



# The impact platform

*Cleanly written, synoptic research capsules are ricocheting around the web and getting read. It's spillover from the neoliberal university, and drinkable all the same.*

by [Jeff Pooley](#)


When Samsung finally threw in the towel on its flagship Galaxy Note 7 smartphone in early October, *The Conversation* mobilized its reserve army of academic authors. Over the next week, the site—a newish platform for scholars to share their research in plain English—published three articles on the South Korean company's exploding-battery debacle. One, written by an Australian professor of software practice, predicted in 700 well-written words that the conglomerate would avoid long-term damage. A second story appeared a few days later, authored by a UK-based scholar of business, and encouraged Samsung to keep apologizing. A British academic chemist, in the third piece, looked for the silver lining: the high-profile explosions are “a unique opportunity to improve battery safety across the industry.” All three articles have been repeatedly republished on other sites—a practice explicitly encouraged by *The Conversation*. Among the republishers: the [Australian Broadcasting Corporation](#), the *Independent*, and [Yahoo News](#).

*The Conversation*—“academic rigour, journalistic flair”—is the leading example of a new, web-enabled mode of academic popularization: the *impact platform*. The nonprofit site's unpaid scholar-writers, together with professional staff editors, produce dozens of short, image-filled dispatches every week day. In a crucial twist, each piece is released into the web with a Creative Commons license and the hope for widescale republication. There's no grumbling about the *Huffington Post* and other aggregators stealing page views: The whole point is to spread the academic news to any and all takers, as long as the author and publication are credited.

The “impact” in impact platform is a nod to the motivating source for *The Conversation* and its imitators: the policy-driven demand for “public impact” in the Anglophone university systems. It's no accident that *The Conversation* started in Australia and has its second-biggest “edition,” by far, in the UK. Both countries have adopted controversial higher-ed ranking regimes that require academics and their departments to demonstrate—and quantify—public reach. *The Conversation's* reader tallies are a convenient way to show taxpayer “return on investment.” This explains the site's array of funders, which tend to be universities, grant-making foundations, and national research councils.

The “metric tide” dynamic that underwrites the enterprise may be questionable, but the upshot is a new stage for “translated” or born-public scholarship—for all of us, not just those laboring under the Research Excellence Framework regime. Cleanly written, synoptic research capsules are ricocheting around the web *and getting read*. It's spillover from the neoliberal university, and drinkable all the same.

The *Conversation* model was adopted this summer by *Aeon*, which ended a four-year run as a for-profit, longform culture and ideas site in the mold of *The Awl*. Restructured as a nonprofit, *Aeon* still publishes unhurried, carefully edited essays, but the site launched a new, snappier format called “Ideas”: shorter “provocations” on timely topics. As with *The*

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*Conversation*, *Aeon*’s “Ideas” pieces are about a thousand words and penned by academics (backed by real editors). Each article carries a prominent “REPUBLISH” button with readymade html (embedded with *Aeon* metrics tracking) and a similar Creative Commons license.

This edit-and-spread nonprofit model is a genuinely new installment in the long history of science popularization. The open-access (OA) invitation to republish is the key shift, made possible by the same pair of converging factors—the Internet’s low-cost distribution and professors’ willingness to write for free—that enables OA scholar-to-scholar publishing.

The impact platform, by extrapolation from these two outlets, has a bundle of defining traits:

1. Academic authors, professional editors – articles are written for the general public (a smart 16-year-old is *The Conversation*’s target) by academics, but with prose wrangled (and whittled) by editors with media-industry pedigrees
2. Timely, brief, and translated – current-events hooks and/or repackaged research findings support concise and accessibly written articles
3. Nonprofit status – foundations, universities, science-research agencies, and reader donations fund the editorial operations
4. Creative Commons licensing – other outlets around the web are encouraged to republish the platforms’ articles

The original Australian *Conversation* was launched in 2011 in Melbourne by Andrew Jaspan, a veteran (and controversial) British-Australian journalist. Jaspan steered the nonprofit through rapid growth and six daily editions across four continents—a half-decade sprint that may help explain his recently announced suspension. With or without Jaspan, the model he built has gained surprising traction. The Australian edition alone claims 3.3 million site “users,” and ten times as many readers find *The Conversation*’s articles in “republished” form on other sites. The edition boasts over 30 thousand registered academic authors, and—according to *The Conversation*’s own data—the pieces generate follow-on media interest, collaboration requests, and even speaking invitations. Its growing stable of scholar-writers is catalogued in a searchable Research and Expert Database aimed at journalists. “Authors are media-ready,” the site promises, “and available for follow up interviews or articles.”

The UK edition launched in 2013, followed by *The Conversation US* the next year. Unlike the UK and Australian versions, the US outlet (still labeled a “pilot” two years later) is financed largely by foundations, with few universities or federal funders pitching in. An African edition, based in South Africa, rolled out in 2015, with the French installment (“L’expertise universitaire, l’exigence journalistique”) launching a few months later with the backing of many *grand écoles*. In September, the network added a “Global” edition based in New York, with support from the Carnegie Corporation. The six *Conversation* titles frequently share stories across the editions, supported by a combined staff of 90. On any given day dozens of stories appear on the network, delivered by e-mail newsletter, Twitter, and the editions’ landing pages. Most will be republished elsewhere.


