Literature Review:

Twitter’s Relevance and Use as a Communication Tool

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Launched in 2006, the social media web application known as Twitter has grown by leaps and bounds. By answering the question “What are you doing?” in 140 characters or less, users are doing just that and microblogging their thoughts, musings, images, links, news, and more to the open audience that is the Internet (7 Things, 2007). To get a better handle on Twitter and the phenomenon it has created we need to understand social media a bit more. Once that is done we can take a look at how instant messaging set some of the ground work for Twitter before delving into what Twitter is and why understanding it is important.

Social networking is not a new concept. Coyle and Vaughn (2008) tell us that a social network at its core is a set of individuals linked to one another through interpersonal means--whether it be through computers, locality, ideas, or similar interests. People by nature are social and find different and unique ways to connect with one another. In the 21st century it’s only natural that relationships forged online can carry similar weight as those relationships that are made offline the old fashioned way. Coyle and Vaughn’s (2008) study found that in today’s digital age, social networking is a new form of communication that continues to evolve.

It is this evolution in communication that allows people to connect in new ways. Taylor (2008) acknowledges that different social networks give us access to our “friends” in different ways, ways which differentiate our relationships. Whether it is checking your friend’s Facebook page to find out what they did this weekend, getting business referrals on LinkedIn, getting the latest news updates in your Twitter feed, or checking out the pictures on Flickr that your cousin took of her trip to the Grand Canyon, you are connecting with people in various ways.
With social networking use exceeding web based email use in February 2009 (Wilson, 2009), some of these connections are not just being made by people. Businesses and organizations are also seeing the value of connecting with their consumers and other individuals of interest online. Business are using social networking tools to find new opportunities, expertise, employees, and information on how customers utilize their products and services (Wilson, 2009). Some health care organizations have found that social networking gives them a better avenue to listen and respond to patient needs and “allows for richer engagement and deeper doctor-patient relationships” (Hawn, 2009, p. 368). While in educational settings it can help develop trust and understanding between students and teachers (Kist, 2008) or be used for more practical purposes like forming learning communities for student collaboration (Barbour and Plough, 2009).

By understanding the ways social networking allows individuals to be connected with one another, it lays the groundwork for discovering how Twitter connects people to one another. Along these same lines and as a prelude to Twitter, instant messaging (IM) shares many characteristics with the microblogging service.

Mostly utilized by students in high school and college (Quan-Haase, 2008), IM is another way that people can stay connected online. IM is defined as “applications that provide text-based, near-synchronous communication between two or more users who are usually known to one another” (Quan-Haase, 2008, p. 106). Whether it is through the use of online messaging software or SMS texts on cell phones it is this near-synchronousness that gives IM a feel of live conversation. IM has it’s own place in the communication hierarchy, and in many cases is considered “talking” and not writing (Jacobs, 2008).
Conversing via IM carries with it it’s own mentality, etiquette, and syntax. Users view it as an informal medium of communication which allows them to keep in touch with many people in a casual way. Things that are talked about via IM may not always be considered phone or e-mail worthy and can be discussed in this manner. Since many students spend a lot of time online, communicating through IM is a convenient way of interacting with friends. It also provides a reduced sense of interruption as individuals can carry many simultaneous conversations at the same time (Quan-Haase, 2008).

At its core IM provides users with a means to communicate and connect with people. Communicating and socializing with family and friends that are not nearby via IM can make them feel not as distant (Jacobs, 2008). Personal exchanges though IM can also lead to in person meetings (Quan-Haase, 2008). Finally, “away messages” left by IM users when they are away from the computer, but still logged on, let others know where they are or what they are doing and keep people connected (Jacobs, 2008).

It is the immediacy and casual nature of communicating through instant messaging that lays some of the groundwork for Twitter with features and procedures that are similar in nature and function. “Think of it[Twitter] like instant messaging for the masses. Whereas IM is based on one-on-one communication, Twitter lets users update and engage in conversation-albeit in brief, short phrases-with their followers” (Church, 2008, p. 10)

As previously mentioned Twitter is a fairly new microblogging web application that allows users to post status updates that are at the most, 140 characters in length. These status
updates are small pieces of digital content that could include text, images, links, videos, or other Internet based media.

