

# Will social media make or break medical conferences?

The conference 'hashtag' has become a regular addition to any advertising poster or programme. Social media technologies take many different forms including internet forums, social blogs, microblogs, wikis, podcasts and videos. Social media is cheap and accessible, and differentiated from 'traditional' media in quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence that enable anyone (even private individuals) to publish or access information often with minimal quality assurance. The use of social media at conferences, not just confined to health care, has exploded. In particular Twitter has become an established tool for pre-, intra- and post-conference communication (Parr, 2012).

Twitter is an online social networking and microblogging service that enables users to send and read 'tweets' – messages limited to 140 characters which can include pictures and photographs. Registered users can read and post tweets but unregistered users can only read them. Globally Twitter is now one of the ten most visited websites. As of June 2014, approximately 6000 tweets are sent every second, which corresponds to over 350 000 tweets per minute, 500 million tweets per day and 200 billion tweets per year (Internet Live Stats, 2015).

The International Conference on Emergency Medicine 2012 was the first significant emergency medicine conference to use and record Twitter use with over 4500 tweets. Tweeting by participants was common, and a large number (74.4%) of original tweets related to clinical or research material. There was also a large virtual Twitter-based participation in the conference as over 400 people produced tweets about the conference, yet only 34% of those were physically present (Neill et al, 2014). This has now been surpassed by the Social Media and Critical Care Conference (SMACCGold); over 4 days there were 23 000 tweets, which have made a total of over 39 million impres-

sions (the number of times a tweet about the conference appears across all users' timelines) (Symplur, 2014).

## Uses of Twitter at conferences

There are many potential uses of Twitter at conferences, both for organizers and attendees. Pre-conference advertising, intra-conference networking and sharing of key messages from lectures and workshops are the most common. While the use of social media including Twitter offers many potential benefits in terms of disseminating information, sharing new research findings and collaborative learning, there is the possibility of disparity of message (a Chinese whispers of the modern age), and issues with trustworthiness and reliability of information presented (Jalali and Wood, 2013).

The evolving use of Twitter in scientific conferences may present opportunities for education and interaction but also may inadvertently result in misrepresentation through human error or technical restrictions (notably the limited character count of Twitter). Concerns about the use of Twitter by health-care professionals are already on record in respect of live real-time tweeting from hospital settings (McCartney, 2013). Consideration must also be given to those who can not attend. Could the sharing of live information lead to a reduction in the number of people actually coming to a conference and can those people tracking the live feed count that as continuing professional development? It is possible that a reduction in attendees may impact on the financial viability of smaller conferences or those which rely on having a minimum number of attendees.

There may also be implications for the presentation of original research findings in relation to copyright regulations enforced by scientific journals or conflicts of interest (Decamp, 2013). Some presenters may feel inherently uncomfortable about direct sharing of their slides using the photo sharing functions available within Twitter.

Despite this, the sharing of information by social media has clear potential and if the use of social media is found to be an effective means of accurately communicating messages to a wider audience, then organizers, speakers and delegates must surely respond by assisting such communication. Conversely, if social media simply provides a well-intentioned platform for the dissemination of inaccurate or incorrect information, steps must be taken to protect the integrity of scientific conferences.

## Perceptions of social media use

Recently the authors assessed speakers' reactions to tweets about their talks at a national emergency medicine conference (Roland et al, 2015). The majority of speakers had no concerns about the content of the tweets. However, of the 14 speakers, three did raise concerns that they had been misrepresented and three said they would change their approach to future presentations. These changes included making their conclusions clearer and putting up statements in a Twitter-friendly way. This implies that there is still an educational need for both speakers and conference organizers to be briefed on the potential advantages and disadvantages of Twitter use. Concerns still exist, as one speaker framed in the free text feedback at the end of the questionnaire:

**'I think it is a useful tool principally for dissemination. Feedback is unregulated and although it can be useful, it is sometimes difficult to gauge the seniority/experience of the person commenting. I therefore welcome all opinions and comments but am unclear about how to take some of them.'**

The support for further study in this area was realized by another:

**'Twitter is a tool for those who Twitter – the many who do are outweighed by the many who don't. Does it have an effect – this needs to be determined.'**

There has yet to be any (known) litigation or academic conflict resulting from Twitter use at a conference but given the lack of general guidance this may be an incident waiting to happen. Conversely conferences failing to embrace social media, and in particular Twitter, may find they become increasingly isolated and perceived as being of lower quality than others. Given that we still have yet to determine how well tweets accurately reflect content, whether 'tweeters' learn more than non-tweeters and whether the presenters of the future require social media training to gain the maximal impact from their presentation, the authors suggest that the following should be considered by all conference organizers:

1. Setting rules or goodwill agreement for social media use
2. Teaching people how to use Twitter at conferences
3. Ensuring presenters are aware of how their presentations may be used on social media.

### Conclusions

Social media is increasingly shaping the content, reach and participant engagement from medical conferences. Time will tell if the construct of the traditional medical conference can keep pace with the continued rapid development of social media as a learning and knowledge dissemination tool. **BJHM**

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### KEY POINTS

- Social media is increasingly used to publicize and promote clinical conferences, and also allows conference participants to share content among a broad, and sometimes virtual, audience unbounded by time or geography.
- Social media permits content sharing through the rapid dissemination of key messages, but conversely such content may not accurately reflect the speaker's intent, leading to misinformation and/or misrepresentation of the facts.
- There is currently little guidance on social media use before or during conferences.
- The potential for real time social media, notably Twitter, to encourage participation through feedback on presentations, and interaction with delegates, speakers and organizers, has yet to be fully realized.

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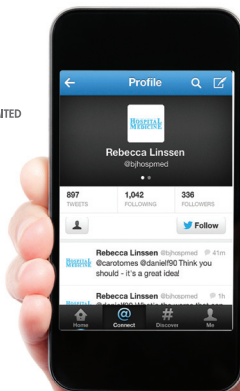
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