Exploring the relationship between choice of hosting platform for plain language summary (PLS) content and engagement metrics

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Key Takeaways

- Hosting location plays an important role in determining the visibility and engagement of PLSs.
- While publisher websites may sustain long-term discoverability among academic audiences, third-party platforms appear more effective for generating early and active engagement, likely due to better SEO optimization and user experience design.
- To maximize PLS content impact, dissemination strategies should consider a multi-platform approach combining authoritative publishers with the outreach potential of open, optimized sharing platforms.
- More consistent reporting and transparency in viewership metrics across platforms will be essential to support evidence-based best practices in open, patient-centered research communication.

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Background & Objective

- Plain language summaries (PLS) are increasingly recognized as an essential component of transparent and accessible scientific communication.[1,2]
  - By translating complex research findings into clear, non-technical language, PLS enable broader audiences, including patients, caregivers, and non-specialist healthcare professionals, to understand and engage with published research.[2,3]
  - This aligns with growing expectations from stakeholders, including patients, funders, and publishers, to improve accessibility, inclusivity, and public trust in science.[1,3-5]
- Despite their inherent value, the adoption and effective use of PLS remain inconsistent across the life sciences publishing landscape; evidence suggests that their reach and impact can be limited.[2,4,6]
  - One potential barrier is suboptimal audience engagement, which may be influenced by how and where PLS are hosted.[6,7]
  - Traditional journal websites, although authoritative, may not be optimized for discoverability or user engagement beyond academic audiences.
  - In contrast, independent third-party platforms, which are often designed with enhanced usability, searchability, and multimedia integration, may offer greater potential to amplify visibility and interaction.
  - Understanding how hosting platforms influence viewership metrics is therefore critical to maximizing the impact of PLS.
- This study investigates the relationship between the platform used for hosting PLS, comparing journal websites with independent third-party websites, and associated engagement metrics.
  - By identifying patterns in visibility and user interaction, this research aims to inform best practices for dissemination strategies and ultimately enhance the accessibility and real-world impact of scientific research.

Research Design & Methods

- This was a retrospective, comparative audit of viewership across three representing hosting solutions / platforms for PLS content related to medical / pharmaceutical research
- Platforms audited included one scientific publishing company's online journals and two third-party sharing platforms:
  - **Publisher:** https://www.tandfonline.com/ a global academic publishing company that publishes scholarly journals and digital resources, including PLS content related to their articles.
  - **Third-Party 1:** https://www.growkudos.com/ an open-access website for researchers and companies to host PLS content related to existing published research and research initiatives.
  - **Third-Party 2;** https://pfizer.figshare.com/ a company specific hub on Figshare, which is an online repository that enables researchers and companies to store and share digital content, including PLSs.
- Comparable samples of PLS content related to medical / pharmaceutical research were identified and available metrics were extracted from each platform

Results

Audit Sample

- PLS content pages were identified, and available metrics were extracted from each platform, covering a three-year period (January 2023 to February 2026).
- Data were available for N=64 PLS content pages: Publisher n=29; Third-Party 1 n=15; Third-Party 2 n=20.
- Mean number of days since publication for PLS content pages included in this analysis, per platform: Publisher n=771; Third-Party 1 n=261; Third-Party 2 n=723.
- Subset data were available for further SEO analysis for N=15 PLS content pages: Publisher n=5; Third-Party 1 n=5; Third-Party 2 n=5.

Viewership Metrics

- Mean lifetime views per PLS content page: Publisher n=1,413; Third-Party 1 n=926; Third-Party 2 n=693. (Figure 1a)
- Mean views over a standardized six month period per PLS content page: Publisher n=313; Third-Party 1 n=774 views; Third-Party 2 n=217. (Figure 1b)

Engagement Metrics

- For Third-Party 1, user engagement with further reading resources were captured; for Third-Party 2, user engagement with PLS downloads were captured.
- Mean engagement actions (downloads or further reading clicks) per PLS content page: Third-Party 1 n=171; Third Party 2 n=123.

