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Blogs as a way to elicit feedback on research and engage stakeholders

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Abstract

**Aim** To reflect on the potential of blogs to enhance engagement with research, create a dialogue between researchers and nurses, and provide feedback to researchers.

**Background** Blogs can create opportunities to share ideas, provide an arena for interaction, and rapidly and effectively initiate dialogue and feedback on research.

**Data sources** This paper draws on analysis of comments on a blog post about the findings of a peer-reviewed journal article.

**Review methods** Content analysis of web blog discussion.

**Discussion** It is unclear if the readers of the blog would have accessed this article any other way. Therefore, posting research findings on a blog can engage a new audience of nurses and provide a way to feed back comments and responses to researchers. This highlights the potential value of online forums for 'knowledge translation' and draws attention to virtual collegiality, which can provide a way for nurses in diverse locations to share their experiences and ideas, and gain support and information.

**Conclusion** Research findings were brought to life through the participation of blog commenters, who validated findings reported in the research.

**Implications for practice/research** Given the rapid uptake of social media, it is inevitable that it will become an increasingly important feature of research. This paper demonstrates how the nexus can occur between more formal social enquiry and less formal engagement in critique and knowledge translation. The authors argue that the rapid uptake and exchange of information through social media can provide an indication of the social relevance of the research.

**Keywords** Research engagement, social media, blogs, online forums, knowledge dissemination, nursing research, communication tools

**Introduction**

For many, social media has become a part of everyday life. The rapid increase in its use in various forms has had a manifest effect on society, through changed social dynamics and communication. Social media can be viewed as a many-to-many communications tool, providing interactivity and content on demand, particularly when coupled with mobile devices (Coyle and Meier 2009). Social media has resulted in increased virtual connectivity and communication between individuals and groups, creating more open access to information and increased participation. Given the rapid uptake of social media, it is inevitable that it will become an increasingly important feature of research. Nurse researchers are wrestling with how their practice might be informed and shaped by increasing social media activity. The potential for social media to enable new or extend existing forms of data collection and access offers exciting possibilities (Cleary et al 2013). Similarly, the capacity for social media to support new forms of engagement with scholarship will continue to open up opportunities. As a communication tool with the potential to engage large audiences and create great impact, social media provides unique opportunities and challenges for nurses and nurse researchers.
Background

In recent years, nurse researchers have increasingly turned to the internet as a medium for conducting research. Online media can assist with large-scale, longitudinal multi-country studies (Huntington et al. 2009), provide access to hidden populations (Miller and Sonderlund 2010) or those otherwise difficult to access, and provide cost-effective methods of recruitment (O’Connor et al. 2014). To understand patients’ experiences of illness, unsolicited first-person online narratives have increasingly been used as a source of research data (O’Brien and Clark 2010). More novel applications include the analysis of social networks to identify the nature and extent of collegial relationships among nurses (Merrill et al. 2012).

Social media is even providing researchers with new opportunities to attain data and funding (Jacobson 2011). For instance, websites such as kickstarter.com and crowdrise.com allow people to make ‘microdonations’, which can be as little as a few dollars but have the collective capacity to bypass traditional and formal funding agencies.

Similarly, blogs can provide an avenue for stakeholders to engage with research, as happened with the blog discussed in this paper. Blogs readers can provide feedback to researchers by submitting comments, thereby providing insight into the authenticity of the research. Additionally, social media can increase the dissemination of information and feedback through other internet tools: for example, a blog will generate further interest and activity as it is shared with friends, colleagues and the rest of the internet, using emails and other social media, such as Twitter and Facebook.

Online networks are challenging traditional assumptions about published scholarship, and the less bounded and less fixed environment of social media is creating new ways for consumers to engage with scholarship. For consumers of research, access to densely connected social media networks creates a means through which research can be rapidly disseminated, changing the usual notions of context and readership (Schroeder 2003).

