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The use of Twitter by scientists – suggestions for good practice

Twitter is used increasingly as a means for scientific engagement and communication, and its use will no doubt become even more widespread as a greater cross-section of individuals become Twitterate. There is considerable value in this to both individuals and science itself – in particular it can increase the visibility of published research papers - and the reflections below are offered in the spirit of establishing and encouraging good practice in a new forum and are hence suggestive rather than prescriptive. Some background considerations and suggestions are provided for (1) General Tweeting and (2) Tweeting from scientific meetings.

(1) General Tweeting

Science has, over timescales of centuries, established methods and protocols through which different views, opinions and interpretations can be evaluated and discussed. These operate on the basis of considered reflection and are sufficiently venerable to be considered robust. Social media now offers fast exchange of information, sometimes also selectively chosen or abbreviated, but at the moment, it clearly cannot provide an alternative to the depth and extent of established scientific interactions.

Remember that:

- once you have tweeted, you completely lose control of the content (via re-tweets etc.). Whilst tweeting as a process is instantaneous, the paradox is that the outcome is not at all temporary. You should be comfortable with your tweets being out there, for ever, however your career or world subsequently develops
- you will never know who you are tweeting to exactly - it's not the same as chatting to your friends in the coffee room
- If you have the University of Reading in your profile, your twitter feed content should be work-related (this may not include only your subject area of course). For everything else, we suggest an alternative account. If you are tweeting from an official University account, you must be especially mindful that the institution's reputation is linked to what you say.

(2) Tweeting at Scientific Meetings

Social media can undermine these established protocols and conventions, which may not help the progress of the science or could even be actively counter-productive. Consequently, for use in scientific meetings, confining the use of social media to describing and conveying the circumstances in which work is presented, rather than commenting on its content, seems prudent.

There are well established conventions through which new findings and information are presented in scientific meetings and forums. These include the courtesy of listening to hearing a speaker without interruptions, allowing the whole of the material to be presented before asking questions, not making audible asides or comments to others during a presentation, and ensuring that criticisms of the work presented are made in such a way that the presenter is able to reply. It is generally disreputable to copy figures in oral and poster presentations, and often banned by a meeting's rules anyway.

The following considerations would for tweeting from a science meeting seem sensible:

- Only tweet after a talk has finished, to avoid giving only half the story
- Language used is crucial - it can be the difference between reporting fact, and being discourteous
- Do not tweet slides or pictures unless the speaker specifically declares that you can
- If you get the opportunity to ask a question or comment, tweet it and the answer received
- If you are presenting, bear in mind that someone could be tweeting your talk
- If you are organising, consider getting an agreed view on tweeting from all speakers, and making this part of the information sent to attendees.

Hence, before making a social media comment in a scientific meeting, in particular a tweet, the evaluation of its content in terms professionalism could be found from thinking TWEET?, where the letters form the following mnemonic:

T	Test	
W	Whether:	
E	Educational	Does the comment provide the background context, circumstances and a sense of the mood (e.g. excitement, disappointment)? It should not be sarcastic or personal.
E	Erudite	Is the comment meaningful? Does it avoid subverting the normal processes of science (e.g. would this otherwise form part of a comment article on the work presented)? Are the comments entirely factual, avoiding an evaluation?
T	Tactful	Is this something which it would be reasonable to say to the speaker or a member of the audience at the meeting at the same time as it is being sent? Are you taking advantage of the speaker being occupied to make a public comment that cannot be responded to? Remember not to send images without first asking permission.

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