Viewership Dynamics

- Mean views per PLS content page per day since publication or upload: Publisher n=1.7; Third-Party 1 n=4.2; Third-Party 2 n=1.2. (Figure 2a)
- Median views per PLS content page per day since publication or upload: Publisher n=1.7; Third-Party 1 n=3.4; Third-Party 2 n=0.9. (Figure 2b)
- For all platforms, viewership growth trajectories were mostly steady and consistent across the initial 180 days following publication / upload, with a balanced distribution of views across each time period. (Figure 3)

SEO and Accessibility

- For a representative sample of PLS pages for each platform, additional independent SEO auditing was completed, using Google's Lighthouse Developer tool, which reports benchmarking for SEO and accessibility.[8]
- Mean SEO audit scores (measured as a percentage of optimisation, up to 100%) across platforms: Publisher, 88%; Third-Party 1, 100%; Third-Party 2, 94%. (Figure 5a)
- Mean Accessibility audit scores (also measured as a percentage of optimisation, up to 100%): Publisher, 96%; Third-Party 1, 96%; Third-Party 2, 84%. (Figure 5b)

Figure 1 - Viewership metrics comparing (A) mean lifetime views and (B) mean six-monthly views across PLS platforms



Figure 2 – Viewership dynamics comparing (A) mean views per day and (B) median views per day across PLS platforms



Figure 3 – Viewership dynamics trajectories for (A) Publisher and (B) Third-Party 1, showing mean and median views

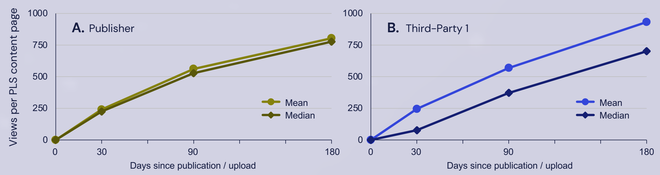
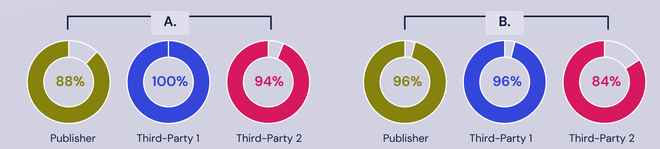


Figure 4 – Audit scores for (A) SEO and (B) Accessibility, as a percentage of optimisation



Discussion

Limitations

- The primary limitations of this analysis were the heterogeneity of engagement metrics available across platforms and the limited sample size.
  - The restricted availability of transparent or standardized analytics (e.g., unique viewer data, time-on-page, altmetric integration) across platforms limits direct comparison or impact assessment.
  - Future research would benefit from standardized engagement definitions and longitudinal analysis linking platform design, dissemination strategies, and audience characteristics.

Conclusions

- Although the sample size of this cross-platform analysis was modest, clear patterns emerged across publisher and third-party platforms.
  - Publisher-hosted PLSs achieved higher mean lifetime view counts, reflecting the higher mean time since publication, however, short-term (6-month) visibility and active engagement actions were higher on one of the two third-party platforms.
  - This suggests that platforms optimized for open access, search engine performance, and user-friendly interfaces may more effectively reach broader, non-academic audiences.
  - Engagement patterns across the first 180 days indicated steady view growth with no single early spike, implying consistent discoverability rather than transient exposure.
  - The third-party platform with the highest SEO score (100%) achieved consistently strong short-term performance, underscoring the importance of technical optimization for visibility beyond academic search ecosystems.
- Further research and greater transparency is needed to fully characterise platform-based best practices for ensuring the maximum viewership and impact of PLS, but overall, the findings reinforce that hosting strategy is not a neutral choice: platform selection can meaningfully shape the reach and influence of plain language summaries.

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Disclosures

- FM, CR, DS are employees of Kudos Innovations Ltd.
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