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Published online: 25 Oct 2018.

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How Not to Get Ratioed and Other Advice for the Savvy Graduate Mentor

KATHLEEN SEARLES and YANNA KRUPNIKOV

While political communication scholars are attuned to the ways changing information communication technology affects politics, we are often slower to think about how such changes affect our discipline. Our graduate students face a different, more mediated professional reality. We may not always think about communication technologies when we mentor, but changes in the tools we use to communicate our research have implications for the way we train graduate students.

When used effectively, new communication technology can improve science communication and extend networks. One promising platform is Twitter: using this medium, scholars can share research, and chat with other academics. At first glance, Twitter may also hold the key to making those ever-elusive network connections. For graduate students facing a competitive job market, these benefits seem consequential.

This interest in Twitter leaves advisers in the difficult position of advising graduate students on how they should navigate yet another professional context. We address this idea in three points: (a) the benefits of Twitter engagement, (b) the costs of participation on Twitter and, (c) suggestions for helping graduate students—and faculty—navigate publicly communicating their research. While we focus on Twitter, this advice applies to other platforms for science communication.

Should I Be on Twitter?

There are a variety of ways to approach Twitter: One can join Twitter but never participate (i.e., "lurking"), one can join and participate infrequently, or one can be a frequent participant. While much is up to personal preference, there are some benchmarks to consider when advising graduate students.

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Potential Benefits

Broad Communication of Research

While the communication of science has important social value (Lupia, 2013; Lupia & Aldrich, 2015), there is also benefit for the scholar, as sharing research on Twitter can draw attention to scholarship. This attention may come not only from media outlets and policy-focused groups, but from other academics. Research suggests some correlation between the attention an article receives on Twitter and citations (Eysenbach, 2012; Peoples, Midway, Sackett, Lynch, & Cooney, 2016)—although the strength of the Twitter-citation link is under debate (Hausman et al., 2013). Even if a shared article doesn't translate to significantly more future citations, however, attention to the piece is higher than it would be without sharing (Thelwall, Haustein, Larivière, & Sugimoto, 2013). There is also evidence that increased article sharing on Twitter is correlated with more article downloads (Shuai, Pepe, & Bollen, 2012).[1]

Networks

Academic discussion on Twitter also suggests the possibility of wide-reaching scholarly networks. Through these networks academics can ask questions, obtain advice, and share experiences. In a profession oft characterized by opaque processes and informal norms, such access can be an invaluable form of professionalization. For a graduate student who may be too intimidated to approach a scholar at a conference, such conversations are easily initiated on Twitter (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016). Twitter can also connect academics with communities that may be absent in their home institutions (Ferguson & Wheat, 2015). Engaging on Twitter can help alleviate the sense of loneliness and exclusion some academics may feel in their own departments. Much like many graduate students are encouraged to meet with faculty in their area at conferences, advisers may consider asking students to do the same on Twitter.

Research Presentation

Twitter has a 280-character limit, which means that arguments must be made quickly and succinctly. These types of limits may prepare graduate students for describing their projects engagingly, good practice for those brief windows of opportunity for conversation at a conference or in a cover letter.

Potential Costs

Effort

If one does decide to join Twitter, a key consideration is activity level. Both the platform and the informal rules for engagement are constantly updating, and navigating these constraints requires some investment. Given that research suggests that academic power dynamics replicate on Twitter and that graduate students tend to express greater hesitation in what they tweet (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016), becoming an active participant may contribute to stress (Ferguson & Wheat, 2015). Even in Twitter networks designed for

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[1] Peoples and colleagues (2013) account for journal prestige and find that it doesn't act as a confound.

mentorship, graduate students may still experience anxiety (Ferguson & Wheat, 2015). It is also important to remember it is a platform designed to capitalize and sustain attention; ensure you don't fall down the "Twitter hole."

Followers

Twitter has built-in metrics: number of followers, and engagement with tweets either through responses, retweeting, or "liking." It may be difficult not to focus on these metrics—especially in comparison to other people. Similarly, as people use Twitter for self-promotion, it is likely that participation on the platform means daily reminders of others' academic successes such as invited talks, publications at top journals, awards, and notes of thanks from former students. While it is important to see these successes as shared progress rather than a zero-sum game, such information may affect our ability to cope with the pressures of academic life. This may be especially difficult for graduate students who are about to enter a competitive job market.

