National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement

What Works
Engaging the public through social media

A guide from the NCCPE and network contributors
November 2018

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Why use social media?

Social media has become a key way that people connect with one another. According to a 2016 statistical bulletin from The *Office for National Statistics*:

> *"Use of the internet for social networking continued to grow and has become part of many adults' everyday lives, rising to 63% in 2016."*[1]

The bulletin identified that social media use in the 16-24 age group was 91%, and in the 25-39 age group was 89%. Only in the 65+ age group was it used by fewer than half the public (23%).

Social media offers a particular opportunity for researchers who want to engage the public with their work. There are lots of benefits, including:

Reach: It provides the platform to connect with a wider demographic of people than face- to-face events, it also allows those that work in remote locations to connect with the public

Immediacy: You can engage with social media wherever there is an internet connection

Dialogue: You can open up conversations with others to better understand how they are making sense of your research, or to input into your engagement ideas. It also enables audience–led discussion and debate – exposing you to other interests and ideas.

Community building: It can enable you to develop a community of interest around your research or connect with communities who might be interested in your research

Sharing: Your research, interests, opinions, questions, events, jobs and other opportunities, as well as learning from others

Improving research: Through collaborating, consulting, listening and learning from others views of your research and hearing other points of view

Gather data: Both quantitative and qualitative

[1] Office for National Statistics, 2016. *Internet access – households and individuals: 2016*. Via https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/bulletins/internetaccesshouseholdsandindividuals/2016#activities-completed-on-the-internet

Raising awareness: Increasing your profile, networking, raising awareness of your research or project, socialising and keeping in touch with others and offering the opportunity for an interested public to find out about your research

However, there are some challenges to bear in mind before getting started!

- Whilst the set-up costs can be small, the time investment can be large depending on your goals – so consider how you will build your social media activity into your existing routine
- Posting on social media does not mean that you will access the groups you want to engage with – you will need to work hard to make connections, and get noticed
- Not everyone will welcome your content, so make sure you have a strategy for dealing with any negative feedback or trolls

That said, social media can be a really effective part of your public engagement toolkit, so read on to find out how it can work for you.

WHY USE SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN ENGAGEMENT TOOL?

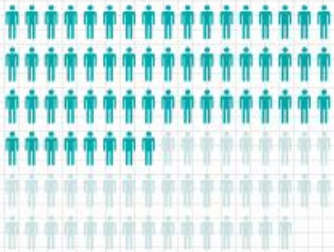
For Researchers

Social media is an opportunity to move away from just disseminating information in to a world that opens-- and encourages-- discussion between interested parties

It is one of the most flexible methods of engagement. It can be done any time, any place and requires no financial input-- just a small donation of time.

DID YOU KNOW?

89% of UK population is online



59% have at least one social media account

2hr 31 mins

average time on social media networks per day

6% increase

of social media users between 2014-16

That's a huge, captive audience of varying demographics waiting to talk to you about your research area

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA



Statistics taken from Think Digital First, 2016: http://www.thinkdigitalfirst.com/2016/01/04/the-demographics-of-social-media-users-in-2016/

Getting started



Quality engagement: purpose and people

When developing an engagement activity it is important to consider: There are two key things to bear in mind before developing any engagement activity:

- **Purpose**: what you hope to achieve
- **People**: who you want to engage with

Understanding these two things will help to ensure that the engagement that you develop is high quality. For more information, check out the **NCCPE's quality engagement pages.**

Purpose: what you hope to achieve

Social media can serve lots of different purposes. It is important to consider what you are hoping to achieve. This, alongside consideration of the people you are hoping to engage with, will really shape the engagement work that you choose to do.

Purpose come in all shapes and sizes, and one size does not fit all. In their review of case studies of engagement, Duncan and Manners (forthcoming) describe six main categories of purpose for public engagement with higher education:

Sharing what we do	Where the goal is to inspire or inform people about your work. Building understanding and stimulating curiosity is a vital part of the engagement landscape.
Responding (to societal needs / requests)	Much of the public engagement work done by universities is driven by the university, yet we know that there are many organisations and individuals keen to work with universities, who have their own ideas about the things they would like to participate in and the issues or topics that they would like to address. Identifying and responding to such requests can be an important motivator for engagement.
Creating knowledge together / Doing research together (collaborating, innovating)	We include collaborative research within our definition of public engagement. The purpose here is to work together on research projects, to create knowledge collaboratively. This could be co-production (where you engage people throughout the process, from setting the research questions to sharing the results) or collaborative engagement, where you involve people in certain parts of the research programme e.g. citizen science.

