

Professional Social Networking in Radiology: Who Is There and What Are They Doing?

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Rationale and Objectives: Although it is perceived that the use of social media professionally is increasing among radiologists, little is known about the habits and demographics of this subspecialty. This study aims to compare radiologists who use social networking for professional purposes to those who do not with regard to their characteristics, habits, and attitudes.

Materials and Methods: Radiologists were invited by e-mail and through posts on social networks to participate in a survey on the use of social media platforms. Questions included type of user, pattern of use, and benefits and barriers. Professional users and professional nonusers were compared.

Results: One hundred eighty-six radiologists responded. One hundred ten (59.1%) used social networking for professional purposes, 34 (18.2%) for personal-use only, and 42 (22.6%) denied using social media. LinkedIn was the most common platform among all professional users, and Twitter was the most commonly used platform among highly active professional users. Trainees comprised 52 out of 110 (47.3%) professional social networking users compared to 18 out of 76 (23.7%) nonusers ($P < 0.01$). A subgroup analysis on Twitter use for professional purposes revealed a significant gender difference: 15 out of 66 (22.7%) professional Twitter users were female compared to 48 out of 120 (40.0%) non-Twitter users ($P < 0.05$). The greatest barrier to professional social media use for nonusers was confidentiality.

Conclusion: Nearly 60% of radiologist respondents use social networking for professional purposes. Radiology is likely to see growth in the role of social networking in the coming years as nearly half of professional users are radiology trainees. Twitter use for professional purposes among radiologists was disproportionately male. It is important to be cognizant of gender imbalance and to improve visibility of female leaders on social networking.

Key Words: Social media; social network; radiology; survey; professional.

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INTRODUCTION

Social networking in healthcare is a growing phenomenon (1,2). Early users were patients interacting with other patients in the form of online forums and automated mailing lists, known as listservs. Later patients and healthcare professionals used dedicated platforms for online social interaction, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Recently, physician-to-physician interaction on social networking is growing, with users finding benefits of obtaining education and news, following medical conferences, and sharing expertise, research, and opinions (3). The American Medical Association states that social networking can “support physicians’

personal expression, enable individual physicians to have a professional presence online, foster collegiality and camaraderie within the profession, provide opportunity to widely disseminate public health messages and other health communication” (4).

A 2011 survey of 4033 physicians by QuantiaMD found that physicians are highly engaged with social networks: 90% of physicians report personal use and 65% of physicians use social media for professional reasons (5). A later survey of Australian physicians by Brown et al. found that 74% used social media networks to some extent (6). None of these surveys queried use among specialties in medicine. There are no studies that describe the use of social networking among individual radiologists. Although professional social networking may offer advantages to all physicians, there are also specific reasons to understand the radiologists’ use of social networking.

Radiologists are an important part of healthcare delivery, but are perceived as being invisible. Social media may present an opportunity for radiologists to interact with other health professionals and the public to provide information to patients, in line with the principles of Imaging 3.0 (7–9). It is particularly important for radiologists to be actively engaged on social networking when topics discussed pertain to radiology. A study of Twitter content posted in 2013 regarding

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radiation risk from computed tomography found that 59% of tweets were unfavorable (10). However, most articles were not peer-reviewed, and only 16% of unique users were physicians and only 3% were radiologists. Social networking for radiologists has also been highlighted in recent articles describing the advantages for professional development, Twitter trends at radiology conferences, and the impact of social media on readership of peer-reviewed radiology journals (11,12). Another study showed that dissemination of scientific material on a radiology blog promoted on Facebook can substantially augment the reach of more traditional publication venues (3).

As more professional radiology organizations use social media to disseminate information and reach members, understanding which radiologists use social media for professional purposes is valuable for planning and predicting future trends in social media use in radiology (13–15). This study aims to compare the radiologists who use social networking for professional purposes to those who do not with regard to their characteristics, habits, and attitudes.

METHODS

This study was approved by our institutional review board. The need for written informed consent was waived due to the design of this survey study and anonymity of the survey respondents.

Study Group

A survey was designed to query radiologists about their use of social networking. The multiple-choice survey was created using online survey software (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). Radiologists were invited to participate in the survey between December 21, 2014 and March 21, 2015 by e-mail solicitation from the authors' personal radiologist networks and by posts on social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook. The e-mail networks included approximately 100 trainees and faculty in the senior author's radiology department and 65 radiology colleagues from private and academic institutions in the United States. There were six Twitter and one Facebook social media posts from the senior author. The posts contained a message to participate in the survey and the web address for the survey. We estimated the target audience by Twitter "impressions." An impression represents the tweet has been delivered to the Twitter stream of a particular account. The tweet may not have been read, so it is overestimating the potential audience. It was not possible to estimate audience reached by Facebook.

Survey

The survey questions focused on four main categories of data: type of social media user, pattern of use (platforms, duration, frequency), benefits of use, and barriers to use (Table 1). The types of social network use were (1) professional use, (2) personal-only use, and (3) no social media use. Professional users were defined as radiologists who had social

TABLE 1. Survey Questions

Defining the user

Do you use social media?

Which of the following social media services do you use for networking with friends and family (personal account)?

Which of the following social media services do you use for networking with colleagues or for educational reasons (professional account)?

Which best describes your social media accounts?

Pattern of use

How long have you used social media in a professional capacity?

How would you characterize your usage of social media services for professional purposes?

How would you characterize the amount of time spent on social media services for professional purposes?

Benefits

How have you used or benefited from social media professionally?

Barriers

What are some barriers to using social media for professional purposes?

Radiologist characteristics

What is your gender?

To which "generation" described below do you consider yourself to belong?

Where are you in your radiology career?

What is your radiology practice type?

What is your radiology subspecialty by fellowship or practice?

networking accounts for which any use was related to radiology. This category is inclusive of those users who use social networking accounts for both professional and personal purposes. Personal-only users were defined as radiologists who had social networking accounts for which no radiology-related activities transpired. Radiologists with no social media use did not possess any type of social networking account.

All respondents answered questions that characterized them by gender, age group, career position, and practice type. Personal-only and no social media user respondents did not answer questions about pattern and benefits of social networking (Table 1).

Age groups were categorized by generations. Respondents were asked which generation they identify with. Baby Boomers were defined as being born from 1943 up to the early 1960s. Generation X was defined as being born from the early 1960s to the early 1980s. Generation Y was defined as being born from the late 1980s to the early 2000s. Additional categories included The Greatest Generation, defined as being born from around 1901 through 1924, and The Silent Generation, defined as being born from 1925 until 1942.

Analysis of Survey Results

Radiologists who used social networking for professional purposes were compared to the professional nonusers (personal-only

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