It is argued that virtual forms of engagement are shifting the source of knowledge from texts to users as producers of knowledge (Hartley 2010). The more immediate access to published scholarly work is also challenging traditional structures of power and knowledge, as virtual technologies and social media foster new forms of participation and collective engagement. In this way, the internet is challenging the traditionally held academic view of publishing articles in journals that have the highest impact, as these may not have as great an impact in terms of access and immediacy or the reach of social media.

Several systematic reviews have been published on ‘knowledge translation’, which refers to the activities of moving research into nursing practice, and the uptake of research into nursing practice, with the profession continuing to grapple with how best to mobilise knowledge (Wallin 2009, Pentland et al. 2011, Shea 2011). The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that ‘stronger emphasis should be placed on translating knowledge into action to improve public health by bridging the gap of what is known and what is actually done’ (WHO 2004), conveying the implications for nursing research (Wallin 2009). Social media offers patients, clinicians, researchers and the public considerable opportunity to address barriers to the uptake of information and the translation of knowledge into practice, albeit with varying amounts of accuracy (Jacobson 2011, Palmer 2012). Consumers of research and researchers can communicate and share ideas in less formal and more egalitarian forums (Cleary et al. 2013), opening up new opportunities for the dissemination and application of research and the identification of topics and issues that warrant investigation.

One of the main forms of social media is the blog – an abbreviation of ‘web log’ – which is a compilation of information. Existing across a wide range of fields and interests, blogs have become increasingly sophisticated, with features including automated publishing and wide ranges of text, image, audio and video tools. Nearly anyone with an internet connection can create a blog, and blogging provides rapid, almost instantaneous dissemination of content. A blog can also be password-protected to restrict readership. Readers can usually leave public or private comments on a blog, anonymously if they wish, which expands blogs into a more robust, interactive communication tool (Schroeder 2003). Blogs provide an arena for interaction and dialogue, and create opportunities to share ideas, comments and experiences rapidly from diverse locations and often from diverse viewpoints.

This paper outlines an analysis of content posted in comments to a blog post that highlighted the publication of a study of nurses’ experiences of verbal abuse (Jackson et al. 2013). The publicly-accessible blog was located on a popular Australian nursing site. The post presented a summary of the research findings and invited comments from readers. As a result, the published research findings resonated through virtual connections between nurses who revealed similar experiences, bringing to life the experiences
not only of the original research participants, but those of virtual community members who momentarily validated each other's experiences and translated the knowledge gained into implications for their practice.

In this paper, we explore how the online representation of the original qualitative text generated discussion and revelation from readers. In this way, the use of the blog draws attention to the implications of online forums in understanding the impact of research and knowledge translation.

**Method**

This paper draws on analysis of the content of blog readers’ comments, which resulted from a post discussing the findings of a peer-reviewed journal article (Jackson *et al.* 2013) and an invitation to readers to post feedback. At the time of the analysis, the post’s discussion thread was inactive. The thread was in a ‘tree hierarchy’, with later commenters able to see earlier comments, and the blog used the WordPress software, which allowed for longer comments. The lengths of comments varied from a few sentences through to 500 words, with the 30 published comments reaching a total length of close to 5,000 words.

Inductive analysis of the comments’ contents was conducted to generate 16 themes. The comments were first extracted into a Word document to assist in analysis. The text was read and reread in its entirety, and through open-coding, descriptive codes were attached to words or short phrases that captured salient attributes of the commenters’ experiences (Elo and Kyngäs 2008). As coding progressed and patterns emerged, codes were clustered and condensed into higher order themes through summation and integration (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). During the coding, an audit record describing coding rules and decisions made during the clustering and summation was maintained. Confirmability of the analysis involved achieving agreement within the research team on the interpretation (Guba and Lincoln 1989). When the analysis was complete, the frequency with which each theme occurred was calculated, to provide a descriptive representation.

