



Effective use of digital communications to disseminate research-related parliamentary opportunities

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Key findings

- The top ways that researchers and intermediaries report finding out about parliamentary engagement opportunities are, in order of use: mailing lists, Twitter and e-newsletters.
- On average, intermediaries feel they only reach 40% of the researcher community they are responsible for reaching.
- The main barriers to communicating opportunities that intermediaries report facing include not knowing all of the relevant people at their institution, if the information reaches the intended audience, or what the best means of communication is.
- Ninety-four percent of participants report that an e-newsletter from UK Parliament's Knowledge Exchange Unit is their preferred digital form of receiving opportunities, closely followed by an email from an internal key contact (90%).
- The most popular social media platforms are Twitter and LinkedIn. These ranked as 6th and 9th respectively out of 13 digital communication methods as a preferred means of receiving opportunities.
- The least preferred forms of digital communication, noted by the majority of participants as methods they would never use, are Instagram, Facebook and YouTube.

Context

In 2017, the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) and Parliament's Outreach team found that the biggest [barrier to researcher engagement](#) with Parliament was a lack of knowledge or guidance on how to do so. To address this, the Knowledge Exchange Unit (KEU; formed in 2018) in POST created a series of [webpages](#) with information on engaging with Parliament. They also developed two main methods of digital communication to share parliamentary engagement and impact opportunities with as many UK researchers as possible: a mailing list of intermediaries – a network of individuals who promote opportunities for UK researchers to engage with Parliament – and a presence on Twitter ([@UKParl_Research](#)).

To ensure that the digital communication methods used by the KEU are as effective and inclusive as possible, the KEU's Digital Knowledge Exchange fellow (Dr Sandra Messenger, Cranfield) conducted a survey in November 2020 asking UK researchers and intermediaries how Parliament could best communicate research-related opportunities to them. This briefing presents the key findings from the survey.

Survey participants

The online survey was promoted using: social media (Twitter; KEU personal LinkedIn accounts), the Parliament website, the KEU mailing list, external mailing lists (National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement), professional bodies (Association of Research Managers and Administrators, PraxisAuril), networks (Knowledge Transfer Network), electronic newsletters (e-newsletter; University Policy Engagement Network - UPEN) and a blog post ([UPEN blog](#)).

Within a two-week window, 166 individuals submitted a completed survey, of which 44% were researchers and 56% occupied non-research roles. Participants that worked for a Higher Education Institution (HEI) represented 84% of those who completed the survey and came from 61 unique institutions. The remaining participants (16%) worked outside of Higher Education.

Current digital engagement methods

Of the 108 participants (including researchers and intermediaries) that currently use digital methods to actively search for, receive or come across opportunities, the top three digital methods in order of use were: mailing lists (77%; emails or attachments sent on an ad hoc basis), Twitter (59%) and e-newsletters (51%; text contained in formally compiled updates received at defined intervals). The perceived average usefulness of these methods fell between 6 – 8 (where 0 is not useful and 10 is extremely useful).

How intermediaries currently communicate opportunities

Of the 93 participants that occupied a non-research based role, 70 acted as intermediaries by passing on parliamentary opportunities mainly to researchers within their organisation and other internal intermediaries. The top reason for intermediaries to share opportunities was to generate engagement and impact, with the lowest reason for doing so being that the activity was a set objective.

The majority of intermediaries (80 – 91%) selected e-newsletters and email communication methods (directly to researchers, other intermediaries or ad hoc community mailing lists) as digital communications they currently find most useful.

Twitter was the only form of social media where more participants felt this was currently useful (56%) versus those who felt it was not useful/ do not ever use it (44%).

Barriers intermediaries face to communicating opportunities

On average, the intermediaries felt their communications only got through to 40% of the researcher community they were responsible for reaching. The main barriers included a) not knowing all of the relevant people in their institution (53%), b) uncertainty around whether the information they cascade reaches the intended audience (46%), and c) uncertainty of the optimum digital communication method to reach the widest audience (40%). Intermediaries repeatedly commented that the researchers they communicate with are time poor and that their messaging was heavily diluted against a backdrop of numerous other competing opportunities. They felt that this hindered their ability to both interest researchers in policy engagement and bring parliamentary opportunities to their attention.

