IHPI COMMUNICATIONS RESOURCE

Bluesky 101 for Health Researchers

What is Bluesky?

Originally started as a project at what was then called Twitter, Bluesky launched as an invitation-only independent platform in early 2023 and then became open to all in early 2024. It grew rapidly in the last half of 2024 and into 2025, and has 31 million users as of February 2025.

It's a microblogging-style platform (like Twitter/X) but it's based on a decentralized open-source platform that allows users more control over what they see and allows individual coders or companies to develop tools to help people use it. This also means that almost everything on Bluesky is public, though you can do some restricting. It's owned by a private for-profit benefit corporation called Bluesky Social and currently does not charge for any service or accept paid advertising. This may change in future.

Who is on Bluesky and why should I join?

Since fall 2024, Bluesky has attracted millions of people, including many individual academics and many components of the research ecosystem (journals, professional societies, funding organizations). Many joined in reaction to the increasing toxicity of the Twitter/X environment, which had been a robust global social media platform for academia for more than a decade.

While the Twitter/X platform is still in use by many academics and their institutions, its usefulness has dropped as the algorithm changed and reduced engagement on posts with links, hashtags and certain keywords. Many users also face increased risk of hostility especially if they post about certain topics, and certain accounts' posts are heavily prioritized on the "For You" tab.

The University of Michigan is moving toward having "branded" accounts on Bluesky but with an approval process for schools, colleges, departments, institutes and major centers.

What can you post and do on Bluesky?

Your handle: This is the unique name of your account that you choose when you create your account; it can be changed in Settings and can be up to 18 characters long. If you have a custom website domain, you can follow a process to have your handle be the same as your web domain.

Your profile: Your display name (use your real name and add degrees if appropriate, up to 64 characters), plus a description of you can that can be up to 250 characters and can include keywords, hashtags and handles of related accounts to increase your chances of being discovered in searches. Use a professional photo and a cover image.

Posts ("skeets"): Text up to 300 characters including hashtags, emojis, links and handles of accounts you want to mention, as well as up to 4 images, GIFs and videos up to 1 minute. Posts cannot be edited. You cannot tag accounts in images like you can on Twitter/X. Images can have alt text which helps with search visibility and aids users who use screen readers.

What can you post and do on Bluesky? (cont'd)

Threads: By replying to your own post, you can create a thread of posts that can be read in order.

Interactions: You can like, reply to, or repost, posts by others. Unlike on Twitter/X, your likes are public. You can add your own comments and images when you repost, and even build a thread of your own starting with a repost. You get notifications when accounts engage with your posts. You can send direct messages to people you follow who follow you back.

How can you choose what to see on Bluesky?

When you log into Bluesky your view can include multiple tabs of posts from other accounts. You can customize these tabs to optimize your experience:

- **Discover tab:** This tab is generated by Bluesky based on posts you've interacted with and what is trending overall on the platform. It's as close as Bluesky has to a central "algorithm."
- **Following tab:** Posts from accounts you've chosen to follow, with most recent posts first.
- **Lists:** You can make a list of accounts based on any criteria you want, or you can subscribe to a list that someone else has made. (If a person has a made a list that's public, you can find it in the Lists tab on their profile page) Each list you create/subscribe to is visible as a separate tab.
- **Feeds:** A way to see all posts containing certain terms or hashtags, with the most recent posts first. Feeds require simple programming; you can subscribe to ones created by others or suggested by Bluesky, or make your own. Each feed you follow is visible as a separate tab.
- **Starter packs:** To help people find and follow one another, Bluesky offers the ability to make Starter Packs – compilations of accounts and feeds that the pack's creator recommends and can invite others to follow. You can instantly "follow all" accounts in a Starter Pack, or pick and choose. Each pack has a unique link, and Bluesky makes a nice graphic and QR code to help you get attention for one you've created. If an account has created a starter pack, you can always see it on their profile page. But you cannot "subscribe to" a Starter Pack and see posts from the people in the pack as a tab on your feed – that function comes from following lists. If you suddenly get a lot of new followers at once, it may be because you were added to a starter pack.

How can you protect yourself?

- **Privacy:** This is a public platform. You can decide if you want your profile to be seen by people who aren't logged into Bluesky or not, but outside apps can still access and display your activity. When you delete a post, it is deleted for good. Use blocking and moderating lists to avoid being followed by bots and harassers.
- **Restricting interactions:** You can disallow others from quoting your posts (reposting with their own thoughts) and disallow replies to your posts from some or all users.

How can you protect yourself? (cont'd)

- **Blocking, muting, moderating lists and labeling:** You can block any user from seeing and interacting with your posts.
  - You can follow a moderating list created by another account, that automatically blocks all the accounts on the list from following/engaging with you. You can also create your own moderating list in Settings.
  - You can mute certain keywords or tags, so that they do not appear in any feed.
  - You can label posts that violate community guidelines. (You can also subscribe to custom labeling tools such as ones for medical or scientific misinformation.)
- **See who has put you on lists or Starter Packs:** This can be done via third-party apps such as **http://clearsky.app/** (a site where you can enter your handle and see all your blocks, lists and starter packs in one place) and @listifications.app (an account you can follow to get notifications).

Best practices for using Bluesky as a researcher:

Like any social media platform, Bluesky is best when you share information that others will find interesting, useful, understandable, and even humorous, and when you make yourself findable.

- Whenever possible, include a link or image in a post, and relevant hashtags or keywords that will increase visibility via feeds.
- When including images, make sure to include a description in Alt text (there is a setting that will require you to if you want). This ensures accessibility but also improves search visibility.
- When reposting someone else's post, consider adding your own thoughts.
- Post about professional activities: New papers, presentations, career milestones, older work that is newly relevant, appearances in news media/podcasts/university publications.
- It's ok to post about the same thing multiple times across the span of a week, but use slightly different language each time.
- Try to post in "plain language" so that non-specialists can understand.
- Use the thread feature to create a narrative – for instance, the publication of a new paper could be the occasion for a thread that first shares the paper, then discusses the origins of the research, the key findings, the implications and the next steps you and colleagues are taking.
- Praise and share the work of others: Whether it's a junior colleague, a mentor, collaborators, or members of your research team, be generous with praise and tag them so they can be known to others.
- Share research findings, helpful resources and news items from reputable sources, and if you have a subscription that allows you to provide free access to an item, note that in your post.
- Share slide sets from your presentations (use Slideshare to store them)
- Be human! Include as much about your quasi-professional or personal life as you are comfortable doing. (Even if it's an occasional photo of a sunset or a flower.)
- If you do policy-relevant work, consider how political to get.
- Get out of your echo chamber. Follow accounts that might have different views, or are in different fields. Follow lists and feeds related to topics you're interested in but don't work directly on.
- Include your Bluesky handle in your email signature, professional web profiles and CV
- If you have a Twitter/X profile, you can import your old tweets to Bluesky using a bridging app; they will show up with their original dates. You can also add your Bluesky handle to your X bio, but consider carefully before deleting your X account because it will release your handle for someone else to use. Stopping posting, and making your posts private and closing your direct messages, may be better. You can tell X to email you if someone mentions you in a tweet or tags you in an image that you might want to engage with.