Wolfson Academic Tools

Twitter

The social network famous for short nuggets of gossip, information, humour and tirade. As well as being full of personal reflections and media hype, it can be a really useful academic tool.

Why use it?

With over 330 million active monthly users, the scale of data on Twitter is huge. Most of this isn’t relevant for research but there are three reason why you might find it useful:

Promotion
Tell people about your research, publications, talks. Link to more in-depth information on a departmental webpage, conference site or blog. There are lots of people going through the same process as you and they’ll be interested to hear your approaches to dealing with the challenges of research.

Research
There is a wealth of qualitative data available from individual subjects about current world events, and organisations such as NGOs, governments, and influential individuals. Also a great tool for enlisting the help of the public in your research (citizen science).

Keep up to date
follow peers, key academics, conferences and hashtags specific to your field to monitor developments and publications. The insights will be brief and often link you to a website for more information, a new publication or a report.

What does it do?

You can be a passive bystander on Twitter. Follow lots of people, organisations and companies and find out what is happening in the world through their eyes.

You can also engage. You can tweet your own thoughts on your studies, events you have attended and papers you have read. Also you can also get involved by liking, retweeting or replying to others’ tweets.

Terminology

@ - used to refer to individuals on Twitter. It is combined with a username. When @ precedes a username, it automatically gets linked to that user’s profile page.

Handle - a username selected by anyone using Twitter and must contain fewer than 15 characters. Each Twitter handle has a unique URL, with the handle added after twitter.com. Example: http://twitter.com/username.

Tweet -- a message posted on Twitter with 280 or fewer characters

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Developing a following

You will need to define your audience first: are you looking to promote your research to others in the field or to reach out to engage with non-academic audiences? This will impact on the content and style of your feed. Will it be a professional feed or a personal one?

Regular tweeting is the key to keeping your audience interested. A few times a week should be sufficient and probably no more than three a day, unless you are at a conference.

Remember to promote your handle. If you actively engage with other social media, use this to let people know that you tweet; insert your feed on a blog, for instance. Link to it from your university or LinkedIn profile and put it on your email signature.

Managing your feed

Twitter can easily becoming overwhelming. Watch it for a minute and already the tweet that was at the top of your feed when you logged on is now several mouse scroll away. You can also become fixated on checking Twitter for updates. Be strict and set a limited amount of time to one side for when you will engage with it.

That said, there is no good way of searching and archiving tweets so you may need to look to other apps to help you keep abreast of new tweets.

Try Tweetdeck as a way of monitoring what is coming in. This is particularly helpful when you are at a conference and trying to follow a hashtag: https://tweetdeck.twitter.com/

Tools like IFTTT can also push specific tweets from a handle or hashtag to your email inbox to help draw them to your attention or they can be automatically filed in a Google doc. https://ifttt.com/

Tips

- Tweet because it fits with your working practices, otherwise it will be quite a challenge.
- Check it regularly even as an observer; things move on quickly on Twitter.
- Use image to grab attention.
- Be clear about your purpose; it will help you decide what to tweet.
- The more people you follow, the more likely you are to get a following.

E-professionalism

This is the way you engage yourself online in relation to your academic role, including your attitudes, actions and your adherence to relevant professional codes of conduct. You should consider the ethics of public blogging before posting anything online.

You should not reveal the identities of research participants. However, you can of course openly tweet about fieldwork highs and lows in general; peers are always keen to know that someone, somewhere is going through the same challenges as they are.

If you are tweeting about others in the academy, only be prepared to put something on a tweet that you would say to someone’s face. Be mindful that your feed will stay visible when you have left Cambridge and are looking for a post elsewhere.

In general it is better to be clear and open about yourself and your academic position. It’s also important to make clear whether you are writing on behalf of your university.

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