

Understanding some policy implications of Twitter

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Twitter, the popular social media website in which individuals are asked to respond to the question ‘What are you doing?’ in 140 characters, is increasingly becoming the first port of call for individuals to get their news. Messages on Twitter (‘tweets’) can be sent by text message or through the Internet. As even the most basic mobile phone can be used, the technology is potentially accessible even in impoverished countries. Because of this diversity of contributors, news gathered from Twitter is considered by some to be less biased and more ‘real’ than other mediums. This paper examines the site’s role in being the first to report on the Mumbai bomb blasts in 2008 and the downed US Airways flight in 2009 as case studies. This paper also explores the question of whether Twitter has transformed ordinary individuals into empowered citizen journalists or whether their voices are merely subsumed by traditional media. In other words, has Twitter really produced a new space in which ordinary people meaningfully interact with ordinary people around the world who have rich insider accounts pertaining to diverse forms of socioeconomic life? This paper ultimately concludes that ordinary people on Twitter are producing news and consuming news (especially ‘breaking news’) produced by other ordinary people. News produced by news organizations (both traditional and online) as well as local governments is also being consumed to Twitter. These changes have substantial policy implications in the UK and elsewhere, especially in terms of (1) taxpayer-funded media and (2) the continuing lack of access to the Internet and new mobile technologies by marginalized populations limits them from access to this increasingly important social media. Before exploring the policy aspects of Twitter, the medium itself will be introduced and its potential usefulness explained.

What is Twitter?

Twitter is an exponentially growing communicative technology which allows users to maintain a public web-based ‘conversation’ through the use of SMS (i.e. text messages) sent from mobile phones, mobile devices, or the Twitter.com website. Twitter’s aim, *prima facie*, is: respond to the question ‘What are you doing?’ in 140 characters or less. In practice, the question is not indicative of the responses as they can and do encompass anything of interest to the user (from what one is doing to commenting on an issue). These response messages on Twitter (termed ‘tweets’) are automatically posted and are publicly accessible on the user’s profile page on the Twitter website. Anyone with Internet access can instantly see a tweet and respond to it.¹ One does not need to even ‘know’ the other user to engage in a Twitter-based conversation. In this vein, Twitter has been compared to a Habermasian public sphere (Witte et al., 2009).

It is estimated that more than 2.25 million tweets are sent every day (Rajan and Sidders, 2009). One reason for the popularity of this medium is its ease of use. Anyone with a mobile phone (and that is 84% of the UK population (Deloitte LLP, 2009)) can quickly fire off a text message to Twitter’s mobile phone number. And because sending a text message has become a banal activity in scores of countries around the world, the learning curve for using Twitter is relatively low for individuals familiar with ‘texting’. Also, unlike recent Web 2.0 technologies, one does not need broadband Internet access or, for that matter, a PC to regularly use Twitter (this is not to say that Twitter’s uptake crosses traditional social boundaries and inequalities - an issue which will be discussed subsequently).

Though restricted to 140 characters, Twitter has simple, yet powerful methods of connecting tweets to larger themes, specific people, and groups. Tweets can be categorized by a 'hashtag,' which is preceded by a hash sign (e.g. #nickgriffin for the recent discussion of Nick Griffin's appearance on BBC Question Time or #postalstrike for the recent Royal Mail strike actions). These hashtags can be used to categorize tweets into themes or by a group of people. For example, those interested or attending the 10th annual conference of the Association of Internet Researchers in 2009 sent tweets with the hashtag '#ir10'. From the Twitter website, searching for #ir10 reveals a list of all tweets with this hashtag. Similarly, if a tweet was referring or in response to an individual who is a user of Twitter, an at-sign can be placed before their Twitter name (e.g. @stephenfry). It is through the at-sign, that public Twitter-based conversation occurs. Twitter also displays a 'feed' of tweets of users one is 'following' (i.e. users you have selected to receive tweets from). These users can be people you are interested in (from A-list celebrities to your neighbour), a professional organization, a magazine/journal, a company, etc. This feed of tweets appears when you log into Twitter (either from a computer or mobile device). The aggregation of a user's tweets on one's Twitter page is considered a 'micro-blog,' a web log that consists of short messages rather than long ones (Java et al., 2007). Anyone can scroll through these messages, potentially garnering an insight into that user's political views, daily happenings, or even current location.

