

MAKING CONNECTIONS

What GDN Net has learned about using social media to raise the profile of Southern research

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This is one of a series of short publications through which the GDN Net team reflects on what it has learned about supporting Southern researchers to contribute and debate research in development thinking, policy and practice.



By the final year of the GDN Net programme, social media were central to our activities, used by the whole team and subjected to careful monitoring and evaluation (M&E). Our first attempts at using social media were more piecemeal and trial-and-error. As our use evolved, we experienced several challenges along the way and in this publication, we share our social media journey and what we have learned about using these tools to engage with Southern researchers and support uptake of their research.

When the current phase of GDN Net began in 2010, one objective was to catalyse interaction among GDN Net's users: the Southern researchers subscribed to our services, those participating in our research communications training or those whose research featured on GDN Net's website. Our initial technical solution was a bespoke online collaborative workspace (GDN Net Community Groups), which we piloted with attendees of GDN Net's capacity building workshops. Our community groups were designed in such a way as to serve as a space where we could host all the workshop training material, including presentations, handouts, participants' policy briefs, workshop photos and videos.

We had big ambitions for the GDN Net Community Groups. We wanted them to be a place where researchers would interact, discuss their work with each other and with us, and get our feedback on their policy briefs and how they were applying what they had learned at the research communication workshops. In other words, we aimed to use the groups to break the ice with researchers pre-workshop, and maintain our relationship and interaction with them post-workshop. However, this model did not work out. The majority of our capacity building trainees were based in Africa and tended to have limited internet connectivity, mainly due to poor infrastructure and expensive internet services. It was almost impossible for researchers to make use of the online platform. Moreover, some researchers found it not user-friendly enough and required more time than they could allocate.

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It was about this time that we commissioned a study into the uptake of social media among Southern researchers and discovered that these were common barriers among academics worldwide (see *Related Publications*, p.5). In the meantime, the GDN Net blog, which was originally created for reporting on GDN's Annual Conferences, was gaining momentum and seemed to resonate with the audience, especially following the GDN 2011 Annual Conference. We realised that using existing social media channels with which researchers were familiar would serve our cause better than a bespoke platform hosted on our portal. At the time of the January 2010 GDN Annual Conference in Prague, social media use was becoming more commonplace (although not, as we discovered, throughout the research community). We decided to try using a blog to cover the event. Being a conference-driven blog, this meant a year elapsed before new content was added when the next GDN Annual Conference took place. Despite establishing an audience at its launch, by putting the blog on hold, we had to build one from scratch again.

How social media became integrated into GDN Net

Sherine Ghoneim, Programme Director, GDN Net

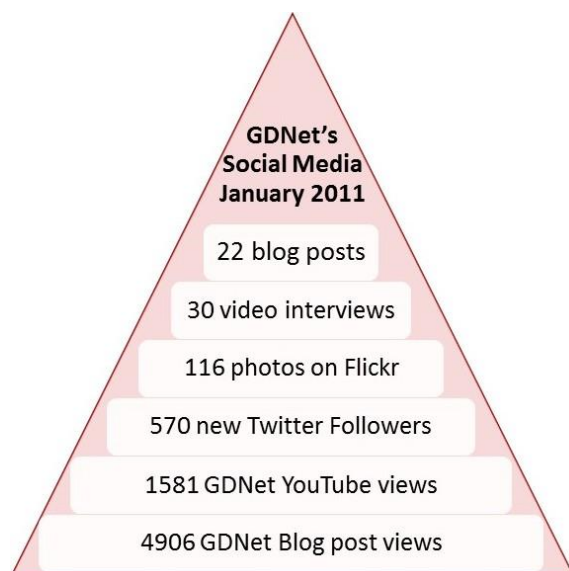
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What I find most striking about how GDN Net has used social media is the pace of change. When we planned the latest phase of the GDN Net programme in 2010, we looked to the Southern research environment to guide us and social media were just not part of the landscape at that time. But after only a couple of years it became clear that social media could be used to make an important contribution to GDN Net's purpose. We were starting to see demand for social media from our members but also the technology was changing to the extent that the use of social media was becoming essential for information services to have a visible presence. At the same time, we saw social media could make a difference to the effectiveness of Southern researchers and so we brought them into our capacity building workshops. By 2013, social media were so embedded in GDN Net's work that they needed to be integrated into our Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) framework and a new set of indicators developed for them.

