

Building your online presence through social media during grad school

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Image courtesy of Adobe Stock/bloomicon.

Working-from-home and social-distancing guidelines imposed by COVID-19 made graduate school more challenging, particularly for building a solid network and professional connections when we were asked to be physically farther apart. Even outside of the ongoing global pandemic, free online social media platforms can help us enhance our professional networks and connect with new people from all over the world. Building your online presence through social media during graduate school does not have to be complicated. Based on our personal experiences and engagement in extension and science communication, we are providing some tips to improve your professional online presence on multiple social media platforms.

Set Your Goals

Before you start thinking about what you want to achieve with your social media goals, you should have a clear picture of where you stand right now. That means you need to conduct a social media examination/audit. "Audit" can be a scary word, but in this case, it does not have anything to do with the tax authorities. Instead, it simply means collecting key information about each of your social media accounts. A social media audit creates a clear picture of your current social efforts and shows you the best way to improve results.

Once you have completed your examination, look through the information you have gathered. You will start to see which social media platforms are already performing well, whether you need to create an account on a new platform, or if you have more accounts than you can handle.

Next, start to think about what is really important for you to achieve your goals.

Generally, graduate students' goals are: (1) science communication, (2) professional relationships/networking, and (3) becoming an authority on a research topic. Take a

look at your overall career aspirations, and go from there. In a more advanced way, you can use the **SMART** goal framework:

- **Specific:** Be clear. The more specific you can be with your goal, the easier it will be to see what it is you need to accomplish clearly.
- **Measurable:** Can your goal be measured? How will you know when you've achieved your goal?
- **Attainable:** Is it possible to achieve the goal you've set for yourself?
- **Relevant:** Is this going to impact your career?
- **Timely:** Give your goal a deadline (or imagine one).

Identify and Get to Know Your Audience

Aligned with your goals, you need to think about your audience or the people that you want to reach. Is it other scientists for networking? The general public? Farmers? Ranchers? Think carefully. This is a very important step. It will drive the way you craft your posts. If you want to connect to other scientists, use scientific language. If you want to communicate your science to the general public, use average language and avoid jargon or complex words. Jargon builds roadblocks, lacking the bridges we desire when communicating about our very important research or practice to the general public! For this audience, we aim to have a "readability" at the 8th- to 10th-grade level because that is the reading level of the average college graduate. If you want to learn more about how to communicate your science, please contact headquarters staff Susan Fisk ([Send Message](#)) and Rachel Schutte ([Send Message](#)) for a media training.

Identify the Best Platform Based on Your Goals and Audience

Social media platforms can be used for multiple purposes, including professional goals. If you are not on social media professionally, it could affect your career (e.g., job

opportunities, promotion, and future partnerships/work collaborations) in ways you cannot foresee. Your presence on social media and how you manage your profile(s) should be aligned with your defined goals.

From the list of most popular social media platforms, LinkedIn is the one designed purely and exclusively for professional social networking. This platform has a broad range of use, particularly outside of academia, where employers are very active. Thus, consider creating a LinkedIn account for seeing future job opportunities (particularly non-academic jobs). To strengthen your profile and increase the chances of being considered for job opportunities related to your skills, make sure to include specific skills on your LinkedIn profile to showcase your abilities (for example, statistical analysis, remote sensing, spatial analysis, molecular biology, and so on). These skills can be validated by your connections, which is called skill endorsement.

Even though most of the other social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube) have their non-professional “social” side, graduate students have increasingly used them for disseminating and communicating research. For example, Twitter may be used to engage in conversations related to your research area, to observe the world’s discussion on your area of expertise, to promote your published paper, or to let the community know about your research projects and the things you love about your work. Platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are photo heavy, and thus powerful tools for visually appealing posts. For example, recording your field and lab data collection, sharing the behind-the-scenes looks of your work, or publishing key figures and highlights from your recently published manuscript are some ways these platforms can be used professionally.

Craft Your Post

When crafting your post, treat your social media as a living journey—one that is endless and stored forever. It can be scary to think about, but what you post on social media never really goes away.

Assume that your post can always be found and viewed multiple times by multiple people. For this reason, make sure to post accordingly.

When crafting your post, keep in mind the importance of:

- Investing in a device with a good camera and keeping it nearby for important events (e.g., field or lab work and group meetings).
- Providing a short and concise explanation to your post. Keep in mind that some platforms have word limits (e.g., the character limit in Twitter is 280).
- Exploring hashtags that are meaningful to you, such as #AcademicChatter, #PhDchat, #scitwitter, #WomenInSTEM, #BlackInSTEM, or #LGBTQInSTEM.

Hashtags are made to be seen and get you seen. Hashtags are one of the best ways for new professional connections to find you.



Recording your field and lab data collection, sharing the behind-the-scenes looks of your work, or publishing key figures and highlights from your recently published manuscript are some ways social media platforms can be used professionally. Photo by Michael Sider.

