

Effective, selective tweets can advance research from lab to policymakers

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In a recent study, University of Missouri researchers, including Brian Hensel, Ph.D., MSPH, have examined the usefulness of Twitter and developed tips for the scientific community on how to use the social media tool to advance their research from the lab to the hands of health policymakers. Credit: Justin Kelley/MU Health

Many science researchers struggle with translating their research findings to legislative policies and health practices, causing the majority of new findings to remain largely inside the scientific community. With more than 300 million monthly users, Twitter's success has piqued the interests of many science researchers as a possible tool to publicize new research findings. In a recent study, University of Missouri researchers have examined the usefulness of Twitter and developed tips for the scientific community on how to use the social media tool to advance their research from the lab to the hands of health policymakers.

"Twitter is a venue with the potential to help scientists circulate [health](#)-related research to policymakers," said Julie Kapp, Ph.D., associate professor in the Department of Health Management and Informatics at the MU School of Medicine and lead author of the study. "However, before encouraging researchers to flood Twitter with hashtags and tweets, it's best to develop an evidence-based approach to tweeting that leverages key people and moments."

Kapp and Brian Hensel, Ph.D., MSPH, assistant professor in the Department of Health Management and Informatics at the MU School of Medicine and co-author of the study, found that nearly all health policymakers, or individuals directly related to the actual writing of health legislation, had Twitter accounts, and many use their accounts frequently. She suggests researchers target their tweets to Congress members on committees with jurisdiction over health and health care issues, because these individuals may be receptive by how useful the findings are to their political and legislative agendas. Kapp also suggests researchers tweet in an effort to educate policymakers rather than persuade them.

"The tweet should be a concise statement of the main finding," Kapp said. "If scientists know their research relates to a current policy under consideration, they should consider noting that in the tweet. Researchers

also should provide a link to their research articles."

Kapp said building trust through the 140 characters allotted by Twitter likely will require consistent communication patterns over time. In addition, she said that in order to use [research findings](#) to drive policy, researchers must have a strong understanding of influencers, behaviors and activists specific to the Twitter culture.

In future studies, Kapp will explore whether certain characteristics of Congressional members, such as their age, sex and future political aspirations, play a role in their Twitter engagement. She also plans to explore if engagement varies by the calendar year, political and cultural climate, and current events.

Kapp's study, "Is Twitter a Forum for Disseminating Research to Health Policy?" was published by the *Annals of Epidemiology*, an international journal devoted to epidemiologic research and methodological development.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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