Looking forward: how might the KEU better communicate opportunities?

When asked how the KEU could best share opportunities, the two digital communication methods selected as being the most ideal were a KEU e-newsletter (94%) and emails from an internal key contact (90%; see Figure 1). This also held true when responses from the researchers and intermediaries were examined separately. After this, a) the parliamentary website, b) webinars and c) mailing lists were chosen, respectively, when researcher and intermediary participant responses were combined. When separated, the order of preference changed slightly where researchers selected c > a > b and intermediaries chose b > a > c.

Of 156 participants that were interested in obtaining information on parliamentary opportunities through



social media, Twitter (45%) was found to be the preferred platform with @UKParl_Research (KEU handle) and @POST_UK (POST handle) listed as the top two Twitter handles to receive the information as it arises. When compared to other methods of digital communication social media, in the form of Twitter, placed 6th where YouTube, Facebook and Instagram were selected as methods that the majority of participants – whether researchers or intermediaries – would never use (Figure 1).

Format of presentation of communications

Participants selected 'mainly text with some images' as the top way that they would ideally like opportunities presented to them. The least attractive method was an audio format such as a podcast.

Participant recommendations for optimising digital communications

Respondents requested that the KEU refrained from adding to the number of communication channels. Participants also commented on the need for succinct simple information and upfront keywords. They also asked to be given as much lead-time as possible on time-critical opportunities.

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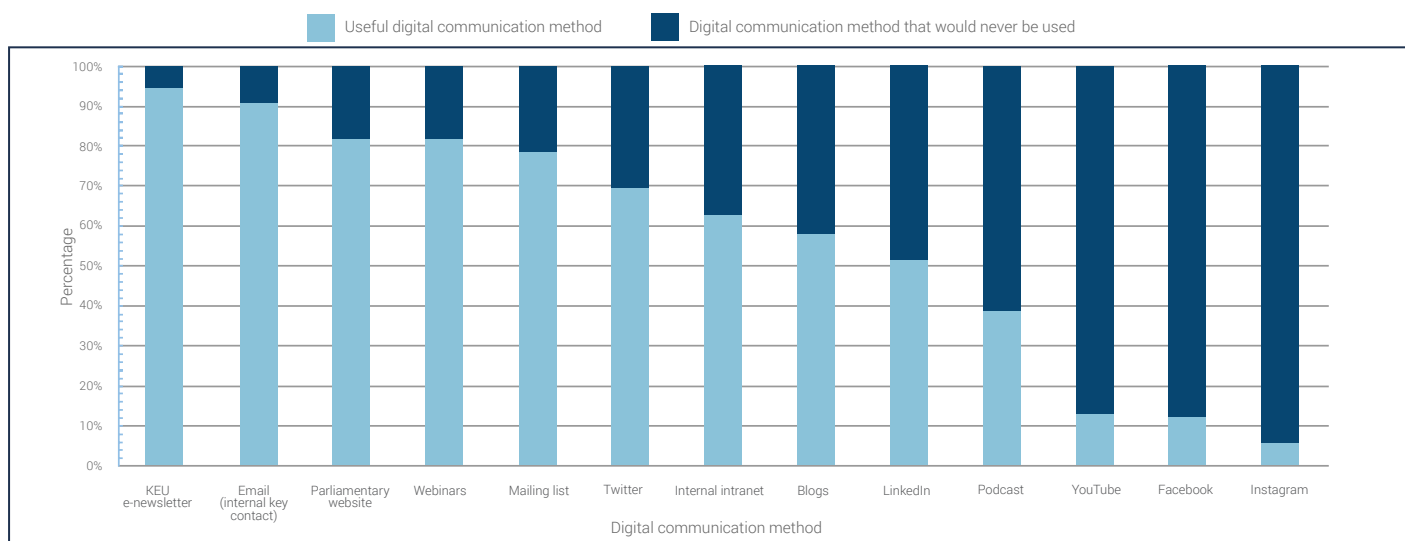


Figure 1. Ideal digital communication methods selected by researchers and intermediaries, by percentage (n=156)