Social media in science

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Abstract

Communication for projects about protected areas is essentially the same as for other research projects. Unfortunately that means that social media are not often used. But they can add value to communication about protected areas as social media are very suitable for engaging stakeholders and for seeking their contribution. This could take the form of, for instance, creating a Facebook group about sustainable transport or asking for best practices of sustainable tourism via Twitter. This article is to give you an idea of what you can post where and to point out a few things to keep in mind when starting on social media. It is meant to lower the threshold and get you started. You will also find a few examples of protected areas that do use social media.

Why would your organization (protected area) be on social media?

Due to globalization we see and learn more about what is happening around the globe. Travel programmes show us destinations and ways of living we have never seen before and they are accessible because of cheap travel options. That is also seen in some protected areas: more and more tourist go there (IUCN 2010). For protected area administrations this has created the need to keep in contact with researchers, visitors and protected area managers all over the world. Social media are one option that organizations can use to achieve this goal.

If people search for something or want to know about a protected area, they tend to use Google (or another search machine) and see what they can find. You might say: but I have a website, they will find that. Could be, but Twitter and Facebook are ranked upfront in search machines (Site Stream 2011) and they have functions your website does not. Both of them can serve as a way for you to get information about visitors and researchers alike (their opinions on what they like or don't like) and to share your expertise with them. Of course those media are also very suitable for presenting your organization. If visitors or researchers want to know what your protected area is about, what kind of image it has, they check the Facebook and Twitter pages and they can see by the reactions, *likes* and *retweets* how it is received by other users. This is usually of more value for them than a mission statement on a protected area webpage, because they know those are carefully composed by the management. The reactions of others and the interaction on social media pages tend to give a more *real-life* view.

Why would you need a strategy?

A strategy can be helpful for organizing what you can do with social media professionally. Because the online word is so fast, it is tempting to create a Facebook page or Twitter account quickly without thinking about it in advance. First of all: it is good that you

are going to use social media. But you are missing opportunities if you start without a strategy. A strategy will give you direction, ensure an consistent image and make sure you are not a social media flash-in-the-pan. With a strategy it is easier to make social media work for you because you can do it right from the start: have interesting content and posts in the right tone.

How to create an online strategy

As with all strategies, it starts with the question: what do you want to achieve? (Keller 2003). What are your goals? Do you want to promote a protected area or do you want to ask for ideas on protecting that area, etc. Then you need to know your target group. Will they be tourists, residents, researchers – or all of them – young, modern, high-tech / low tech. It is important to know this so you can adjust your message to your target group and add value for them. Then finally you need a budget. Twitter and Facebook are free to start but it does take time to manage those media and eventually you might want to consider advertisements as well. Don't forget to integrate your online and offline strategy and make sure all means contribute to your mission.

General advice on using social media

Mixture of actions
As you can see in the image above, social media require several actions. Once you are set up, you can engage in conversations, listen, measure and learn. It is important to keep this cycle going so you can continue to improve.

Content is king
For an effective online presence you need to have content to place on Twitter and Facebook. Before you start a profile, you need to know on what kind of content you want to focus. You have to make sure you are receiving a continuous stream of information that you can post. Once you have an information stream for yourself and you have the right mindset, you will be able to find interesting news. Look at your daily mail,
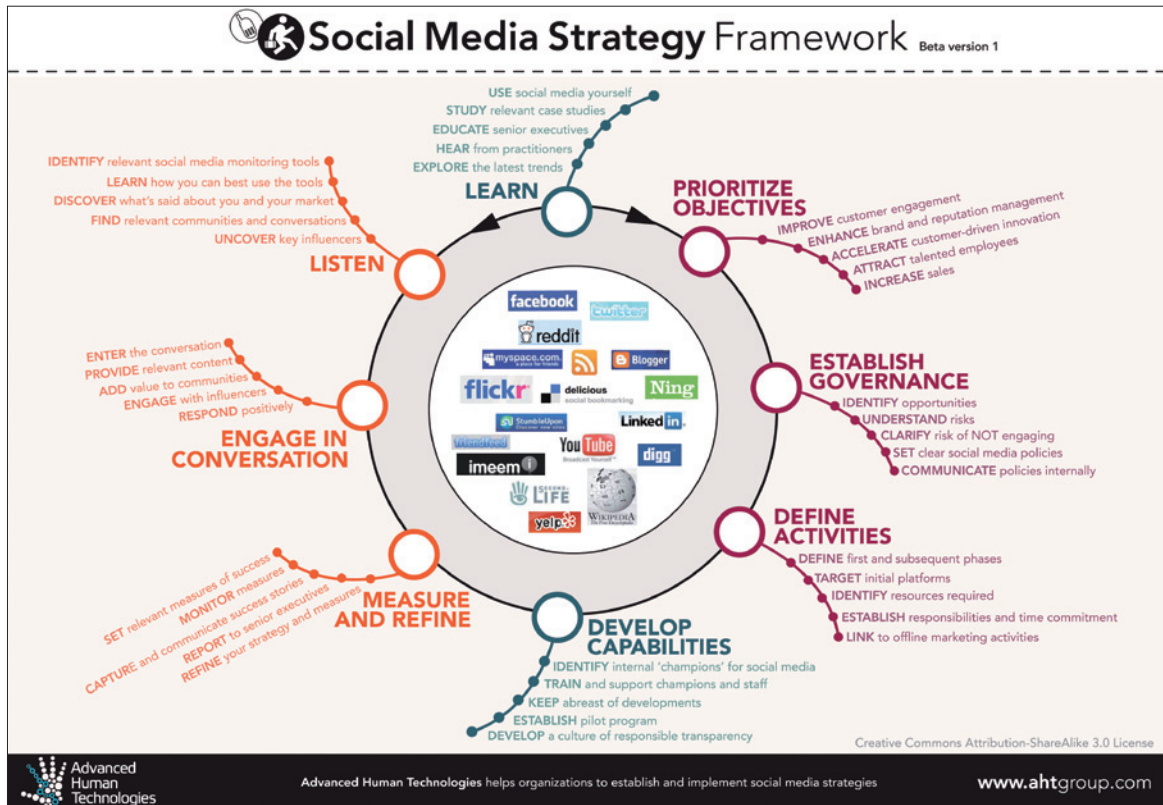
Figure 1 – Social media strategy framework. © AHTgroup. Cycle of actions to be taken for effective use of social media.

