INVESTING IN SOCIAL MEDIA PAYS BIG DIVIDENDS

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Over the past six years, the use of social media, including Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, has been a vital part of APRA's Communications Strategy in raising awareness of the programme's activities and outputs. Since 2016, APRA's social media profile has been embedded within the Future Agricultures Consortium's (FAC) well-established online channels – including Facebook and Twitter – with the view to increase FAC's followings and enhance APRA's visibility.

The Impact, Communication and Engagement (ICE) team has been responsible for developing APRA's Digital Strategy and tracking the impact of social media activities, including sharing APRA's publications and news on events, and promoting APRA's key research messages.

**What did ICE do?**

**Twitter**
Posting APRA-related content on FAC's Twitter account began in 2016, but the frequency increased more significantly from 2018, when APRA's ICE Digital Strategy was revised to include a greater focus on social media. As a result, Twitter impressions (a total tally of all the times the Tweet has been seen) increased significantly – from 7.5k in February 2017 to 20.9k in February 2018. The number of followers also increased by 13% during this time, from 14.7k to 16.6k. Between 2018 and 2020, one to two Tweets were sent out per week to advertise a new blog, paper or news article on APRA websites.

An average of two Twitter ‘Ads’ to promote particular posts, costing £15 each, also ran monthly during 2019-2022, with the aim of: 1) increasing post link clicks to drive more social media users to APRA's webpages; and 2) increasing engagement with the posts themselves, i.e., generating more likes, retweets and comments to spread APRA's research messages to a wider online audience. The campaigns were further targeted to reach certain African countries in which the APRA research took place, including: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

‘The ICE team shared important information on Twitter to increase the visibility of our APRA research outputs’ – Abebaw Assaye, APRA Ethiopia researcher

As of April 2022, FAC’s Twitter account following has reached 21.9k and, in January 2022, monthly Twitter impressions reached 95.7k. The engagement rate has also increased to 5.7%.

**Facebook**
In comparison to Twitter, in 2016, FAC’s Facebook page had a relatively small following of 2.6k ‘fans’. With minimal activity between 2016 and 2018, the number of fans increased only marginally to 2.8k and, by early 2018, the page had received just 37 page views and 16 likes. Moreover, messages on the page reached only 192 people (‘reach’ is the number of people who see any content from your page/about your page, including posts, stories, ads, and social information from people who interact with your page).

As with Twitter, APRA-related content was strategically increased on FAC's page from 2018. The ICE team started posting roughly three to five times a week, highlighting various APRA publications and events. The team also leveraged Facebook’s costed ‘boost’ function to promote posts – spending £5 per boost up to five times a month. The boost was targeted by country – again to reach specific places in which the APRA research was conducted, but also by interest of the user (this is based on ‘keywords’ a user has searched for or posted about themselves, including: women’s empowerment, gender, agribusiness, empowerment, agronomy, farmer, academic journal, livestock, public policy, and research and development).

The aim of the boost was to increase the reach of APRA's research messages to a relevant audience, and it was found to work well: a boosted post from 20 January 2022 reached 37,957 people and achieved 888 ‘engagements’ (likes/shares).

‘The ICE team helped us engage more in the social media space, which we hadn’t achieved previously’ – Fred Dzanku, APRA Ghana country lead

Between February 2018 and February 2022, FAC's Facebook fans increased by over 80%, from 2.8k to 5.1k.

**WhatsApp**
WhatsApp groups were used regularly to communicate within and across APRA teams and the research Work Streams. Photos from the field or APRA events were shared by teams, along with media articles. This channel proved a highly effective way to share information across APRA, and for ICE to harvest photos and information for website news items, blogs, etc.

WhatsApp was also used by the ICE team to keep teams up-to-date with various news, developments,

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1 The ICE team is made up of members of WRENmedia staff, including its Director.
and requests (e.g., to register for events and submit feedback forms).

A survey was shared with the APRA teams to gather insights and lessons on the programme’s communication activities and ICE team support. Figure 1 shows that more than 70% of respondents rated the importance of using social media within their work at 4 or 5 out of 5 (with 5 being the highest importance).

