

# Twitter expands the reach and engagement of a national scientific meeting: the Irish Society of Urology

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## Abstract

**Background** Social media is the interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and web-based networks. This year, the Irish Society of Urology (ISU) expanded its involvement in social media with a preregistered Twitter hashtag (#ISU14) for the annual meeting.

**Aim** The aim of this study was to highlight the use of Twitter at an annual national meeting held in 2014.

**Methods** The Symplur healthcare analytics website was used to prospectively examine traffic related to the 2014 ISU Annual Meeting. This feature was used to generate statistics for the number of impressions, unique tweets (excluding retweets) and distinct contributors who used the indexing hashtag #ISU14. Individual tweets were assessed using the conference hashtag on the Twitter website.

**Results** The total number of attendees at the conference was 119, and 99 individuals participated in Twitter using the conference hashtag (#ISU14). 31 % of attendees

participated in tweeting at the conference. Over the course of the conference, a total of 798 unique tweets were generated, creating over 665,000 impressions in cyberspace. 590 (73.9 %) tweets were generated from attendees at the conference, while 26.1 % of tweets were from virtual followers. 702 (87.9 %) tweets were from urologists and 439 (55 %) tweets were of scientific nature. Tweet activity peaked during the guest lectures on both days.

**Conclusion** Twitter use at the ISU has been shown to facilitate interaction between delegates and allows users to follow as well as participate from afar.

**Keywords** Twitter · Social media · Symplur · Analytics · Conference · Urology · Surgery

## Introduction

Social media (SoMe) is the interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and web-based networks [1]. SoMe depends on the efficient transfer of information via mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss and modify user-generated content [2]. SoMe is a category of online resources combining user participation and communication [3]. These include social networks such as Facebook, blogging, microbloggings (Twitter), video-sharing sites (YouTube) and photo-sharing sites (Instagram).

The use of social media at medical conferences has been well-documented [4–8]. A recent study has demonstrated substantial social media activity at eight international urology conferences in 2013, greatly increasing the audience and influence of these conferences [9]. It allows interaction between delegates of the conference as well as

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virtual followers of the conference from around the world. It facilitates discussion and forges networks regardless of the size or profile of the conference.

There is a significant uptake of social media by urological journals with almost 25 % using a Twitter account and 40 % using a Facebook profile [10]. Contemporary surgeons and trainees are highly proficient with mobile technology and use online formats as communication channels. The British Journal of Urology International (BJUI) has paved a new landscape for itself in recent years and social media is the driver of much of this change through online activities such as blogs and Twitter [11].

The healthcare analytic website, Symplur [12], generates data regarding Twitter use pertaining to a specified hashtag. In these analytics, a tweet is defined as a  $\leq 140$  character social media entry on Twitter, and a retweet means the redistribution of a tweet from one user by another user. In addition, Symplur calculates 'impressions' by multiplying the number of tweets per participant by the number of followers for that participant, and summing these numbers across all participants during the period evaluated.

This year, the organisers of the annual meeting of the Irish Society of Urology (ISU) expanded its involvement in social media with an online blog summarising the meeting as well as a predefined Twitter hashtag (#ISU14) for the meeting. The aim of this study was to highlight the role of Twitter at the 2014 annual meeting of the ISU. To the best of our knowledge, this is the Irish first study detailing the use of social media at a national conference in Ireland.

## Methods

The conference specific hashtag (#ISU14) was preregistered with Symplur Healthcare Hashtags. The healthcare analytics website, Symplur, was used to prospectively examine traffic related to the 2014 ISU Annual Meeting in Killarney, Co Kerry. The meeting was held on the 25th and 26th of September 2014. Symplur is part of the Healthcare Hashtag Project and provides a webpage with customisable participation and influencer metrics. This feature was used to generate statistics for the number of impressions (an estimate of the total number of times a tweet could have been viewed), unique tweets (excluding retweets) and distinct contributors who used the indexing hashtag #ISU14. Statistics were collected for the immediate 5-day period before and 2 days after the meeting (20 September 2014 to 28 September 2014).