Applying knowledge together (collaborating, innovating)	Another key purpose for engagement is to seek to apply knowledge together. Often researchers are keen to make a difference with their research, and need to work in partnership with others to explore how this can happen.
Learning from others (consulting)	A vital purpose engagement can serve is to inform and educate you – to help you put yourself in other's shoes, to see the world through their eyes, and to explore how they make sense of the world and the values that guide them. Consultation and dialogue are key ways to realise this.
Changing attitudes / behaviour	Some engagement seeks to support people to make decisions in their lives. The purpose is to influence their attitudes or behaviour. This is a controversial purpose, with some researchers saying that we should not seek to change other people, but just offer them the research to enable them to make up their own minds.

People: who you want to engage with

Understanding who you would like to engage with is as important as understanding what you are trying to achieve. Indeed the two should inform each other.

Useful links:
Pew Research Center – social media use in 2018
Sprout social – social media demographics to inform a better segmentation strategy 2017

Know your intended audience / participants

- Who are they? Think about their age/ gender/ location/ interests
- What can you find out about how your potential audiences use social media? Once you know you can develop your plan accordingly
- Information on the demographics of people using specific social media platforms is available. Whilst much of this information is provided for those that work in marketing, they still contain useful information - so make use of the available information to choose an appropriate platform for your potential audience.
- Consider where you can share your content to engage these audiences – you will need to go to them. Do not expect them to come to you
- Can you engage with any conversations they are already having e.g. if a weekly chat with gardeners in your area already takes place on Facebook can you speak with the administrators and see if you can participate

Engage your audience / participants

- Social media is a great place to share content, so ensure your content is high quality and shareable
- Content should be succinct, easy to read, free from jargon and stimulate curiosity and or action
- Consider what is in it for your audience. Why will they care about your research or project?
- What do your audience value? How do they currently behave on social media? How can you link into their interests?
- Consider where people with shared interests are engaging and go to them.
- Make sure you consider cultural, ethical and religious sensitivities when framing your content
- Tell people at face to face events how they can connect with you online

Your social media presence

- Consider who or what you are representing – you as an individual, your research group, your project, your institution or all of these! Although remember you will represent all of these things in some way in your online engagement
- Depending on your aims you need to decide if you wish to separate your 'personal' profiles from your professional ones. This can differ from network to network. It's better to decide how you want to organise this before setting up any accounts and to check the privacy settings on any existing profiles.
- Experiment and reflect - see what works with the audience you want to engage with
- Link up to others, especially if there are other experts in your field already on social media. Connect with your institutional/grant funder social media accounts it's likely they will have a large audience and might be able to support you to grow yours.
- Be generous - share good content relating to your aims, even if it isn't yours, but try to comment on it in interesting ways
- Don't forget the *social* part of social media - it's about interaction with people and you need to be involved and be active regularly to be part of the community
- Social media is unpredictable - your plans might not turn out as you expect. Experiment with different approaches

Choosing the right tools

Your approach and platform will be shaped by your purpose and the people you are hoping to engage.

Here's some top tips in choosing the right platform:

- Create a new account for work related posts and keep it separate to your personal account
- Platforms surge and die, people using them shift, so keeping an eye on those changes means that you can adapt your tactics to ensure you're always working towards your aim

Here is a snapshot of the pros and cons of different platforms.

Twitter

Twitter is a news and social networking service where users post and interact with messages known as 'tweets'.