‘The timeliness in information dissemination on social media was important’ – Kehinde Adesina Thomas, APRA Nigeria researcher

In response to how APRA researchers would rate the ICE team support in using social media (Figure 2), once again, the majority – more than 85% – responded with 4 out of 5.

‘We were encouraged to use our social media handles and it worked well’ – Toendepi Shonhe, APRA Zimbabwe researcher

**What worked well?**

The ICE team’s work on Twitter and Facebook has been particularly successful in increasing the visibility of, and access to, APRA’s blogs and publications (of which there are over 210), such as Policy Briefs, Working Papers and Journal Articles. By the end of February 2022, a total of 150 APRA publications had been shared on social media: 84 Working Papers, 28 COVID-19 Reports, 28 Policy Briefs, five Research Notes, and five Accompanied Learning on Relevance and Effectiveness Papers.

The Twitter Ads function has been an important tool in increasing publication sharing. For example, a promoted Tweet to highlight a Working Paper published on the APRA webpages in March 2022 was retweeted 20 times.

‘The social media posts helped disseminate our research output to a wider audience’ – Kofi Takyi Asante, APRA Ghana researcher

‘Promoting on various social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, has been helpful in improving readership of publications’ – Louis Hodey, APRA Ghana researcher

Social media platforms were also extremely useful during the promotion of APRA’s in-person events, such as conferences and workshops. During such events,
the APRA research teams shared images for the ICE team to post on social media to enhance awareness and engagement. Using social media to promote online events also proved effective; a good example is the APRA-led e-Dialogue held on 20 January 2022 on ‘Agrarian Change and Rural Transformation in sub-Saharan Africa’, attended by over 120 participants, mainly from Africa. In the two-week period building up to and following the event, 73k impressions, 116 likes, 77 retweets, and 26 link clicks were generated. This was achieved through the creation of promotional social media posters, and the pairing of APRA team photos with the presentation of key messages. The webinars and e-Dialogues were also livestreamed on Facebook, where they could be easily accessed by a general audience who could add queries and comments in the ‘comments’ box underneath the video.

WhatsApp was also an important tool in the planning and coordination of APRA’s online events, and for communicating with those involved during proceedings. For instance, the ICE team was able to send messages and reminders regarding agenda timings, turning cameras on/microphones off etc., – which proved highly effective for instant response.

**Key lessons**

Based on the APRA experience, lessons can be learned on what would be replicated for a similar programme in future, and what could be done differently. The first key lesson is that development of an effective digital strategy is key – as shown by the revised version and its impact since 2018. By making the most of promotional social media tools, for instance, reach and audience engagement with APRA posts has significantly increased. We would recommend the use of this cost-effective approach for other research programmes. The consistent approach to posting also seemed to work well in terms of increasing and engaging FAC/APRA’s online audience, as shown by the increased followings and engagement rates.

In terms of what could be done differently, creating an APRA account on LinkedIn would have been beneficial in raising the organisation’s professional profile. LinkedIn enables endorsements and recommendations from the business/research community, and would have been another good platform to showcase APRA’s expertise and outcomes.

Providing social media training and support to the research teams on how to set up their own accounts, and share and engage with posts, would also have been useful to further increase the traction and reach of research outputs. This was reiterated in feedback from the teams:

‘Help researchers become active on social media’ – Joseph Yaro, APRA West Africa hub coordinator

‘Improve capacity of research team to use social media’ – Aida Isinika, APRA Tanzania country lead

‘Training on how to use such platforms could have been helpful’ – Fred Dzanku, APRA Ghana country lead

Other valuable suggestions from the APRA teams included:

‘The ICE team could consider promoting previous publications by reposting them on social media platforms. In this case, older publications could be reposted to rekindle people’s interest’ – Louis Hodey, APRA Ghana researcher

‘Creating more linkages with the social media accounts of organisations affiliated with APRA researchers would work well to increase sharing of the key messages’ – Chris Magomba, APRA Tanzania researcher