

Social networks and public health: use of Twitter by ministries of health

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Social networks are popular worldwide and its use in health care is being studied in different fields such as health promotion and epidemiology surveillance (Chew and Eysenbach 2010; Signorini et al. 2011; Gold et al. 2011). However, it is still unclear how health organizations (ministries or departments of health) use social networks, such as Twitter, to connect with people and socialize health information (Hawker 2010).

There are few Ministries of Health that have an active Twitter account, and it would be easy to assume that many of them are within the developed world; this fact is supported by Twitter statistics (MarketingGum 2011). Furthermore, Spanish, mostly spoken in developing countries, is the least used language in Twitter (MarketingGum 2011).

In spite of the evidence given, the ministry of health of more Spanish-speaking countries has an active Twitter account in comparison to English-speaking countries. The number of Spanish- and English-speaking countries and their Ministry of Health that has an active Twitter account are shown in Table 1. For this, I have checked the website of every Ministry of Health and looked for the link to its Twitter account.

It is more likely that developed countries are where most Twitter users live, so I wonder if it would be useful for

national health agencies to start using Twitter more actively. It may be an effective way to reach their citizens and promote healthier life styles, adherence to treatment, or improve knowledge about any disease. Moreover, the same statistics show that most of the Twitter users are young-adult college students; thus, they have the capacity to fully understand basic health information. Also, they spend much time on Twitter, so it could be of great help to send away tips on nutrition or how to prevent STDs. Even though Twitter gives us only 140 characters, it gives the opportunity to reach a vast population in real time and access may not be limited by geographic location.

I would like to draw attention to the promising new uses of Twitter for health promotion or any other activity related with health care. Here, I present how many ministries of health use Twitter; now it is time to carry out further

Table 1 Number of Spanish- and English-speaking countries and the number of ministries of health that have an active Twitter account according to WHO Regional Offices

	English-speaking countries		Spanish-speaking countries	
	Countries	Twitter accounts	Countries	Twitter accounts
WHO African Region	22	1	1	
WHO Region of the Americas	14	2	19	11
WHO South-East Asia Region	1	0		
WHO European Region	3	1	1	1
WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region	1	0		
WHO Western Pacific Region	16	2		
Total	57	6 (10.53 %)	21	12 (57.14 %)

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research to determine how Twitter, along with any other social networks, can be a tool to improve a country's health when used by national health agencies.

Social networks are here; chances are that they will not leave us. It is high time to use them for health promotion or as a source of health information.

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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