

Using Twitter at the ASCO Conference

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Last week I attended the annual meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) in Chicago. For my work it is the most important scientific meeting of the year, and it is also by far the biggest with more than 30.000 participants.



Figure 1: Chicago last Thursday. Flickr image by ifmuth.

Blogging is a great way to report from conferences, and for me FriendFeed is the best microblogging tool to do that. Its use at the 2008 ISMB conference was nicely described in a PLoS Comp Biol paper ([doi:10.1371/journal.pcbi.1000263](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1000263)) by Neil Saunders et al. Unfortunately it seems as if the use of FriendFeed is declining at every online science conference I go to, as everybody seems to be switching to Twitter. At the BibCamp that we organized in May we didn't even bother trying FriendFeed (or similar microblogging tools such as Google Buzz, ScienceFeed, Hot Potato, Snapgroups or Google Wave).

My main problem with using Twitter at conferences is that it is difficult to connect all tweets talking about a particular session together. General hashtags like #asco10 are not a solution for conferences with several thousand tweets. The ASCO conference organizers asked us to use two special hash tags for some sessions, but it seemed as if almost nobody was using them. I would not be surprised if someone invents (or has already done so) a nice service that connects tweets to conference sessions.

Another shortcoming of Twitter is the lack of automatic long-term archiving. Therefore @RMEOncology created a Twapper Keeper that was used to archive

the about 4500 tweets with the #asco10 hashtag. You can do interesting things with such an archive, Cornelius Puschmann did an analysis of the Twitter activity at our recent BibCamp using the R statistical software.

On the second conference day we were invited by the ASCO organizers to a tweetup. We were twice as many people compared to the tweetup at last year's ASCO (including one familiar face, @MaverickNY). We had an interesting discussion for about an hour. The most important message for me: we were encouraged to freely tweet about the sessions, restricted only by common sense and not a particular policy. A large meeting like ASCO with a lot of press coverage and videotaping of most sessions obviously has it easier to allow widespread Twitter use than a smaller meeting like the Cold Spring Harbor Biology of Genomes meeting. The discussions at that meeting in May were nicely covered by Daniel MacArthur and Ivan Oransky.

ASCO was also the first conference that I attended with an iPad. We had free WiFi (that worked in most places) and the iPad was great to write Tweets, look through the PDF of the sessions and posters I wanted to see (created back home), and to keep in touch via email and Skype. The only caveat: adding links to Tweets was difficult without multitasking – although this should become easier with the soon to be released iOS 4.

I did not like all Tweets about the conference. Twitter was obviously also used as a marketing tool. Although there is nothing wrong with that, some pharma companies felt it necessary to tweet exactly the same message again and again. I would have like more tweets reporting key findings from the sessions and/or adding comments or interesting links (e.g. with background information). But I'm optimistic that Twitter coverage at ASCO11 will be even better, and that by ASCO12 Twitter will be as mainstream and popular as email was at ASCO10.

Starting tomorrow, I will also write for the Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting blog (the meeting itself will start June 27). The Nature Network blog has more info about the event.