Pros

- Can be great for engagement with journalists, policy makers, MPs and other professionals and public interest groups (e.g. environment/patient groups).
- Has a vast user base
- Hashtags can be used to follow campaigns
- Other Twitter users can be tagged into tweets to encourage dialogue and expand networks
- Images and videos can be utilised to generate more impressions
- Can be used to give an interesting headline and call to action by linking to external content
- The character limit for each post helps ensure your content is succinct and quick to read.
- Very open and public
- Easy to gauge the mood on a particular topic
- Can utilise lists (like filters) and add subsets of participant followers
- Twitter Takeover days are a useful tool for researcher to share their research with a different audience
- Extremely useful platform for disseminating information, consulting with individuals and also getting individuals involved with discussion
- Easy to track the reach and engagement of each interaction via Twitter analytics
- Schools, colleges, universities and professional bodies often use Twitter as a form of communication about their activities

Cons – things to think about

- Needs direction and careful planning to be useful, and there needs to be a real awareness of *who* uses twitter.
- Twitter has the potential to be excellent because there are few restrictions on who can be in your network (compared to Facebook which relies on accepted friends), but visibility on Twitter can be challenging if you are just one account in a network of hundreds.
- Twitter often feels like lots of people are shouting and no-one is listening – stimulating genuine engagement can be challenging and time consuming

Facebook

Facebook is a social networking website that allows users to post comments, share photos and post links to other websites and watch and share short videos.

Pros

- Used by a diverse audience comprised of different age groups, however more favourable with older age groups compared to other platforms
- 'Groups' and 'pages' can be created to bring together those interested in certain topics
- Great for engagement with general public audiences, for promoting offline engagement opportunities and getting online engagement through public events (e.g. live streaming). This may require paid advertising
- Allows you to share a headline, links, videos, images and tag other users for to find out more
- No limits on word count enables you to be more nuanced
- Facebook LIVE allows for analysis of when engagement is happening during a broadcast
- Good for promoting events and disseminating information, rather than stimulating two-way interactions

'Parent Science Gang' is a user-led citizen science project that engages participants entirely through Facebook, after realising that this is how they could easily reach time-poor parents. Read more about it here: **http://parentingsciencegang.org.uk**

Cons - things to think about

- More of a commercial focus – there may be some costs involved such as paid advertising
- Can promote and maintain short conversations, but these tend to be slow (waiting for responses, etc.) and require the initial input and audience
- The usefulness of Facebook is decreasing as the algorithms change meaning it normally needs financial investment to sustain visibility

- Your network relies on accepted friends. These people may not want to engage with your research, or work-based activity
- Inbuilt analytic tools are clunky and difficult to assess

Snapchat

Snapchat is social networking application which is used to share photos, videos, text and drawings. Messages disappear from the application after a few second or after 24 hours depending on how the application is used.

Pros

- Great for 'in the moment' online engagement
- Suited to very specific types of public engagement- typically those that give great short, snappy visuals (like experiments)

A team of UWE Bristol Engineers used Snapchat to share behind the scenes of their time engaging festival-goers at Glastonbury festival 2017 with their 'Pee Power' unit: - https://twitter.com/UWEBristol/status/880877897334108160

Cons – things to think about

- Not suited for more dialogic, two-way interactions with audiences
- No known ways to capture metrics

Instagram

Instagram is a social networking service which allows users to share photo and videos which can be edited with carious filters and tags. Photos and videos are shared publically or with pre-approved followers.

Pros

- Instagram is a great way to share images. It is also the most popular social media platform amongst young people which is very useful if they are your intended audience, but do remember ethical and safeguarding considerations
- Great for engagement via video 'stories'. Instagram stories allow users to post photos and videos that vanish after 24 hours
- A marketing tool, especially useful for under 25 year olds
- Probably the one platform which is 'one to watch' as the popularity increases and the functionality increases scope to rival Twitter/Snapchat/Facebook

- Has the potential for dissemination, and involvement, people also have created small communities around #hashtags which may have potential impacts for utilisation for collaboration in future and mobilising large groups

Cons - things to think about

- You can't link to external content on posts, making it a bad platform for sharing links
- It's image-led. If you don't have an eye for a good photo, it's probably not for you
- Photos aren't usually a good way to share complex ideas or findings that are difficult to communicate visually
- While posts can generate comments, Instagram isn't a forum for debate in the same way that Facebook or Twitter can be

YouTube

YouTube allows users to upload, view, rate, share, add to favourites, comment and report on videos and subscribe to other users. Available content includes video clips, music videos, movie trailers, live streams, documentary films and video bloggers.

