

## If a tweet falls in a conference . . .

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The growing ubiquity of social media in life in general and medicine, in particular, continues, with emergency medicine being well known for embracing the free open access medical education (FOAM) movement. The organized use of and reporting on Twitter at medical conferences have been described as early as the 2012 International Conference of Emergency Medicine.<sup>1</sup> In this issue of *CJEM*, Yiu et al. reported Twitter use performance compared to traditional evaluation metrics for evaluating talks at the Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians 2014 Conference.<sup>2</sup> They essentially found no correlation between traditional evaluations and Twitter metrics for presentations but, importantly, still concluded that Twitter has a valuable role in real-time knowledge translation and dissemination.<sup>2</sup>

Twitter use can enhance conferences for those presenting and attending the conference, as well as for those not in attendance. Twitter can facilitate virtual and in-person networking with other conference attendees with similar interests; and, for those who build online professional relationships, conferences can be an opportunity to meet virtual colleagues in real life. Twitter discussions can also serve as near-real-time peer review for conference content, sparking debates on controversial topics or calling out inaccurate information. Perhaps the most important benefit that Twitter conference use confers is accelerated knowledge translation, disseminating information both more quickly and more broadly. It can help broadcast information from a talk to conference attendees who may be at a parallel activity, especially for large conferences where there are multiple simultaneous talks, and to those not at the conference.

The brevity imposed by Twitter's 240-character limit means that the messages are succinct and to the point,

although this can serve as a double-edged sword, limiting nuance or even accuracy. Roland and May<sup>3</sup> analysed tweets and queried 14 of the speakers from the 2013 College of Emergency Medicine Annual Scientific Conference; speakers reported that only 43% of the tweets represented what they were trying to say, 43% only partially represented their message, and 8% misrepresented the message. In fact, 3 of the 14 speakers reported that they would change their approach to future talks to make the conclusions clearer or put up statements in a more Twitter-friendly way.

While not on the same scale, many emergency medicine residencies (or individuals in attendance) also share content from weekly residency didactic conferences, often flagged with the *#EMconf* hashtag. Riddell and colleagues found that *#EMconf* was among the top five most commonly used hashtags among tweets of influential emergency physicians.<sup>4</sup> At our residency program, a few resident volunteers (who also help run our residency blog) share conference pearls from the residency Twitter account. Speakers' reach can expand from the few dozen local attendees to a much wider audience, with wider geographic, cross-institutional, and cross-specialty communication. Additionally, this allows residents to become substantively involved in FOAM in a professional and supported environment, with the supervision of faculty and residents more experienced with medical social media who can help junior residents develop a professional social media presence. Our volunteer approach improves on prior experience where compulsory conference tweeting was met with varying levels of enthusiasm by residents.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, residency programs experience barriers to embracing social media, including insufficient local faculty knowledge or interest, fear of professionalism violations, lack of institutional or

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technological support, and lack of funding or time<sup>6</sup>; fortunately, a number of resources are available to assist those who want to start, including CORD IT<sup>6</sup> and guides for beginners.<sup>7,8,9</sup>

Twitter use is now standard and often embraced by organizers at large international conferences, playing a valuable role in knowledge dissemination by amplifying the content to an expanded audience, as well as enhancing the experience for attendees. The work by Yiu and colleagues<sup>2</sup> shows the potential for social media to serve as an adjunctive evaluation metric for feedback to those who present at conferences, where, unsurprisingly, targeted, specific, and timely feedback can be difficult to collect from the audience. Furthermore, Yiu and colleagues highlight advantages of incorporating tweets as feedback, including transparency, less bias, and potentially less burdensome; if audience members are live-tweeting conference sessions spontaneously, those public data simply need to be collected, not actively elicited.<sup>2</sup> While sharing conference content via social media can mean inaccurate information (from the speaker directly; misinterpreted by a quick-tweeting audience member; or, simply a loss of relevant context or nuance due to the limiting format) can be widely and rapidly disseminated, this concern is hardly new. To wit, the fitting aphorism, “A lie travels around the globe while the truth is putting on its shoes,” often attributed to Mark Twain, Thomas Jefferson, or Winston Churchill, appears to be first written by Jonathan Swift in 1710: “Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it.”<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, if a speaker lectures at a conference and nobody tweets about it, does it make an impact?

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