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How to Protect Integrity of Research in the Age of Social Media?

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI), data-driven decisions and evidence-based approaches appear to become increasingly important when establishing credibility and authority in non-academic circles. Knowing the difference between an experiment meant to illustrate a point, doing research for a degree where rigor and ethics are crucial, and doing research in a business context have transformed into a skill not only relevant for academics, but progressively for anyone reading articles on the Internet and on social media. On social media algorithms drive visibility not rigor and ethics. An experiment conducted on LinkedIn in October 2025 describes what happens when two nearly identical articles are posted at the same time and how algorithms drive visibility and conversations. Simultaneously, a critical reflection of how to identify “good research” from a practitioners’ perspective is provided. Finally, assessment criteria for the layperson are provided to foster awareness and to promote skill development and literacy in an era in which making sense to data in a self-reliant manner are indispensable across all social strata. Key findings of the experiment highlight the importance of scientific rigor also in online research and demonstrate how easily bias and uncontrolled variables, such as resharing behaviour, can distort outcomes and conclusions. Subsequent studies may refine this initial experiment by employing more rigorous methodologies and adhering to established ethical standards in research.

Keywords: research, social media, credibility, skill development

1. Introduction

In October 2025, one of the authors conducted an experiment on LinkedIn by simultaneously posting two articles. Both posts used identical imagery and tone, yet their titles and foci were entirely different. Article 1 (Isaacson, 2025a) discussed five reasons why scientific research might be harmful within a particular profession, whereas Article 2 (Isaacson, 2025b) emphasised the absolute necessity of research in the same field.

The conversation that followed anticipated the author's intention to create a third post (Isaacson, 2025c) revealing the results of the experiment. The aim was to test the assumption that the post highlighting potential harm ("harm post") would attract more engagement than the post advocating the benefits ("help post"). While the method of 'appealing' is attractive and revealing, predicting user behaviour presents notable challenges. Particularly when employing comments, reshares, and like functions as tools for research data collection. Such practices do not meet rigorous research standards and have proven to be fundamentally flawed in this experiment.

This experiment highlights the need to increase awareness and develop skills, both in academic and non-academic spheres, regarding the dual impact of today's "click economy" and AI-driven practices on research and science as also supported by Casas-Puente and Gutiérrez-Leyton (2025). On one hand, these forces improve accessibility and visibility; on the other, they expose researchers and their work to greater vulnerability, particularly when attention and consumption overshadow genuine curiosity. O'Brien et al. (2021) underscore the necessity for critical evaluation of scientific information to minimise the spread of false and biased claims, and to fully realise the benefits that research and science provide.

Seth (2026), during her Thinkers50 presentation in November 2025, stresses that research should be viewed as a tool for discovery rather than justification. She warns against detaching research results from their original context and repurposing them to fit personal or organisational agendas, as this undermines the rigor and diligence invested in the original work. Seth also describes the phenomenon of "catchphraseitis", where profound research ideas are reduced to catchy phrases or buzzwords, intended to attract attention rather than encourage critical reflection.

Taddicken and Krämer (2021) discuss the opportunities and challenges that arise when both experts and laypeople share and generate content about research on social media. They call for further research into these evolving forms of science communication. The credibility of research as a discipline appears increasingly tested, as researchers have limited control over how and by whom their work is disseminated on social platforms. There is a clear distinction to be made between using research to drive social media traffic and genuinely highlighting researchers' contributions to share knowledge in an authentic, non-sensational manner.

To address these challenges, it is essential to maintain the free flow of information as a fundamental element of democracy, ensuring that it is not overregulated, and yet that the system would protect against bad practices. Education and awareness for both writers and readers are critical. By fostering informed and responsible sharing practices, we can support researchers and their work, preventing harm from both creators of research and readers who may misuse it, whether maliciously or unintentionally. Research itself is not inherently harmful. However, misuse, sensationalism, and the absence of ethical standards or proper data collection can

undermine its integrity. Therefore, it is essential to educate readers on how to distinguish between rigorous research and less credible practices.