Pros

- A great broadcasting channel – the most popular video sharing platform
- Can link in to other social media channels such as Facebook and Instagram and embedded in websites and blogs
- Can be used as a repository for project videos e.g. events.

Cons - things to think about

- Not suited for two-way engagement better used for dissemination
- Can be visually great, but camera work takes time and needs practice. While video production costs have decreased dramatically in recent years, producing quality video content can still be resource intensive. It's also worth noting that content created specifically for YouTube has its own conventions which differ from corporate, conventional videos. It's more direct, DIY, personal etc.

Reddit

Reddit is a social news aggregation, web content rating and discussion website. Registered members submit content to the site such as links, text posts and images which are then voted up or down by other members.

Pros

- Over 1.6 billion users a month from almost every nation on earth

- Users can share links, images, or start conversations with communities of interest (Subreddits), directly connecting niche content with relevant audiences
- Over a million communities (Subreddits) organised around every topic imaginable, including academic disciplines like science (20m subscribers), history (13m) and philosophy (13m)
- Closely moderated Ask Me Anything (AMA) posts give experts the opportunity to engage users (Redditors) in informal, time-limited, question-and-answer sessions, often generating thousands of comments and questions and reaching millions of users
- Posts, comments and questions are organised by popularity with users 'upvoting' content they like and 'downvoting' content they don't. This democratic approach provides a transparent means of taking the temperature of public opinion on different topics and could provide researchers with quantitative and qualitative data.
- Because Reddit is fundamentally about the conversations that happen 'below the line', it's possible to gauge not only the reach of a post, its also impact on users' the opinions and beliefs
- Reddit has a reputation for crowd sourcing and initiating collaborations between users that often transcend the site, leading to positive change IRL (In Real Life). Researchers have linked to online studies and gathered huge datasets in a matter of hours
- Reddit is anonymous and user data isn't used to target advertising

Goldsmiths neuropsychologist Dr Ashok Jansari took part in a massive online Q&A on Reddit that identified over 650 people around the world with near superhuman facial recognition abilities. Read more about it here: **https://www.gold.ac.uk/news/reddit-facial-recognition-research**

Cons

- Reddit's interface and appearance isn't as user-friendly as other social media platforms and can be off-putting for new users
- Reddit is a space for internet culture. Memes and self-referential content are prevalent and can be alienating for those out of the loop
- Reddit's million plus Subreddits include NSFW (Not Safe For Work) communities and toxic / hate groups
- While user anonymity prevents the gathering of identifiable personal data, it can also lead to trolling and antisocial behaviour
- As the visibility of posts is defined by their popularity through the voting system, quality content can get buried if poorly timed or articulated. There is no guarantee your posts will be seen
- While diverse overall, the average user (Redditor) is male, middle-class, a native English speaker and socially liberal. There's nothing particularly 'hard-to-reach' about the majority of Redditors

What makes content shareable?

Format

Photos and videos (in particular) are always popular - visual elements help increase appeal – add captions to videos to increase engagement and aid accessibility however note that people don't always listen with the sound on

Videos should be concise – seconds rather than minutes, however this does vary by platform

Content

Consider making your content **fun** and make sure it is **relevant** - these posts are likely to be shared

Consider including posts that show your **human side** and the fact there is a person behind the post. People want to interact with people. The most successful brands on social media act like people

Make your post **clear** and **accessible** and develop your tone

Content needs to be **tailored** to the platform

Be **realistic** about your content. Is it interesting? Why is social the right medium for it? Is it visual and shareable? Does it invite or provoke responses? Is it playful and / or relate to the internet culture?

'Piggy back' on other events that are topical e.g. awareness campaigns, anniversaries, national days. Planning is key!

Share content that people like to see and be **creative**!

Set up **specific opportunities** for people to engage e.g. set questions to create conversations

Keep it **simple**, **unique** and **useful**. In the everyday flood of social media content, you will need to stand out in terms of relevance and uniqueness
Share-ability. Look at your content and analyse its share ability. Think 'if I saw this post on social media, would I want to share it with others?' If not, why not? Can it be reformatted?

