

twitter.com

/weaverluke

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Twitter bird image courtesy of [Aravind Ajith](#)

Wall Street Journal:

“Twitter is starting to cross into the mainstream, as a wide range of people find interesting uses for the brief notes”

(via [Neville Hobson](#))

Mike Atherton:

“Anyone who tells you how you’re supposed to use Twitter is missing the point. We all use it differently. Hence the value.”



All of a Twitter

Twitter.com has been called “the railroad tracks ... of the 21st century.”

[Andy Murray](#), [Stephen Fry](#) and millions of other people¹ use it. Even [Britney Spears](#) - or at least her “people”² - have joined the party.

Wikipedia [describes Twitter](#) as follows:

Twitter is a free social networking and micro-blogging service that allows its users to send and read other users’ updates (otherwise known as tweets), which are text-based posts of up to 140 characters in length.

Well, sure, but, ok, so...
what’s Twitter actually for?

I propose to take a sculptor’s approach to this question, chipping away at the granite block of information and opinion in the hope of uncovering truth. In which case, the most pressing question is actually:



“Walkaway” by Meredith Farmer

What **doesn’t** define Twitter?

(“What are you doing?”)

Log into twitter.com and you’ll see a prompt: “What are you doing?” A quote from Derek Powazek, featured in [one of the very first posts](#) on the official Twitter blog in summer 2006, surely reflects the founders’ original assumptions regarding Twitter’s utility:

¹ [Nielsen Online reports \(pdf\)](#) that Twitter had 2.4 million unique visitors during September 2008 in the US alone - which represents year-on-year growth of 343%.

² Interestingly, each twitter message (aka “tweet”) from [twitter.com/therealbritney](#) is now credited to specific members of Britney’s entourage, or even to Britney herself (although who know’s if it’s really her..?), rather than simply hiding the team member’s identities behind a manufactured Britney persona; Twitter seems to work best when real individuals’ voices are allowed to emerge.

“Twitter lets me SMS to a group all at once and creates a handy ‘what I’m up to right now’ insert for my site. A kind of in-situ, realtime, status message blogging. Fun!”

However, two years on from Twitter’s launch, status updates are just one of myriad ways we are actually using the service. It turns out that Twitter is useful for sending messages of all kinds, from

all kinds of individuals and groups (and, indeed, things - see below!), to all kinds of individuals and groups.

Take a look at a handful of the ingenious ways people are using Twitter:

- For impromptu, topical, collective-action in the US (during the Presidential election campaign): “[Let’s Use Twitter To Track Robocalls In Real Time](#)”;
- To track [notifications of delays on specific lines on the London Underground](#) (very useful for a Londoner, this);
- As a means of [getting out of jail, writing a novel and talking to ones plants](#) (presumably not all at the same time).

Moreover, [according to Wikipedia](#):

Research reported in New Scientist magazine in May 2008 ... found that blogs, maps, photo sites and instant messaging systems like Twitter did a better job of getting information out during emergencies such as the shootings at Virginia Tech than either the traditional news media or government emergency services.

And there are [an articulated truckload of third-party services](#) designed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your Twittlife in every conceivable way.

Relying on the hive mind for pacemaker advice

ADD TO FAVES ADD NOTE BLOG THIS ALL SIZES

Ian My pacemaker crashed i have no idea how to restart it. Help anyone! Trying to get pacemaker faq but there in flash! Or something non standard. »

Message received in one of my feeds today. [Surname redacted]

Comments



Stuart Barr pro says:

and his next tweet was? "Arghh... too... late...."
Posted 6 months ago. ([permlink](#))

Screenshot by [Larsz](#)

@ActionLamb: “I don’t even notice the [“What are you doing?”] txt any more!”



@edent: “NASA’s use of twitter for the Mars rover [@marsrover] and other probes is very good.” And “check out @low-flyingrocks: 2008 SV7 just passed the Earth at 5km/s approximately twentyfive million one hundred thousand km [per hour] ...”

