

Impact of a Physician-Led Social Media Sharing Program on a Medical Journal's Web Traffic

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Abstract

Purpose: The use of social media by health professionals and medical journals is increasing. The aim of this study was to compare online views of articles in press (AIPs) released by *Annals of Emergency Medicine* before and after a nine-person social media team started actively posting links to AIPs using their personal Twitter accounts.

Methods: An observational before-and-after study was conducted. Web traffic data for *Annals* were obtained from the publisher (Elsevier), detailing the number of page views to annemergmed.com by referring websites during the study period. The preintervention time period was defined as January 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014, and the postintervention period as July 1, 2014, to July 31, 2015. The primary outcome was page views from Twitter per AIP released each month to account for the number of articles published each month. Secondary outcomes included page views from Facebook (on which there was no article-sharing intervention) and total article views per month.

Results: The median page views from Twitter per individual AIP released each month increased from 33 in the preintervention period to 130, for an effect size of 97 (95% confidence interval, 56-111; $P < .001$). There was a smaller increase in median page views from Facebook per individual AIP of 21 (95% confidence interval, 10-32). There was no significant increase in these median values for total page views per AIP.

Conclusions: Twitter sharing of AIPs increased the number of page views that came from Twitter but did not increase the overall number of page views.

Key Words: Social media, peer-reviewed literature, education

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INTRODUCTION

The use of social media by health professionals is increasing [1]. Similarly, medical journals are increasingly using social media to disseminate information regarding new publications. Novel online tools now allow discussion and collaboration between research authors and readers [2].

Annals of Emergency Medicine has been developing its social media strategy for several years, since 2008, when it launched a podcast. The editorial staff began sharing

articles on Facebook and Twitter in 2011, and in 2013 the journal entered a partnership with the website Academic Life in Emergency Medicine (ALiEM.com) to host online discussions and journal clubs focused on *Annals* articles. In 2014, the journal recruited the first *Annals* SocialMedia Team (AST), a group of engaged volunteers from the online emergency medicine community. These emergency physicians and residents are active bloggers, podcasters, and/or tweeters. In July 2014, the team began

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sharing links to articles in press (AIPs) via their personal, noninstitutional Twitter accounts.

The impact of social media use on research article consumption is uncertain. Multiple observational studies suggest a correlation between the sharing of peer-reviewed publications on social media and traditional impact metrics (ie, citations) [3,4], article page views, and article PDF downloads [5]. However, two studies published by Fox et al [6,7] in the journal *Circulation* found no increase in page views when new articles were randomized to social media promotion from their journal's Twitter and Facebook accounts. On the other hand, Hawkins et al [8] reported a successful social media article promotion program at *JACR* led by editorial board members sharing past articles from their personal accounts. It is unclear whether these findings would extrapolate to the *Annals'* strategy of Twitter AIP sharing via personal accounts from active members of an online community.

The objective of this study was to compare the Twitter dissemination of *Annals* articles before and after the AST started sharing AIP links using their personal accounts. We measured article dissemination using monthly numbers of page views per AIP at the *Annals* website (annemergmed.com) via Twitter links. We hypothesized that the number of page views per AIP coming from Twitter each month would increase with the use of AST personal Twitter accounts for sharing article links.

METHODS

Study Design and Setting

We conducted an observational before-and-after analysis of the impact of social media sharing on dissemination of AIP published by *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. The University of Chicago institutional review board deemed this project exempt from review.

Selection of Participants

AST members were responsible for the journal's social media sharing strategy. This volunteer team consists of nine American emergency physicians and residents [9] (including study authors N.S.T. and S.C.) recruited by the journal because of their active membership on various social media platforms, including blogs, podcasts, and Twitter, and varied clinical and educational interests. At the time of the start of the intervention, team members had a mean of 2,169 followers (95% confidence interval [CI], 1,284-3,054; see Table 1); all members remained on the team throughout the duration of the intervention.

Table 1. AST members, Twitter handles, and follower counts at the start of the study intervention

Member	Twitter Handle	Follower Count
Steve Carroll	@embasic	3,785
Jeremy Faust	@jeremyfaust	2,095
Justin Hensley	@EBMgoneWILD	618
David Marcus	@EMIMDoc	2,604
Howie Mell	@DrHowieMell	1,923
Kevin Scott	@K_ScottMD	492
Bob Stuntz	@BobStuntz	1,490
Seth Trueger	@MDaware	4,629
Lauren Westafer	@LWestafer	1,888

Note: AST, *Annals* SocialMedia Team.

Interventions

Before the intervention, only *Annals* staff disseminated AIPs on the journal's website and on journal-operated Twitter and Facebook accounts. This practice continued during the intervention period. Starting in July 2014, AST members shared tweets with links to new AIPs on the journal website via their personal Twitter accounts. Each AIP was shared only once, with the tweet including a brief summary and/or commentary on the study, up to the 140-character limit per tweet (see example, Figure 2). AST members were free to draft tweets as they saw fit; initial instructions suggested that they use screen captures of the Editor's Capsule Summary, pertinent figures, tables, or paragraphs from the study, and hyperlinks to the article on the journal web page (abstract or full text, not PDF). All article types published to the journal web page as AIPs were eligible for sharing; this included original research, case reports, editorials, clinical policies, and systematic review snapshots, but not letters to the editor, journal clubs, Change of Shift (narrative essays), or News & Perspectives. Individual AST members selected AIPs to share at their discretion as they were released online; members recorded their shares on a private, shared online document to avoid repetition. Only one AST member (S.C.) had Twitter and Facebook accounts linked to automatically post tweets to Facebook. The preintervention period spanned January 1, 2013, to June 30, 2014, and the postintervention period spanned July 1, 2014, to July 31, 2015. These time periods were selected on the basis of the maximum website data available from the publisher (Elsevier).

Methods of Measurement

We obtained web traffic data for *Annals of Emergency Medicine* (annemergmed.com) from the publisher on January 6, 2016. These data included the gross number of page views for AIPs during the study period and data

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