Don't just keep reposting other people's content. **Ask people** what they think about the important article or image? Make your audience aware that there's a human behind the screen

Remember to give people the **opportunity** to ask questions and engage in **conversation** by leaving that opportunity open. But beware of feeding trolls (a term used to describe people who post offensive and controversial comments online)

Your content should include a '**hook'**. This could be an interesting perspective, a question, provocation or theme. You are aiming to stimulate curiosity

Exploit hashtags. #hashtags can be a useful way to keep track of discussions / debates / interactions on social media (and may feed into the 'paper trail' above). But, they need consistency (e.g. avoiding different spellings) and wide uptake to be representative

Bit.ly your links to make them look more appealing and makes the post easier to read as they are shorter and will take up less space

Targeted posts and collaborations with schools/organisations are a very useful way to ensure that your posts have a wide reach

Don't be afraid to **experiment**, you're not going to stumble across a winning formula straight away. Social media is an ever evolving medium and you can be ever evolving along with it to find a way that allows you to engage with your audiences in the best way for both parties!

Evaluation and impact

Getting started

1. Make sure you have a clear purpose, and set yourself goals/aims to measure against
2. Develop SMART objectives – things you think will help you achieve your purposes
3. Remember – evaluation should be ongoing, enabling you to improve what you do as well as assessing the impact of your work
4. Remember to use both quantitative and qualitative data
5. Consider your platforms limits for evaluation i.e. some are better for testimonies. This can help shape your evaluation approach
6. Be aware of actual reach vs potential reach – just because you have 100 Twitter followers doesn't mean they will engage with your tweet!

Data collection

1. Make use of digital tools for evaluating social media content, including those built into the platform. **Digital tool for evaluation** . There are guides available for marketers which are helpful.
2. Dig down into the metrics looking at reach vs engagement, demographics and conversations. Do long term analysis weekly or monthly analyses to show how things shift.
3. Look at what organic conversations and themes develop (using a coding framework to analyse your qualitative data e.g. the Generic Learning Outcomes Framework)

Impact

1. Testimonial evidence can be a useful source of evaluative evidence, but make sure you link it to quantitative data too
2. Analyse the discussions that have emerged relating to your aims, using coding frameworks where possible
3. Remember that engagement has an impact on you and your work – so capture this too
4. Has your research process changed? Have your ideas of engagement been challenged or developed?
5. Check with networks to see if behaviours/thoughts have changed

Risks and how to manage them

Remember using social media is not risk free – just like any engagement it needs to be thoughtful. Social media is a public conversation and has potentially international engagers. Risks include:

Content: Content can be sensitive to certain communities including international contexts. Be aware and get a second opinion. Don't be afraid to take risks but take informed risks. Own your mistakes. Don't forget to consider what you are missing.

Reputational damage: If you are representing a project or organisation, ensure you understand their values and protocols. Beware of how you respond – think before you tweet! Engage with institutional communication/social media teams for support and advice.

Focal point for organisation: You may become a focal point for your organisation and have to deal with negative issues. Remember you can choose not to engage. Only share what you are comfortable sharing. Don't take responsibility for everything and involve the marketing and communications team at your organisation.

Peers undermining your engagement work: Engagement is not always valued by your peers – but if the engagement work is serving its purpose, keep going. Take opportunities to share what you've done. Evaluate it and evidence its worth. Share this with senior managers. Work with your engagement team – who can help support you.

Trolling: An internet 'troll' is someone who posts offensive and controversial comments online in order to generate reactive responses from other users. Make sure you don't 'feed the trolls.' If you're not sure if someone is a troll, you could answer once, but then walk away. Make sure you ask for help and support. Recognise it as something trolls enjoy and try not to take it to heart. Report it to the social media platform if you think it violates their code of conduct.

Sustainability: Do you want the activity to be sustained? If not, what will you do if your project takes off in ways you did not expect? How much responsibility do you need to take to manage this?

Time drain: Be aware of this from the start. Make sure you factor time in.