Is Twitter a medium we should pay attention to?

Twitter has received significant media attention in its use to disseminate information during disasters, including the 2008 Mumbai bomb blasts (Dolnick, 2008) and the January 2009 crash of US Airways Flight 1549 (Beaumont, 2009). In the latter event,

Janis Krums, a passenger on the Midtown Ferry took a picture of the downed US Airways jet floating in the Hudson² and uploaded it to Twitter before news crews even arrived on the scene. Krums not only uploaded his tweet and photograph with ease, but also continued tweeting as he helped with aid efforts. In an instant, he was transformed from Florida-based businessman to both citizen journalist and emergency aid worker. During the Mumbai bomb blasts in 2008, Twitter was used to circulate news about the attacks (Beaumont, 2008). Seconds after the first blasts, Twitter users were providing eyewitness accounts from Mumbai. For example, on November 26 2008, the day of the attacks, @ShriNagesh tweeted ‘a gunman appeared in front of us, carrying machine gun-type weapons & started firing. I just turned & ran in opp direction’ and @Dupree tweeted ‘Mumbai terrorists are asking hotel reception for rooms of American citizens and holding them hostage on one floor’. On November 27 @Ashokjjr tweeted, ‘Oberoi fire under control now’ and @sengupta tweeted, ‘Trident fire seems under control’ (BBC News, 2008). Though limited to 140 characters, the information contained in these tweets was invaluable to individuals in Mumbai as well as news media outlets throughout the world. Traffic on Twitter with the #mumbai tag grew to a volume on November 27 that the Indian government asked for Twitter users to halt their updates: ‘ALL LIVE UPDATES - PLEASE STOP TWEETING about #Mumbai police and military operations’ (BBC News, 2008). Some reports indicated that the Indian government was worried that the terrorists were garnering inside information about the situation from Internet media sites (Courier Mail, 2008).

Not only was news in the case of both Flight 1549 and the Mumbai bomb blasts disseminated nearly instantaneously, but it also included photographic documentation

as well. Krums' emotive image was used by traditional news organizations around the world. In the face of deep budget cuts, these media outlets are hard-pressed to have people on the ground picking up stories this quickly. Twitter, on the other hand, has at its disposal a virtual army of citizen journalists ready to tweet at a moments notice from their mobile phones or mobile devices. As 'smart' camera phones, iPhones, and Blackberries penetrate Western markets further, a higher percentage of this army can seamlessly embed pictures into their tweets. Though, at the time of writing, 23.5% of the UK population has mobile Internet on their phone (Deloitte LLP, 2009) and, as such, are capable of sending tweets with linked photographs. Furthermore, as mentioned previously, it is relatively easy for a user to do this. Most iPhone users with a Twitter-based application could take a picture and send a tweet in under forty-five seconds. This seamless convergence of photographic and textual information from everyday 'citizen journalists' made Twitter an invaluable guerrilla news source during the post-election protests in Iran (Morozov, 2009), the 2008 cyclone in Burma (Washkuch, 2008), and the elections in Moldova (Barry et al., 2009, Mungiu-Pippidi and Munteanu, 2009).

Twitter has not just made the headlines through news of activism or disasters. Rather, the social media site has begun to influence our personal lives. For example, Twitter speed-dating, when singles go to a bar armed with a mobile phone, sending tweets to potential suitors, has gained a following in New York (Snow, 2009). And, in Los Angeles, the Kogi Korean BBQ-To-Go van, which sells award-winning Korean-Mexican fusion tacos, sends tweets to its followers letting them know when and where the van will next be stopping (Oh, 2009). Twitter has also become an increasingly popular medium for support networks. For example, Hawn (2009)

highlights the case of Rachel Baumgartel, a women with type 2 diabetes who uses Twitter to inform her support network of her diet, exercise regime, and hemoglobin a1C levels. For Baumgartel and many others like her, Twitter functions as a medium for her network to keep one ‘in line’ on a daily basis in terms of following a treatment regime.

