**Scientists’ self-promotion in an age of social media**

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<https://www.aaas.org/blog/driving-force/scientists-self-promotion-age-social-media>



Nearly 30 years ago, Eugene Garfield, the altmetrician of science who invented citation analysis (or [bibliometrics](http://crln.acrl.org/content/73/10/596.full), the foreunner of journal impact factors and h-factors) asked, “[Is there room in science for self-promotion](http://www.the-scientist.com/?articles.view/articleNo/9200/title/Is-There-Room-in-Science-for-Self-Promotion-/%20)? Of certain innocuous varieties that are merely extensions of unconventional individuals, I surely hope so. Members of the scientific community can exhibit tolerance toward such colleagues.”

Fast-forward to the age of social media. What is considered self-promotional today, as opposed to acceptable practices that advance one's career? When does “tolerance” become the indulgence of narcissism? Has self-promotion become the norm?

A [2014 survey](https://dynamicecology.wordpress.com/2014/08/07/self-promotion-in-science-poll-results-and-commentary/) of ecologists (dubbed a “conversation starter”) asked respondents to rate “self-promotional activities” as “fine,” “I have some reservations,” or “I disapprove.” While disagreement was common, the following approached consensus as *not* [self-promotional](https://dynamicecology.wordpress.com/2014/08/04/poll-what-constitutes-self-promotion-in-science/):

 • Publishing in *Nature*, *Science*, or PNAS rather than a discipline-specific journal

 • Blogging, but not about your own work

 • Tweeting, but not about your own work

 • Doing interviews for popular media

 • Allowing your employer to send out press releases about your work

 • Commenting on blogs, where the comments do not primarily comprise references to your own work

Among the more controversial practices were these:

 • Inviting big names in your field to your talk or poster at a conference

 • As a reviewer, suggesting that authors cite your papers

 • As an author, citing your own paper when other citations might be equally or more appropriate

 • Tweeting about your own work to people who don’t follow you on Twitter

 • Nominating yourself for awards

 • Asking others to nominate you for awards

To one whose career unfolded mainly in the 20th century, it seems clear that social networking has altered the norms of propriety. A cohort of mine recently hoped, “humility shaped me.” Yet what we find “morally questionable” is now considered “savvy” and the [new normal](https://pressingpause.com/2016/04/25/me-myself-and-i-self-promotion-and-the-new-normal/).

One social media guru notes that “Self-promotion has a bad reputation because it is so often associated with marketing, advertising, and social timelines that do nothing but pitch, pitch, pitch regardless of how it makes their audience feel. . . [Self-promotion can be a good thing](http://www.fastcompany.com/3032287/hit-the-ground-running/the-art-of-self-promotion-on-social-media) if your content is outstandingly useful and always adds value.

Finally, we hear a lot these days about “value-added content.” This is what justifies much of scientists’ behavior—how the work pushes back the frontiers of knowledge. In the days of [Robert Merton](http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/mar03/indextwo.html), the words “priority” and “originality” would be invoked. Today, the value is something to attract funding and become monetized. Still, can scientists be graceful in self-promoting? If not, psychologists have found, [“Humblebrag” can backfire.](https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/05/150512104037.htm) [W]e tend to overestimate others' positive reactions and underestimate their negative ones,” which can be exacerbated when sharing information at a distance.

Make of all this what you wish. I end this tract with a decisive declaration: I abhor self-promotion. As a traditionalist in career matters, I find it contrary to the foundational ethic of contributions to community without consciously self-serving and -aggrandizing one’s individual feats. That sounds old-fashioned and probably detrimental to glorifying one’s achievements. But our deeds should speak louder than our words. They should stand without the nudge of personality, personal web pages, or ballyhooed impact factors.

Let others, perhaps our own students and peers near and far, tweet about the content we offer. We should modestly propose, while others hail or dispose.