

Guidelines for Economists on Twitter

German Version

The "Guidelines for Economists on Twitter" are the result of a science project conducted by the Leibniz Research Alliance Science 2.0.

Developed and designed by:



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I About these guidelines

How can a communication channel that allows only 140 characters per message be of any interest to economists who are accustomed to publishing their scholarly findings in journal articles running from 3,000 to 8,000 words? Is there any sense in using this form of short messages for communication in economics? Can researchers turn the use of this communication channel to good account for their own research?

The present guidelines want to provide answers to these questions and to show the possible forms and benefits which the use of Twitter can bring to economists. They result from a survey of nine German-speaking economists who were ranked as active and visible users of Twitter by the German business daily Handelsblatt^[1] and selected by their "TweetLevel Scores"^[2]. The survey was carried out between November 2013 and February 2014.

A few basic statements can be derived from the interviews:

- a) The usage of Twitter among the German scientific community is not as widespread as, for instance, in the USA ("the Americans are less inhibited"^[3])

- b) In Germany, a conservative idea of science prevails ("[there is]...much reluctance to adopt all these digital media widely"^[4]).

c) The benefit of Twitter is not obvious to all economists (“...for a successful career it's not the number of tweets that counts, or your Klout Score, or the number of blogposts, it's just the points you gain with publications in journals”^[5]).

The survey was supplemented with a literature analysis within a project at the University of Kiel. Based on this survey and the literature analysis, a first version of the guidelines was developed. These guidelines were tested in a second, empirical phase: eight economists who use Twitter in varying intensity and for different purposes, were interviewed about their usage behaviour up to that date. They were requested to follow the recommendations of the guidelines for eleven weeks, and after this period they were interviewed again.

The results showed that the participants made changes in their choice of target groups and contents, they changed the frequency and timing of their Twitter use, and they changed their use of hashtags and retweets. At the end of the test phase, participants considered Twitter to be more useful to themselves and others, and their own usage more sophisticated. Feedback from the participants was taken into consideration for this final version of the guidelines.

II Motivation and benefit: why be on Twitter?

Economists twitter for four basic reasons:



To promote

One of the most important reasons for economists to use Twitter is that they can promote their own projects, institutes, websites, or initiatives. Twitter serves to generate attention and heighten the profile of persons and institutions.



To disseminate research

The dissemination of research findings through the established medium, the academic journal, usually takes a long time. The benefit of Twitter here is that research findings can be disseminated quickly, feedback can be received early, and discussion can be initiated both nationally and internationally.

to teach

Twitter can serve to translate latest research findings into teaching and put them to discussion there. Twitter also allows teaching economists to contact their students and thus to invigorate scholarly discourse and to diminish fear of contact.

to inform

Twitter can serve to inform not only colleagues and students, but also to give a broad public interested in economics access to research findings . This channel can also be used to address specifically the multipliers and decision-makers relevant to the discipline and to communicate the latest research findings.

Using Twitter offers four benefits to economists:

1. *Lead in knowledge*

Twitter gives economists quick access to relevant current topics, to recent news from colleagues, and to ongoing debates in the national and international press. This knowledge benefit can be employed especially for consultation in economic policy. Twitter enables the quick and accurate receipt of information: "...a journalist sends a direct message in reply to a tweet and wants to talk to me...that actually happens quite a lot."^[6]

2. *Impact*

The speed, reach, and target accuracy of Twitter allows economists to distribute their research more quickly, to build worldwide networks, and to initiate and maintain contacts. "I was surprised how important tweets are for new publications on our homepage. Most people don't check our home-page to look for new publications. They get the information indirectly from Twitter, click it and read it."^[7]

3. *Interaction*

Twitter enables economists to communicate directly with potential readers, multipliers, and colleagues. Interaction with people who would not normally be easy to reach can bring a benefit to their own research and reputation: "My activities on Twitter have resulted in invitations from science institutions to act as a consultant...and it was always stated explicitly that the institution aims to increase its public visibility."^[8]

4. *Self-marketing*

Many economists notice that the download numbers for papers which they disseminated through Twitter rise significantly. By itself, this does not increase academic reputation, but it generates attention and thus awareness. This can result in invitations to consult on economic policy or to collaborate in projects: "You get in touch with people, for instance with Mr Flasbarth, the president of the Federal Environment Agency and now secretary of state at the Federal Ministry for the Environment. I was in contact with him before, but since we are on Twitter we have arranged personal meetings to talk about some things. Quite a lot of interesting things have developed from this [Note: from the Twitter activities]."^[9]

5. *Awareness*

Twitter enables economists to learn what other leading economists are talking about. In particular, it provides an insight into policy discussions almost in real time. Various Twitter accounts also disseminate new research or data that can be of interest to economists.^[10]

III Recommendations: How to tweet successfully

Help in setting up a Twitter profile, FAQs and information about basic functions of Twitter can be found at <https://support.twitter.com/>. There are also many tips and tricks, such as: <https://blog.bufferapp.com/twitter-new-profile-marketing-tips>.

