience in mind when writing your summary for these profiles. For example, while ResearchGate targets scientists, LinkedIn users span across many different industries—so beware of jargon! The best summary would be comprehensible to anyone.

By now, this may sound like too much work that will take too much time. However, the time invested in creating a basic profile should be minimal because the information you will be displaying is already gathered somewhere, like in your CV. You may also think you do not need to create a profile yourself if you have professional profile page on your institution’s website. However, these pages are often outdated because you usually do not have the authorization to update it.

If you want tailor your online profile in a way that predetermined categories (and character limits) in other websites do not allow, then creating a personal website (or a lab website, if you are leading a group) is the best. If you have decided what information to include, this too should not be very time consuming with the availability of drag-and-drop website builders (for example, Weebly). It can always be done in small bits, starting with the basic information mentioned above and a contact form and then adding other material that you may want to share, e.g., blog posts or a photo gallery, later. If you do create your own website, a good practice is to include the link to it on all of the other online profiles you may have.

Define Your Goals and Time Commitment

Social media can be professionally advantageous for networking, announcing publications,<sup>2</sup> teaching, out-

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<sup>1</sup> ORCID provides a unique digital identifier that distinguishes you from other researchers. This identifier is personal, meaning it is associated with you and will not change if you move to other institution. An ORCID identifier is currently required by many publishers, including the Societies, when you submit an article for publication.

<sup>2</sup> A study suggested Twitter activity could increase citations rates (doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0166570), but do not expect that promoting articles on social media will substitute good science!
reach, etc. However, before you start, I suggest defining your goals and judging how much time you can spare for these endeavors. If your goal is to establish expertise, perhaps the best approach is blogging about the results of your research or your general area of work. Twitter may be for you if you are interested in staying informed about the activity of people you choose to follow while also contributing to ongoing conversations. If your goal is outreach and connection with the public, Twitter is useful to share links to information, press articles, or your own blog posts. Platforms like Instagram or Pinterest may be more appropriate for sharing images and pictures while YouTube is for sharing videos. Some platforms may work well to share both text and visual information, e.g., Facebook.

This is not an exhaustive list of social media platforms or activities, but I hope these examples showed that defining your goals before you choose which platform(s) to use makes you more effective and saves you time. One aspect to consider is that the more social media platforms you are active in, the bigger (and more diverse) the audience you will reach. While this may sound like a great time commitment, realize that social media accounts could be linked so that when you post on one, the same post appears on others simultaneously.

All of these activities give us the opportunity to network and increase our visibility. The more effort and time you put in, the more you get back. Obviously, what you want to achieve and how you engage with social media depends on your career stage and your preferences. So, care about and curate your online presence, but participate only to the extent that it fits your career goals.

Bringing It All Together and Avoiding Missteps

Being active in several platforms will be most valuable when all accounts are coherent with your brand. Two important things to guarantee consistency are: (i) using the same picture across all social media networks and (ii) articulating a consistent message across social media sites: your summary may be written differently depending on the audience of each platform, but your views should be consistent. Additionally, update information to show any change in job position, affiliation, or evolving professional interests.

To avoid missteps, it is best to separate personal from professional social media. Check the privacy settings of your personal accounts, and be certain that posts and pictures are only visible to those you intend to share them with. No inappropriate photos or messages should appear when your name is searched online. This is even more important if you are on the job market.

Finally, be aware of the public nature of your posts and take special care with controversial subjects. Always keep a polite and positive attitude. Above all, keep it professional and enjoy it!3

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3 Commercial names and links in this article are provided as examples and are not an endorsement in any way.