So... Twitter is useful exclusively for communicating useful information. Right?

Well, perhaps not.

The Guardian’s @charlesarthur³ recently made a brave stab at defining Twitter’s purpose in terms of its utility in his (personal) blog post “How to be a good citizen of Twitter”. But the voices raised in protest at such a prescriptive mini-manifesto for Twitter useage were many and passionate (see the comments on the post).

I suspect that we who feel so strongly about our Twitter freedoms do so because we have, individually and collectively, begun to invest so much of ourselves in it. I mean, goddamnit, people are packing short stories into 140 characters!⁴ (The winning entry, by @rgouldtx: “‘Time travel works!’ the note read. ‘However you can only travel to the past and one-way.’ I recognized my own handwriting and felt a chill.”)



“My Twitter Class of 08” by Mallix

me/we

Well, if we can’t really pin down what kind of messaging Twitter is meant

for, can we at least define who Twitter is suited to? Is Twitter for individuals... and/or for groups.. and/or even for objects..? It turns out that all of the above entities, or rather individual human or mechanical representatives of those entities are twittering away happily in conversation with, often, engaged and sizeable communities. (Yes, we talk back to machines - sad/funny, isn’t it?).

Collective uses of Twitter can be quite compelling. For instance,

³ The “@” sign is used on Twitter to direct a message at a particular user, but also has become a convention to refer to a Twitter user in a non-Twitter context such as this post.

⁴ Thanks to @aroberts for the pointer to this story. Full details of the competition winners can be found here.



@LJRICH - "I follow a few inanimate tweeters, @towerbridge is soothingly zen in its tweets, and @marsphoenix sounds pretty easy-going."

@bowbrick's "favourite use of Twitter: the learning blogs and the school trip blog at Fair Field Juniors <http://www.fairfield.herts.sch.uk/fairfieldtrip>" It must be heartwarming to be able to follow your child's and their friends' story of their school trip - live.

The [Twitter Fan Wiki](#) lists a wealth of special-category twitterers, which include not only individuals (Clones, Fakers, Minor Celebrities[!] and Podcasters, Blogs and websites), but also the representatives of collectives (Organisations, Radio Stations, US Government etc), places (Libraries, Museums and Airports) and abstract information sources (News Services, [Purveyors of poetry and] literature and Movies and tv shows). Even the Flying Spaghetti Monster is at it!

And non-individual Twitter identities, such as inanimate objects, can hint intriguingly at a human presence behind the digital shadow theatre:

When public institutions, such as the British @downingstreet (10 Downing Street, the Prime Minister's office) and @r4today (Radio 4's flagship news programme, Today) start tweeting, the Twitterati (a name for people who spend too much time on Twitter ;) seem to feel honour-bound to ferret out the individual human being behind the official Twitter-persona facade.

We are getting used to authentic, human-to-human conversations, and we like it!

Yes, yes, but... what is Twitter for?

The end of the previous section hinted at my answer. For Twitter seems to be...



Uncannily like... socialising

Consider the aspects of Twitter that are closely analogous to how we converse, and indeed socialise, in the face-to-face, physical world:

Every breath you take

Small chunks of text (the 140 character limit for each tweet ensures this point) mimic phrase lengths of natural conversation.

Talk to her

A personal conversation in a public space: using the “@” sign, one can address another Twitter user (if they have their preferences set appropriately, they will receive a special alert that you have messaged them), but without excluding others from seeing the tweet. Just like a conversation held in public.



“Sleepydog and Lloyd”
(@sleepydog & @lloydavis) by
Benjamin Ellis (@bmje)

A word in your shell-like

Private conversations: a “d” (direct) message to another user (who must be subscribed to your updates, aka “following you”, for you to send them such a message), will reach that user and only that user. As with a conversation held in a private space.

Oyez, oyez!

