

## Membership and Communication: The Dual Benefits of Social Media for AFS

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The American Fisheries Society (AFS)—like any large, dynamic organization of members—will have occasions that require a collective refocusing. Brand new approaches, or advances in existing methodologies, often require us to take stock of current practices and consider new beneficial alternatives. For example, field and lab advances such as electrofishing, telemetry, and otolith microchemistry have become well-accepted investigatory approaches, and in the office many of us now use high-end statistical and modeling software to crunch our numbers. Just as we have adopted these new tools, scientific communication is another need that has demonstrated opportunities for advancement. Many of us now rely on instantaneously downloadable electronic files when needing scientific information, or we talk directly to each other over cellular phone connections and e-mail—instead of posting letters. Likewise, social media is a rapidly developing tool that we as individuals are beginning to use and one that holds great potential for AFS.

Social media generally includes those quick interactions (mainly person-to-person or person-to-group) that take place electronically, often as a Facebook post, tweet, or blog entry. Social media has clearly made an impact in popular culture, and more recently scientific organizations have identified ways to use these media to improve communication. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Sea Grant, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and numerous state resource agencies are just a few examples of scientific groups that actively use social media (and have an active public following). More specifically, Ogden (2013) provided some interesting examples of social media uses in science. For example, she retold the story of a researcher sampling fish in Guyana, who was unaware that all 5,000 of his samples needed to be identified at the species level before they could leave the country (based on Guyanese law). Amazingly, this otherwise impossible identification task was accomplished through posting images to Facebook, whereby the researcher's entire network was able to comment on nearly all specimens within a single day! (Note: He did get the specimens and himself home.)

AFS has taken some initial steps to adopt social media. President Boreman (2013) recently highlighted the society's desire to "take advantage of social media as a means of recruitment" (p. 99), yet the society's strategic plan lacks a clear



**Steve Midway and Patrick Cooney. Photo credit: Lindsay Campbell.**

strategy toward that goal. The main AFS website has links to the society's social media accounts; however, it takes some snooping to find them and the content is not uniformly updated. (For example, the AFS Vimeo account highlights the videos from Seattle 2011 and the newest Flickr photos also dates back close to a year.) These efforts are a good start, but it may be time for the society to prioritize maintaining a social media presence.

Social media efforts hold the promise of several benefits to the AFS and its members. The most obvious benefit is the improved communication to be gained from responsible adoption of rapid communication methods. Martin et al. (2013) clearly demonstrated that, for fishing information, anglers now rely on the Internet and social media more than ever before. Why shouldn't we, too, as a group that often provides information for the very same demographic? Individually, successful efforts have been made to integrate social media into the work of some AFS members. Kopaska and Fox (2013) recently presented an unofficial inventory by social media uses of AFS members—several blogs and YouTube channels were featured and, we suspect, are subsequently on the radar of many more interested scientists. Though it is clear that independent grassroots efforts have been made (successfully) by members, we see numerous instances where the linkages provided by a dedicated society effort might create a responsible and more efficient means of communication that would be greater than the sum of its parts.

A second imperative for increased and dedicated social media efforts stems from the ongoing concerns regarding society

recruitment (e.g., Fisher 2012; Seitz et al. 2012; Wuellner and Jackson 2012) and the obvious need to understand the types of individuals we are trying to attract (Millenbah et al. 2011). In other words, as a society we are losing members—and the lifeblood of a healthy scientific society is the influx of new science and ideas that are generated by new members. The younger demographic we need to attract to the fisheries profession as the next cohort is the group that relies on (requires?) social media more than any other. Prospective AFS members—for example, high school and undergraduate students—have been raised on technology and thus are incredibly technology-savvy and group oriented. We see this not only in their use of social media but in the tremendous effort that universities and other institutions are now investing in Podcasts, eBooks, and online courses. If AFS wants to recruit this technologically efficient group as the next generation of fisheries problem solvers, it is our opinion that this effort will be led by the use of social media.

Naturally, there will be detractors to social media. Many society members operate external to social media and do fine recruiting students, publishing scientific articles, and attending conferences, among other activities. Our claim is that social media is not something to replace the existing framework; rather, it is an additional tool to improve communication. Content on social media is typically not subject to review yet can spread faster than nearly any other form of information. Additionally, the instantaneous nature of interactions on social media could create false expectations—a sense where individuals might feel entitled to immediate answers. This, of course, is rarely the case in fisheries science. So though we realize there are challenges as we move forward in the social media world, our observations suggest that the rewards greatly outweigh the risks and that the associated risks can be managed and reduced. And for those perhaps hung up on the notion that “I don’t want to have to create multiple accounts in multiple social media just to stay current,” we are not necessarily suggesting that individual members adopt Facebook and Twitter accounts but, rather, that the society’s social media be publicly shared.

In reality, websites are the face of any company, institution, society, or group. Any organization—particularly a diffuse one, like AFS—needs to prioritize an online presence because it is often the first place a potential member might encounter the society. Although only our opinions (but based on conversations with other AFS members), specific improvements might include (1) an AFS homepage that has dedicated webpages not only for members but also for the public and potential members; (2) integration of member comments on a dedicated AFS social media page—something similar to a Twitter or Facebook feed; and (3) promotion and encouragement of chapter, section, and subsection social media accounts. It would also be useful to have continuing education workshops that assist members in developing personal or group social media accounts (and inline with the intended purpose, the AFS could create a YouTube account with similar social media tutorials for those not attending a workshop). For those attending the AFS annual meeting in Arkansas, we suggest you consider participating in the symposium “Using

Social Media to Improve Communication in the Fisheries Profession and Engage the Public.”

In summation, many scientific disciplines are benefiting from adopting social media, thus achieving greater spread of information and increased and more diverse involvement. For AFS specifically, it may also be the germ of a new member recruitment strategy. We understand that the scientific process is at the core of any scientific society, and the temporal scale upon which this process operates is not the same as for social media. Therefore, our ideas and suggestions are not intended as a radical change or one aimed at replacing any other specific modes of communication. If social media can assist us in improving AFS, we see the big-picture benefit as increased society communication and growth, which will ultimately strengthen and promote our rich traditions.

*Steve Midway and Patrick Cooney, along with Dana Sackett and Brandon Peoples, operate The Fisheries Blog (thefisheriesblog.com), a website featuring weekly content on a range of topical fisheries themes.*

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## NEW AFS MEMBERS

Brinton Barnes	Roany Martinez Cabrera
Sandra Bohn	Christopher Matechik
John Cassinelli	Dana McCanne
Janet Duffy-Anderson	Sarah Moffitt
Bart Durham	Sarah Evelyn Moffitt
Meghan Gahm	Diem Thu Nguyen
Joseph Gebryshak	Moses Ong
Jo-Marie Kasiniak	James Selleck III
Rajeev Kumar	Tsigereda Shekib
David Marancik	Hillary Ward
Kia Marin	