Trolls

Although Twitter feeds can be made private, doing so is likely to limit the reach of tweets. If the goal is to increase the visibility of one's research, a public feed is beneficial. In turn, one always risks the possibility of hostile tweets from strangers—which in their worst form can become harassment (Jhaver et al., 2018). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that while many people have experienced harassment online, women and people of color are especially likely to face online harassment via social media (Greer, 2018; Jhaver et al., 2018).[2] In sum, what makes Twitter a useful tool for increasing the reach of scientific research also makes it a platform that leaves users open to incivility and harassment, leaving some groups especially vulnerable.

So You've Decided to Join Twitter

If a graduate student decides that the possible benefits of being active on Twitter outweigh the possible costs, the next step to consider is how to effectively engage on Twitter. Next we detail some suggestions, keeping in mind that these suggestions depend on an individual's comfort level. We also note how faculty may engage with graduate students on Twitter. And while these suggestions apply to general discussion about academia and research, we want to reinforce that these may not apply to all types of discourse on Twitter.

Becoming Active on Twitter

1. *Respect*. While in face-to-face communication we can rely on cues such as tone of voice or facial expressions, we do not have these cues in an online setting (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). Without verbal conversation it is difficult to pick up a person's tone, which means it is difficult to determine if they are being friendly or aggressive. Moreover, as most of our time on social media is on mobile devices (Lella & Lipsman, 2016), it is not uncommon for there to be errors. Keep in mind online communication is

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[2] A Pew survey on online harassment finds that while men are slightly more likely to experience (non-sexual) online harassment in general, women are more likely to experience online harassment via social media (see http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/).

difficult, but do not be afraid to ignore or block a user that make you feel uncomfortable.

2. *Kindness*. Hand-in-hand with respect goes the idea of kindness. Twitter is a public medium, and displays of hostile or unkind behavior are held up for the world to see. While this is true for all Twitter users, it is especially important in Twitter interactions between a faculty member and graduate student. Twitter may be fraught for graduate students, who are just starting to navigate professional academic settings. If you as a faculty member observe a graduate student making an error, send them a direct message.[3]

3. *Find your voice*. The ease and accessibility of the platform can make Twitter feel daunting. Think through your own rules of engagement. What are your goals? The way you communicate should balance these goals with professional concerns. For example, how much will you share? What sort of information will you share? Effective Twitter accounts are cohesive in what they share, how they share it, and how they interact.

4. *Communicate better*. There are now 280 characters allowed per tweet, but take Twitter as a challenge to communicate scholarship effectively. To this end, use figures and images to your advantage, use threads sparingly, and avoid jargon when possible. In a saturated news environment Twitter offers us a platform to share our expertise in matters where our scholarship may be relevant.

5. *Find your community*. Sharing research that interests you and tagging the authors and/or outlet is an easy way to initiate conversations with people working in your area. Don't just limit your network to academics; consider public-facing accounts that are working in your area. Use hashtags to connect with communities of practice or organizations that do the work of organizing tweets into like feeds, like #WomenAlsoKnowStuff or #POCAlsoKnowStuff.

6. *Promote others*. The best way to build a network is to promote others' work. This is not to say that you should *not* promote your own work, but an account that does not engage with others is less likely to get engagement in return.

7. *Find your balance*. Not everyone likes Twitter. Figure out what works for you and set healthy boundaries. Take care that the attention merchants (e.g., Twitter developers) don't succeed in monopolizing your time. It may be worth thinking through ways to avoid using it to procrastinate, limiting the amount of time you spend each day/week or limiting the time of day you log on. It is also important for advisers to note that certain groups may face challenges in public settings.

8. *Be mindful of bias*. Specifically, remember that the same biases we see in our everyday institutions replicate online. For example, women are less likely to be retweeted, and their work is less likely to be recommended (Herring & Martinson, 2004; Mashable, 2012). Think about who you follow, who you retweet, and what scholars are represented in the scholarship you share.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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[3] Here we refer to academic disagreements, rather than factually incorrect tweets that if publicly shared may have broader consequences.

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