

Driving Force

10 ways scientists can benefit from Twitter

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This bird is the well-known logo for Twitter, although the old Twitter "Fail Whale" can still be seen when the social networking site has issues. (Image: Twitter)

I'll admit that when I first heard about Twitter, I didn't really understand the fuss (in fact I may have said something like "that sounds like the stupidest idea ever—what could you possibly say in 140 characters?"). But a little over a year ago I listened to a webinar that convinced me to give it a shot. At the beginning things were slow, and I often felt like I was shouting in an empty room (when not many people are 'following' you this feeling is natural). But gradually I developed a network—actually, several networks—that I've found really helpful for me personally and for my career.

Ways scientists can benefit from Twitter:

1. **Troubleshooting help:** Can't for the life of you figure out what's wrong with your Western blot or data analysis? Chances are someone on Twitter can help!
2. **Learn:** Twitter is a great way to learn more about new techniques that could be relevant to your research and to follow research that is further afield (I follow several astronomers, for example).
3. **Share your findings:** Along the same lines, you can share knowledge with others. You can tweet about your lab's recent paper or poster presentation, an interesting paper you've run across, or an update on your [lab's website](#). This is a wonderful way to engage with the public and might even lead your research to be picked up by a science journalist.
4. **Career help:** I think this is one of the most powerful ways to use Twitter. On Twitter you can form connections (and relationships) with senior scientists—the same people who serve on study sections for grant review and hiring committees (and who've lived through the struggles of the grad student/postdoc/assistant professorship years). I've seen several of these senior scientists offer tips, feedback, and support to junior scientists on how to write grants and apply for jobs, among other advice.
5. **Get a glimpse into the future of science:** Through Twitter, I've learned about different models for changing the funding of scientific research, revolutionizing scientific publishing, and creating opportunities for a more sustainable scientific workforce. Time will tell if any of these ideas will become mainstream, but it's exciting to see people thinking outside the box.
6. **Emotional support:** Sometimes it's nice to talk to someone who knows the pain of a technique that just won't work, a bad grant score, a rejected paper, or the stress of the tenure-track job search.
7. **"Go" to a conference:** If you can't go to a conference, chances are that there are people on Twitter 'live-tweeting' it (i.e., talking about the seminars, poster presentations, or the quality of the food you're missing). You can follow all the people tweeting about a conference if you know the conference's hashtag—for example,

the hashtag for the AAAS annual meeting next month is [#AAASMTg](#). And if you actually go to a conference, there are often ‘tweet ups’ where you can meet up in person with the people you’ve been exchanging 140–character messages with for months (or years).

8. [Actually do research](#): Some scientists are using Twitter as a research tool to track data such as [flu outbreaks](#).
9. [A productive break](#): Have a 10-minute break between meetings or steps in your experiment? Check out Twitter—chances are you’ll learn something, make a connection, or laugh. Internet breaks like this can make you more productive in the long run (or so says this [study](#)).
10. [A laugh](#): And sometimes Twitter can just be hilarious. Want a brilliant recent example? Check out the [#overlyhonestmethods](#) posts.

Are there any downsides to using Twitter?

Well, like any social media tool (or the internet in general), Twitter can be a bit dangerous in the hands of someone procrastinating on grant-writing or teaching prep. When I really need to concentrate, I find it’s best to shut down Twitter (and e-mail) and set a timer for when I can take a break.

Additionally, some studies have shown that social media can make some people feel [depressed](#) in a grass-is-greener kind of way. The solution for this? Go on a Twitter hiatus for awhile or use the network more actively to get the support you need.

Tips for tweeting

1. [Choose whether you want to be anonymous](#): There are pluses and minuses to either choice (and some people even have two accounts). Also, some labs have a Twitter account shared by the whole lab.
2. [Follow some interesting people](#): The Huffington Post [lists](#) scientists to follow in different fields, although it’s pretty light on some fields (Warning: you must be logged in to Twitter to access their lists). Also, once you’ve added some people, you can then see who they follow. Obviously one of your first follows should be [@aaasmember](#)! In fact you can find a list of all the AAAS social media feeds [here](#). You can also follow discussions about AAAS by using the [#AAAS](#) tag.
3. [It’s ok to lurk](#): Spend some time figuring out how everything works ([here’s a good primer](#)), but then jump right in. Share an article, retweet posts you find witty or interesting, ask a question, and (most importantly) respond to other people.
4. [Give it time](#): As I said at the start of the post, Twitter isn’t always that rewarding at the beginning when you don’t have many followers. But even then, you’ll find links to articles that you think are amazing, and you’ll learn a lot from listening. And once you start interacting with people it becomes much more fun and helpful.

Why not give it a shot?

My favorite memories on Twitter: serendipitously reading someone live tweet my advisor’s talk from another country, learning about my public radio internship, and several (sometimes sad, but often funny) chats about postdoc life and science careers—including the recent [#overlyhonestmethods](#) discussion.