



## FEBRUARY INNOVATION HIGHLIGHTS

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### COMING SOON!

HITLAB's Paloma Luisi was featured on a podcast entitled "Pulling Back the Curtain: Revealing the Stories Behind Health." We'll share it with you as soon as it's released, here and on our social media sites.

### OPPORTUNITY ALERTS

HITLAB seeks partners, including collaborators and study sites, for two government grants. [More](#)

We're hiring: Manager, Innovation. [More](#)

### SEND TO A FRIEND

Send this email to someone

## Explorations: Lessons in Innovation

### Why Public Health Researchers Need Twitter

by Yvonne Bokhour

As a busy public health researcher, you may have had a few fleeting thoughts about Twitter, wondering what all the fuss is about. How can posts limited to 140 characters possibly advance your cause or career? Can tweets really impact population health? Is it worth spending the time, considering everything else on your plate?

Twitter is having an enormous effect on our field. As but one example, consider this blog post by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation: "**Contagious Content: The Role of Social Media in Public Health.**" It describes the evolution of a single tweet—an **interactive map** of vaccine preventable outbreaks since 2008, posted by Gates Foundation CEO Dr. Seth Berkley—that was eventually seen by more than 500,000 people.

As the article makes clear, those with reliable data (in this case supporting vaccine effectiveness) have a powerful tool in social media, and should work towards presenting their evidence "engagingly" on digital platforms.

But although social media use is rising, many public health professionals remain disinterested or skeptical. Faculty members at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health were recently surveyed on the subject. The results, published in a paper entitled "**Mind the Gap: Social Media Engagement by Public Health Researchers,**" revealed a small minority of users. Many expressed concern about the spread of unreliable information on social media, perhaps without recognizing their own potential to "gather health information, disseminate research findings, and provide guidance."

In fact, Twitter can assist public health advocates in many ways. For example, it can advance their scientific knowledge. Paloma Luisi, HITLAB's Manager of Research & Evaluation, explains, "Being able to connect with bilateral agencies, foundations, non-profits, and governments will help all researchers in public health learn the latest updates straight from the source."

Luisi continues, "Additionally, it's important to know how agencies are communicating their updates to the Twitter public. For example, a local public health agency could be messaging its flu vaccine campaign completely differently than the CDC. An engaged researcher would observe and question the value of different campaigns and potentially integrate some of these questions into his or her own work."

Sebastian Majewski, Senior Communications Officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, also believes in Twitter's ability to advance scientific knowledge, telling HITLAB researchers "can start to create lists of peers to keep up-to-date with what is moving colleagues, what articles they are reading and what political decisions they comment on. Also, social media monitoring is developing into a further research method that can be part of a research portfolio with interviews, focus groups and surveys."

Twitter enables public health researchers to forge beneficial connections. Luisi explains, "I think one of the most valuable uses of Twitter is actually at conferences where customized hashtags are now ubiquitous. Live tweeting meaningful insights during the conference, using it to meet up with like-minded researchers, and engaging in social media dialogue are all ways that researchers can use Twitter. A successfully tweeted conference will help researchers gain followers both within and adjacent to their field."

And such followers can be of enormous help. Says Majewski, "If you build up a network of followers that are interested in you because you offer relevant content, you can tap into that network and disseminate your own research. Interestingly, it is not necessary to have thousands of followers. While it might help to reach more people, it can be as valuable only to have 50 followers as long as those fifty are fully engaged in your research work."

Can Twitter help earn grant money? According to Majewski, "It doesn't skip the proposal and pitching phase for grant money. But you might become aware of a grant because someone posts about a call for applications. Twitter and other social networks don't replace a grant making process, but they can help to connect with the right people."

In addition to disseminating reliable information, acquiring knowledge, and making contacts, researchers might use Twitter to actively save lives. In **“Social and News Media Enable Estimation of Epidemiological Patterns Early in the 2010 Haitian Cholera Outbreak,”** investigators showed that data garnered from tweets at the start of the Haitian cholera epidemic “correlated well” with official data. Tweets might therefore be an important measure of morbidity, especially at the start of an outbreak.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to Twitter use among health care professionals is lack of time. But Twitter needn’t be excessively time-consuming. You can spend a few minutes every day, or limit your participation to conferences. It’s not hard to learn, either. As Majewski points out, “It is definitely harder to become a health expert than a Twitter expert.”

For more information on Twitter and public health, follow the Gates Foundation on Twitter at [@gateshealth](#), visit **Symplur** on the Web, and read **“More health departments nationwide embracing social media: Use of tools rises.”**

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