

Tweeting Science: Lessons from Curating a Rocur Account

Michelle Rodrigues (mrodrigs@illinois.edu), June 26, 2017

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For my public engagement project, I served as a curator for the Twitter account @biotweeps. Biotweeps is a “rocur” account, where guest scientists curate for a week. Curating provides scientists an opportunity to reach a much wider audience than they would normally reach. For example, I currently have about 1,380 followers, whereas Biotweeps has approximately 11,200 followers.

I signed up for a slot in early June so it would not conflict with any existing deadlines and I could hopefully devote more time to it. Although tweeting about science sounds deceptively easy, I was intimidated by it. While I flit on and off Twitter, and randomly tweet about research and issues in science, the pace of Twitter is dizzying. Curating involved sustained effort, and I wasn't sure how to plan for it. I was given a set of guidelines, but they were simple: introduce yourself, make it accessible, keep it short, engage in conversation, credit creators, and use hashtags. I loosely set a schedule, starting chronologically with my early interest and exposure to science, and concluding with my current work and thoughts about retention and inclusion in science. Throughout the week, I planned to interweave my research process and results with reflection about inspiring kids' interest in science, but also retaining and supporting them at various stages of the scientific training process.

The process was much more time-consuming and overwhelming than I expected. Firing off tweets sounds simple enough, but planning them, and selecting associated images and links took time. Most days I began tweeting around 8 am, and sent off my last tweets between 8-10 pm. While I was not tweeting all day, I spent most of my days engaging in twitter conversations. When I was busy with other things and couldn't tweet, I'd spend more time later in the evening occupied with Twitter. Furthermore, engaging with followers and sustaining conversations required constant, focused attention. I thought I could easily fit tweets around other work while keeping Twitter open in the background, but I soon realized that was impossible. With the high volume of followers, there was constant likes, retweeting, and continued conversations. I found it hard to stay on track with my planned schedule. I quickly fell behind, and it was hard to catch up.

At the end of the day, I wanted to catch up and tweet more, but it became intellectually and emotionally exhausting. I intended to share both the rewards of doing field work and academic research, but also some of the challenges. Sharing those challenges generated positive feedback and follower engagement, but revisiting those experiences could be overwhelming. Additionally, engaging with currently trending discussions and hashtags that were occupying #scicomm twitter took me in unexpected directions. When there were trending statements from professors that mental health problems meant you didn't belong in graduate school, I felt it was important to speak about my own experiences. Sharing those experiences was tough, but I received messages thanking me, and knowing that my tweets may have helped struggling graduate students makes it worth it.

This engagement activity was demanding, but also rewarding. It was gratifying to see people tweet that they enjoyed my curation and eagerly following my tweets. It helped me realize how to effectively use Twitter for scientific communication. I joined Twitter to communicate my work, but I typically use it for networking, joking around with other field biologists, and sharing cute animal pictures. While some of those activities involve communicating about research, and led me to outreach opportunities, it's never felt like "real" science communication. During my week at Biotweeps, I became adept at actively tweeting about research. Successfully engaging an audience in the fast-paced world of Twitter is a skill. I have new respect for scientists who effectively command large audiences, create viral hashtags, and consistently highlight their science.

After my curation week, I received analytics that provided data on my outreach success. People engaged with my tweets a total of 13,544 times. My tweets received a total of 2,855 "likes," 855 replies, and 356 retweets. I also received 545 clicks on URLs that I linked, which means that people are hopefully engaging further with the websites and articles I shared. I highly recommend curating a rocur account, and I'd like to do it again in the future. However, I have a few suggestions for anyone considering curating a rocur account: 1) If you're new to Twitter, follow some rocur accounts to get a feel for them before you sign up; 2) Follow some of the more popular science communicators to see how they structure tweets and threads; 3) Pick a week that you have as little going on as possible, because curating the Twitter account will expand to take up all your time.

For more information About Biotweeps, see: <https://biotweep.wordpress.com/>