

Show Me Stars: Engaging Celebrities in Astronomy Outreach with their Twitter Followers

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Summary

The Las Cumbres Observatory Global Telescope Network (LCOGT¹) has telescopes in locations around the globe that are used daily by scientists and by the general public.

In a new LCOGT outreach initiative called *Show Me Stars*, celebrities were chosen as guest hosts for a series of Twitter-based observing events using a 2-metre robotic telescope. The celebrities made tweets throughout their one-hour online observing sessions using the hashtag “#ShowMeStars”, with the aim of engaging large pools of Twitter followers in astronomy.

Introduction

Communicating science to the public is best achieved by creating a dialogue to pique interest. As a simple broadcast medium, Twitter can be very effective in helping to achieve this. Many professional scientists tweet short snippets about scientific concepts, research or even intriguing aspects of research life. Twitter allows the public to directly interact with these scientists without personal details being revealed. These interactions happen mostly in the open, allowing anyone to eavesdrop and benefit from the exchanges.

Twitter can be thought of as a lightweight, dynamic and personal system of syndicating information. The strength of Twitter is its simplicity; you have only 140 characters per tweet to share your information. This rule applies to everyone, regardless of the information shared.

Twitter broadcasts information instantly and is ideally suited for live news. It has fundamentally changed our way of viewing astronomy. Many people now hear about the latest papers, science communication happening all over the globe, new astronomy software packages and the current state of astronomy research funding via people they follow on Twitter.

Rise of the machines

It has been suggested that using Twitter as an outreach tool would be an interesting path for LCOGT (@lcogt) to explore. LCOGT has previously experimented with automated tweeting of observations as well as tweeting astrophotography images from its network as “editors’ picks”.

The most successful machines that tweet are the ones with their own personalities. For example, *Mars Curiosity rover* (Twitter username: @MarsCuriosity) always tweets in the first person and frequently uses colloquialisms to make its work more easily digestible (Vertesi, 2010). There are many other examples of this type of science communication using Twitter, including famous observatories such as the Herschel Space Observatory (@ESAHerschel) and the Lovell Telescope (@LovellTelescope) at Jodrell Bank (Lowe, 2008). Both of LCOGT’s 2-metre flagship telescopes also tweet observations, images and news in the first person (@FaulkesNorth, @FaulkesSouth).

An alternative way of using Twitter to engage with the public is to use it to start a conversation. In a series of events called *Show Me Stars*, this is what LCOGT decided to do: invite the public to talk directly with the organisation’s astronomers and guests. All that was needed was a high-profile event to attract the public’s attention.

Guest host

An astronomy comment from the famous Irish comedian Dara Ó Briain (@daraobriain) brought LCOGT team members into a conversation with him on Twitter about robotic telescopes. Dara was interested in LCOGT, and we recognised the potential to reach his 600 000 followers on Twitter. (Dara has nearly 1.6 million followers.)

A couple of weeks later, Dara took part in a one-hour observing session using the 2-metre Las Cumbres Observatory telescope on the mountain Haleakalā, Hawaii (also called Faulkes Telescope North, @FaulkesNorth) for the first *Show Me Stars* event. (The observations were made robotically, with Dara at home controlling the telescope from the UK through the LCOGT web interface.) The idea was simple: to ask Dara to post tweets throughout this session to his many followers using the hashtag #ShowMeStars. And, once the observations had been completed, to post links to the astronomical images.

Twitter’s hashtag feature allows anybody (whether they have a Twitter account or not) to view a conversation between users. Each tweet that includes “#ShowMeStars” can be viewed in chronological sequence, by anyone².

Prior to the session, Dara and LCOGT publicised the event on Twitter (again using the hashtag #ShowMeStars) to build interest, but we relied almost entirely on the serendipitous nature of Twitter for people to find out about the event while it was happening. Twitter tends to be used in a way similar to the way people listen to the radio whilst travelling, as little snatches of entertainment and news, looking at what is current and not scrolling back far into the past.

The hashtag allowed members of the public (or “Twittersphere” as it is often called) to ask questions and engage in discussions with Dara, the LCOGT team, and each other. We also created a website³ where each image was uploaded automatically, as well as featuring all of the tweets made using the hashtag feature. It allowed us to provide extra information about what was going on at the observatory site, like an all-sky camera image and planetarium view of the sky above the telescope.

Show Me Stars has run twice since this initial event in August 2011, featuring Mark Thompson (amateur astronomer appearing on UK television, @peoplesastro) in March 2012 and Jon Culshaw (UK comedian specialising in impressions and BBC Sky at Night co-presenter, @jonculshaw) in December 2012.

Evaluation

The celebrities who have participated were already “science aware”, but they were not professional scientists. Their Twitter followers have selected them because they are entertainers, not because they are known for tweeting about science (with Mark Thompson being the notable exception, although he also regularly appears on light entertainment TV programmes). This allows Show Me Stars to reach a section of the public who may not have actively sought out a science event.

For several reasons it is hard to measure the impact that an event of this kind has had on the public. For example, it is difficult to obtain responses to questionnaires unless there is personal contact with the audience, particularly on Twitter where audience attention spans are very short. The web statistics, however, provide some monitoring data. During the first

event, the LCOGT web server logged over 15 000 views — the majority of which were of the tweeted images taken during the observing sessions. The web server failed 15 minutes after the start, due to the high demand, so content was moved onto the cloud, using Amazon Web Services hosting and the image sharing site TwitPic, which registered a further 35 000 hits over the course of the hour.

Over the three Show Me Stars events, the total web traffic logged on <http://lcogt.net> exceeded 73 000 unique visits. In all three cases, the hour immediately following each event (and sometimes considerably longer) was spent answering the public’s questions about astronomy, which were submitted on Twitter. This was an important aspect of the outreach event, and we endeavoured to answer every question (Sandu, 2011).

Tips

- Be accommodating to the host. They are your ambassador and are giving their time for free.
- Find hosts who have a wide reach. Not only should they have a large number of followers, but they should not be best known for science work.
- Make sure your infrastructure is stable. A project of this nature can easily fail if the technology collapses (Lintott, 2008).
- Manage expectations. This may be a member of the public’s first encounter with astronomy, and they need to be aware that we have to cope with the weather, for example.
- Try to give people some way to retain enthusiasm. Create a website where you can provide background information and useful links, and create an image archive.

Show Me More Stars?

LCOGT plans to continue Show Me Stars with new guest hosts, and some previous hosts who enjoyed the events have requested to be involved in the future. Jon Culshaw said after his session: “*Show Me Stars demonstrates the brilliant simplicity of astronomy in an online space where people don’t feel intimidated or alienated. Welcome to the Universe! You’ll never leave.*”

Acknowledgments

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References

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Links

- ¹ <http://lcogt.net>
- ² WikiHow article on using hashtags on Twitter: www.wikihow.com/Use-Hashtags-With-Twitter
- ³ <http://lcogt.net/showmestars>

Biography

Edward Gomez (@zemogle) is Education Director of LCOGT, based at Cardiff University, UK. His work involves creating web-based projects to enable the public to use the organisation’s global telescope network. He has a PhD in stellar wind modelling, but his current research interests encompass exoplanets and Solar System object monitoring. Edward is also Co-Chair of Task Force 2 Children and Schools at the IAU’s Office of Astronomy for Development.