The rise of Twitter-based citizen journalists?

As discussed in the case of US Airways flight 1549, it was a ‘citizen journalist’, Janis Krums, who took a picture of the downed aircraft and circulated it to the ‘twittersphere’ from his iPhone before the traditional media had any idea of the disaster. Similarly, in the case of the Mumbai bomb blasts, it was ordinary Indians ‘reporting’ on the destruction. A question this paper is interested in is whether this signals the rise of citizen journalism or whether it is merely a new means for traditional media to pick up on stories (and even have access to free photographic documentation). Either way, this is a question with significant policy implications. Jen Leo, a blogger for the Los Angeles times, wrote about Krums’ iconic photograph and asks whether it is ‘becoming more interesting to turn to citizen journalism than traditional broadcast media for coverage?’ (Leo, 2009). Part of this question is contingent on the legitimacy of Twitter as a news source itself. Ross McCulloch (2009) of the Third Sector Lab blog emphasizes how flight 1549 marked a turning point for Twitter’s legitimacy:

With the press of a few buttons on his iPhone, Janis Krums changed the way the world looks at twitter. While the traditional news networks were still searching for the plane in the Hudson, [his] photo was already spreading like wildfire across the twittersphere.

From McCulloch’s perspective, the tipping point whereby Twitter became considered to be a potentially legitimate source of breaking news was flight 1549. Not only

could interested individuals see Krums' photograph online, but they could also send tweets directly to him, posing questions and requesting clarification. Indeed, Krums' @jkrums Twitter following rocketed from 150 to nearly 6000. Krums participated in Twitter-led discussions including one on the Third Sector Lab site. What is particularly unique in this type of citizen journalism is that consumers of Krums' account were able to build (or at least perceive) a rapport with Krums himself. Though this case highlights the use of citizen journalism in breaking news stories, it does not displace the usefulness of traditional news media (or length-unrestricted blogs in the realm of new media) to cover in-depth or longer running issues and matters. Bianco (2009), for example, argues that Twitter has 'notably proved to the world its capacity to transmit real-time information', but is not a medium best designed for reporting 'issues and campaigns across a protracted period of time'.

Though Twitter is not displacing traditional media from Bianco's (2009) perspective, news organizations have found the medium useful in their coverage of breaking news. Minutes after Krums posted the 'The Miracle on the Hudson' photograph on Twitter, media outlets were calling his mobile phone asking for up-to-the-minute information and requesting interviews. As Bianco (2009) notes, within half an hour of taking the picture, Krums was interviewed live by MSNBC. McCulloch (2009) rightly points out that though this event may have been a means by which Twitter was legitimized, this newfound victory was not at the expense of 'old media' in that the 'newspapers and TV news stations didn't pay a penny to the likes of Reuters and AP when US 1549 hit the Hudson [... as they] all got their big photo for free that day' through the Internet. In a similar vein, there have been cases where governments have banned journalists from reporting from their countries. The 2009 election in Iran is the most

well-known example. As Palser (2009) notes, major international news organizations such as CNN relied on information from social networking and social media websites including Twitter. However, research indicates that the use of social media by journalists remains exceptional rather than the norm. Lariscy et al. (2009) found that only 7.5% of journalists they interviewed indicated social media is ‘very important to their work’ while 56.5% were neutral or considered social media to be ‘of little or no importance’. Ultimately, Lariscy et al. (2009) conclude that though journalists are not significantly using social media, they ‘do not appear opposed to it’.

