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The Ebb and Flow of Social Media for Researchers

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"Nothing vast enters the life of mortals without a curse" – Sophocles

These profound words resonate deeply in an era defined by the ebb and flow of our relationship with social media. The opening of the Netflix documentary "The Social Dilemma" invokes this quote from Sophocles, setting the stage for a contemplative exploration of the digital realm. The film unearths the stories of the architects behind social media platforms, individuals who birthed the innovation and later recoiled in realization of its potential to disrupt the very foundations of our civilization. The documentary's impact reverberated globally, prompting over 100 million viewers to reconsider their digital habits, leading some to silence notifications or even abandon social media platforms entirely.

While societal consciousness expands regarding the adverse effects of extended social media engagement on mental health, personal well-being, and interpersonal relationships, it remains an undeniable fact that social media has seamlessly integrated itself into our daily existence. According to the Global Web Index's 2023 report, a staggering 60% of the world's population actively participates in the digital communities that social media offers.[1] The modern landscape sees the average internet user investing 6 hours and 35 minutes of their day online, dedicating a significant 2 hours and 24 minutes exclusively to social media engagement.[1]

However, within this curse lies a blessing – an unprecedented opportunity for researchers to leverage social media as a channel to reach and engage with large audiences. From this perspective, the use of social media networks by scientists and academic publishers aiming to distribute their research data and findings for a more robust and inclusive discussion environment is becoming increasingly inevitable. As a simple reflection of this trend, it is striking to observe how rapidly the number of social media accounts held by scientific researchers and academic publishers has been increasing.[2]

Although visibility may sound daunting, it stands as one of the most crucial attributes a scientist should cultivate. The impetus to embark on scientific research often stems from the desire to make a meaningful impact by sharing newfound knowledge. In this context, visibility becomes not just a choice, but a responsibility. Social media offers an avenue to achieve this visibility, allowing researchers to showcase their work to a broader audience than ever before. Engaging with the public is a critical aspect of being visible on social media as a researcher. It goes far beyond sharing your research findings; it involves actively participating in conversations, responding to comments and messages, and building relationships with your followers which can be an opportunity to bridge the gap between scientific research and the general audience. Communicating your work in a clear and accessible manner can help the public better understand complex and unknown scientific concepts, fostering a positive perception of science.

Use of social media networks among researchers not only provides increased visibility and expanded impact but also facilitates the emergence of an online community that enables to build connections between scientists all over the world by transcending geographical boundaries and allowing extensive knowledge share. Moreover, such enhanced relationships

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would let researchers to find further collaborators and funders. Thanks to the ubiquity of social media and its power to remove physical barriers, it is now possible for an early-career researcher to consult, take mentorship and plan career goals with pioneers in their field, which is something that would have been almost impossible in the pre-social media era. The aforementioned physical barriers used to let to disparities between scientists in the past times when internet could not be thought of as a communication system.

In the 21st century, where even e-mail can be considered slow, real-time media systems are very valuable in terms of providing fast and effective communication and data sharing for clinicians and scientists, as in all fields. Virtual meetings, educational online workshops, and seminars have become the routines of the scientific world today, especially since face-to-face meetings have become impossible due to the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. These remote meetings enable researchers from all over the globe to participate in scientific discussions without physical and financial burdens. This is an undeniable contribution of social media systems to the universality of knowledge and equality of access to science.

However, alongside these promising aspects, social media also ushers in challenges that researchers must address responsibly. The digital age has given rise to a phenomenon known as "infobesity," where the relentless influx of information can overwhelm individuals, making it difficult to discern credible content from misinformation. Researchers engaging with social media must be wary of contributing to this saturation of information and strive to deliver value and accuracy in their communications. Moreover, while social media's vast reach facilitates knowledge sharing, it also presents a paradoxical concern – information overload and attention fragmentation. In the era of bite-sized content and fleeting attention spans, researchers may find it challenging to communicate complex ideas effectively. The rapid-scroll nature of social media may lead to important research findings being lost in the stream of information. Furthermore, social media's suitability for basic education remains a subject of debate. While it can be a powerful tool for informal learning and knowledge sharing, the superficial nature of some social media interactions may not fully replace traditional educational methods, particularly for foundational subjects.

In addition to these challenges, the lack of stringent regulations on social media platforms has enabled the spread of unchecked and misleading information. The unrestricted sharing of content can inadvertently propagate unverified claims and pseudoscience, eroding public trust in reliable scientific information. This unfiltered environment also opens the door to unprofessional and offensive commentary that can undermine the constructive nature of scientific discourse. The consequences extend beyond just the realm of misinformation. The absence of quality control measures can lead to breaches of patients' privacy, with sensitive medical information being shared without consent. This raises ethical concerns and highlights the need for more robust guidelines to protect both individuals' rights and the integrity of scientific research.[3,4]

In conclusion, Sophocles' timeless words mirror the duality inherent in our relationship with social media – a blend of challenges and opportunities, curses and blessings. The ebb and flow of this digital realm is a testament to the complex nature of human interaction with technology. As researchers navigate these currents, they hold the power to harness social media as a force for change, wielding its potential to amplify their work's impact, connect with diverse audiences, and foster a culture of scientific curiosity and understanding that transcends the confines of academia.

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