



Thoughtful debate is losing ground over appearance

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Technology enabling open science is putting scientists under greater scrutiny than ever

Science may be opening up, but there are still areas that researchers would like to see remain private. Indeed, under the auspices of open science, scientists are increasingly expected to present a virtual projection of who they are. Appearance has gained an unprecedented level of importance. Scientists who do not play along open themselves to being mistreated or misunderstood.

Living in a world of social media network means that scientists' every utterance is recorded, dissected and analysed. Unfortunately, researchers have come to this game unprepared and without the type of training that politicians typically benefit from. Nobel Laureate Tim Hunt has had a [bitter experience](#) in this new era. His recent comments at a luncheon regarding women in his lab have brought the debate about how much appearance matters into another dimension. He was quoted as saying "you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you and when you criticise them, they cry." Clearly researchers need to think ahead when speaking as scientists, even at informal events.

Regardless of how ill-advised his comments were, Hunt learned the hard way that comments reported on Twitter do not come with context. The resulting deluge of scorn provided under hashtag [distractinglysexy](#) is a case in point. There are no excuses for such words. But context helps understand [how they came about](#). The words were uttered as part an impromptu and informal speech at the start of a luncheon themed 'women's science journalist dinner' at the 2015 World Science Journalists' Conference (WSJC) in Seoul, South Korea.

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People who have known Hunt personally for years contacted by *EuroScientist* thought the accusation of misogyny were [out of character](#). They also recognised a rather clumsy attempt at British humour. To say the least, these comments did not translate very well when they reached the cybersphere.

As scientists venture further into the unexplored realm of open science, where technology will document their every move, there are lessons to be learnt from this episode.

First, debates as important as the status of women in science require a much more in-depth analysis than the context-free reports brought by 140 character tweets. The fact that the debated was initiated on Twitter is a boon in terms of numbers reached. But it is also a curse, as the medium is not an adequate discussion platform.

What is more, there is a need to avoid knee-jerk reactions in response to what people read on Twitter—particularly for those at the highest level of the decision-making pyramid. Otherwise, we are bound to witness again the [lack of due process](#) resulting in Hunt's loss of various positions. It is not because social media reports of scientists' behaviour is instant that follow-up decisions should also be done according to the same timeline. We all need to learn a new approach before making a decision in relation to such rapidly emerging controversies: take a step back, breathe, pause, analyse and [sleep over it!](#)

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