To do this, we produced a few posts preceding the conference and spread the word through the GDNNet portal, email newsletter and other social media platforms (particularly Twitter). During the 2011 conference, held in Bogotá, Colombia, we put lots of energy into our social media activities including 22 blog posts in both English and Spanish and 30 interviews with conference key speakers and participants (including Juan Manuel Santos, the President of Colombia). This all prompted a remarkable increase in visits to the GDNNet Blog and YouTube channel, and interaction on Twitter, which we attribute to two factors:

- **the size of the social media team:** at Bogotá, we worked with staff from CommsConsult and Euforic Services, and members of our Regional Network Partner, LACEA, who generated the Spanish content.
- **the nature of the audience:** social media were already widely used in Latin America by January 2011 and the conference attracted a lot of young students who were very comfortable with online interaction.

We learned that we would need a strong social media team if we wanted to offer reliable and timely coverage going forward, and that with a receptive audience, the results could be dramatic.



Following the Bogotá Conference, and throughout 2011, our social media work continued to be driven by events, but content was also added more frequently. We began to cover GDNNet's research communications capacity building workshops, as well as conferences and meetings organised by GDN's Regional Network Partners and other Southern research institutes and organisations. Our use of social media was fast becoming an official area of focus for GDNNet. As part of her role as Research Communications Capacity Building Manager, Zeinab was tasked with managing GDNNet's social media activity, and received training and advice from Euforic Services, a consultancy working on social media for international development. However, as social media use was

growing within GDNNet as an output on its own, we came to realise that social media could not remain the responsibility of one person in GDNNet when our aim was to embed them across the whole programme and its different areas of work.

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The ERF Annual Conference in January 2012 provided an opportunity for this to be put into action. The GDNNet team took part in social media training so we could all participate in reporting for the conference and covering other events throughout the year. With more people involved and a constant flow of content required, we found it helpful to create a social media calendar to capture relevant news hooks and events, coordinate the different social media platforms being used and organise division of labour among the team. As our capacity increased, we became more aware of the drawbacks of event-driven social media. Individual campaigns may be successful and create a short-term following but it is difficult to build on these successes and to maintain, let alone increase, the audience without regular content. M&E played a vital role in GDNNet's social media evolution at this point. By comparing the statistics from different events, we saw that the most online interaction occurred when there was regular content, involvement of all team members and integration of social media activity within the GDNNet programme and its different outputs. We needed a social media strategy that would help us to make better use of social media for communication and interaction, and incorporate them into all aspects of the GDNNet programme, from capacity building to knowledge-brokering, rather than treating use of social media as a separate activity. The rest of this publication focuses on what we have learned as we developed and implemented that strategy.

GDNNet Publications Relating to Social Media

These are all available to download from the GDNNet project page on the DFID Research for Development site at <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/Project/60734/>

- *Effective Writing for the Web*, GDNNet, Awards & Medals Presentation Skills Training, Budapest, 2012.
- *Making Full Use of the Power of Social Media in Your Research*, as above.
- *Learning By Design: perspectives on monitoring and evaluating a Southern-focused knowledge service*, by Sherine Ghoneim and Robbie Gregorowski, 2014.
- *GDNNet's Baseline and M&E Framework 2010* and subsequent annual M&E reports produced by Itad.
- *Are southern academics virtually connected?*, Cheryl Brown (2011). GDNNet's study on web 2.0 uptake by Southern researchers.