Seek Relationships over Followers

Building a strong network through social media requires you to seek relationships, not just followers. Here are some of the considerations for building meaningful connections:

- **Be human**—Through social media, you interact with people from all walks of life and different cultures all over the world. Respect is as important on social media as it is in the real world. But, keep in mind, that there are always people who will disagree with you (and with your posts).
- **Be yourself**—There are different ways to manage social media profiles professionally. For example, some students like to post pictures from the field and laboratory work or the conferences and seminars attended. Others might rather do threads explaining science concepts or tweets promoting their papers. Others can

share science art. Some students advocate for social justice in science. Whether you are straightforward, funny, artistic, or an activist, remember to be yourself and find your space on social media.

- **Connect and network**—Find people who are relevant to your field by looking up the names of people in the literature you read. Follow professors and peers from your university as well as institutional accounts from professional societies or government agencies. If you are on Twitter, here are some accounts related to the Societies you may want to follow and engage @ASA_CSSA_SSSA, @SSSA_soils, @_SASES, @AgronomyJournal, @AgricEnvLetters, and @ACSGradStudents. By connecting with names relevant to your field, you can then incorporate social media into icebreaker strategies during the Societies' Annual Meeting: "Hi, I know you from Twitter," for example, could be the initiation of an in-person connection that started virtually before the conference. Our Graduate Student Program at the Annual Meeting also offers a special session focused on networking with members from industry, academia, government, and NGOs. This is a great opportunity for strengthening your networking beyond social media.
- **Engage**—Consider generating content as much as you consume it. If you are on social media, keep engaged and interact with your network. Liking other people's posts is a good start, but you need more engagement to build a network. Reply to posts that are meaningful to you, congratulate your peers on their wins, and support their struggles. Tag people in your posts. Interact with hashtags, ask questions, and retweet relevant posts while adding your opinion.

Engaging with our @ACSGradStudents Twitter account is a good start to enhance your professional networks.

Promote Your Research on the Web

Research accessibility has changed a lot over the past decades; from photocopied books and manuscripts to information accessed in real-time from a smartphone device. Promoting your research on the web gives visibility for you and your work, which can be helpful to attract funders, collaborators, employers, publishers, and mentors. You can promote your research on the web using various social-networking accounts (Twitter and LinkedIn), scholarly platforms (Research Gate and Google Scholar), digital identifiers (ORCID), or personal websites.

Some of the questions you may want to answer while promoting your research on the web include: Who are you? What are your career interests and goals? What have you accomplished? What are your research products (book chapter, publication, poster presentation, dissertation/thesis, oral presentation)? What degrees have you earned?

Make the Most of Visual Content

Sometimes words are not enough, and you may need to step out of the box when it comes to engaging the audience. This is where great visuals can really come in handy and make you stand out from the crowd. Around 65% of people are visual learners. Use photos, videos, collages, infographics, GIFs, etc. We all know that a picture is worth a thousand words.

Use Available Resources

- Social media scheduling and management tools: Buffer Publish, Hootsuite, and Zoho.
- Video-editing apps and software: Adobe Premier PRO, Adobe Premier Rush, Camtasia, Lightworks (free), and Hitfilm Express (free)
- Audio-editing apps and software: Adobe Audition, Sound Forge, and Audacity (free).
- Image-editing apps and software: Adobe Spark (free version), Canvas (free version), Power Point, Adobe Illustrator, and Adobe Photoshop.



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Build Your Online Presence by Examples

Don't know how to start building your online presence? Here are some examples of social media accounts developed by graduate students in crop-, soil-, and agronomy-related areas.

- The Tiller Queen (<https://rveenstra.wixsite.com/tillers/blog>): Rachel Veenstra (Ph.D. student at Kansas State University)
- @GOESbyJuniper (<https://twitter.com/GOESbyJuniper>): Juniper Kiss (Ph.D. student at the University of Southampton)
- @FavorettoVitor (<https://twitter.com/FavorettoVitor>): Vitor Favoretto (Ph.D. candidate at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign)
- @AgRemotegirl (<https://twitter.com/AgRemotegirl>): Luciana Nieto (Ph.D. student at Kansas State University)
- Agro Connection: www.agroconnection.net

Building an online presence comes with some risks—for example, getting caught up in the non-professional “social” side of these different platforms or being exposed to more information than our brain can process at one time (information overload). Nobody wants to become a slave to our social media.

As graduate students, it is important to use social media to our advantage. Foster a healthy relationship with your social media profile(s), perhaps by coming up with a

posting schedule or even turning it off after a certain time of day. Your online presence should not come at the expense of your research or your health.

Take care of yourself while in graduate school and beyond, be passionate, and share your enthusiasm for your research projects and graduate school in general. Your social media accounts will follow suit.

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