Addressing one’s (imagined?) superpublic: the majority of tweets are not addressed to anyone in particular. Depending on your preferences, they will be viewable by anyone (ie, anyone who is following you, or happens to look at your public profile), or by any of your “friends”⁵. These general tweets are often motivated by a desire to share interesting information and/or experiences with whoever cares to listen (or not). Yes - everyone can address a virtual auditorium, be it full or

⁵ “Friend” has a very specific meaning within Twitter, denoting people who are both “following you” and who you also “follow”.

Andy Roberts:
“Writing styes on twitter can vary from ugly txt speak (not gr8 !) through cut down sentences (“need coffee. late for bus”) to Haiku poetry, free expression and eloquent mini sagas.”



empty, in Twitterland.

On the face of it, then, this usecase is something of an [outlier](#) - after all, there's nothing very social about speaking from behind a lectern.

However, because Twitter is quintessentially democratic, it turns out that an adjacent analogy for this usecase is that of an Open Space or "[unconference](#)" event where individuals propose a topic for discussion, then others spontaneously group together with the proposer (or don't!) to discuss the topic.

In Twitterland, we can all stand at the lectern and at the same time all be in the audience. It's quite mind-bending as an abstract concept, but soon comes to feel quite natural in practice, in my experience at least.

Dear diary

Speaking to experience: just as some maintain a "conversation" with their diaries, so do Twitter users sometimes seem - arguably, perhaps fancifully on my part? - to be conversing not with individuals or even the Twitter world at large, but more with the container of experience that their Twitter account provides. Or perhaps this usecase and the previous one are really two aspects of a single usecase - of dropping thoughts into a pond and watching the ripples spread?

In your own words

[@weaverluke](#): "I HEAR ITS CAPSLOCK DAY"

[@stevebowbrick](#): "@weaverluke LOVE CAPSLOCK DAY. AND TO THINK I NEARLY MISSED IT. MAKES TYPING A LOT EASIER DOESN'T IT?"

140 characters can be a lot of fun. :)

Human language is amazingly nuanced and varied, and the limited frame of 140 characters seems to inspire people to wring every ounce of expressivity and/or hilarity and/or clarity and/or emotion out of their tweets. Twitter seems to be inspiring a revival of wordsmithery - a trend birthed by the blogging boom - in this age of Pop Idol and America's Next Top Model. I love words, so that makes me happy. :) More to the point, this focus on linguistic precision and expressivity is analo-



gous to the immense sophistication we bring to our offline conversations, in terms of tone of voice, body language, choice of vocabulary and syntax and so on.

The fuzz factor

Physical-world social networks are naturally “fuzzy” in two key ways:

1. Fuzzy relationship definitions: we tend to have a unique set of associations and feelings about each person we know, rather than simply categorising them in our brain as “friend”, “colleague”, “partner”;
2. Fuzzy social network boundaries: although we may participate in specific and notionally-separate social networks in the physical world, the boundaries of those networks are often highly porous. Someone who is a member of your running club might become one of your group of drinking buddies in the course of a Saturday afternoon.

@davidcushman:
“Twitter’s value is in keeping the conversation open, visible, synchronous and consistent.”

The vast majority of social web services - including giants like Facebook - construe social networks primarily in terms of a binary division between “contacts” and “not contacts”; in general, one must request that a person becomes a “contact” before engaging them in conversation on the network. Just imagine if you had to do the same thing in the face-to-face world!

Twitter, conversely, by allowing even non-contacts to impinge on the periphery of one another’s attention with “@” messages (provided that the recipient of the message opts in to such a possibility - see “Talk to her”, above), emulates much more closely the way that we naturally socialise with one another, very often dipping our toes into relationship through half-gestures and casual observations on the weather etc in order to test the relationship’s potential before taking such a high-risk



“Poppies in the Sunset on Lake Geneva” by Pear Biter



step as asking the person in question to be our “friend”. In fact, just how often, since primary school, have you asked someone to “be my friend”? Perhaps never?