See also: *Express and Not Impress: guidelines for blog writing*, S. Emara, GDNNet blog, December 11th, 2013, <http://gdnetblog.org/2013/12/11/express-and-not-impress/>

Challenges GDNNet has faced in using social media

Helping researchers with networking has been a central aim of GDNNet and social media were ideal spaces for this interaction to take place. One cannot interact, however, without an audience so ***the first and biggest social media challenge we thought we would encounter was how to build an audience.*** In fact, this turned out to be easier than expected. The large conferences and events that GDNNet supported were perfect opportunities to build a following but ***we learned that the real challenge is in keeping that audience.*** In social media, as with all communication, you lose your audience if they lose interest in what you are saying. In our experience, the best way to overcome this is to gain a good understanding of an audience and their interests, and to generate regular new content.

An enduring challenge has been engaging our audience.

Doubtless we are not the first to experience this, but as a programme for researchers working in different regions, we discovered particular challenges in engaging our audience through live conference coverage or regular delivery of content. In Latin America, social media channels are popular among academics, but we have found that, researchers based in the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa are far less likely to be using web 2.0 (social media) in their work. Social media channels are interlinked and by using several of them, we could increase the likelihood of reaching researchers, and signpost them to other GDNNet social media channels. GDNNet's Twitter account, for example, has been vital in directing traffic to our blog where it has made a real difference to the volume of comments made on posts. We also learned to appreciate that social media is an open world where no boundaries are necessary; interaction did not need to be limited to the GDNNet team providing content for audiences to react to. In fact, when we introduced guest bloggers, this proved to be particularly successful in stimulating responses.

The subjects being covered through social media can present their own challenges. At conferences, discussions about economic development issues can quickly become technical, which created problems for our social media team, whose backgrounds tended to be in the social sciences. In Bogotá, for example, we wrote a blog post about a prominent economist's presentation and featured it in a printed broadsheet for display at the conference venue. When the presenter saw the broadsheet, he expressed his concern that the post did not accurately represent what he had said. We amended the content, based on the researcher's contributions, but the problem remained: we wanted to continue making the more technical research shared at conferences, available to a wider audience but our reporting was limited by our lack of specialist knowledge. Our initial solution was to produce more video blogs, where our non-technical summary accompanied clips of the researchers talking about the research in their own words. In recent months we experimented by using an expert reviewer who gave feedback on the blog posts prior to

publication. This approach helped us to provide rich, reliable, technical content on the different topics covered at the conference. One important thing we have learned is that ***in public online spaces you need to be open to receiving criticism about what you share and how to respond.*** This is something we have introduced recently to our research communications capacity building workshops, making use of social media a key component of the content. It can be difficult for researchers to embrace this culture of openness, exposing their work to an online audience where it may trigger negative comments. The message we are trying to convey to Southern researchers is that using social media is not about aiming to please.



Use of social media was added to our capacity building workshops

Using social media to promote Southern research

GDNNet's new social media approach required a steady flow of content for various social media platforms and a natural source for this was GDNNet's online repository, the Knowledgebase, which provided free access to more than 21,000 full length research papers. During the final year of the programme, GDNNet's Knowledge Services team was adding over 200 items to the Knowledgebase every month. In the process, the team would keep an eye out for particularly controversial or timely papers produced by Southern researchers to promote on Twitter or the GDNNet blog. The blog posts about papers in the Knowledgebase were either written by GDNNet or we invited researchers to write guest blog posts for us. The posts tended to be written in an informal style, in contrast to the summary produced about the research for the GDNNet Knowledgebase on the GDNNet website. This alternative format allowed us to explain to online readers what we personally found interesting about the paper that had we chosen to feature. The blog also gave other researchers the opportunity to comment on the research or ask questions, to which the GDNNet team or original author of the paper could respond. In practice, we had only a small number of comments on these posts but blogging also brought the advantage of being able to create different content objects based on the same research product that could then be re-posted on, and linked to, other platforms. We found that the distance the research travels as a result of blogging depends to a great extent on the author's own online connections. If the author was popular on Twitter, for example, then the post tended to be picked up more quickly.

