



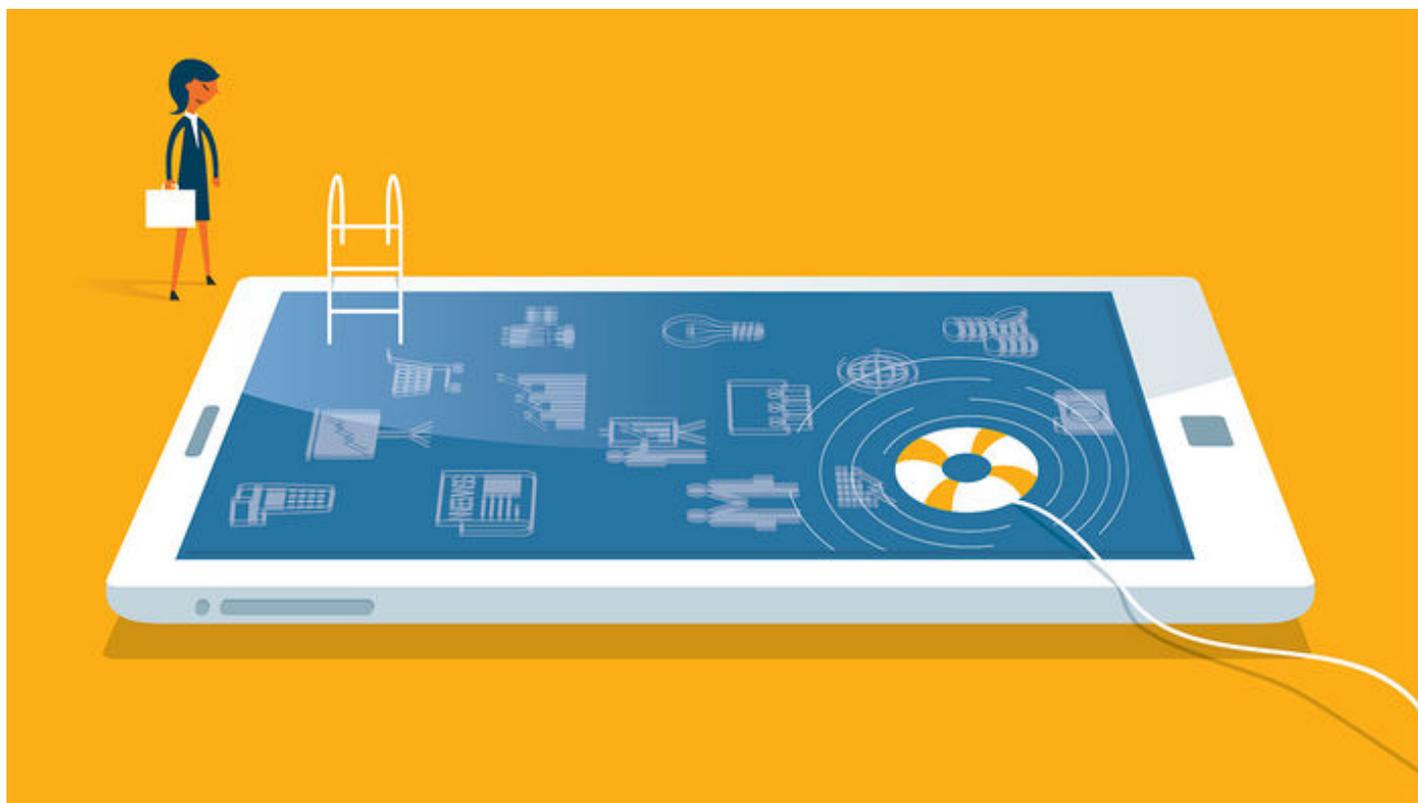
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## A social media survival guide for scientists

By [Neil A. Lewis, Jr.](#), [Jay J. Van Bavel](#), [Leah H. Somerville](#), [June Gruber](#) | Nov. 5, 2018, 2:15 PM

We'd like to start with a quick story—a story about two scientists who ignored their parents' warnings about talking to strangers on the internet and, as a result, ended up writing grants, organizing professional development workshops, and—eventually—working together on this Letters to Young Scientists column.

### Previous Letter to Young Scientists

The team-written Letters to Young Scientists column offers training and career advice from within academia.



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Neil and Jay “met” on Twitter when Neil was a graduate student and Jay was a faculty member. Neil engaged constructively with Jay’s tweets about research and its relevance to social issues, and they became “Twitter friends.” A few years later, when Neil became a faculty member and wanted to create an academic job market workshop in New York City, this friendship came in handy. Neil emailed Jay to ask whether he was willing to cohost the workshop at New York University, and Jay agreed. Via Twitter direct messages and email, they wrote a grant proposal for the workshop and then organized the entire thing, all before ever meeting “in real life.” Better yet, the **workshop** was a hit!

Great things can happen when scientists use social media effectively. And today, **at least 45,000 scientists around the world use Twitter**. But sometimes it can go bad—quickly.