Missing people: Be aware that social media isn't reaching everyone. Identify your current audience, then identify the non-users and those who only use social media intermittently.

Legal challenges: Check the legal definition of defamation and don't do it!

Privacy: Be clear about the protocols around what can be shared e.g. event images in relation to GDPR.

Lack of engagement: Social media is an art form and it takes time to build a community. This depends on your purpose and the people you want to engage with. Review your approach as you go along.

Content hijacked by groups with different aims and values: Use of hashtags can expand the reach of your posts, but can also increase the potential for your content to be misrepresented or co-opted by agendas you disagree with.

Difficulty explaining the content: If you find it difficult to convey context in tweets consider finding another platform, or provide links to more in-depth content that contextualises your tweet.

Changing landscape: The speed at which platforms change is very fast - keeping up to date with the current best practice takes time and knowledge.

Training: Lots of institutions offer training for social media use. If yours doesn't there are lots of guides and support networks online.

Differing agendas - Research institutions, charities, universities, businesses and other research partners can all have their own social media policies and guidelines. These can conflict with each other and it can be a challenge for individuals to find out where they stand and ensure that they abide by all the conditions they need to online.

These risks aren't here to put you off however are worth keeping in mind, along with the other tips in this guide to enable you to use social media effectively and thoughtfully to engage with your chosen audience. Good luck!

Resources

This section includes useful resources to help you engage with the public through social media. These resources have been collated from the contributors to the guide and include:

- Engagement examples
- Reports
- Blogs
- Articles
- Guides
- Online resources

RESOURCES
Example Tom rocks maths relies entirely on social media to drive traffic to the material posted on the site. Social media platforms are used to generate interest and to inspire people to learn maths.
Report Connecting scientists and the public in online dialogues about science. Winston Churchill Fellowship Report which contains information and case studies on the following: - the use of crowdfunding to engage with public audiences via social media (there are so many benefits beyond the money that can be generated) - ways in which engagement via social media can be generated through partnership working with existing audience networks (rather than bringing the public to one new social media account - the Union of Concerned Scientists Example) - focusing on other networks beyond those that we are familiar with (e.g. WeChat and Line / China and Japanese networks) Heather Doran Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship (2015)
Blog #PhDlimerick. Social media trend where PhD students and academics across the globe describe their research in a limerick. Rubina Kalra University of Bath (2017)

Blog

A catalogue of blogs written by Chris Elliot, Professor of Food Safety and Director of the Institute for Global Food Security at Queen's University Belfast.

Article

'We muddle our way through': shared and distributed expertise in digital engagement with research

Ann Grand; Richard Holliman; Trevor Collins and Anne Adams (2016)

Online resource

Digital practices of engaged researchers

Help for researchers considering the challenges of engaged research in order to review and adapt their own digital practices.

Online resource

Higher Education Academy 2014 **– Social media for increasing the networking and engagement opportunities of academics**

Example

Jisc ran a **competition in 2017 to celebrate higher education social media superstars**.

Online resource

London School of Economics – 2017 in review: **round-up of top posts on communicating research with social media.**

Guide

Using Twitter in university research, teaching and impact activities – a guide for academics and researchers.

Amy Mollett, Danielle Moran and Patrick Dunleavy (2011)

Guide

The A to Z od social media for academia – Your definitive guide to using social media as an academic

Andy Miah, Times Higher Education (2016)

Top tips from our contributors



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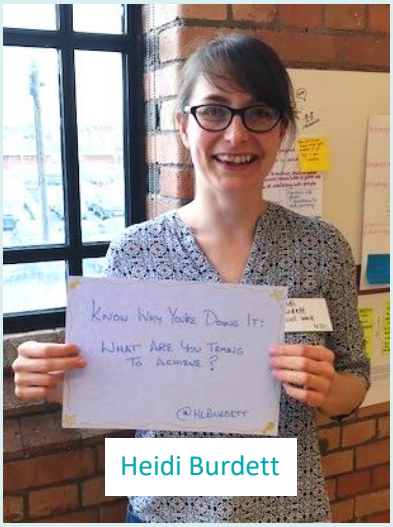
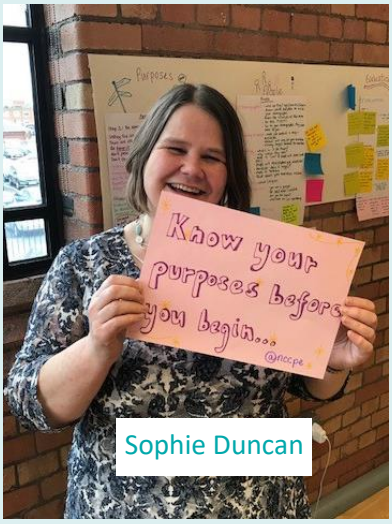


