The Use of Online Strategies and Social Media for Research Dissemination in Education

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Executive Summary
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Context: There has been global interest in public service sectors in how to better connect research to policy and practice to improve outcomes for citizens. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada calls these efforts Knowledge Mobilization (KMb). Alongside the growing interest in KMb has been the transformation of how knowledge is produced, accessed, and disseminated in light of the internet and the use of social media. This article arises from a larger study (Cooper, 2014) that explores the roles of 44 Research Brokering Organizations (RBOs) --third party educational organizations that connect research producers and users -- in facilitating KMb processes across Canada.
Research Question: What online dissemination mechanisms do RBOs in Canada use to mobilize their research?
Method: This study used a multicase research design to collect empirical data on educational organizations whose major focus and activity is connecting research producers and users to improve knowledge mobilization.
Sampling: Three sampling strategies resulted in the identification of 541 potential organizations for the broader study. 44 RBOs were selected that met two inclusion criteria: 1) *Target Audience* (they connected research producers **and** users, and 2) *KMb Mission Statement* (their organizational goals were explicitly related to KMb).

Data Collection and Analysis: Organizational websites were visited to determine which online strategies were utilized in addition to the website itself. Frequencies and descriptive statistics were calculated using Excel. After general analysis of all online dissemination strategies, further analysis was conducted in relation to social media. To analyze social media posts (including facebook posts, twitter posts, blog posts and online forums) all posts from September 2010-December 2010 were entered into spreadsheets (one entry per row) and inductively coded based on content and links to external sources.

Findings: Overall, this study found low levels of use of online dissemination strategies by RBOs, although there are a few organizations that use these mechanisms extensively. Most RBOs use few online strategies in addition to their website: 32% only use a website, 36% use 1-2 additional strategies, 25% use 3-4 additional strategies and 7% use more than 5 additional strategies. Additional strategies that were used included blogging and microblogging (blogs and Twitter), social networking (Facebook, LinkedIn, Online Discussion Forums), social bookmarking (Delicious), multimedia (YouTube channels, Flickr), share buttons embedded on websites (which allow users to email something, tweet it, post it to Facebook etc.), and RSS feeds (Figure 1).
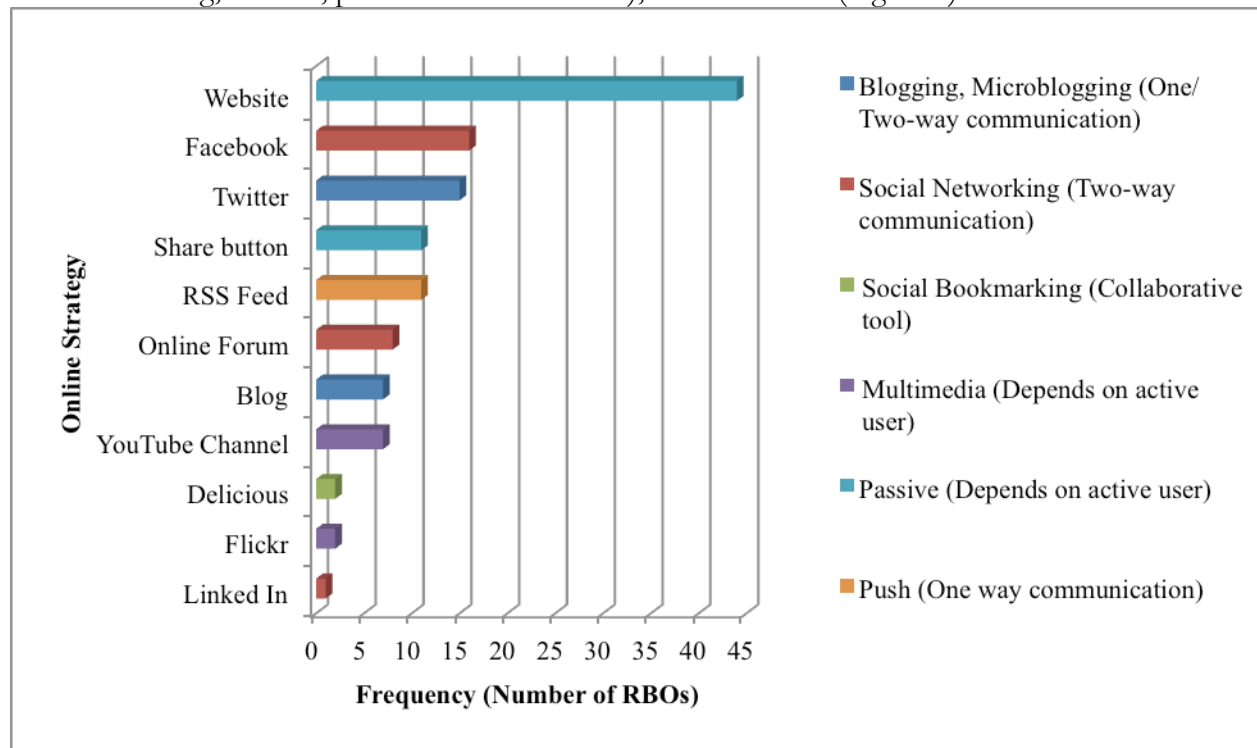

Figure 1. RBOs use of online dissemination strategies

RBOs use of social media was modest. Only one-third of RBOs (36%) had Facebook pages or groups. Facebook pages had a wide range of network followers from 17- 4,577 (M= 547, SD= 1, 161). Similarly, one-third (34%) of RBOs were also using Twitter. Twitter networks were usually not very large, from 11-5000 followers (M=905.5, SD= 1309). Intensity of twitter usage also varied across RBOs ranging from 0 tweets per month to 149 tweets per month (M=34, SD= 41).

Five types of Twitter posts were identified: Opinion (viewpoints on educational issues), Promotion of Organization, Information (about events, videos, newspaper articles), Personal updates (about where a person was or what they were doing) and Research-based (posts that revolved around empirical research or shared research reports and products. RBOs' posts to Facebook and Twitter were about 20% research-based.

Implications: Building and joining technological platforms for interaction, while creating capacity for online interaction, does not ensure actual use. An analogy of Tristram Hooley (September 1, 2011) (an author of the guide for social media for researchers) compares many online strategies as building elaborate empty rooms. The implications of reported low levels of activity mean that, on their own, social media mechanisms will not necessarily increase KMb. Rather, like other strategies, they need to be embedded in larger processes that promote sustained interaction among groups. These findings are not meant to diminish the potential of social media as a research dissemination tool, especially for target audiences that might be active participants of social media; it is just to say that, according to this research, the buzz around social media has yet to be substantiated. In fact, due to social media being somewhat new (especially in relation to research dissemination), it perhaps mirrors the diffusion of innovation model by Everett Rogers (1995) with innovators and early adopters leading the charge, and with the early and late majority of organizations to follow after watching other RBOs implement successful research dissemination strategies using social media.

About the Author

Dr. Amanda Cooper is an Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership and Policy at Queen's University in Canada. She specializes in knowledge mobilization and translation in public service sectors. She is the director of the Research Informing Policy, Practice and Leadership in Education program (RIPPLE), a team undertaking research and related activities aimed at learning more about how to build strong linkages between research, policy and practice. For more information about her work or research program, please visit: www.amandacooper.ca.