M&E of social media: beyond visits and retweets

Conducting a regular health check of GDNNet's social media statistics and platforms enabled us to monitor how our audience was growing and evolving at different events. From this, we identified that we needed to 'feed' our platforms with regular content, and therefore we updated our approach accordingly and progressively.

As explained already in this publication, GDNNet's use of social media grew substantially over time, and this health check had to be adapted in response. We had to create new M&E indicators specifically for social media that would measure their contribution to GDNNet's objectives. M&E has helped us to keep an eye on progress, take stock of successes and failures, and to learn how to adapt and come up with new ideas for engaging more interactively with our online audience. Put simply, we learned what to measure and how. These are not easy questions to answer and have to keep being asked. Our M&E of social media needed to be reviewed regularly to make sure it complied with the programme's logframe and activities.

Defining what we meant by 'interaction'

When it came to planning how to do M&E of social media we had to think about what we meant by interaction and how to measure it. We had to ask ourselves: 'What does GDNNet aim to achieve through the use of social media? What kind of reactions will we be looking to trigger from our audience?' This only prompted further questions for us to puzzle over as we tried to establish what we meant by 'interaction':

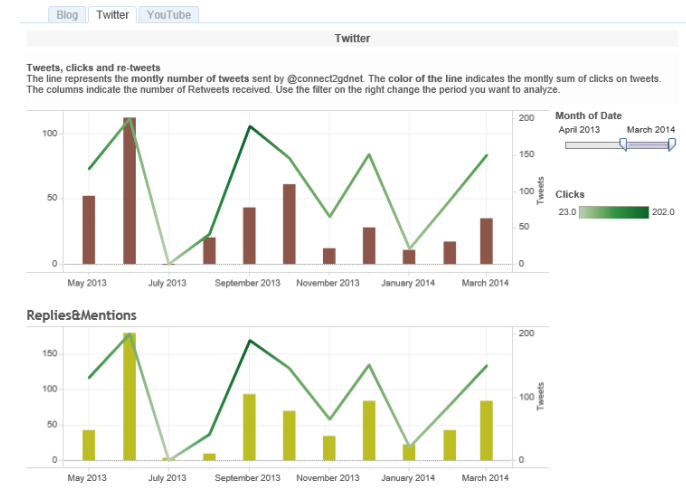
- 1) Is two-way communications where GDNNet talks to its user base and they respond classed as interaction? (GDNNet-to-User interaction).
- 2) Have we facilitated interaction if we create an online space where researchers interact with each other? (researcher-to-researcher interaction).

These interpretations are both legitimate, but require different approaches to achieve them and certainly a different set of indicators with which to monitor progress. It is extremely important to define what is intended to be monitored before the benchmarks are set in place.

Different meanings imply different measures

We came to learn that interaction happens at different levels. Initially, GDNNet invested in building a relationship with its members, Southern researchers, but more recently, developed its approach in order to trigger interaction between online audiences themselves. This change in perspective was reflected by a change in the M&E. In the case of our Twitter account, for example, this meant looking at the number and quality of replies and mentions instead of the number of tweets and re-tweets (see chart, above right). The same applied to GDNNet's blog, monitoring the number

and content of comments as a sign of researcher-to-researcher interaction, rather than the number of posts produced and views.



GDNNet's Social Media statistics 2013/2014 are shared online through interactive charts created using 'Tableau Public'
<http://public.tableausoftware.com/profile/#!/vizhome/TestVizGDNet/Blog>

Making time for reflection

Another aspect of our M&E of social media was to be systematic about learning from each activity and experience, whether a success or failure; an approach we applied across all of GDNNet's areas of work. At first it felt quite an effort sometimes to review and log our learning but we have since become eager to sit down, think, reflect and go through After Action Reviews to document our learning and come up with better practices for the next time we approach a similar task.