The total number of registered attendees at the meeting was obtained through direct correspondence with the meeting organisers. Twitter users were then cross-referenced with the attendance list to assess if a user was an

attendee or following the conference virtually. Individual tweets collated by searching the conference hashtag (#ISU14) on the Twitter website-unrelated tweets were discarded. Two of the co-authors (GN, FOK) independently scrutinised the tweets. Tweets were categorised based upon whether the generator was present at the conference or not, the occupation of the generator and the topic and content of the tweet. The content of tweets was categorised as of scientific nature (if the tweet contained scientific information pertaining to a presentation), as social or personal (if the tweet was not of scientific basis), as industry or advertising (if the tweet was generated from industry relating to their product). Unprofessional content was defined as a tweet containing profanities, information of sexual/racial nature, patient identifying information or unethical conduct.

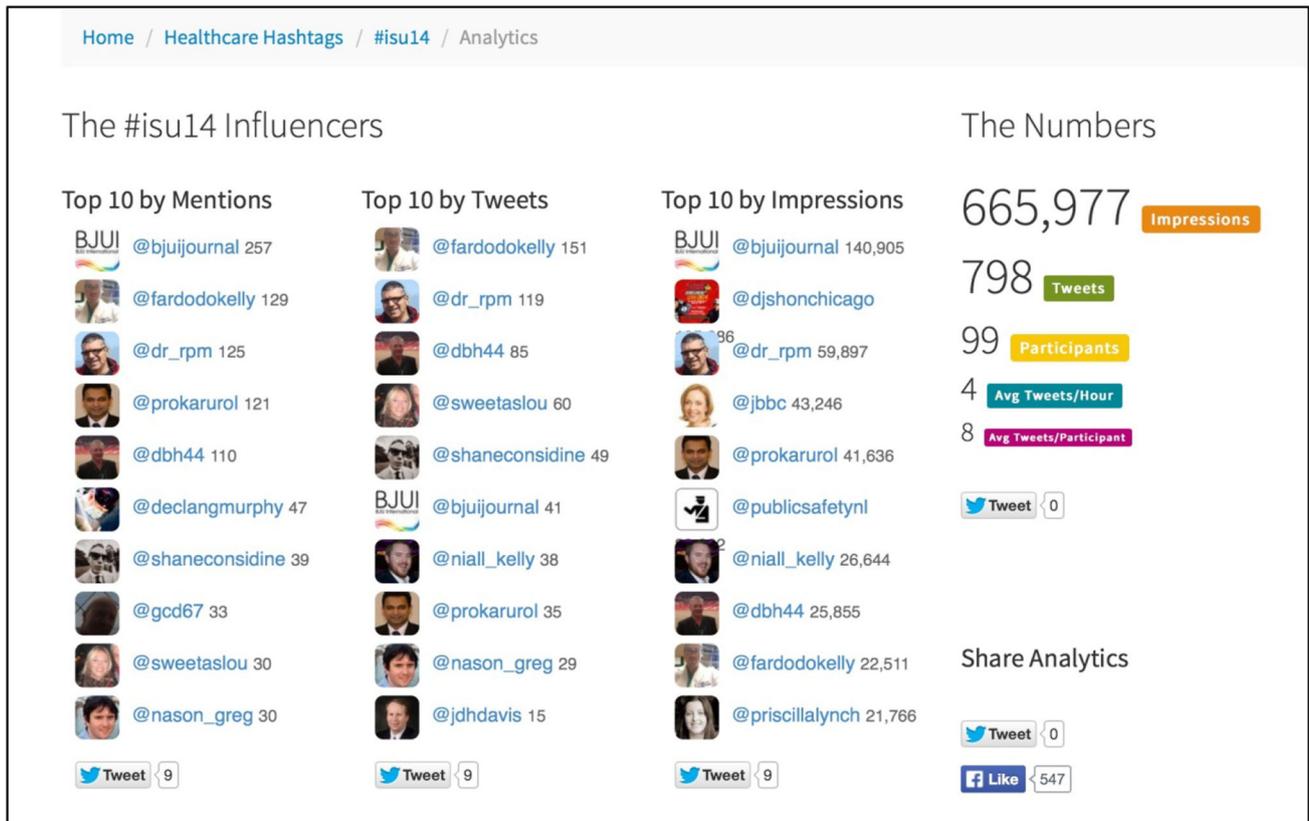
A social media team was developed to promote the use of social media at the annual meeting. Free wi-fi was available throughout the conference centre. There was a live Twitter feed screen outside the presentation hall displaying live tweets. Prior to the meeting the registered delegates received email notice regarding the conference hashtag and the use of Twitter at the conference. The BJUI also supported the meeting through publication of the conference abstracts in their journal and promoted the conference via their Twitter feed. Furthermore, the social media team had agreed to write a post conference blog which was to appear on the BJUI website following the meeting.