protected areas magazines or the television with the idea in mind: what can be of interest to my followers? Then soon filtering news for your social media channels will become an easy habit.

Add value and position yourself

It is important to offer your followers something valuable. That can be news, entertainment or advice. Do you want to be an expert on biodiversity in your protected area? Then post about the news and trends in biodiversity there. Do you want to give your organization an individual outlook online? Then focus on sharing your insights and opinion. Make sure to use the search words you consider relevant for finding you in your profile and posts and remember that social media is more about listening then about sending.

Connect and be personal

Use social media to connect. Be open for feedback, be ready to learn, listen and facilitate the contact between your followers. Just remember that you cannot be in control of what is said about you. Social media is all about being open, honest and personal. It's important not just to swamp people with information about your organization but to be really interested in what is going on online and to offer something valuable for your followers.

Twitter

Twitter started as a platform for informing others about what you are doing. But it is no longer solely about what are you doing but about what is going on. In 140 characters you can post an *update* which will show in the *timeline* of people who follow you. In your timeline you will see the updates of people you are following.

What to post?

Share news about trends in your protected area, links to interesting articles, links to cool video clips of tourists and give your opinion about them. Share your insights: how is protected area x going to develop? What threats are there? What positive news is there about the area?

Here is an example of protected areas on Twitter: *twitter.com/#!/Protected_areas*. They post about where to find protected areas, threats to areas, links to articles, questions, etc. Don't be afraid to add a personal touch and a bit of humour once in a while, as long as the whole mix of posts gives something valuable to the followers.

How to get followers?

To get followers you have to give. And it helps to follow other people. Do you want to be followed by x National Park? Then follow x National Park yourself. Follow interesting people so you get interesting posts in your timeline. That is another valuable source of information for you. You can *retweet*, i.e. share somebody else's interesting post with your followers. Want more followers? Basic requirements are, of course, to link to your twitter profile on your website, in your email signature, etc. There are a few more things you can do. Again: content is king. Offer value and people

will follow you. But people need to find you first, so in order to help them you can use hash tags of trendy topics (rather like keywords indicating what the tweet is about), retweet popular posts and see what works and what does not. You can see if your post is retweeted or if people respond to it. Use twitter during events. Let people ask questions – once you start you will see you'll find these ways!

When and how many tweets

It is also good to think about the number of posts and their timing. Most organizations tend to post during office hours. But try to post at 8 o'clock in the evening for a change, or on a Sunday. You will see that a lot of users are online then. What about the number of posts? Post 20 times a day and people will get tired of it. Post almost never and you will get few followers, because you have nothing to offer. If you manage to post between 3 and 10 times a week that would be fine. Quality is more important than quantity.

Facebook

What to post?

Facebook was started for students at university to get to know each other better. The basis is to share updates and stay up-to-date on what your friends are doing. Facebook users create a profile page that shows their friends and networks information about themselves. Facebook needs different content from Twitter. Where Twitter is used to post interesting articles and give status updates, Facebook tends to have a more personal nature for most users. Most users are on Facebook to connect with their (international) friends, see what they are doing and they tend to *like* organizations that they already know or that have great offers. So only posting interesting articles will not work on Facebook. It is a good start but it is more about creating a community and inspiring the community. Extend your image by sharing cool pictures and video clips, set up competitions, link to (protected area) events and offer discounts. Facebook is more about inspiring people.

