Editorial

Gerontology Gone Viral

As many readers already know, I recently changed my academic affiliation from the University of Southern California to Syracuse University to become the inaugural holder of the Marjorie Cantor Chair of Aging Studies. I anticipate little difficulty for this journal in the transition, save the challenge of accommodating geographic distance. You see, the editorial office will remain at the University of Southern California with Norella Putney continuing to serve in her position as Managing Editor. But this type of long-distance arrangement is not unusual in the world of scholarly publishing anymore. In fact, the other three Journals of Gerontology (Biological Sciences, Medical Sciences, and Psychological Sciences) and The Gerontologist have been operating this way for the past several years with editors and their managing editors at various degrees of remove from each other. What allows these arrangements to smoothly function is digital communication technology, as well as the functions of ScholarOne Manuscripts that have made the enterprise a paperless affair. Now that the aforementioned journals operate as virtual entities, the next obvious decision is to determine whether publication should be purely virtual or whether paper copy should still be made available. I expect this to be a contentious issue with a sharp generational divide—and one that will be ultimately decided by cost concerns; but that is an issue for another editorial.

What this editorial concerns is how ubiquitous digital services and their networking interfaces—collectively known as social media—can be best employed in service to JG:SS. Even if you are not a Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter user, you are no doubt familiar with them. Social media is now used extensively by peer-reviewed scientific journals as a tool for promoting and disseminating research, and bridging and integrating scholarly communities.

Although it is easy to get swept up in the excitement that often attends any new technology, it is wise to take a step back and consider all the available options and their consequences before adopting a possible social media strategy. The saying—if all you had was a hammer, everything would look like a nail—certainly applies in this context, raising the fundamental question about whether the tools of social media fit the goals of scholarly publishing. This all depends on how we define “goals.” Is it to increase downloads, increase citation counts, enable discussion around research content, or disseminate findings beyond the boundaries of the academy? It is likely to be all of these.

For the uninitiated, Facebook provides a dedicated website that allows subscribed “friends” to share information, make announcements, and have threaded discussions about professional issues of mutual interest and concern. LinkedIn is a social networking site mainly used for professional interaction around topics common to a particular business or occupation. Twitter is an instant messaging system that lets the account holder blast a text message of up to 140 characters, known as a tweet, to his or her followers who can then retweet that message to their own followers. Twitter is designed for short bursts of news that can spread through the network exponentially, otherwise known as “going viral.” These media are complementary in that Twitter provides headline messages to potentially large numbers of people, whereas Facebook and LinkedIn are more typically used as forums for interaction among a more select group of individuals.

For the purpose of optimizing the reputation of JG:SS, the obvious question is whether engaging with social media can increase the Journal’s impact factor. Social media, if used to its best advantage, will increase visibility of journal content, but whether visibility translates into more downloads and, more importantly, greater citation counts is a question that has not been fully documented. We need to answer this question through experiments where equivalent articles are tested under varying conditions of social media promotion and nonpromotion. Yet, there are likely intangible benefits to using social media such as enhancing the ability to engage gerontological scholars—who are increasingly global and cut across disciplinary lines—with a common interactive forum, the platforms for which are provided by Facebook and LinkedIn (that at present will look familiar to most potential subscribers). Practical benefits of this forum would include the ability to exchange information about research methodology and data sets, as well as professional issues, upcoming conferences, and employment opportunities.

Twitter blasts from JG:SS can be automatically fed to media outlets, increasing the chance that research findings will be picked up by major news organizations and followed up by an interview with an article’s author. Translating complex findings from scientific research into a 140-character message presents some challenges. The message needs to be catchy as well as accurate and informative. The possibility that these abbreviated messages will go viral and reach policy- or opinion-makers is both an exciting and a sobering thought.
Silverstein

An example may be useful here. Consider the following abstract from one of the most cited studies published in JG:SS:

We find that volunteering has a protective effect on mortality among those who volunteered for one organization or for forty hours or less over the past year. We further find that the protective effects of volunteering are strongest for respondents who report low levels of informal social interaction.

(Musick, Herzog, & House, 1999, p. S173)

Now consider a hypothetical tweet that might have emerged from this study:

National study finds that volunteering when you are old can save your life! Benefit is greatest among those with few friends, researchers say.

What might the policy and practical consequences be if such a Twitter feed went viral and was picked up by national news media? Would we see an upsurge in volunteering among older adults? What if the reverse finding was found and volunteering turned out to increase mortality? Certainly, a strong editorial hand is required to guard against the risk of oversimplifying and trivializing complex findings for public consumption. On balance, however, these types of broadcasts serve the public’s interest by applying basic social research (much of which is supported by Federal dollars) to everyday problems and increasing public awareness of a particular issue or course of action.

In terms of developing a social media action plan for JG:SS I list several initiatives that are being considered for rollout this year:

- A weekly Twitter feed about a particularly interesting finding from the pages of the journal, with a link to the abstract and article.
- Facebook and LinkedIn pages where members of the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) and interested outsiders can engage in discussion of their own making or respond to posts made by the editor or others about research in social gerontology.
- Podcasts of short interviews with JG:SS authors about their published research.
- A journal blog with selected JG:SS authors describing the backstories of their recently published research and engaging in dialog with readers.
- A mobile app that allows journal users to access JG:SS articles from handheld and portable devices (as editor, I would like this sort of app for ScholarOne Manuscripts, and maybe you would, too).

In the immediate future, I intend to build social media on existing initiatives at the journal. For the last 2 years, I have designated one article per issue as “Editor’s Choice,” based on its contribution to and resonance within the field. These articles are available for free downloads in advanced access on the Oxford University Press website. I plan to employ Facebook and LinkedIn to widen dissemination of these articles and increase discussion of their findings within scientific, policy, and public circles. Twitter will also be used to reach broadcast media and other interested parties.

Despite some initial skepticism, I am on board with social media, concluding that the upside for the journal and the profession—in terms of building a virtual research community, providing a forum for cross-talk among scholars in aging, and extending linkages outward to the media and the public—is greater than the potential downside. This effort will take coordination with the GSA and Oxford University Press, organizations that can provide the requisite technological expertise and marketing skills. What remains is the will of an editor to plunge in and bring these constituents together, something I will embark on this year. So, it is with these thoughts in mind that I hope to shepherd JG:SS into the brave new world of social media, treading into new technological territory that in a just a few years is almost certain to become a natural part of the scholarly landscape.

Merril Silverstein, PhD
Editor, Journal of Gerontology Social Sciences

REFERENCE