Social Media: The Role of Twitter in the Formation of Trust, Mentorship, and Collaboration Within a Virtual Life Science Community

Calla Hastings, 2014

Working at the Social Network Innovation Lab, I spent my summer researching the ways that a particular virtual life science community uses social media—Twitter in particular—to communicate with one another. Using a variety of qualitative research methods including surveying, interviewing, and coding, we sought to explore the ways that this community uses social media to build trust and form collaborative and mentoring relationships.

Focusing on a community with a membership of 122, we conducted eleven Skype-based interviews to learn more about the utility of social media. Among our findings was evidence of trust amongst community members mediated by Twitter. Additionally, it appears that Twitter plays a central role in forming collaborative relationships within the community. Online, Twitter promotes lightweight collaborations that are sporadic, brief, and informal. In addition, relationships formed on Twitter often act as precursors to formal collaborations that occur face-to-face at community events. Twitter alone, however, is unable to promote formal collaborations. Looking at mentorship, we determined that Twitter produces sporadic mentoring in instances in which community members reach out to the group for advice or guidance. Twitter helps specific mentors and mentees connect, however, in most cases, additional non-Twitter based communication is needed to supplement the relationship.

Our research indicates that Twitter creates an ambient environment conducive to the formation of trust, mentorship, and collaboration and is central to the continued cohesion of this virtual scientific community.

Faculty Mentor: Dhiraj Murthy
Funded by the National Science Foundation