## Results

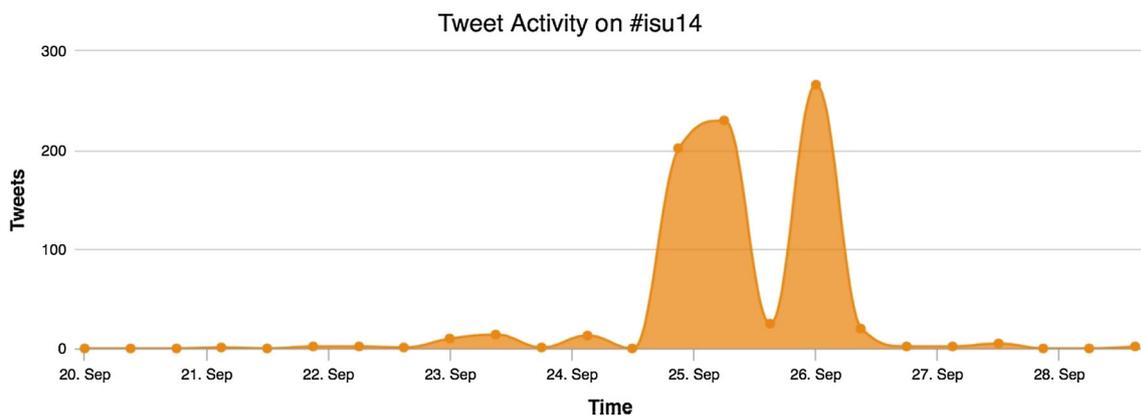
The total number of attendees at the conference was 119. 37 attendees (31.1 %) participated in tweeting at the conference. Interestingly, 590 (73.9 %) tweets were generated by users present at the conference yet over one-quarter (208) of tweets were from remote users.

Over the course of the conference, a total of 798 unique tweets were sent generating over 665,000 impressions in cyberspace (Fig. 1). The number of individual Twitter participants was 99. There was on average 4 tweets per hour during the peri-conference period. Tweet activity peaked during the guest lectures on both days (Fig. 2).

702 (87.9 %) tweets were from urologists, 42 (5.2 %) from medical media outlets, 35 (4.3 %) from industry, 14 (1.8 %) from basic translational scientists and 5 (0.6 %) from a urological journal. 439 (55 %) tweets contained scientific content, 298 (37.3 %) regarding social or personal content and 61 (7.6 %) related to industry or advertising. Of the scientific-related tweets ( $n = 439$ ), the most common topics discussed were prostate cancer (36.4 %), technology including robotics (20.3 %), urological training



**Fig. 1** Symplur analytics of Twitter use at the Irish Society of Urology (#ISU14)



**Fig. 2** Tweet activity during the peri-conference period

and education (16.2 %) and paediatric urology (5.7 %). There was no unprofessional content recognised.

Regarding the demographics of Twitter participants, it is evident that the most influential participants (as measured by Symplur analytics) are individuals or organisations with established social media profiles. For example, @bjuijournal is the journal of the Irish Society of Urology as well as one of the highest impact urology journals in

the world with the highest recognised social media influence (as measured by the Klout score—a score which measures social media influence). Other top influencers are members of the ISU social media team. Furthermore @prokarurol and @declangmurphy are the Editor of the BJUI and the Social Media Editor of the BJUI, both global urologists and key member in the urological social media network worldwide.

