Follow me! Increasing participation in online conferences

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There have been mixed reviews about the use of Twitter for increasing interaction during online conferences. Social media platforms such as Twitter have the potential to satisfy a perceived need for networking and communication opportunities that are commensurate with the face-to-face environment but generally lacking in the online world. However, a reluctance to adopt new and emerging technologies, or perhaps a lack of understanding about how to use Twitter for a more interactive conference experience, has inhibited its success. This paper reports on the use of Twitter in the Follow the Sun Online Learning Festival and provides an overview of the challenges involved in encouraging and sustaining participation in a virtual environment.

Keywords: Twitter, social media, online conferencing

Introduction and Background

Conference organisers have already discovered that Twitter is 'a powerful component of one's networking activity' (Reinhardt et al, 2009, p. 147) and are thus using this microblogging platform as an additional form of communication during face-to-face conferences. In an analysis of 'How people are using Twitter during conferences', Reinhardt et al (2009, p. 153) argued that 'Twitter helps you reach out to others with similar interests [and] provides networking potential'. Martin Ebnar (2009, p. 97) likewise found that the use of Twitter during a conference 'enhanced the words of the keynote speaker [and] turned the presentation into an interactive, highly attention-evoking act'. Twitter enabled 'the previously hidden thoughts of the participants…to become visible and thus helped to deepen the presented subject' (Ebnar, 2009, p. 97). While the use of Twitter for increasing interaction during face-to-face conferences has been widely documented, little is known about the potential of Twitter for creating networking opportunities in online events.

This paper reports on the use of Twitter as part of an online, synchronous conference, which was organised by the Australian Digital Futures Institute at USQ, Beyond Distance Research Alliance at the University of Leicester and Athabasca University, and the challenges involved in encouraging participants to adopt and interact with this written, and often foreign, form of communication. There is no doubt that the social component of the traditional conference contributes to its appeal. Most people like to travel and to 'meet and interact with other people who are physically present' (Kimura & Ho, 2008, p. 121) and the 'spontaneous and random socialising and networking that can happen…may be inhibited or even eliminated by online participation' (Anderson & Anderson, 2009). However, online conferences can be organised to utilise an array of communication modes to promote interaction. The purpose of using Twitter during the Follow the Sun Online Learning Festival was to analyse how people are using social media during online events.

Establishing a Twitter presence for #FTS12

Twitter was used during the Follow the Sun Online Learning Festival to add a dimension to the conference by allowing geographically dispersed individuals to communicate with each other. At the conclusion of the conference, delegates received a survey that analysed their social media usage throughout the event and the main messages that were expressed via Tweets. Delegates who consented to their Tweets being analysed were required to use the conference hash tag (#FTS12). It was found that the majority of Tweets were informative, instructional, promotional or conversational. (See Table 1)

Table 1: Categorisation of Tweets from Follow the Sun

Tweet Category	Example Tweet
Informative: Tweets that pointed to resources with an accompanying link	'Recordings from #fts12 now available @ http://t.co/smWYn413'
Instructional: Tweets with a directive to perform an activity.	'Click latecomers link to join! http://t.co/5iTLCwN'
Promotional: Tweets that promoted an upcoming presentation.	'Nominal Group Technique Session @ #fts12. Join us!'
Conversational: Tweets that included an observation or expressed an opinion.	'Interesting conversation about the future of the world' or 'Very impressive start to Follow the Sun!'

Twitter usage, according to Java et al (2007), can be roughly categorised into three types: information sharing, information seeking and friendship-wise relationship. However, analysis of the Tweets emanating from the Follow the Sun Online Learning Festival indicates that information sharing was the primary motivator for using Twitter during the online event. The informative, instructional and promotional Tweets invariably provided information for others regarding an upcoming presentation, change of location or a complementary link to issues discussed. There was no evidence to suggest that conference delegates used Twitter as a friendship-wise relationship tool. In fact, despite the networking potential of social media platforms, only 41% of survey respondents indicated that they were actively listening, asking questions and/or communicating using social media during the sessions and 36.2% of respondents said that they did not communicate with others during or after the festival. This suggests that, despite the best attempts by the conference organisers to facilitate an interactive, social learning climate, creating a community or network is challenging in the text-based environment.

Conclusion

Initial indications suggest that when used appropriately, Twitter is extremely useful for the fast exchange of thoughts, ideas and information. Twitter proponents value its potential as a backchannel for the reportage of live events and the layer of interconnectivity it provides, while its critics chastise the tool as a meaningless distraction. A number of challenges need to be addressed before Twitter can be used as a networking tool at online events. This form of written communication does not come naturally to most people and it cannot be assumed that all conference delegates will embrace it. Conference organisers need to both educate participants on how to network in an online community and find alternate means of interacting with those who are disengaged with Twitter. From the outset, conference facilitators need to explain that the intent is to share important ideas, gage audience reactions and push thoughts and ideas to a new place. The key is to figure out how to implement these social networking platforms, whilst managing expectations of what is actually possible in an online verses face-to-face environment.

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