

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/239901618>

Understanding Twitter

Article in *British Journal of Occupational Therapy* · June 2013

DOI: 10.4276/030802213X13706169933021

CITATIONS

7

READS

1,660

4 authors:



Fiona Maclean

Queen Margaret University

22 PUBLICATIONS 33 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Derek Jones

The University of Edinburgh

48 PUBLICATIONS 909 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Gail Carin-Levy

Queen Margaret University

13 PUBLICATIONS 161 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



Heather M Hunter

Queen Margaret University

5 PUBLICATIONS 24 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Occupational Therapy Internship [View project](#)



Volunteering with lived experience of mental illness. [View project](#)

Understanding Twitter

Fiona Maclean,¹ Derek Jones,² Gail Carin-Levy³ and Heather Hunter⁴



Key words:

Twitter, social media.

This opinion piece introduces, defines and considers the application of Twitter within occupational therapy research and education. It defines the social networking tool and then examines its potential for use in occupational therapy education, by students and within research. The opinion piece raises critical issues that the profession must address in relation to the responsible use of Twitter but strongly advocates it as a form of social media that needs to be better understood and utilised by educators, researchers and practitioners within occupational therapy.

Introduction

Social networking is already a mainstay of everyday life, and its use and importance within research and education is already indicated in occupational therapy (Giordano and Giordano 2011, Bodell et al 2009). Technology is constantly re-shaping our ideas of online social networking, and this opinion piece sets out to introduce, define and consider the application of Twitter within occupational therapy research and education.

Twitter defined

Twitter is a widely used free social networking tool that allows people to share information, in a real-time news feed (Mistry 2011) through posting brief comments about their experiences and thoughts (Bristol et al 2010). Public messages sent and received via Twitter — or 'tweets' — are limited to no more than 140 characters and can include links to blogs, web pages, images, videos and all other material online. Despite the brevity imposed by this media tool, Twitter use is extensively used in a wide variety of circumstances and, according to Mollett et al (2011, p1), 'thousands of academics and researchers at all levels of experience and across all disciplines already use Twitter daily'.

After setting up a twitter account (www.twitter.com), users establish a profile and a Twitter 'name' — for instance, @OTprofile — and can then send and receive tweets, accessed through any computer or mobile networked device. Once a tweet is sent, it appears in the user's Twitter 'feed' and in the feed of anyone who is following them. Table 1 provides a summary of common Twitter terminology.

Searching can also be used to find relevant tweets. This can be by keywords, often identified by user-defined hashtags, identified by an initial '#' symbol (for example #occupation or #journal). Hashtags help to locate particular areas of discussion (Bristol et al 2010) and some hashtags that are used as professionally relevant to occupational therapy can be seen in the example tweets in Table 2.

As a communication tool, Twitter allows the free exchange of ideas nationally and globally, between people interested in similar areas of expertise, as well as providing the opportunity to engage in critical debate. In Table 2, below, a few postings by the authors indicate the kind of communication that can be achieved.

Twitter in education

Literature examining the effectiveness of using Twitter in education is variable in scope, although a growing number of publications outline the potential

¹Lecturer, Queen Margaret University, Division of Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies, Edinburgh.

²Senior Lecturer, Northumbria University, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Department of Public Health and Wellbeing, Newcastle upon Tyne.

³Lecturer, Queen Margaret University, Division of Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies, Edinburgh.

⁴Lecturer, Queen Margaret University, Division of Occupational Therapy and Arts Therapies, Edinburgh.

Corresponding author: Fiona Maclean, Lecturer, Queen Margaret University Drive, Musselburgh, Edinburgh, East Lothian EH21 6UU. Email: fmaclean@qmu.ac.uk

Reference: Maclean F, Jones D, Carin-Levy G, Hunter H (2013) Understanding Twitter. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 76(6), 295-298.

DOI: 10.4276/030802213X13706169933021

© The College of Occupational Therapists Ltd.

Submitted: 11 September 2012.

Accepted: 13 December 2012.

Table 1. Useful Twitter terminology (adapted from Mollett et al 2011)

