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Posting Research Online

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Abstract

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Knowledge and information often stay where they are generated. For that reason, the performance of research institutions hangs on the ability to disseminate research findings to different audiences. For each research agenda, this calls for a dissemination policy, a dissemination plan, a dissemination strategy, and dissemination tactics.

Over the past 10 years, the world has witnessed the amazingly rapid development of the internet as a worldwide communications network linking millions of computers. Not surprisingly, the internet is now the primary means of disseminating research findings, such as through digital libraries containing electronic journals, electronic print archives, and conference proceedings. It is now possible for all researchers to use the internet to promote research online so that it may be invoked by peers, educators, students, journalists, customers for research expertise, and the general public. Research institutions ignore the internet at their peril.

Comments
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Posting Research Online

by Olivier Serrat

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Knowledge and information often stay where they are generated. For that reason, the performance of research institutions hangs on the ability to disseminate research findings to different audiences.[1] For each research agenda, this calls for a dissemination policy, a dissemination plan, a dissemination strategy, and dissemination tactics.

Over the past 10 years, the world has witnessed the amazingly rapid development of the internet as a worldwide communications network linking millions of computers. Not surprisingly, the internet is now the primary means of disseminating research findings, such as through digital libraries containing electronic journals, electronic print archives, and conference proceedings. It is now possible for all researchers to use the internet to promote research online so that it may be invoked by peers, educators, students, journalists, customers for research expertise, and the general public. Research institutions ignore the internet at their peril.

Posting Research Online

There are powerful arguments for using the internet to disseminate research findings:

- **Outlay:** Posting is almost free of charge. The main cost is associated with compiling, designing, and producing material. Once material is online, hundreds, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of people can access it at no additional cost to the supplier.
- **Speed and Flexibility:** The internet is very fast compared to most print media. It also enables hypertext-specific and interactive actions, such as linking to full journals or conference papers from publication lists or summaries (if copyright permits it). Posting takes minutes, unlike printing, and helps material to be opportune and fresh. (Furthermore, updating material does not require a new print run.)
- **Synergies:** Posting enhances and sponsors other dissemination methods by allowing people to see the quality of work. Making material available online means that audiences are more likely to buy, subscribe to, or request other products.
- **Audiences:** The internet exposes work to new audiences. Although not everyone has access to it, more people will be able to find and access materials if they are available online as well as in print.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** internet publication facilitates online impact assessment.[2]

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[1] Dissemination is the process of sharing knowledge and information. The challenge is to improve accessibility to audiences. This means making research findings physically accessible in comprehensible ways to as many audiences as possible.

[2] Conversely, it also draws broad-based feedback on the quality of work, which is an intrinsic element of all good research practice.

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- **Fund-raising:** The investors that fund research know that the internet links research to practice. Increasingly, internet publication is a requirement of research funding. Dissemination raises the profile of an organization and builds its capacity. Investors are more likely to be attracted to research institutions that are demonstrably committed to disseminating research findings to many end users.
- **Others:** The internet limits the need for gatekeepers, offers greater control over intellectual property, and eliminates the constraints posed by lack of space.

Communicating Online

Successful online communication means actively encouraging end users to read and absorb material. Simple operating principles can be drawn from an understanding of how people use the web:

- **Reading Online:** How do people behave online? End users are impatient. They are typically short of time and may be paying for the connection. They want immediate gratification. They want to see the value of a page instantly. They are also active, not passive. They have the power to move from page to page and they want to exercise it. Research shows too that reading from a computer screen is tiring and takes about 25% longer than reading from paper. Therefore, end users are less willing to invest time and they make on-the-spot judgments about the value of the knowledge and information presented. Further, about 80% of end users do not actually read but scan for knowledge and information. They will not scroll down a page if they are not convinced upfront that it contains useful data. And they do not like self-serving publicity. The implication for internet publication is simple: the challenge for disseminating the full content of research findings online is to convince end users to print the documents in which they are found.
- **Disseminating Successfully Online:** Building on this understanding of how people use the web, the operating principles are that websites must be scannable (because end users do not read),[3] concise (because end users do not scroll),[4] and objective (because end users do not like self-serving publicity).[5]

Posting Research in a Web-Friendly Way

Paradoxically, however, researchers are probably most averse to posting research online. The internet is a relatively new method of disseminating research findings that can upset long-standing conventions within research institutions. Despite persuasive, common-sense arguments to the contrary, some researchers are still not convinced of its usefulness. Others fret that their work will be pirated or that they will lose their status. To make matters worse, research writing is inherently not web-friendly.[6] All the more cause, then, to make a special effort:

- **Assisting End Users to Find Research:** Researchers can help end users find research findings without difficulty if they display prominent links to the materials in the website; advertise examples of latest research with short, informative descriptions; make the work discernible to search engines with compelling page and section headings, page descriptions, and meta tags; and advise audiences, notably by electronic mail but also through other various marketing techniques, that research findings are available on the website.

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[3] This means using headings, breaking text into short sections, marking key knowledge and information-carrying words in bold, limiting each paragraph to one idea and stating what that is in the first sentence, using bullets and numbered lists, and splitting long text into multiple pages according to subject.

[4] This entails keeping to the subject; giving background information with hyperlinks to other pages; eschewing repetition, adjectives, and metaphors; using simple sentence structures; and writing in the active, not the passive.

[5] This requires composing for the audience, reining in superlatives and vague statements, presenting nothing as fact without providing evidence, avoiding exaggerations or self-congratulations, curbing promotional talk, and giving facts and letting end users decide what is relevant.

[6] The full-text version of research findings appears on a computer screen as a mass of text. Research papers are also commonly written in what is known as the pyramid style: starting with a foundation and gradually building to a conclusion. And the need to convey depth of knowledge and information is such that research writing can be wordy. And so research papers are not scannable or concise, nor do they satisfy the desire that most web users have for immediate gratification. In contrast, the internet has its own writing style, which serves to convey knowledge and information directly. It is akin to the journalistic style, which inverts the pyramid: starting with a conclusion, laying out essential information, and developing the background.

- **Organizing Links to Documents:** Researchers must think outside the box. What is the perspective of outsiders who know little about a research institution? A helpful logic is to categorize materials by type, e.g., working paper, discussion paper, et cetera; year of publication; and research theme. This logic must then be made obvious to end users by providing a menu at the top of the page enabling direct access to the section of interest. It is also helpful to make explicit that a document is downloadable or not. A customized search engine should be built if numerous documents are hosted on the website.
- **Selecting a Digital Format:** Documents featured on the website must be in a format that will enable end users to both open and print them. Documents should not be split or zipped.

Building on Commitment

Successful websites are not constructed in a corporate vacuum. They have a reason for being and a mission statement. They light the way and make navigation easy. They have ever-changing, targeted, and credible content. They load very quickly. They are consistent in look, feel, and design. They are interactive. They are marketed. They are measured. They understand search engines. They are built for growth and look to the future.

For further information

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