

# Social Media and the 21st-Century Scholar: How You Can Harness Social Media to Amplify Your Career

Teresa M. Chan, MD, MHPE<sup>a</sup>, David Stukus, MD<sup>b</sup>, Jimmie Leppink, PhD<sup>c</sup>, Lina Duque, MBA<sup>d</sup>, Blair L. Bigham, ACPf, MSc, MD<sup>e</sup>, Neil Mehta, MBBS, MS<sup>e</sup>, Brent Thoma, MA, MD, MSc<sup>f</sup>

## Abstract

To many physicians and professionals, social media seems to be a risky business. However, recent literature has shown that there is potential to enhance your scholarly brand by engaging your stakeholders online. In this article, we discuss the opportunities presented to modern scholars by social media. Using case studies, we highlight two success stories around how scientists and scholars might use social media to enhance their careers. We also outline five key steps you can follow to build and manage your scholarly presence online.

**Key Words:** Social media, branding, modern scholar, career enhancement

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media is ubiquitous in the 21st century but remains a vague construct. Merriam-Webster defines social media as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and micro-blogging) through which people create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content” [1]. To many health care professionals, social media is an unfamiliar space. They perceive social media activities as being fraught with risk, a waste of time, or both [2]. Certainly, the amplification of certain messages can damage a career

[3], and there are aspects of social media that provide no tangible benefit to health care practitioners. These negative perceptions may dissuade scholars from attempting to engage in social media.

An essential goal of medical research and scholarship, however, is to improve health care, which requires dissemination of new knowledge quickly and effectively to practitioners, patients, and the public. Traditional publishing can take months to years from the completion of data analysis until the results are made available [4]. The time-honored peer-review process attempts to ensure quality with high editorial standards and strict formatting requirements. After publication, it can take a long time (up to 17 years) to effect changes in clinician behavior [5]. Moreover, health information is one of the top reasons for searching the World Wide Web and social media and for finding answers or support [6], yet third parties may distort or misrepresent the truth. Many of the general and medical news media services can publish conflicting or inaccurate information [7,8]. If their conflicts of interest are not obvious, they may exploit a vulnerable population [7].

Considering the great barriers that already prevent effective knowledge translation and patient engagement, it is incumbent on scientists and scholars to use every tool in their armamentarium, including social media, to reach their intended audiences.

<sup>a</sup>Division of Emergency Medicine, Department of Medicine, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

<sup>b</sup>Division of Allergy and Immunology, Nationwide Children’s Hospital and The Ohio State University College of Medicine, Columbus, Ohio.

<sup>c</sup>School of Health Professions Education, Maastricht University, Maastricht, Netherlands.

<sup>d</sup>Lina Duque Consulting, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

<sup>e</sup>Department of Medicine, Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio.

<sup>f</sup>Department of Emergency Medicine, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada.

Corresponding author and reprints: Teresa M. Chan, MD, MHPE, McMaster University, Division of Emergency Medicine, Department of Medicine, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8L 2X2; e-mail: [teresa.chan@medportal.ca](mailto:teresa.chan@medportal.ca).

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## GETTING ONLINE: A GREAT (AND TERRIBLE) OPPORTUNITY

There are plenty of reasons academics should consider creating an online presence. It can be used to summarize their own and others' research in areas of their expertise and thus provide a source for timely, authentic, and trustworthy information. It does not have to be an entirely altruistic activity, because a robust online presence will allow the authors to reach others interested in their research area, build communities of practice [9-13] (ie, a community of individuals who share a common interest and interact on an ongoing basis to deepen their knowledge and expertise in it) to promote discussions, and drive further research. Communications with the public will ensure that this research is grounded in real needs of the target groups with potential to make meaningful contributions to health care. As their online presence grows, scholars have the potential to become powerful influencers of opinion, driving funding for research and education and policies supported by scientific evidence.

In this article we review two case studies to provide our readers with examples: (1) Brent Thoma, MD, who developed an online identity as a resident, which has propelled his career, and (2) David Stukus, MD, who works tirelessly to dispel myths about allergies.

### CASE STUDY 1: AN ONLINE EDUCATOR

Brent Thoma (@Brent\_Thoma) is now an emergency physician in Saskatchewan, Canada. However, as a third-year resident, he struggled on parts of his annual in-training examination that he found less exciting and concluded that this was, at least in part, a result of the resources that he used to prepare for the examination. An early adopter of online educational resources, he frequently used blogs and podcasts to enhance his own education, but noted that most focused on only the most intriguing questions and concepts that the field had to offer [14].

In December 2012, the BoringEM website (now a multi-author blog known as <https://CanadiEM.org/>) was born. The blog, which focused on the aspects of emergency medicine that Thoma felt were the least interesting (eg, the first blog post was entitled "Urinalysis Voodoo" and examined the subtleties on diagnostic urinalyses) became a hit. Within months an Australian physician named Mike Cadogan (@sandnsurf) had taken Dr Thoma under his wing,

assisting him with the updating and hosting of his new website [14].

Fortuitously, Dr Thoma's online exploits were embraced by a forward-thinking program director, Robert Woods (@robwoodsuofo). This, combined with the warm greeting of the online community of practice [13], soon made him comfortable enough to identify himself openly. From the relative isolation of Saskatchewan, he fostered an international network of mentors—many of whom he had never met! Several of these mentors had an interest in studying the phenomenon of online education in emergency medicine and over the next 4 years he published >50 peer-reviewed articles describing, investigating, and innovating within online medical education. Dr Thoma's story is an example of how social media can be used to amplify the impact of a scholar's work.

### CASE STUDY 2: THE ONLINE CLINICIAN ADVOCATE

David Stukus is an academic pediatric allergist who joined Twitter (Twitter Inc, San Francisco, California, USA) in 2013 using the handle @AllergyKidsDoc. His initial reasoning for becoming active on social media was to dispel common misconceptions about allergic conditions, which aligned with his research and quality improvement interests. His initial target audience included parents and patients who had allergies, but soon after, he developed a following that included primary care clinicians, researchers, and even other allergists. Dr Stukus also uses Twitter to disperse information from national conferences, opine on the latest research presented in journals and mainstream media, join live tweet chats, interact with colleagues, and ultimately to promote his own research [15].

Within a few years, @AllergyKidsDoc had earned Dr Stukus recognition from professional organizations, resulting in dozens of media interviews and invitations to write for *Huffington Post*, all of which helped him establish a national reputation for his work and which led to further opportunities to present on this topic at national meetings to train other physicians on how to use social media. He has published research regarding the use of Twitter at academic meetings [15] and helped establish curriculum at his institution for an elective rotation in health care social media.

Dr Stukus is one example of how social media can be utilized to help grow an academic career by converting "likes" and "follows" into metrics more traditionally

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