Once users register for an account they can customize it in various ways similar to other social networking sites. Each status update, or “tweet” are posted online in the public timeline and are viewable by anyone. Each tweet displays a person’s username and the content of their post while also linking back to an individual’s Twitterfeed that shows a list of a user’s most recent tweets. At first only the tweets of the user show up in their Twitterfeed, but a user begins to follow people, tweets from their followers are displayed in their feed as well. By utilizing cell phones and the mobile web, users can send and receive tweets almost anywhere (7 Things, 2007). What makes Twitter intriguing is that it builds an online community between friends and colleagues who follow one another and update frequently (7 Things, 2009).

While some may see 140 characters as limiting, some argue that it is the best thing about Twitter as it forces people to get to the point, be concise, and focus on the message (Jacques, 2009). At face value there’s something to be said about brevity. Often times constraints provide creative solutions for users. In this case some of the direct benefits of limiting yourself to 140 characters is that you need to take your time when you craft posts so as to not have any typos. It also demands that you be efficient and use keywords, while not bogging the message down with unnecessary words (Jacques, 2009).

Twitter has seen tremendous growth since it was created as a result of widespread use by mainstream media, businesses, and various organizations (Farhi, 2009). What is drawing people to Twitter? What are they utilizing it for? Is it useful and worthwhile? These are all questions a
For personal users Twitter serves much the same purpose as maintaining a blog, albeit with more frequent updates and shorter posts. Users can let their followers know what they’re working on, what they’re reading, or what they had for breakfast. As Taylor (2008) puts it, “it would be useful and interesting to be able to keep tabs on your friends as you all go through your day” (p. 20).

Use of Twitter goes beyond personal use and can be purposeful with practical applications. Companies and businesses see it as a way to generate awareness about their products, create media opportunities, foster customer loyalty, launch marketing campaigns, manage reputations, hear about trends, and in recruiting new employees (Fathi, 2008). How do they accomplish this? By communicating and representing a business in an authentic way (Pinkston, 2009). An example that illustrates this would be the NBA’s Phoenix Suns, who are turning online connections into real ones with Twitter. By communicating with their fans online the Suns developed special promotions to connect with fans at games (Zuk, 2009).

Twitter is also being experimented with in the health care field. The Henry Ford Health System in Michigan started off using Twitter to put out press releases, but in January 2009 they used Twitter to post updates on a robotic bladder removed surgery and since then have posted about several more. Corresponding links were posted as well to portions of the surgery that were viewable on YouTube—all this in an effort to promote the surgery to the general public (Bush, 2009). Not all health care uses are so radical. In more practical applications doctors and health
organizations can pass on medical and health related information to their followers via Twitter, while some chronically ill patients gain support from their Twitter followers (Hawn, 2009).

In the news arena the use of Twitter has been obvious, news breaks on Twitter with both China’s Sichuan earthquake in May 2008 (Emmett, 2009) and the US Airways Hudson River crash in January 2009 being first reported via the online service (Sangani, 2009). For news reporting it often “works best in situations where the story is changing so fast that mainstream media can’t assemble all the facts at once” (Farhi, 2009, p. 28). News organizations are using Twitter to more than just report the news. They are also using it to find out what kinds of conversations people are having for story leads as well as asking questions or suggestions on stories (Hallett, 2008). By having a presence on Twitter, news sites are able to increase their traffic as Twitter users are two to three times more likely to visit a news site than the average web user (Farhi, 2009).

Another area that is experimenting with Twitter is in the field of education. In an interesting collaborative writing project that involves the use of Twitter, students add to a narrative 140 characters at a time and only have 140 posts to tell a whole story based on the Twittory (Twitter story) framework (Skiba, 2008). Other examples of using Twitter for academic purposes run the gamut from using it to alert students to announcements and extra credit opportunities, group collaboration and communication, to facilitating class discussion inside and outside of the classroom (Twitter in Higher, 2009).

