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Building a community

The Nature Microbiology Community provides a space for researchers to freely share information and discuss ideas. We hope that this initiative encourages greater discourse and engagement with the microbiology research field.

Communication in science has always been important. Ideas and supporting data are shared though the published literature (and more recently preprints) so that they can be considered and discussed by colleagues in the field and beyond. Outside of the literature, the sharing and discussion of the latest advances, news and gossip happens at multiple levels: by word of mouth at informal gatherings, group meetings, institutional seminars and conferences, as well as by direct contact via e-mail (thank you, Ray Tomlinson), instant message or video-call. There will even be those in the field that still take the time to write longhand a letter to post, or who just pick up the phone. Of course, two decades since its inception (one if we count the arrival of Facebook and Twitter as a watershed), social media in its various forms now has an ever-increasing part to play in science communication. When time is limiting and travel expensive and protracted, many researchers use social media to keep others informed about their own news and to stay abreast of what is going on elsewhere in the field. Through Facebook, Twitter, Google+, Reddit and a myriad other blog and news platforms, the modern microbiologist can connect with colleagues both near and afar and share information and thoughts with a worldwide network of contacts in close to real time.

This is the ideal. However, in reality some of the conventions that shape our interactions with each other in the physical world also manifest in our online life. For instance, the 1% rule of thumb (also known as the 90–9–1 principle and variations thereof) suggests that for the 1% of people that create content in an online community, 9% will view and engage with that content while the remaining 90% will just view the content with no further engagement. This is certainly true on Twitter; most simply observe content posted by others in their timeline, perhaps occasionally retweeting, while the creation of new content and sharing of thoughts is done by a relative few (albeit a number of people that is still large and growing). The same pattern holds true in many circumstances in the physical world. For instance, at even the most lively and interactive of conferences, the majority of questions at the end of each talk will come from a relatively small proportion of the attendees. Of course, question sessions tend to be short and there are generally other opportunities to interact with a speaker at the meeting. However, there is an 'activation energy' that prevents many conference participants from engaging. All but the brashest of us will, at some stage in their career, have had a moment when the heart starts pounding and palms moisten as we prepare to expose our internal monologue and ask a question of the speaker. For many, this experience proves overwhelming, preventing the question from being asked, no matter how useful it might have been to the discussion.

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So why is engaging with a wider community important? If only 1–10% of any given community (physical or online) is active in creating, sharing and discussing content and ideas, then the conversation will be driven by the views of the most outspoken, and may not necessarily be representative of the entire community. There are also personal benefits to be had from engaging more, allowing one to grasp opportunities to learn and expand knowledge and experience. Furthermore, greater engagement can help to raise one's own profile in a community and to forge connections with other researchers, who could turn out to be future collaborators, referees or panel members. It is definitely worth persevering to overcome any barriers that might otherwise limit your engagement with the research community around you.

At *Nature Microbiology*, we strongly encourage greater discourse amongst microbiologists and with us, the editors (http://www.nature.com/nmicrobiol/about/editors), whether through the formal pages of our journal, attendance at conferences or via Twitter. We are also always looking for new avenues to promote interaction and engagement with you, the reader. In continuation of this aim, we have created the Nature Microbiology Community (https://naturemicrobiologycommunity.nature.com/), a space that is freely open for anyone to join, post content, share information and discuss ideas. The site supports blog, image and video content and we have created a number of 'channels' into which similar content can be grouped. For example, the community has a 'Gallery' channel to which microbiology-inspired artwork can be posted; we encourage all members to join us in sharing recent news stories and literature in the 'In the news' and 'Journal club' channels; there is a 'Behind the paper' channel which offers the chance for authors to tell the real story behind their manuscript (from any journal, not just ours); an 'On the road' channel for members to tell each other about their travels; and the 'Under the microscope' channel, in which we encourage members to just talk about their experiences as microbiologists and life in general. We will also have a regular 'From the editors' blog aimed at tackling various behind the scenes aspects of the editing process. We hope that researchers from all career levels will become part of the community, using it to make contacts with other researchers by posting content and commenting on others' posts. In this way, members can enhance their online presence in a place that is growing in visibility amongst microbiologist colleagues.

We are the first to admit that the community is something of an experiment for us. We do not yet know where it will take us in the coming months and years, but we are committed to providing it with the opportunity to find its feet and grow. It may be unlikely that the Nature Microbiology Community will turn out to be an exception to the 1% rule, but we hope that at the very least it provides an interesting online corner, in which engagement and interaction can be explored amongst fellow microbiology enthusiasts. ❐