2. Distinguishing and Evaluating Research Shared on Social Media

It is important to recognise the difference between various types of research publications, particularly when encountering research papers or findings that are shared on social media platforms. Reading and analysing such content critically are essential, as not all publications go through the same level of scrutiny or review, and these practices are not universal.

In academia, social media posts are commonly classified as ‘grey literature’. Grey literature refers to any publication that conveys an author’s opinion without having undergone a formal review process. This definition extends beyond social media posts to include books, company reports, and articles produced by thought leaders, whether published on personal blogs or social media platforms (Gilchrist & Perks, 2023). The notable reputation or prominence of the author does not exclude their work from being considered grey literature, even though the technology offers benefits of democratisation, enabling insights to be shared without needing to go through gatekeepers who have their own agendas and, potentially, large marketing budgets to ‘grease the wheels’ (Yoshida et al., 2024).

Students and researchers embarking on their academic studies are typically taught early on how to identify which types of grey literature are trustworthy and suitable for inclusion in their own research. They are advised to consider the credibility of sources carefully and are often encouraged to prioritise peer-reviewed book chapters or journal articles, as these sources are more likely to present rigorous, evidence-based findings (Sovacool et al., 2022). Simultaneously, as data from Casas-Puente and Gutiérrez-Leyton (2025) highlight, internet and social media literacy are lagging among university students.

TABLE 1. CRAAP ACRONYM

Letter	Aspect	Questions/Considerations
C	Currency	How up-to-date is the information? Was more dated research chosen to prove a point? Has newer research succeeded the source referenced in the meantime?
R	Relevance	How relevant is the piece for your context? How relevant is the context for you in which the research took place?
A	Authority	Who is the author affiliated with? Does research support an aspect of their business? Is there a section describing positionality or conflict of interest in the paper? Is there transparency about the role of the author as researcher?
A	Accuracy	Is the information supported by evidence? Has it been reviewed? What does the tone sound like: matter of fact, sensational, biased, emotional, presenting different perspectives?
P	Purpose	Why is the author sharing the information? What is the intention and what are possible benefits for the author/the reader? Are there indicators for bias or conflicts of interest?

Source: own compilation based on Lasky (2024), 2026

The CRAAP test (Lasky, 2024) offers a practical checklist to assess a source's reliability, serving as a more mature version of the "5 reasons" proposed in the LinkedIn articles (Isaacson, 2025a; 2025b). This test enables users to quickly assess the quality and trustworthiness of the information being presented. Table 1, "CRAAP Acronym", offers further explanation of each letter in the acronym, guiding readers through the evaluation process.

3. Conclusion

Research does not inherently cause harm to any profession or topic. Its true value lies in its ability to contribute meaningful insights, generate new knowledge, and encourage critical thinking. However, harm can arise from the misuse or abuse of research, particularly by readers or contributors on social media and mainstream media. Such harm is likely when quick checks for accuracy and credibility are neglected, leading to misinformation or misrepresentation of findings, even when the research itself has followed a sound approach. Researchers play an essential role in advancing knowledge and provoking thoughtful discussion. When their work is appropriately interpreted and disseminated, it serves as a powerful tool for discovery and informed decision-making. Yet the rise of sensationalism on social media, driven by the pursuit of clicks and the demands of algorithms, can distort research findings, diminishing their intended purpose and impact. Furthermore, insufficient ethical standards in data collection practices may result in harm. Although curiosity, not academic rigor, was the driving force behind this experiment, it effectively demonstrated the unpredictability of social media and user behaviour, highlighting how research outcomes can be readily influenced. Future research may expand upon this experiment by employing methodologies that adhere to rigorous academic standards.

To safeguard the integrity of research as a discipline, it is vital that readers become more educated and capable of distinguishing credible research from opinion or sensational content. Research should be employed as it was intended: as a means of discovery and as a foundation for making informed choices, considering a range of perspectives rather than relying solely on a single viewpoint, regardless of its source or the reputation of the individual presenting it.

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Ethics Statement

For studies involving human participants, the authors confirm that the research complied with relevant institutional and national ethical standards. Ethical approval was obtained where required, and informed consent was secured from all participants prior to data collection. If ethical approval was not required, the authors confirm that the study adhered to applicable ethical guidelines.

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