*Aeon*, the online magazine that recently adopted a similar model, was launched in 2012 as a gorgeously designed space for long-form reflections. The idea, as the editor Brigid Hains explained in [press accounts](#), was to tell the “stories of science, going into depth, the sort of thing that you might see occasionally in the the *New York Times*.” Hains herself is an environmental historian, and *Aeon*’s articles—many 7,000 words or more—tended to have a translational character. From the launch, the site’s essays were strikingly well-edited and thoughtful, leading *Pando Daily* to ask, “Is *Aeon Magazine* the best magazine on the Internet?” in 2013. Long-form pieces on the science of sleep, the future of the human race, and philosophy and Buddhism won awards and considerable attention. The ad-free site, sometimes grouped with other born-digital storytelling startups like [Narratively](#) and [The Atavist](#), was in a different business than *The Conversation*.

That changed this summer, when *Aeon* went nonprofit. For its first few years, the magazine was funded by Brigid Hains’s husband, Paul Hains, who also serves as *Aeon*’s publisher. (Paul, a former financier, is the scion of a very wealthy family.) The site continues to publish its established long-form “Essays,” written by a mix of academics and writers. What changed—and what brought the publication into the impact-platform orbit—is *Aeon*’s new “Ideas” format: shorter, more frequent pieces issued with a Creative Commons license and an invitation to republish. Almost every “Ideas” author is an academic, and many of the articles are published with an official “Partner” like Oxford University Press and the Cognitive Neuroscience Society. *Aeon*’s Ideas section, in short, is a lot like *The Conversation*, though on a smaller scale, with authors [payments](#) and a cleaner look.

In addition to *The Conversation* and *Aeon*, a handful of universities have launched their own sites. The LSE’s *Impact Blog* is the most polished, with a full-time editor and regular posts from academics around the world. As the name suggests, the site is unapologetic about its interest in “maximizing the impact of academic work” and also features meta pieces—how-to stories on reaching publics and policy makers—and monograph reviews (via the [LSE Review of Books](#)). Like the full-fledged platform sites, the LSE articles carry Creative Commons licenses. Most of the other university blogs, like King’s College London’s site, are more modest, though the University of Sheffield runs its *Society Matters* on [Medium](#), the Silicon Valley web-publishing startup.

It’s a stretch, however, to assign the “impact platform” label to most of these university sites. Many of them do not disclose their licensing, and few if any actively encourage republication. Some, like Bournemouth’s [Research Blog](#), are more like publicity operations, with uncredited posts presumably authored by the university’s public relations staff. In that respect, they resemble the high-traffic *ScienceDaily*, a for-profit press release pass-along site—a kind of Business Wire for academia.

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If we stick with the criteria outlined above—researcher-authored, professionally edited, openly licensed, and republication-friendly—the impact platform represents a sliver of the scholarly publishing world. Given the powerful incentives that foundation funders and legislators have established, however, we can expect the category to grow. Which raises an obvious question: Is this development a step forward for open and accessible research sharing, or yet another troubling, metrics-driven expression of market values soiling the university tradition? My sense is that it is both of these things at once.

It isn't just that the sites are underwritten by universities and national research councils motivated by dubious "impact agenda" legislation. Even the scholar-contributors, many of them anyway, are submitting to *The Conversation* under the felt pressure to demonstrate "measurable" impact—on behalf of their departments or their own personal "brands". The same forces that lead an anonymous British physicist to boast of "selling out," or an Australian university to launch a secret-shopper, "pimp my profile" campaign, are behind the growth of impact platforms. It's no accident that *The Conversation* features a sophisticated charts-and-tallies dashboard for authors, complete with time-stamped "reach" numbers. (I know because I have written two pieces for the site—one, ironically, on how popular social-media metrics are encouraging a "dashboard self.") The site's fixation on quantified visibility doesn't merely reflect a rankings-driven university culture. By spotlighting metrics with unmissable relentlessness, the site is encouraging a kind of Chartbeat consciousness among academics. The logic of data-driven audience appeal so fundamental to the media industries is, on *The Conversation's* backend, served up to scholars. The site—together with the analytics-drenched, venture-backed social networks [Academia.edu](#) and [ResearchGate](#)—offers an ongoing lesson in the art of data-aware self-promotion.

For all that, the impact platform deserves a cautious welcome. The nonprofit status counts for a lot, as does the judgment of its professionally trained editorial staff. The idea of writing for the public, at least some of the time, is good and praiseworthy. To this end, the most exciting aspect of these platforms is their unqualified embrace of open access, exemplified by their mania for republication. The sites' funders are motivated by arguably suspect goals, but the published results—often at some editorial remove—are free and accessible. Indeed, *The Conversation's* university, government, and foundation subsidy for open-access is an implicit model for breaking the lockdown of Elsevier, SAGE, and the other academic-publisher oligopolists. The impact platform is flawed and problematic, but also a real gain for open scholarship.

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