Term	Definition
Follow	Following another user means that all their tweets will appear in your feed. Click on their user name (also known as a 'handle'), and their profile will appear with a prominent Follow button beside it. Just click on this to 'follow'.
Who to follow list	This is a list of Twitter's suggestions of people or organisations that you might want to follow, based on points of similarity with your profile. Scroll down the list and click the Follow button next to anyone you want to.
Unfollow	To stop seeing someone else's tweets, go to your following list and find the person you want to stop following and hover the cursor over the Following button until it is replaced by the Unfollow button, then click.
Block	From time to time a spammer or other unsavoury character may appear in your Followers list. Click the icon next to the unwanted follower's name so that the 'Block [their name]' option appears — click this and they will be removed from your Followers list. For any form of spammer or malware user it is a good idea to click also 'Report [their name] for spam' so as to limit their capacity to annoy others. You should look at and 'weed' your Followers list regularly. Twitter shows the new followers at the top of the list.
Retweet or RT	To share somebody else's tweet that you have seen in your feed, hover above it and select retweet. It then goes to all your followers, with a small arrow icon, which shows others that this wasn't originally your tweet.
Reply	To respond to somebody else's tweet, hover over it and select the Reply option, which will then appear in their Interactions section or 'tab'.
@	Used in tweets when you want to mention another user. Also the first part of every twitter user name — for example @BAOTCOT.
Mentions	Check your Mentions area or 'tab' to see when others mention you in a tweet by your username. If you mention others, this will appear in their Mention tab.
#	Hashtag – used to categorise tweets. Popular topics are referred to as trending topics and are sometimes accompanied by hashtags, such as #London2012, #OTuesday or #Occhat. Click on any tweet categorised with # for a list of related tweets from many different users. Including already popular hashtags in your tweet may attract more attention to it. Hashtags are also used as part of 'back channel' communication around an event, be it a conference, a TV programme or a global event. An event audience can share comments, questions and links with each other while continuing to follow the formal presentation.
Direct Message or DM	These are private messages that you can send to other Twitter users. To send a or receive a DM click the envelope icon on your profile page. DMs can only be sent between using who are following each other.
Shortened URLs	Given that a typical web address is rather long and clumsy, free URL shortening sites such as bitly.com and tinyurl.com provide links which you can paste into tweets. Copy the web address of the page that you wish to share, paste it into the box on either site, and you will be given a short link which will redirect anybody who clicks on it back to the original page you want to share.

Table 2. Example tweets

<p>Fiona Maclean (@MacleanFiona) 30/10/2012 16:04 Interesting ... Junco et al (2010) conclude that using Twitter in relevant ways increase student engagement & can improve grades!</p>
<p>Gail Carin-Levy (@gcarinlevy) 23/10/2012 20:53 #Occhat ... I use it in role as educator- took bunch of 1st yrs out for run and asked them to reflect on value & meaning to them.</p>
<p>Gail Carin-Levy (@gcarinlevy) 11/09/2012 19:31 #OTuesday long day organising OT1 induction ... And thus a new cohort of aspiring OTs commence their training. #oteducation.</p>

possibilities and pitfalls of using the tool in this context. Nearly all of the current literature lies outside the field of occupational therapy and Giordano and Giordano (2011) highlight that there are very few published peer-reviewed studies examining social networking and health profession students. One exception is a study by Mistry (2011) that explores the potential usefulness of Twitter as a teaching tool to scaffold learning and engage pre-registration nursing students in critical thinking. This research concluded that learners had little difficulty setting up their Twitter accounts and that some conscientious learners continued to tweet outside of the class, creating a community of learners. Nevertheless, it was noted that learners (and tutors) need to develop slightly differing skillsets when using Twitter; learners' engagement with Twitter needed to be prolonged, and tutor presence needed to be balanced so that tweets and questions were regularly posted (Mistry 2011).

Giordano and Giordano (2011) surveyed 644 first-year students and 413 recent graduates on a range of health-related courses, including occupational therapy. The survey attempted to identify whether students used social media, including Twitter. The results indicated that the majority of students prefer their information online, with a preference for Facebook and little use of Twitter. Despite this, Junco et al (2010) provide experimental evidence, drawn from 125 first-year pre-health professional students undertaking a one-credit first-year seminar course, that Twitter helps to engage students. The experimental group in this American study had greater engagement than the control group, and higher semester grade point averages (an averaged indication of a student's achievement over a period). While this study acknowledges limitations, the research provides a valuable addition to the growing body of work examining social media, which has, thus far, relied largely on testimonials or correlational evidence (Giordano and Giordano 2011). Bristol et al (2010) describe and suggest a number of examples for the use of Twitter in nursing education. This includes asking students to post at least three comments to Twitter during each classroom session.

Skiba (2008) suggests academics could tweet from conferences while they are attending them, in order to communicate immediate thoughts and ideas taken from speakers

to their students, 'live'. Skiba (2008) also notes that tweeting in this way could serve as a subsequent reminder to the conference participant of the thoughts and ideas taken at the time. With this in mind, Twitter was implemented by staff of Queen Margaret University attending the Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Union (COTEC) Conference in Stockholm, Sweden in 2012. By posting tweets for undergraduate students to access, a small community of virtual learners developed, effectively attending the conference remotely. The experience of using Twitter in this way anecdotally lent support to the view of Thompson (2007) who suggests that Twitter creates a sense of classroom community, encouraging social learning and promoting changes in classroom dynamics.

Little discussion exists, however, around whether Twitter use by students should be compulsory in a learning environment, potentially presenting an interesting tension: should Twitter be complementary to educational delivery or should it become a requirement? Are those students who choose not to be engaged put at a disadvantage?

Twitter in research

The most commonly discussed use of Twitter for research purposes in the literature is in tweeting about new publications. Mollett et al (2011) suggest that researchers also tweet about new developments informed by a researcher's project work, for example on changes in relevant government policy, think-tank reports or newly published research. In addition, Mollett et al (2011) point out that Twitter's brevity, accessibility and immediacy are appealing to research partners and non academics alike.