What is important to realize about Twitter is that it connects people in many unique ways. While you can share mundane information about your daily routine, that is not all that is going
on. People are sharing stories, pointing followers to links and information that they find relevant, using it to communicate in emergencies, getting news and information, and getting to know people they might not have otherwise. All of this, in some shape or form, connects and links the user as never before.

An important aspect to Twitter is the ambient awareness that the application gives users. As short pointed status updates pour in, it paints a picture of those that you follow (Johnson, 2009). Believe it or not, it can be useful and interesting to find out what happens to your friends as they go through the day with Twitter facilitating conversations, meetings, and collaboration (Taylor, 2008). Finding out what people are doing via the ambient awareness of Twitter is important in keeping users connected to one another.

Another intriguing and important aspect to Twitter is that you do not need to have an existing connection with someone to form a relationship with them (Pinkston, 2009). It is not an uncommon practice to follow someone that you do not know. The key is to find people whose interests are similar to your own and follow them in order to build a relationship based on similar pursuits (Bell & Kuon, 2009). Once people view your profile and see that you are adding substance to the conversation they will in turn follow you back and your network will grow (Ben-Ari, 2009).

Something else that makes Twitter an important communication tool is the speed, immediacy, and brevity in which breaking news gets posted (Farhi, 2009). Building on the news examples already discussed, Twitter allows us to see current events, and history, unfold in almost real time. It enables users to be citizen journalists to post images, video, and commentary to the
Internet for anyone to see (Bell & Kuon, 2009). Being affected by an event halfway around the world as it happens--that is the kind of power Twitter has.

A common practice on Twitter is to share interesting, fun, or informative information from the web. This important practice points people to possible new information and resources as a user’s followers post links to stories, articles, blogs, images, video, or anything that is posted on the online. Sometimes your followers may even pass along information that are hot topics on the web. All of this not only contributes to the conversation, but also acts as a filter as your followers select what is relevant to relay (Johnson, 2009). It is a user’s following that provides information on what other people are doing in a particular field of study as well as keeping the user up to date on the extensive information in any given field (Ben-Ari, 2009).

Twitter is frequently being used during conferences. Whether integrated into programming or used as a back channel, users who are present and those that are not can interact and participate with one another and discuss conference topics as they occur (Bell & Kuon, 2009). What is important to note about this conversation is that Twitter adds another level of discussion to these types of events and can bring in a wider audience, many of which are not physically present. This secondary discussion can also continue on even after the conference has concluded (Johnson, 2009).

Part of what makes Twitter useful to a lot of people is that the application itself is shaped by the people that use it. An example of this would be the use and creation of the “hashtag” where tweets are grouped by topic or event by users adding the “#” to a word or phrase with that particular post (Johnson, 2009). Generated spontaneously by users, the hashtag allows for easy
searching and grouping of a topic on Twitter. With evolution an ever present possibility, inviting users to contribute to the progress of the application will not only shape the future of the application, but will also enable users to accomplish more sophisticated tasks (7 Things, 2009).

Conclusion

While social networking has evolved, the core idea remains the same: people are linked to one another through interpersonal means. As people have continued to find new ways to stay connected to one another new means of communication have formed such as through IM which delivers short near synchronous text based messaging. This “instant messaging” lays a lot of the groundwork for the microblogging application known today as Twitter.

As a communication tool there are many ways to stay connected to those that a user chooses to follow with Twitter. With many different people and organizations utilizing it in a number of different ways, it only emphasizes the need for understanding of this application. While there are a number of meaningful uses as this review illustrates, Twitter can be a difficult application to figure out. With 60% of new users who sign up not coming back the following month (Farhi, 2009), one has to wonder why people are not staying around if there are a lot of positives to using Twitter. Is this exodus the result of these people seeing no value in the web application? Or could it be because people hear about it, but don’t know what it is entirely about when they sign up? More research in this area is warranted to answer these questions.
References


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