**Results**

Thematic analysis of the postings The online discussion echoed strongly the findings in the published article, confirming as features of daily nursing work life sexualised and gendered verbal abuse; ridicule and disrespect; and hostility and threats. A large proportion of the commentary (83%, *n*= 25) recounted personal narratives of workplace violence, with a little over one-third (37%, *n*= 11) stating that violence was a routine feature of nurses’ working lives. In addition, the discussion generated a critique of systemic issues that contributed to the prevalence of verbal abuse, as well as examples and suggestions of practical strategies to mitigate abuse or respond more effectively.

The commenters raised a number of issues relating to the paper discussed in the blog post. The main issues raised are discussed below and the frequency of their occurrence is summarised in Table 1.

**Verbal abuse and assault and associated stress or injury** Almost all comments described an abusive experience. Most commenters said they had experienced both forms of abuse, but experienced physical assault less frequently. Verbal abuse most frequently used a raised voice or offensive language; it involved actions such as targeting nurses’ skin colour and race, positioning them as stupid, and threatening to shoot or rape them, or stab them with contaminated needles. A consistent theme was sexualised and gendered abuse.

The physical assaults recounted resulted in injury. One comment detailed an instance of stalking.

**Sexualised and gendered abuse** Sexualised and gendered abuse targeted female and male nurses. Gendered abuse was humiliating and degrading, and often accompanied other acts intended to position

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verbal abuse and assault and associated stress or injury</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse is commonplace and expected</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offering practical solutions to help deal with the situation</td>
<td>37%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=11)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nurses positioned as somehow deserving of disrespect</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critique of contributory structural workplace issues and broader social issues</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n=8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexualised and gendered abuse</td>
<td>17%</td>
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<td>(n=5)</td>
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the nurse as inferior or somehow deserving of abuse. It was also used to gain attention and elicit action from nurses. Highly offensive gendered abuse was a precursor to physical assault in a number of instances, suggesting an escalation dynamic may exist between verbal abuse and physical assault.

Abuse is commonplace and expected The commonality of abuse was reflected in the language of commenters, some of whom described their experiences of workplace abuse. Other comments reflected the normality of the experience, expressing the view that it was unlikely to change or that little would be done about it. Verbal abuse, particularly as experienced in the emergency department, was framed as routine. A number of comments discussed feelings of powerlessness and a lack of protective rights.

Offering practical solutions to help deal with the situation In response to shared experiences of abuse, the commenters collectively identified strategies and suggestions about how to respond to or mitigate verbal abuse. A common theme was the issue of when and how to involve security staff, but other comments centred on more practical advice regarding language and actions nurses could use immediately with abusers to call them to account or defuse situations. These comments extended the primary research mentioned in the blog post and illustrated active knowledge translation in the virtual community of colleagues, as the commonality between their experiences and those of the participants in the original research was translated into practical solutions and strategies.

Nurses positioned as deserving disrespect Several commenters said that the general disrespect and degradation experienced by nurses reflected the social position of nurses as people less deserving of respect. They drew analogies with other customer service jobs, where the abuse experienced by nurses would not be tolerated. They also compared themselves with other workers who appeared to receive more respect than they did, as well as with low-paid workers who received more public respect. Other commenters said that patients, family and even other staff thought it acceptable to abuse nurses or thought nurses should tolerate abuse as part of their jobs.

Critique of contributory structural workplace issues and broader social issues The predominant contributory workplace factor discussed by commenters was the repeated failure of some institutions to adequately address nurses’ exposure to verbal abuse and physical assault. A number of commenters reported receiving inadequate training or inadequate responses to reports of abuse and assault. One commenter noted that the safety committee in his or her workplace had stopped reading out reports of assaults on nurses, as the committee members were distressed by the reports; yet despite this distress, there was no clear response to the events. The apparent tolerance of the abuse of nurses in some workplaces, combined with the social image of nurses as somehow less worthy, compounded exposure to abuse.

Discussion
The case presented in this paper illustrates the way that nurses as stakeholders are engaging with research in online forums. It is unclear whether the nurses who commented on the blog post would have accessed the paper mentioned in any other way, and so it is possible that the blog enabled a new audience to engage with the paper. The rapid uptake of the research and the capacity to generate rich online discussion has implications for qualitative research methodology, assessing the impact and relevance of nursing research, understanding the nature of online collegiality, and virtual forums as a mechanism for knowledge translation.