## The good and the bad

Social media allows people from across the globe to engage; keep up with new findings, tools, and cutting-edge trends, sometimes months before they appear in print; receive almost immediate feedback on their work; and find new collaborators. Even if you rarely post yourself, following your favorite scientists, labs, societies, journals, and journalists creates a curated list of fresh discoveries, events, and discussions. Just last week, Leah was alerted to a local scientific event she would have easily missed, just by scrolling through social media for 5 minutes during her commute to work.

Having a presence on social media may even lead to opportunities, exposure, and impact beyond scientific circles. A **recent study** suggests that scientists with more than approximately 1000 Twitter followers reach a broad audience, including educational organizations, media, and members of the general public—people who are unlikely to dust off an academic journal to read your research.

Some academic institutions are starting to realize the benefits of social media and are rewarding their scientists for engagement. For instance, the Mayo Clinic recently started **including social media scholarship activities in their criteria for academic advancement**.



Despite the countless benefits, there is also a dark side. Social media makes it easy to fire off a hot take on the latest issue of the day, but it often lacks the careful editing, feedback, and revision that characterizes the rest of our academic work. As a consequence, many people post things they wish they hadn't, and doing so can come back to haunt them. A key challenge of social media use is keeping a long view of the kind of identity you want to **present to the world**, not just today but down the road.

When you tweet, post in a public Facebook group, or write a blog post, that information is there for the world to see and criticize. Sometimes posts generate positive, productive responses—but other times, the responses can be quite negative and even vicious. We have been on the receiving end of public criticism and can attest that it is not fun to watch a fellow scholar publicly rip your paper. It can also be frustrating to witness the collateral damage that can result from abrasive social media discussions like the one professor Danielle Navarro recently described **in a wrenching blog post**.

But it doesn't have to be ugly. These strategies can help you maximize the benefits and minimize the costs.

**Be intentional.** Social media platforms allow you to reach both intended and unintended audiences. Assume that any message you write could go viral, and think about how it may be received by multiple audiences with different viewpoints. Treat every post **as if you were speaking to someone sitting next to you**: Would you feel comfortable conveying the same message in person? Finally, think about how you want to use different platforms. Are you using them in a professional capacity, a personal capacity, or both?

**Build a strong network.** The key to social media success (and happiness) is curating the right list of accounts to follow. Craft a list of scientists, labs, societies, academic departments, companies, journals, and journalists to generate a high-quality feed of interesting news and updates. An easy way to start is by following current members of your scientific circles. Then keep your eye out for who they are following, reposting, or interacting with, and follow those who seem interesting or

730       don't hesitate to unfollow or block accounts if it turns out that they're not adding value!

**Remember that posts last forever.** Before you post anything, ask yourself, “What are the odds that I might regret this?” Jay uses **an app** to erase anything he posts after a few months, which helps minimize the chances that something is taken out of context or shared long after he has updated his opinion. But remember that **the internet is archived forever**, so just because you or your app attempted to delete a post, it doesn't mean it is actually gone!

**Be charitable.** If you find yourself interpreting a negative tone in another person's post, consider whether it could be read differently. Posts are only words, after all, and miss the rich nonverbal information—such as facial expressions, pitch, and body language—that we gain when interacting face-to-face. Just as you want others to assume the best in you, extend that same courtesy when reading others' posts.

**Let the haters hate; take the high road.** As Taylor Swift wisely noted, “Haters gonna hate.” And it turns out that they do a lot of hating on social media. **Jay's research** has found that moral outrage goes viral, but it can also lead us into echo chambers. Our advice is to look at criticisms and take seriously those that are constructive, but try to steer clear of the ugly side of social media by purging your feed of trolls, sock puppets, and anyone else who seems more concerned with hating than creating.

**Don't lose track of offline life.** Social media is full of instantaneous social exchanges—exactly the **type of interactions that humans find rewarding**. Generating a huge online following may help your **Kardashian Index**, but be mindful that the best work requires time for deep thought, patience, and persistence. If you don't give your primary work—and friends and family—the serious attention they deserve, the time you spend on social media can cost you the things that matter the most.

Send thoughts, questions, and suggestions for future topics to [letterstoyoungscientists@aaas.org](mailto:letterstoyoungscientists@aaas.org)

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### Neil A. Lewis, Jr.

Neil A. Lewis, Jr. is an assistant professor of communication and social behavior at Cornell University.

 [Twitter](#)



### Jay J. Van Bavel

Jay J. Van Bavel is an associate professor of psychology and neural sciences at New York University in New York City.

 [Twitter](#)

730 

Leah H. Somerville is an associate professor of psychology at Harvard University.

 [Twitter](#)

### June Gruber

June Gruber is an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

 [Twitter](#)

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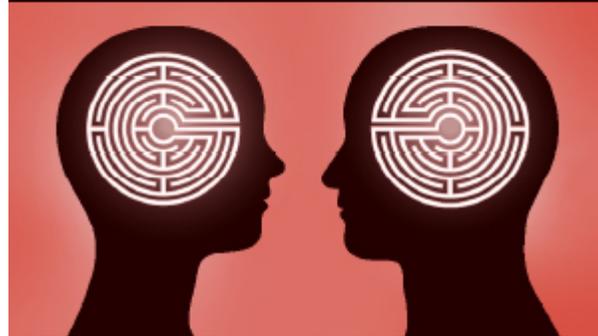
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