The researcher of the future...makes the most of social media

Social media refers to a wide variety of online platforms within which people can interact, from providing online reviews on Amazon to updating information on Wikipedia pages. At the heart of social media lies the idea of user-generated content, with the implication that we as users don't simply absorb online information, but actively contribute to it. As a researcher, I have found social media to be extremely useful in a number of different ways, and it has enabled me to both engage people in my research and to get involved in more public discussions. For me, Twitter has been the best medium for these activities. Twitter is a micro-blogging site, where users post short bursts of information (ie, under 140 characters) known as tweets. There are over 500 million registered Twitter users sending approaching 350 million tweets daily. Twitter can be accessed via the website, apps on smart phones, or SMS (text) messages on mobile phones. Anyone can read tweets that have been posted, but you need to be registered to post tweets.

For me, the beauty of Twitter is that tweets can be comments photos or links to webpages and videos. Furthermore, unless tweets are kept private, they are public and searchable—for example, they can be found by search engines like Google. Users can help focus searches by including hashtags, phrases starting with a # sign (eg, #neuroscience), in their tweets: people clicking on the hashtag can immediately find all the tweets referring to this topic, reply to them, or retweet them (ie, repost them). Twitter uses the tag “join the conversation”, and like conversations, the precise content of people’s tweets is as wide and as variable as any human interest: many users discuss live television programmes as they go out (eg, Newsnight) and the programme makers often encourage this by suggesting such hashtags; others use Twitter as a way of telling jokes or sharing news.

As a scientist, I find that Twitter provides an excellent and flexible forum for many different facets of my work. Twitter is an outstanding forum for...
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promoting public engagement work. The Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience runs an annual Brains on Film competition, as part of Brain Awareness week, and I tweet links to the films on YouTube. These films have now been viewed thousands of times and picked up by other media (eg, national newspapers). I also use Twitter to promote new papers from my lab, and blogs that I and members of my lab have written for our website. Another example would be Science Showoff, a science communication event that I am involved with, at which anyone with an interest in science can present short demonstrations, songs, films and talks about science. Science Showoff, which recruits performers and promotes events solely via Twitter and Facebook, has been highly successful, with a wide variety of demonstrations and sell-out gigs.

Promotion of events and research is a key feature of Twitter, but it is not the only one. I find the more interactive aspects of Twitter to be extremely valuable, and enable me to get involved in more outward facing public engagement activities. Earlier in the year, UK Channel 4 showed a programme over two nights, Drugs Live, in which different aspects of the drug ecstasy were discussed and demonstrated with functional MRI (fMRI). This programme was enthusiastically discussed on Twitter and I became engaged in some specific conversations about the extent to which the fMRI component was adding to the debate, and the potential limitations of this technique. In this way, Twitter allows scientists to get involved in public discussions of science-relevant matters in a way that is both easily managed (in terms of time and amount of involvement) and immediate.

Finally, I have found Twitter to be a very useful scientific resource. In addition to being an effective and novel way of encountering other people’s research (via people tweeting about new papers or science in the news), Twitter can function as a forum for online journal clubs, where the discussion just happens to be public. I frequently live-tweet seminars that I attend, and I encourage my students to do so as well: not only does this mean that people can follow the speaker’s talk in real time, but it also is an excellent training in summarising points in a clear and concise fashion. I have also had opportunities to make scientific collaborations via social media. I’m collaborating on a project involving both medical and basic scientists as well as humanities researchers to look at the phenomenon of voice hearing: my role in this research came about entirely through connections made on Twitter.

More and more universities and funding bodies are realising the importance of public engagement activities, and social media allow a flexible and relatively non-time-intensive way of both engaging in debates and promoting events and research. Furthermore, it does so in a way that facilitates evaluation—for example, one can count Twitter followers and numbers of retweets to measure the ways one’s presence is having an impact on Twitter. As a scientist, I believe that public engagement is an essential activity, both for promoting and explaining our work as scientists, and for shining a light onto the nature of scientific investigations. Social media tools like Twitter permit us to provide a degree of public engagement that we can manage ourselves, and with which we can engage in as often or as intensively as suits us. I’d encourage you to join the conversation.

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