Implications of the blog for enhancing engagement with readers
Qualitative research makes extensive use of the ‘thick description’ – the context in which people’s behaviour occurs (Geertz 1973). Qualitative research ‘starts from and returns to words, talk, and texts as meaningful representations of concepts’ (Gephart 2004), and through these words, talk and texts, the voice of the research participant is represented and conveyed to the reader.

In this paper, we go one step further and explore how the representation of the original qualitative text generated discussion and revelation in an online forum. The voices of research participants as presented in the published text combined with the voices of members of the online community to create an online performance that went beyond the original research locales. The virtual community members located themselves and their experiences in the context of textual representations of the original research participants, and co-wrote an extension of the original text. This online activity served to animate the original research findings and create new discussion and insight.

The importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research interactions between researchers, participants and data analysis has been discussed previously (Graneheim and Lundman 2004).
Our analysis suggests there is capacity for online mediated discussion to go beyond this and ‘give voice’ to the experiences of readers, laid out in text as an adjunct to the original qualitative research. By resonating with the original research and giving voice to consumers of the research, this insight extends common understandings of voice and trustworthiness in qualitative research.

Implications of the blog in establishing dialogic validity
The virtual resonance between the published research and the experiences and actions of the online community, evidenced through the interaction between the original research findings and the experiences and views of the online community, illuminate a form of dialogic validity that highlights the potential for a continuum of validity in qualitative research going beyond the researcher and original participants.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) proposed five criteria for authenticity in qualitative research: fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity. Fairness refers to the extent to which the various constructions and values of participants are canvassed and represented in the research. Whereas ontological authenticity refers the manner in which the research enhances or informs participant constructions. Educative, catalytic and tactical authenticity describes education, action or empowerment to act that participants gain as a consequence of the research. The engagement that occurred in the online community in the case presented in this paper extends these criteria to include educative and catalytic authenticity for consumers of qualitative research.

Implications for the impact and relevance of research
The informal dissemination of published research through social media provides a vehicle for the rapid discovery of research. Our analysis illustrates that virtual dissemination of information and virtual collegial engagement is reimaging the utility of published scholarship and the discourses it generates.

Scholarly journals have been the mainstay of publication for academic research, but social networks provide a vehicle for disseminating research that may reach different audiences or engage readers in different ways. The internet is challenging the traditionally held academic aim of publishing in journals with the highest impact in terms of citations, as these journal do not necessarily provide the greatest overall impact in terms of reach that social media can generate.

The blog post analysed in this paper provided nurses with research they might otherwise not have read, thereby increasing its audience. Although the uptake and response to the research that is the focus of our analysis may reflect the structure and function of the social network in which it was disseminated, the response has implications for determining the impact and relevance of research. Research conducted by Eysenbach (2011) reported that mentions on Twitter (‘tweets’) and peer-reviewed journal citations are correlated, with manuscripts that are highly ‘tweeted’ in the first days of publication being those that go on to have higher rates of citation. Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to quantify the impact of a publication on the internet (at present), there are several proxies for estimates: number of tweets and retweets, number of Facebook ‘likes’, number of comments on a blog, number of times a blog is emailed and so on. We therefore suggest that such measures be further researched to assess their validity and also suggest that researchers consider the ripple effect of publishing on social media, perhaps simultaneously with, and not instead of, publishing in traditional journals.

Citations in peer-reviewed journals that have a high impact are routinely used to evaluate research productivity and as representations of the impact of research. While scientific performance parameters are an important indicator, much of the impact of nursing research is applied and may not result in citations. Nursing research often influences practice and policy, and has an associated effect on the delivery of care and the nursing workforce (Hamers and Visser 2012). Developing indicators of nursing scholarly output to measure alternative forms of activity is important, as is identifying and measuring the translation of research into practice and the dissemination of knowledge among nurses, all of which result in marginal academic citation. Measures such as improvements in quality of care, references in policy and guidelines, and influence on curricula have been identified as alternative (additional) measures of impact for nursing research (Taylor and Bradbury-Jones 2011).

