

# Support, engagement, visibility and personalised news: Twitter has a lot to offer academics if we look past its image problem

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Academics are discovering that twitter is much, much more than a space on which to talk about the latest reality show. [Mark Carrigan](#) outlines what academics can get out of the social media service and why the academic twittersphere really is the most no different from presenting to an audience.



## What's the point of Twitter?

Twitter has an image problem. It first penetrated the public consciousness in a way which has left it defined by celebrities and, particularly for academics, this is unattractive. However the *academic twittersphere* (for lack of a better term) is a relatively self-enclosed ecosystem. While you'll undoubtedly find a bit of celebrity gossip and X-Factor chat, this is strikingly absent in comparison to Twitter more broadly. In fact, academics are using Twitter in all manner of creative and useful ways. These are some of the responses I received when I posed the question "why do you find Twitter useful as an academic?" to my followers on the service:

- Quick answers to questions on things like ... where do I find this tool or that tool .. (@rjhogue)
- We discuss concepts (@Annlytical)
- There are people who are practicing what I'm researching academically and give me a reality check (@Annlytical)
- Twitter is brilliant for keeping up with things, networking, finding new ideas, people's blogs and publications (@BenGuilbaud)
- meeting new people (in all disciplines), academic support, public engagement, increased visibility, filtered news (@Martin\_Eve)
- What Martin said. I think you already saw this but it's the Prezi I made for grad students <http://bit.ly/uK05VM> (@qui\_oui)
- Also, I've found Twitter useful for augmenting F2F academic conferences, extending the conversations (@JessieNYC)
- Twitter is incredibly useful 2 me as an academic 4 many reasons, perhaps chiefly curating the ideal academic dept (@JessieNYC)
- Twitter's unique advantage is that very quickly allows me to spread word of my work to non-academic audiences (@elebelfiore)
- Keeps me up-to-the-minute with news in my field ie; policy issues, and connects me to conferences/o ther academics (@DonnaBramwell)
- connects me to other delegates at conferences, allows me to interact with students in lectures, keeps me uptodate (@timpaa)
- We trade references for research (@annlytical)
- great source of information & resources wouldn't have found otherwise (@nicklebygirl)
- Twitter makes it possible for me to engage with global community even though I now live in Australia & am #altac (@katrinafee)
- a PhD can be very isolated so I think twitter is a great way to meet people who can help and give advice (@CET47)

It's difficult to convey the *point* of Twitter. Partly this is a result of the inadequacy of 'micro-blogging' as a concept: it doesn't get across what such a service is, how it can be used or what value these uses have. Twitter is a profoundly *practical* service and yet it is difficult to convey this because much of the terminology, interface and minutiae of Twitter are inherently confusing until you have engaged with the service. Furthermore, the somewhat steep learning curve isn't a very attractive proposition to time-poor academics.

So why should you *make the leap*? The only reason I can give is that people just like you are finding the service astoundingly useful. The reasons cited above represent a small fraction of the uses to which academics are already putting Twitter and, at present, academic usage of the service is still in its infancy. Why not give it a go? All the evidence suggests you'll find at least *some* uses for it.

The LSE Impact Blog has created a list of [active academic tweeters](#). If you want to see for yourself what all the fuss is about, sign up and follow all the people you can find in these lists who work in your area, as well as any others who look interesting. Say hello, post some links to your work and explore a bit. It's possible that you'll find Twitter simply isn't for you. In which case,

what have you lost? However it's much more likely that you'll join the ever-growing numbers who are finding that Twitter is the most natural social networking service for academics.

### How academics should use Twitter

The fact Twitter offers no *real* tools to control who follows you is a source of concern for some academics. In part this might be a function of a [broader reticence](#) towards online publishing. However I think it also stems from how Twitter is conceived as a medium. If you are presenting at a conference, you wouldn't obsess about the identity of each person in the audience. There might be a variety of reasons *why* you are presenting: sharing your ideas, promoting your work, connecting with others in your field. At any conference, these motives only partially overlap. The reasons for each individual being there varies but nonetheless everyone is working within the same constraints of how the sessions are organised within a physical venue.

Twitter is no different. It's a spot on the internet that's staked out as yours. What you do with it is up to you. Some people choose to wander over to their podium every now and again, make an announcement and then wander off. Some people give their presentation at the podium and then leave, only returning when they want to give another. Some do their presentation but thrive on the Q&A afterwards. Some might not like the feel of the podium and eschew a formal presentation to go and chat more directly with their audience. Likewise some people just want to listen and ask questions of other speakers. Others would rather ditch the conference and go straight to relaxing at the pub.

Most academic users of Twitter fall into one or more of these categories. Likewise people move between categories. But the interpersonal dimensions of it are *fundamentally* no different to a conference. It's just that the form of communication is so dramatically concise, as well as lacking any direct parallel other than the text message, that until you've been using it for a long time, it's difficult to see *quite how much like everyday life it is*. So don't be anxious about it. If you want to use it to draw attention to your work then stop worrying about who follows you and just restrict your tweets to topics you would discuss in a formal work setting. If you want to connect with other people who have similar interests then just tweet about the things that interest you and respond when others do the same, just as you would in any other setting. If you want to get drunk and gossip then go ahead, just remember that people might overhear you and that, on twitter, what you've said echoes in the room for a little while before it dissipates.

The same rules of interaction apply on Twitter as they do offline. If someone habitually goes over time for their talk, monologuing *at* an increasingly bored audience then people in the audience will eventually leave and new audience members won't stay for long. If someone gives a good talk but obviously resents the Q&A afterwards, people might sit in the audience because of intellectual interest but they'll think the speaker is a bit rude. If someone turns up, loudly and briefly announces their new book/paper/insight and then leaves the conference, people won't pay much attention, unless they're a globe trotting academic superstar. While the norms of interaction which apply to Twitter as a *medium* are still in their infancy, the *nature* of that interaction isn't radically new.

#### Related posts:

1. [By leveraging social media for impact, academics can create broader support for our intellectual work and profession.](#)
2. [Do more tweets mean higher citations? If so, Twitter can lead us to the 'personalised journal'; pinpointing more research that is relevant to your interests.](#)
3. [Altmetrics, a guide to Twitter for academics, and increasing your academic footprint: our round-up of social media blogs in 2011](#)
4. [Share your Twitter top tips for a new 'how-to' guide for academics on the merits of academic tweeting](#)
5. [Academic tweeting: using Twitter for research projects](#)