

Politicized Scientists: Credibility Cost of Political Expression on Twitter

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Abstract :

As social media is increasingly popular, we examine the reputational costs of its increased centrality among academics. Analyzing 98,000 scientists on Twitter (2016–2022) reveals substantial and varied political discourse. Experiments assess the impact of such online political expression on a representative sample of 3,700 U.S. respondents and 135 journalists who rate vignettes of synthetic academic profiles with varied political affiliations. Politically neutral scientists are viewed as the most credible. Strikingly, on both the 'left' and 'right' sides of politically neutral, there is a monotonic penalty for scientists displaying political affiliations: the stronger their posts, the less credible their profile and research are perceived, and the lower the public's willingness to read their content, especially among oppositely aligned respondents. A survey of 128 scientists shows awareness of this penalty and a consensus on avoiding political expression outside their expertise.