Nurse researchers who want to address vexing social issues and problems are interested in knowing whether their research and its associated publication have an effect outside academia and clinical practice. Identifying and assessing the nature and extent of broader social impact is a difficult task. The uptake on social media of research is likely to be a useful indicator of the uptake and translation of research in a way that informs a broader audience.
The blog post mentioned in this paper provided a way for readers to provide feedback to the researchers by submitting comments. This strongly validated the feedback and acted as an interactive tool. In doing so, the post generated more traffic as it was shared with friends, colleagues and the rest of the internet, by email and social media including Twitter and Facebook.

Blogging and tweeting may be useful measures of what constitutes important research, its social impact and its relevance. It is feasible that the rapid uptake by social media of the research published on the blog provides an indication of its social relevance. We suggest there is merit in researchers monitoring social media, as public engagement and discourse may point to topics or questions of importance or that warrant further investigation. Nurse researchers should also consider the merits of broadcasting more details of their work through social media such as Twitter.

Virtual collegiality and research engagement
Multiple virtual spaces make up the landscape of our daily lives. We engage with others (close and distant) for social interaction, information,
support and learning. Our analysis of blog readers’ comments highlights a form of virtual collegiality that exists outside workplaces and that provides an online community for nurses in diverse locations to share their experiences and ideas, while gaining support and information.

The blog also demonstrated how the nexus between more formal social inquiry and less formal engagement in critique and knowledge translation could arise. Knowledge translation and the implementation of research is a growing area of interest for nurse researchers and managers. This virtual resonance provides a new view of the relationship between scholarship and social media that warrants greater critical consideration in future nursing research.

Reflections on ethics

The internet as an evolving medium for research and its use in research raises many value-laden questions (Hutchinson and Jackson 2014) and creates a number of tensions. These tensions highlight ethical issues regarding the internet and access to material on it. Although social media (and the internet as a whole) is usually considered a public place, and public behaviour does not necessarily require informed

References


consent (Convery and Cox 2012), the anonymity it confers is powerful but problematic.

As is demonstrated by the blog detailed in this paper, this anonymity provides a way to maintain one's privacy while sharing experiences, feelings or feedback. Many nurses commented anonymously, although some used potentially identifiable usernames. The ethical issues surrounding anonymity have been well documented elsewhere, for example Convery and Cox (2012), Eysenbach and Till (2001). In this paper, we have used a blog post and its associated comments in a way perhaps not originally intended by the authors. However, we feel that the bloggers wanted to publicly share their views of the paper and to invite fellow nurses to follow suit. Rather than simply positioning the bloggers and commentaries as subjects of research, an alternative position is to privilege them as the authors of texts created for an audience.

Access to the blog in this study was unrestricted and individuals were able to comment on posts without membership, password or authorisation. All comments were posted in the full knowledge they would be viewed publicly with no restrictions. Therefore, as the comments were intended for a public audience and freely available electronically, we feel that the use of such material for data analysis is completely legitimate. However, for the purpose of respecting the bloggers’ and commenters’ privacy, we have maintained their anonymity in writing this paper.

Conclusion

The power and reach of social media is widely acknowledged, but the importance of blogs in the fast-evolving world of health care is only just being recognised. Blogs are a way to rapidly and effectively disseminate and receive interactive feedback on research, best practice, news and any other information relevant to staff, students and the public.

The blog considered in this paper possibly brought research to an audience who might not have otherwise accessed the published research. These stakeholders had access to the paper in a way that was safe, supported and potentially anonymous, and enabled them to contribute their views on the research. Sitting at the cusp of the blog revolution, it will be interesting to see how the blogosphere helps shape research and how the attached ethical and legal issues are resolved in years to come.