## Discussion

This study highlights the substantial use of social media at our annual meeting of the Irish Society of Urology. Overall, one-third of conference delegates participated in Twitter activity. As expected the majority was generated by delegates present at the conference, though interestingly over one-quarter were from remote users.

Wilkinson et al., recently demonstrated that social media has been adopted at the large international urological conferences. Twitter was mostly widely embraced at the annual American Urological Association with 4,663 tweets and over 8.6 million impressions during the peri-conference period. There has also been a substantial rise in the use of Twitter at these meetings over the past few years, with a tenfold increase in Twitter use at the European Association of Urology conference from 2012 to 2014 [9]. This was echoed by Matta et al. [13] at the AUA between 2012 and 2013.

A social media revolution is happening across the world at present. Many sectors within surgery have embraced the modalities of social media for patient information [14, 15], as an educational tool [16, 17], to promote new advances [18, 19], to generate debate and modernise traditional journals [10, 20, 21] and to foster discussion at conferences [4, 5, 13, 22]. Social media has become a highlight within annual conferences and allows greater interaction by attendees and allows users at home to follow in depth. Attendees are being encouraged to participate and many associations are now running social media courses. Although the most influential users at the conference, as described by the analytics, include high profile urologists with active Twitter accounts and members of the social media team other (less well-known) Twitter users have also been included as ‘influencers’. This may not necessarily hold true at a larger meeting with greater Twitter activity, however. Despite this, any user can interact, participate in discussion, question their peers or even the high profile experts. Social media allows this interaction which previously was a lot more challenging. As a result, virtual users anywhere in the world, regardless of their speciality or grade, can follow and participate live at conferences.

Limitations to the use of social media at conferences are multi-factorial. Firstly, internationally, social media use is dependent on widely available good quality Wi-Fi. Most international conference centres now cater for this. Secondly, at the larger international meetings there is a significant industry involvement which often produces a large volume of tweets at meetings which can introduce bias towards certain products or services. Furthermore, the content of tweets is unregulated and users can place comments that are not evidence based. Many organisations have, however, produced guidelines with regard to the appropriate professional use of social media [23].

However, although guidelines exist regarding the appropriate use of social media they do not specifically relate to the use of Twitter at conferences. Social media courses have become increasingly popular at the larger international meetings such as the American Urological Association and the European Association of Urology outlining how those new to social media can participate appropriately. It is important that conference organisers highlight the professional use of social media to facilitate the generation of tweeting related to scientific content held at specific sessions during the conference.

This is the first year the ISU took an active role in promoting the use of social media through a social media team at its annual conference. Following the meeting, a blog was produced on the British Journal of Urology (official journal of the ISU) recounting the highlights of the meetings—at the time of writing it had over 750 views [24]. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report of Twitter use at a conference in Ireland. Social media has been adopted as a part of medicine worldwide and has the ability to disseminate information faster and to a wider audience. The integration of social media into medical/surgical training programmes and conferences is going to be an accepted platform going forward.

Regarding the content of tweets, 87.9 % was generated by urologists with 55 % containing scientific content. There was no unprofessional conduct recognised on tweet analysis. A variety of topics were debated through social media, however, not unsurprisingly prostate cancer was the most discussed topic. This analysis of Twitter activity at a urology conference demonstrates that the majority of the content discussed on social media is of a scientific nature and mainly from medical professionals in the speciality. It is an easy and accessible way for participants present and remote to engage in peer debate. Furthermore, twitter analyses only capture the activity of active users, many Twitter users purely ‘follow’ conferences without actively participating, this broadens the scope to which the content is distributed.

This study has a number of limitations—the use of the Symplur Healthcare Hashtag website only captures tweets regarding a conference that is preregistered (as was #ISU14). Furthermore unless users include the conference specific hashtag (#ISU14) then the tweet is not captured by these Twitter analytics. Also the demographic details of individual users are not captured. However, these analytics does provide the most robust analysis of conference Twitter activity currently available.

## Conclusion

Social media modalities such as Twitter are being increasingly used at conferences around the world. Twitter

use at the ISU has been shown to facilitate interaction between delegates and allows users to follow as well as participate from afar.

**Conflict of interest** None.

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