Heidi Burdett



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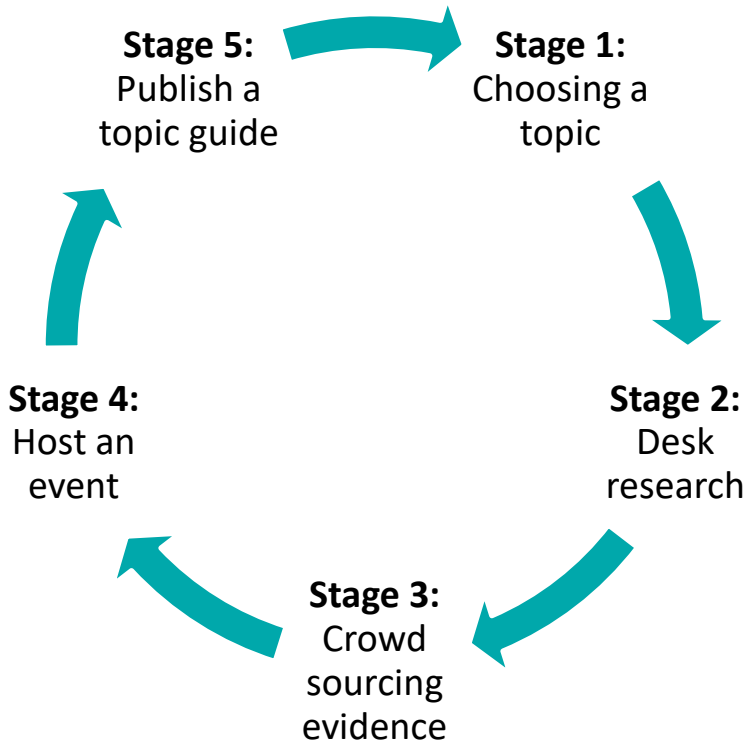
The What Works process

As part of the NCCPE's work to support the development of high quality public engagement, we have noticed a growing need for resources that synthesise what we already know about different areas of engagement practice. The 'What Works' programme is a process to crowd source intelligence and resources relating to different engagement topics, and then synthesise this into a useful guide. The process works in 5 stages:



Social media use is now prevalent in society and can be a useful mechanism for engaging the public with research, however this raises many questions:

- How is social media being used to engage the public with research? What do we know about how to do this well?
- Who is doing interesting work in this space, and how can we help others to make use of the opportunity?
- What are the challenges to participating in social media, and how might they be mitigated?

The NCCPE commissioned a short piece of **desk research** to explore the use of social media in engaging the public with research. The research found:

- Researchers are mainly using social media for the purposes of peer-to-peer networking and dissemination, and many receive support from their universities to do so.
- Significantly fewer researchers use social media to open up conversations or invite collaboration from the public. Reasons for this could include:
    - Social media may not be currently perceived by academics as a suitable means to engage the public with university research. By contrast, many large public facing commercial organisations run sophisticated public engagement programmes primarily through social media
    - Concerns that we may lack rigorous analytical tools for engagement through social media
    - Guidance from universities tends to focus only on dissemination and peer-to-peer networking; and support materials are often out of date and cover only the most rudimentary basics of social networking
    - Researchers may be reluctant to embrace social media, because it is still not highly regarded by some sections of the academic community.
    - Researchers may be concerned about how others may respond to their comments, and how quickly this can escalate

This guide was produced as part of the 'What Works' process and is designed to aid those engaging the public with their research through social media.

The NCCPE worked with experts from universities across the UK to develop this guide.