The simple rule of thumb for GDNNet's After Action Reviews is: Pause...Reflect...Learn...Forward plan

In the context of social media, this meant the team getting together after each event for which we had provided social media reporting, and thinking about what worked well and what could have been done better in readiness for the next time. From this reflection we developed a series of suggestions that we put into action at the next opportunity, e.g. to develop a hash tag specifically for the event and to start tweeting prior to the event to get the hash tag into use in advance. Another idea that we came up with from our After Action Review, was to check the list of participants before the event and research their presence online so that we could mention them or their respective affiliated organisations. We found that this tactic saves time during live tweeting, provides consistency and avoids mistakes, which can easily happen with an instantaneous medium such as Twitter.

GDNNet's M&E framework has helped us to learn how to use social media more strategically, but along the way, we've learned almost as much about how to monitor and evaluate social media effectively.

GdNet's tips for using social media

Although the social media landscape changes quickly, there are some enduring principles of good practice that can help to make their use more successful. Our learning about using social media to engage with Southern researchers and to promote their knowledge, can be distilled into the following set of tips, which we hope others will find useful:

- *Map your audience*; run a simple survey of your constituency and learn which social media channels they use most often. Investing in this at the outset saves wasted effort later as your dissemination is more likely to reach your intended audience.
- *Content is king*; disseminating irrelevant or poor quality content is bad enough but with social media, content is shared through multiple channels, making the problem even worse. Focus on engaging audiences with stories that are worthy of their attention.
- *Use a content calendar*; it helps the team to get organised and ensures that regular and timely content is going out in an organised manner.
- *Slow down and prioritise*; social media are fast-paced and it's easy to think you need to be speaking all the time, but if you send out too many messages, the most important ones could be overlooked.
- *Use more than one tool*: a blog alone, for example, is unlikely to work well but its content can feed several social media channels. More tools does not necessarily mean much more work, but it does mean you need to work smarter.
- *Understand why you are using a tool*: it makes sense to use Facebook and not LinkedIn, for example, if that suits your main target audience and content better, or has the potential to reach more people.
- *Be useful*: respect the limited time your followers and friends have available and ensure that interacting with your channels will be a good use of their time.
- *Bring M&E in at the beginning*: define your indicators early on and start collecting data but keep an eye on progress and be prepared to change them or introduce new ones.
- *Use the tools*: don't waste time understanding how a social media channel works, just use it and let someone else worry about its technical development.

We have found that there are no firm rules about how to use social media; every community is different and every programme is different in the set of activities it undertakes. In our experience, no online community dies overnight; however, members drift away when nothing is happening online or if the community becomes hyper-active and is difficult to follow. Finding the right balance is as difficult as finding the right relationship. You need to work for it, invite and welcome members, come up with great content and focus on community rather than the number of followers. Most importantly, remember to have fun!

Related Resources:

Brown, C. (2011). *Are southern academics virtually connected?*, GdNet's study on web 2.0 uptake by Southern researchers at <http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/Project/60734/>

Tips for conference bloggers, Giussani & Zuckerman, 2007
http://giussani.typepad.com/loip/conferenceblogging/confereceblogging_zuckerman-giussani_A4_color.pdf

Toolkit for researchers: How to write for the Web, IDRC, 2011.
http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Tools_and_Training/Pages/Toolkit-for-researchers.aspx

Impact 2.0 iGuide - New mechanisms for linking research and policy, APC and Comunica, wiki-based publication.
<http://iguides.comunica.org>

What social media and digital tools are think tanks using in their work?, blog post by Nick Scott, June 20th, 2012.
<http://onthinktanks.org/2012/06/20/social-media-digital-tools-use-views-think-tank-initiative-exchange-2012-clinic/>



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