The finger pointing at the moon

When you recommend a film to a friend, you don’t then proceed to recount the whole script to them (or at least, if you do, you are a very strange individual!). Similarly, on Twitter, one points to interesting stuff - often adding a hyperlink added to the description - rather than reproducing it whole.

Examples abound. Here’s one from @jlojlo: “Working at a startup sounds fun | Venture-backed startup seeks pet-loving Accounting Manager <http://twurl.nl/hpik3j>”⁶.

Once again, Twitter emulates quite beautifully how we naturally converse. Technology that is transparent to our innate ways of being, and at the same time amplifies and extends them beyond the limitations of the temporal, physical world: this, for me, is how technology should be.

Where is Twitter, and what shape is it?

Twitter is everywhere and everyshape, given a network connection: Twitter’s own standard and [mobile](#) websites, and its support for email and sms-based tweeting, enable pretty much anyone with even non web-enabled phone to maintain their Twitter presence and purview. And a bunch of functionally-enhanced third-party applications, such as [Twhirl](#) and [Twiterrific](#), allow Twitter users to enjoy an even more immersive and richly-interactive experience - for instance, with Twiterrific on the iPhone, one can snap, upload and tweet a description and link to a photo in seconds.

By enabling such flexibility of location and mode of service useage, Twitter is able to remain transparent to our innate social and communicative modalities. Which is as much as to say it gets out of the way of our lives, remaining an open conduit (virtually) wherever we go and (mostly!) whatever we’re up to.

⁶ Note the creative use of a vertical line (“|”), in place of a colon plus quotation marks, to denote a following quote, thereby saving two precious characters!



Which is all as much as to say...

<drum roll.....>

Twitter is for extending conversations and socialising beyond the physical world.

Sound reasonable?

“But does it scale?”

Let's leave aside:

- Twitter's chequered history of service reliability (now [seemingly fixed](#), at least [for the time being](#));
- the ongoing [technical issues](#) of scaling a service that depends on both reading and writing data to databases at a dizzying and server-melting rate;
- the fact that no-one really seems to know - least of all the founders - [how Twitter is going to make money](#);
- the potential barrier to Twitter's take-up in the developing world because of [the relatively high cost of sending and receiving sms messages](#) (mobile web, or indeed any web, remains a distant pipedream for the majority of the world's population);
- the potential for competitor services to sneak in and eat Twitter's lunch (see [140Char](#) for some sharp analysis of Twitter and its competitive landscape):



by [Mykl Roventine](#)

Even assuming that these issues don't come home to roost with the Twitter birdy, will Twitter have sufficient appeal to The Masses, aka “normal people as opposed to social media nuts like me”, to



grow beyond a seven digit userbase to the nine digits enjoyed by Facebook, MySpace and the like?

<Consults crystal ball...>

Yes. No. Not sure.

Who would have predicted Facebook's explosion through the walls of university campuses across swathes of the developed world? The very same network effects - the self-reinforcing draw of one's friends, and their friends, and their friends enaging with one another within a self-consistent community space - that drove Facebook's growth should work extremely well, perhaps even better, for a hyper-social service like Twitter.

And yet, and yet... It is kind of weird, even in terms of a Facebooked contemporary culture, to hang out in a virtual space exchanging 140-character messages. The whole notion of privacy, [a concept that is, after all only as old as the City](#), seems to be shifting and morphing with great rapidity (at least in the developed, hyper-networked world)⁷.

Who knows if Twitter will prove to be a decisive driver and/or beneficiary of social change, or a flash in the pan that attracts a few million wild-eyed wannabe visionaries before collapsing under its own self-referential weight?

~oOo~

Postscript

[@silestre](#) wondered about romantic uses of Twitter - for flirting, dating etc. We found this via Google: "[Did We Just Witness a Twitter Marriage Proposal?](#)". :)



⁷ Not that Twitter doesn't allow for privacy, as in "A word in your shell-like" above - rather, the primary modes of communication on Twitter are public ones.