a) Profile

- *Set up an account for professional use:* Around 80% of your posts should relate to your work, and no more than 20% be of private nature. If the share of private messages is larger, you should separate the private and professional profiles.
- *Be distinctive:* You should be recognizable as a communicator. This does not only concern your name/photo/profile, but most of all the content and style^[11] of your communication.
- *Be authentic:* Be guided by your interests, use your own voice. Your profile should be recognizable, not generic. Make it worthwhile for others to follow you – because they are interested in your opinions or because they value your sources.
- *Be humorous:* Even if the emphasis is on professional use, things don't have to be deadly serious. Your humour adds a personal touch to your profile.
- *Say it pointedly, but factually:* Brevity is at the heart of Twitter. Clear statements and opinions contribute to the character and attractiveness of a profile.
- *But remember:* Twitter is public, so model your style and content in a manner you would also use for communication in a restaurant or on a train.

b) Target group

- *Define your target groups:* A useful target group can comprise colleagues from your own and neighbouring disciplines, students, but also interested members of the public,

including laymen and media representatives. Follow your target group, by making so-called “lists” on Twitter, and communicate with them.

- *Be guided by your target groups:* Always consider before tweeting: could this be of interest to my target group? Be the “human filter” for others in their search for interesting, relevant and exciting contents. The quality of your tweets will win you the attention of your target groups.
- *Use the right language:* If you wish to reach an international audience, consistently write your posts in English.

c) Contents

- *Judge others by yourself:* Content that you consider to be exciting and remarkable could interest others, too. Be guided by your interests and your tastes – this will add an unmistakable touch to your Twitter presence.
- *Provide useful tips:* 60-70% of your tweets should link to interesting articles, analyses or comments of others (including a qualifying comment from you), 20-30% can be your own texts and comments, the rest should be interaction with other users.
- *Be selective:* Content that most others probably haven’t seen yet has the greatest value. Don’t spread “news” that innumerable other users have shared already. Avoid banalities. Follow relevant sources and stay close to the sources. Creating lists or RSS feeds can be useful, as well as browsing other networks.
- *Be topical:* Content is relevant if it relates to ongoing debates in your disciplines or in politics. In such debates your own opinion is valued.
- *Avoid technical jargon:* Even if the focus is on professional discourse, bear in mind that you do not solely address your colleagues on Twitter. Make sure that a wider audience understands you.

d) Operational

- *Join the conversation:* Twitter is a conversation in which you participate. Hashtags show that you contribute to an ongoing debate about established concepts. @-replies create interaction and produce reactions. Try it, for instance during a conference (nearly every one nowadays has a hashtag!).
- *Enrich your posts:* links, videos, infographics, and your own photos receive more attention and produce more reaction than mere text^[12].
- *Follow other profiles:* Follow users who can teach you how to do things – because they have firm opinions or can be relied on to pass on relevant information and tips. This integrates you into exciting information flows and inspires your own tweets. Especially at the beginning it is worthwhile to search for useful sources. It will also show you some things you want to imitate and others that you want to do differently.
- *Tweet regularly:* Dormant profiles attract no followers. Post at least two or three tweets per week. Several tweets per day are possible if there is sufficient interesting material, but do not overburden your audience.
- *Take (a little) time:* A glance at Twitter, a short tweet – a few minutes per day are sufficient to be an interesting, active tweeter. Nevertheless, resonance depends on a scientist’s reputation. Young researchers must probably invest more time than established colleagues. You could reserve a fixed time for your tweets – if you tweet in the morning you can continue the conversation all day. High resonance is usually achieved in the afternoon^[13]; tweets posted late in the evening are easily overlooked.



Contribute to
the document

[1] Handelsblatt, <http://blog.handelsblatt.com/handelsblog/2012/07/30/deutsche-oekonomen-bei-twitter-das-sommer-update/> [accessed on 1 September 2014]

[2] TweetLevel Score is an impact metric (<http://www.tweetlevel.com>) developed by Edelman Consulting. The tool used to calculate the score is no longer available.

[3] From the interview with Professor Justus Haucap, Duesseldorf Institute for Competition Economics (DICE), University of Düsseldorf

[4] From the interview with Professor Paul J.J. Welfens, Chair of economics, Macroeconomic theory and policy, University of Wuppertal

[5] From the interview with Professor Hans-Dieter Zimmermann, Institute of Information and Process Management, FHS St. Gallen

[6] From the interview with Professor Andreas Löschel, Chair of Microeconomics, University of Münster

[7] From the interview with Professor Michael Wohlgemuth, Chair of Economics and Philosophy, University of Witten/Herdecke

[8] From the interview with Professor Dennis Dittrich, Professor für Economics at the Touro College Berlin

[9] From the interview with Professor Andreas Löschel, Chair of Microeconomics, University of Münster

[10] Good examples are the Twitter feeds from central banks and the NEP lists from RePEc

[11] Examples for the different styles of communication on Twitter can be found at: http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/files/2011/11/Published-Twitter-Guide_Sept_2011.pdf [accessed on 8 July 2015]

[12] If you use other users' photos, please take care that you respect copyright law. One practical option are "Creative Commons (CC) pictures": Flickr (<https://flickr.com>) and WikiMedia (<http://commons.wikimedia.org>) are the first addresses for CC pictures.

[13] A current study about when to tweet shows more detailed information: <https://blog.bufferapp.com/best-time-to-tweet-research> [accessed on 28 July 2015]