Letter by Thoma et al Regarding Article, “A Randomized Trial of Social Media From Circulation”

To the Editor:

We would like to commend Circulation for exploring a topic that has not been well addressed elsewhere with the publication of the study “A Randomized Trial of Social Media From Circulation.”

However, after considering the background literature and methodological characteristics of the study, we are concerned that the authors overstated their conclusion that social media strategies do not increase dissemination of scholarly publications. There is evidence of the benefits and use of social media for knowledge translation, and recent research has shown that mention on social media correlates with traditional impact metrics while increasing the readership of scientific publications among their niche audience. Methodological concerns include unaddressed confounders, the use of page views as a proxy of impact, and the sacrifice of best practices in social media communication for reproducibility.

Social media can be used in many ways. At its simplest, it can be a promotional tool for unidirectional communication. More complex social media strategies focus on engaging others in bidirectional communication around common interests and lead to sharing, reflection, elaboration, and curation. The social media strategy examined in this study consisted of a tweet and Facebook post on Circulation’s social media channels. It is of no surprise that this minimal, unidirectional approach resulted in a negative study because it is more akin to using a social media platform for promotion than for engagement.

Annals of Emergency Medicine has successfully promoted articles via a comprehensive social media strategy. In addition to a tweet and Facebook post from the journal account (@AnnalsofEM), it publishes a journal podcast and collaborates with an emergency medicine blog (Academic Life in Emergency Medicine) to facilitate an online journal club. Additional social media products are created through interaction with the audience, study authors, and experts on topics of common interest. Furthermore, Annals of Emergency Medicine has built a team of healthcare professionals who discuss and share articles via their personal social media accounts. Although not randomized, the Web traffic on http://www.annemergmed.com before and after the implementation of this strategy supports our experience: In the first 2 months of the campaign (July–August 2014), traffic from Twitter increased 289% relative to an 11% overall increase from calendar year 2013, and Twitter became the fifth place (previously ninth place) Web site of origin.

Fox et al have made a valuable contribution to the literature by demonstrating that simply promoting a journal article via the journal’s social media channels is not sufficient to increase readership. We caution readers, however, not to prematurely conclude that social media use cannot increase readership, engagement, or knowledge translation. Active engagement strategies are needed to increase reach and dialogue online as we transition from 1-way dissemination of information to a digital community of practice. This article is an excellent first step in the study of these practices, and we look forward to further research of similar academic rigor testing the value of more comprehensive social media campaigns.

Disclosures

Dr Trueger receives a stipend for his work as the social media editor (Twitter) for Emergency Physicians Monthly and is the social media editor for Annals of Emergency Medicine (he receives no financial compensation for this role). Dr Thoma is the editor-in-chief of the medical blog BoringEM, is an Associate Editor at the medical blog Academic Life in Emergency Medicine, and advises the Canadian Journal of Emergency Medicine on social media strategy (he receives no financial compensation for these roles). Dr Cabrera is the editor-in-chief of the Mayo Clinic EM blog (he receives no financial compensation for this role).

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References

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