Here are two examples of Facebook pages on protected areas:
- Protected area management effectiveness evaluation specialist group. They share articles and create discussions. Available at: *www.facebook.com/pages/Protected-area-management-effectiveness-evaluation-specialist-group/95691094219*
- National Marine Protected Areas Center. This group also has quizzes and pictures besides information and discussions. Available at: *www.facebook.com/usmarineprotectiongov?ref=ts*

How to get likes?

In addition to having a link on your website? You can *like* other organizations and national parks (good for your information stream as well), *like* other posts

Figure 2 – The enterprise social media maturity model. Different roles and functions of social media for individuals, businesses and organizations. © Maxxonline

and respond to (popular) posts. This way other people who see these posts will see your name and might be tempted to take a look at your profile. You can also share articles of others on your page because if you have interesting content, there is a reasonable chance that it will be shared.

Amount of time needed

How much time will Twitter and Facebook cost? Once you got your incoming information stream set up, it can cost you between 30 and 60 minutes a day. You can of course spend more time on it but in an hour you should be able to scan your timelines and see if there is anything to respond to or to retweet and post something yourself.

A case in point: mountain.TRIP

mountain.TRIP (mT) is all about communicating research results on sustainable mountain developments in Europe and showing how that can be done. That also means showing how to use Twitter and Facebook. The goal is simple: get mT known. The message: everything about sustainable mountain development in Europe. Target groups: scientists and practitioners.

What have we learned about social media?

What have we learned so far? That it is hard to find unique content about sustainable mountain development in Europe. On our website we have an RSS stream that gets news from over 50 websites we have selected. This still does not generate enough content. We have to keep on looking for good sources (we need YOU in Twitter!). It is also hard to get reactions on our tweets, but the longer we are using it the better it gets. And we do have clicks from Twitter leading to our website and although we only have 54 followers so far, we are making mT known. We have also learned that it takes time to gather the content and to get known.

Our Facebook site is a bit more of a success story. A lot of links lead from Facebook to our website. What do we post on Facebook? A mix of pictures, video clips, news, advice, competitions and sometimes a personal massage.

Protected areas on Twitter and Facebook

A few examples of protected areas that use Twitter and Facebook. What are they doing well and what can we learn from them?

Hohe Tauern National Park, Austria

Their Twitter page is quite good (*twitter.com/#!/NationalparkHT*). They give a nice mixture of all kinds of information and messages, all in a friendly and positive tone. They post events, messages to users (interaction), keep quizzes and share articles. That means they offer knowledge, fun and interaction: a good example of a complete use of Twitter's functionalities. Their Facebook page (*www.facebook.com/Hohe.Tauern)* is not as interactive. They only link to their own website. This might be good to help people find that website but it is a pity not to use more of Facebook's possibilities, such as interaction and creating a community.

Peak District, United Kingdom

Has quite an interesting and lively Facebook page (*www.facebook.com/pages/Peak-District/109429798689?sk=wall&filter=1*). They share articles, ask questions, answer them, give advice, post some fun and they succeeded in creating a community. On Twitter (*twitter.com/#!/peakdistrict*) there might be room for improvement. The tone is a bit top-down with phrases like *we WANT your views*. And they mostly link to their own website, offering little more than what a user can find there. They might add more value by sharing more news of others, fun, quizzes,...

Schladming Dachstein, Austria

Finally, one last good example (*twitter.com/#!/SchladDachstein*). They are funny, positive, engaging, they give news, links to topical issues and they interact directly with the reader.

What else is available?

Perhaps after reading this article you are convinced of the advantages of being on social media. Here are a few more platforms you can use:

YouTube and Vimeo

Websites where you can post your video and share it. You have the possibility to add *tags* (keywords) to the video. Users looking for such content then have a good chance of finding your video. Users can rate and comment your video. You can also integrate YouTube or Vimeo videos on your own website. And of course you can find interesting video clips there yourself.

Flickr

Fickr is a website where users can share and rate photographs. It gives other users the opportunity to respond to your pictures. For you it can also be a way to collect feedback and get known.

Google docs

Just a tool to make and share documents online. You can edit the same file with different users, track changes and much more. If you work with many people in the same documents or share files via email, Google docs can be a good alternative method, making sure your documents are always available and findable online.

Delicious.com

Is a way to share links and see interesting bookmarks of others. It is a way to find and share interesting websites.

Linked-in

This is a network site on which people place their short résumé and some information about themselves. It is mostly meant to create an online network of colleagues, old colleagues, people you meet etc. You can see the networks of those people as well. If you want to contact somebody who is not in your network, you can see if he / she is in a network of one of your contacts and get in touch via that contact.

Below you can also see the use of social media for employees, organizations and businesses.

I hope that after reading this article you know what social media can do for you and you even feel tempted to try it!

References

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