

## SIGN OF THE TIMES

## Getting Started with Twitter

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Twitter is a simple online tool for receiving and sharing information. It can be a tool for life-long learning and has potential for use in professional networking, information management, and medical education. At the 2012 SGIM Annual Meeting in Orlando, a number of members showed an interest in learning more about Twitter. In addition, the SGIM Educational Technology Interest Group decided to use Twitter instead of a listserv to stay connected in between meetings. Thus, it seems that we may be approaching a tipping point for the use of Twitter in SGIM.

Here is a summary of common questions I received about Twitter:

1. How do I get started?
2. Is there anything I should be concerned about regarding privacy and professionalism?
3. What are some applications of Twitter? Why should I use it?

This article describes a stepwise approach to getting started with Twitter while addressing these questions. It also includes practical tips on using Twitter for networking with SGIM members.

### Create a Twitter Account

1. Go to <http://www.twitter.com> or search for Twitter in Google search.
2. Enter your full name. This will show up next to your username (Twitter handle) on your Twitter profile, which is visible to everyone. On the next screen, create your username. Keep it as close to your full name as possible. If your name is taken, you can use your middle initial or add "MD" as a suffix or "Doc" as

a prefix. For example, I use an "\_ " between by first and last name.

3. On the next screen where it asks you to choose five people to follow, scroll down to the bottom and "Skip this step". Keep skipping the steps till you come to the screen that asks you to upload a photo.
4. Upload a photo if you have one on your computer. You can always add this later. Your photo is visible on your Twitter profile to all Twitter users.
5. Once you complete all these steps, you will reach the Twitter home page, which has an empty stream (timeline) and shows that you are following "0" people.
6. You will have by now received an e-mail from Twitter (to the e-mail account you entered on the first screen). Click on the link in the e-mail to confirm your e-mail account. This will take you back to the Twitter home page.
7. Click on the link to view your profile page and then click on the "Edit Profile" button. Click on "Account" and choose whether you want to "Protect your tweets" or not. Tweets are the brief messages that you post on Twitter. Protecting these tweets means only people you approve will be able to view your posts. You will still be able to see non-protected tweets by others. It is not a bad idea to start with protected tweets until you get comfortable with Twitter. In the long run, you will enjoy Twitter more and get more out of it by having an open account.
8. On the same page also uncheck the box "Let others find me by my e-mail address".

9. Make sure that the box "Add location to my Tweets" is unchecked.

### Select Your Settings

- *Edit your profile.* Describe briefly your main areas of interest and a disclaimer that says something like "All opinions are my own, and retweets do not mean endorsements." We will discuss retweets later.
- *Set up notifications.* You can set up Twitter to notify you with every tweet by someone you follow either by e-mail or text message. This can get to be too much once you start following several people. In most cases, you will want to get an e-mail notification when someone interacts with you on Twitter (e.g. when they mention you or send you a direct message). Some folks may want to get a text message when they get a direct message. For this you have to connect your phone with your Twitter account by going to the mobile settings tab under "Edit Profile".

### Choose and Filter What You See

The Twitter stream of posts can get overwhelming if you follow a lot of people who are prolific posters. I tell people to think about Twitter as a stream flowing by a camp. You decide when you are thirsty, and then you dip your glass in the stream to get some water. You don't have to worry about all the water flowing past you that you did not get to taste.

Twitter provides you three ways to filter your content.

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- **Hashtags.** These are topic names preceded by a # sign. In the Twitter search box you can type in #SGIM2012 (not case sensitive) to see the tweets from the recent annual meeting. #genmed is the hashtag for posts related to general internal medicine, and #SGIMSoMe is for SGIM social media. The last two were recently created and thus may not have much content. One has to remember to include this hashtag when posting and understand that all users may not be aware of specific hashtags. Thus, this filter tends to be more specific rather than sensitive.
- **Lists.** This is a curated list of people on Twitter (Tweeps). You can subscribe to the tweets of SGIM members by going to [https://twitter.com/#!/Neil\\_Mehta/sgimsome](https://twitter.com/#!/Neil_Mehta/sgimsome) and click on the "Subscribe" button. You can access all the tweets by members of this list by going to your profile page > click on "Lists" > click on "SGIMSoMe". Members can post on a variety of topics besides those related to #genmed. Thus, this filter tends to be more sensitive and less specific. When the list has only a handful of members this is not a problem, but as the list grows in size, you may feel overwhelmed. It is important to remember that you don't need to read or respond to most of the tweets. This is not like an e-mail, and regular Tweeps do not expect to get a response to most of their posts even when people read them.
- **Following.** You can choose to follow specific people. The posts

of people you follow will show up on your default Twitter stream. You can find people to follow on the SGIM member list mentioned above. When you follow someone by clicking on the "Follow" button on their profile, they get notified. They may or may not follow you back. If you have a protected account, you will have to approve their request to follow you. People like to see your profile information and your posts before deciding to follow you. Thus, it is important to have the profile completed, including a photograph, and to use your real name to make it easier for them. Following a person is an acknowledgement that you are interested in what they have to say. Thus, the number of followers on Twitter has become a kind of badge of honor. Unfortunately, this can take away from the true purpose of Twitter, with some people resorting to all kinds of shenanigans to get more followers. I would encourage you to ignore this number when making your decision about whom to follow.