Twitter offers various opportunities that were not available previously. The opportunity to use Twitter as a critical appraisal tool for reviewing research is simultaneously an opportunity to spread ideas and thoughts regarding research further. The opportunity to review academic work need not be limited to conference presentations, but can also include reviews of publications — although Mandavilli (2011) also considers some of the drawbacks of this, in suggesting that the pace and tone of online review can be intimidating, and that it is unclear how authors should respond to these critiques. Mandavilli (2011) suggests that a new set of cultural norms is needed and, like others, considers the possibility that online commenting could replace the traditional process of pre-publication peer review that scholarly journals employ to decide whether a paper is publishable.

Where to now for occupational therapy and Twitter?

This opinion piece strongly advocates the use of Twitter as an essential tool that should be used and understood by educators, researchers and practitioners within occupational therapy.

Clearly there are issues associated with Twitter in relation to confidentiality and professionalism. Cunningham (2012), in relation to the medical profession, considers the power of social media and its ability to 'blur boundaries', suggesting there is a need to reflect on how much of our private and personal lives should be made public. Further debate within occupational therapy is needed concerning how best to utilise social media such as Twitter, when the use of social media can reveal aspects of one's private and professional life for all to see. In general, we have a responsibility to consider what impact, if any, the public consumption of personal values and thoughts may have on professionalism and, for this reason, Cunningham (2012), asks whether 'professional distance' is in fact a helpful or meaningful term for professionals in the twenty-first century.

Whatever the potential challenges, Twitter can be seen to enhance the educational experience of students, through access to opinion, research and practice across the profession and beyond. However, there is a need for occupational therapy in the United Kingdom to recognise and explain clearly how our professional code of ethics should be applied to the use of social networking. For example, the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) publish guidance to nurses, midwives and students concerning the use of social media, in which they draw attention to the fact that their registration may be at risk if they share confidential information online, bully or intimidate, pursue personal relationships with patients or service users (Nursing and Midwifery Council 2012).

The examples given by the NMC illustrate the need for Twitter users to maintain professional standards, and show that the expectations of professionalism need to be discussed and highlighted widely to both student occupational therapists and practitioners. The adoption of Twitter within occupational therapy education and research across the UK should require, at the same time, the adoption of explicit expectations and standards of practice for its use. We argue that these expectations and standards should become a requirement of the validation process for occupational therapy courses by the College of Occupational Therapy (COT) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

Conclusion

Twitter is a versatile, accessible and valuable tool for communicating thoughts, ideas and visions of the future, globally. While Twitter presents challenges, the responsible and ethical use of it offers an exciting development that should be embraced. The authors invite readers to join the growing number of occupational therapists who tweet regularly to each other, as well as those in other disciplines, relevant organisations, and service users. As a means of disseminating what we do, Twitter is a tool that we need to be aware of and understand more fully. The authors would like to hear your views, and encourage your participation in using Twitter, and can be found online at @MacleanFiona, @Dr_Derek_Jones, @gcarinlevy and @HHHunter59.

References

- Bodell S, Hook A, Penman M, Wade W (2009) Creating a learning community in today's world: how blogging can facilitate continuing professional development and international learning. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 72(6), 279-81.
- Bristol TJ, Billings DM, Kowalski K (2010) Twitter: consider the possibilities for continuing nursing education. *The Journal of Continuing Education in Nursing*, 41(5), 199-200.
- Cunningham AM (2012) Doctors' use of social media. *General Medical Council*. Available at: <http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/10900.asp> Accessed 30.08.12.
- Giordano C, Giordano C (2011) Health professions students' use of social media. *Journal of Allied Health*, 40(2), 78-81.
- Junco R, Heiberger G, Loken E (2010) The effect of Twitter on college student engagement and grades. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 27(2), 1-14.
- Mandavilli A (2011) Trial by Twitter. *Nature*, 469, 286-87.
- Mistry V (2011) Critical care training: using Twitter as a teaching tool. *British Journal of Nursing*, 20(20), 1292-96.
- Mollett A, Moran D, Dunleavy P (2011) *Using Twitter in university research, teaching and impact activities. A guide for academics and researchers*. London School of Economics and Political Science Public Policy Group.
- Nursing and Midwifery Council (2012) *Social networking sites*. Available at: <http://www.nmc-uk.org/Nurses-and-midwives/Regulation-in-practice/Regulation-in-Practice-Topics/Social-networking-sites/> Accessed 30.08.12.
- Skiba DJ (2008) Nursing Education 2.0: Twitter & tweets. Can you post a nugget of knowledge in 140 characters or less? *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 29(2), 110-12.
- Thompson C (2007) Clive Thompson on how Twitter creates a social sixth sense. *Wired Magazine* 15.07. Available at: http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/magazine/15-07/st_thompson Accessed 26.06.12.