### Posting on Twitter

You can get a lot out of Twitter by just viewing your Twitter stream and clicking on the hyperlinks, but at some point you will want to share your opinions and ideas too. If you have a protected account, only people you have approved will be able to see your posts. You can find a colleague or friend on the SGIM member list to follow you and be your Twitter mentor (Twentor). When posting, remember to keep

your audience (followers) in mind. Post about items in your area of expertise, and you will find that there are a lot of people who are interested in reading your posts. Here are some Twitterisms to know before posting:

- **Your post can contain only 140 characters.** This forces you to be very precise and helps people to quickly glean important points from their Twitter stream.
- **You can add hyperlinks to websites or journal articles or abstracts within your tweets.** Twitter automatically shortens these for you. You can do this by copying the address (URL) of the web page (Highlight and CTRL+C or CMD+C) and then pasting it into a Twitter post (CTRL-V or CMD+V). Thus, you could post something like "Enjoyed the blog post at <http://blogedutech.blogspot.com/2012/05/is-academic-medicine-reaching-twitter.html>". As you can see, the address takes up many characters and can limit what you want to say. Twitter automatically shortens the hyperlink; it may appear as <http://t.co/aBcDe>, for example.
- **If you want to alert someone regarding your post you can type in "@Username".** Thus, you could write something like "@Neil\_Mehta, thx for getting me started on Twitter. We are using this now with our interest group!" That is barely 100 characters. This is also how you reply to someone's post, but if

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Twitter, it automatically adds the @username to your post. If you are protecting your tweets, the person you mention will not see your tweet unless he/she is following you.

- *If you want to send a private message to one person (i.e. direct message), you can type in "D @username". Note the space after "D". Thus, you could post something like "D @Neil\_Mehta can you e-mail me your slides? My e-mail is johndoe@gmail.com."* This way your e-mail address will not be visible to anyone else. You can send a direct message only to someone who follows you.
- *If you want to share someone else's post with your followers, you retweet it, which provides appropriate attribution to the original poster.* This is a bit like citing someone's article during your presentation. The person whose post you are sharing will be notified that you retweeted it and will be grateful for your retweet. The retweet looks something like this, "RT @Neil\_Mehta 'JGIM study showing how diet drinks are related to vascular risk <http://www.springerlink.com/content/b042807u865853t7/>". If you use a Twitter client like Tweetdeck or Hootsuite, you can quote the tweet and add your own comments. Thus, you could post "RT @Neil\_Mehta 'JGIM study showing how diet drinks are related to hypertension and strokes <http://www.springerlink.com/content/b042807u865853t7/> ' 10 year cohort study"

### Additional Tips

- If you have a smartphone, using a Twitter app can be very convenient.
- Do not reveal personal information like your phone number or home address. If you absolutely need to do this via Twitter, use a direct message. Tweeting about your location in real time should be done with caution. While this may help your friends find you, it has obvious risks.
- Do not post about your patients. Even if you do not reveal any protected health information, it may be possible to identify the patient based on your place of work and time of tweet. In addition, the patient may see your public tweet and recognize himself/herself. Please review your institution's social media policies and follow them.
- Remember that you represent the profession and that derogatory or off-color remarks can hurt the image of the profession.
- Be careful about when you tweet. Posting times of tweets are visible publicly. This can be circumvented by using a buffering app like Buffer. This allows you to create your tweets during your personal time and then automatically post them at appropriately spaced intervals during the day. Thus, you can have your tweets posted when they are likely to be seen by your East Coast colleagues while you are still working on the West Coast.
- Use appropriate disclaimers in your profile (example given above).

Once you get comfortable with Twitter, you can think up multiple applications for using it. Here are some examples:

1. Create a list and a hashtag for your SGIM special interest group and use this to keep the conversation and ideas flowing in between annual meetings (e.g. #SGIMSoMe and SGIMSoMe list).
2. Host a Journal Club. Choose a hashtag for the journal club group (e.g. #SGIMJC), select an article and time when it will be discussed, and disseminate it. At the designated time, post a question on Twitter (e.g. "What do you think about the study design? #SGIMJC"). Let the participants respond on Twitter using the same hashtag for a few minutes. As a moderator, your role is to keep the conversation going. Reply to and retweet appropriate posts. Once saturation is reached, ask a second question. This can go on for about 45 to 60 minutes. It is possible to interact with a global audience or even invite the author of the article to participate.
3. Host a case discussion using a hypothetical case by posting the chief complaint and revealing more about the history, exam findings, or test results as requested by participants.

There are many other potential applications of Twitter in medical education and professional networking. Hopefully, the information provided here is enough to get you started. It is a good idea to find a local Twitter mentor (Twentor) if you need additional help.

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