Policy implications: Cost-Saving

Should state-sponsored media turn to Twitter as a low-cost means of disseminating news, headlines, and other information. Currently, the BBC does have a master Twitter account with almost 15,000 followers (though it has never sent a tweet). That being said, the BBC uses Twitter very actively. The BBC’s Twitter presence is composed of lists which allow interested users to see the tweets of BBC broadcasters and DJs (such as Tim Westwood, Bobby Friction, and Russell Howard) as well as maintaining Twitter accounts for many of its shows. BBC presences on Twitter include BBC Breaking News (@bbcbreaking) with over 220,000 followers and 975 tweets sent, BBC World News (@bbcworld) with over 59,000 followers and 45,000 tweets sent, Strictly Come Dancing (@bbcstrictly) with almost 9,000 followers and 800 tweets sent. The BBC also tweets in non-English languages. For example, BBC Persian Click (@persianclick) tweets in Persian (farsi) and BBC Mundo (@bbcmundo) tweets in Spanish.

Should councils and local governments follow the BBC's lead? Councils have begun to employ various online mediums. Swansea Council, in the UK, has maintained the YouTube channel since 2007.³ A larger budget project is Kent County Council's (KCC) online television channel, the first council to run an online television station.⁴ KCC recently launched a £1.6 million Hollyoaks-style drama, 'Hollywould', in collaboration with Bob Geldof which has received 2 million visits since its launch in 2009 (Chittenden, 2009). If delivery of entertainment/news/local information in the case of KCC and local news/information in the case of Swansea can be done successfully online, should governments (local, state, or national) be following suit given the extremely low cost of dissemination on the Internet? This is a pressing question given the current budget crisis in the UK public sector (and in other countries as well). A key policy concern of this paper has been to evaluate the role of Twitter in this dialogue. Some councils such as Peterborough have begun to tweet out updates regarding local news and information.⁵ If this is deemed a successful distribution medium (and such projects are at early stages), local residents could not only get immediate updates on a pool closure in the council or the response to swine flu in the area, but councils would be saving a tremendous amount of taxpayer money (e.g. paper-based council newsletters and leaflets could potentially be eliminated).

Policy implications: Digital Divides

But marginalized populations often lack or have limited net access in their households, making newsletters and leaflets an attractive option. Furthermore, far from being concerned about tweeting, these households are more focused on getting food on the table were keeping the heat on in the winter. This is been amplified by the current economic recession. Indeed, even amongst children – a demographic

which is painted as an extremely net savvy generation - digital divides based upon lines of class, ethnicity, and other socioeconomic factors continue to exist (Livingstone and Helsper, 2007). Policymakers should understand that decisions such as that by Peterborough council must be paired with solutions to address persisting digital divides (e.g. Clarke et al., 2008). This is not to say that technology cannot be harnessed to effectively disseminate information. For example, local governments may want to focus more energy on text messages to mobiles than tweets given the levels of mobile penetration in the UK and other Western countries. Text message-based information services have successfully been deployed during disasters in lesser developed countries. Local, state, or national governments in the UK and elsewhere could employ this strategy. For example, FrontlineSMS⁶ was used during the 2004 Asian tsunami to keep disaster-affected individuals informed. Of course, Twitter and text messaging are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, far from it. However, policy decisions would benefit from understanding the currently limited demographic of Twitter and the limitations of social media.

One limitation is the Issue of information integrity on Twitter. Tweets regarding breaking news, disasters, and public health epidemics can be misleading, incorrect, or even fraudulent (Goolsby, 2009). In the case of the recent swine flu epidemic, tweets tagged with #swineflu often contained false or misleading information. Marginalize and vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by such information. It is impossible to monitor the integrity of information flowing on Twitter. Of course, individuals can follow trusted news outlets on Twitter. However, some users are posing as traditional news organizations by employing a username which sounds or looks like a newspaper or television station. Indeed, someone who posed as the Dalai

Lama on Twitter attracted 20,000 followers in 48 hours (Moore, 2009). Though Twitter eventually shut down this impersonating account, the openness of the medium enables significant fraudulence such as this.

Conclusion

Though the media (from fashion magazines to broadsheets) have been covering Twitter closely, academic researchers have only recently begun to see Twitter's increasing role in social life. This paper has sought to redress this imbalance, especially in terms of evaluating policy decisions. Twitter has become a significant media presence. In the US, nearly one in five Internet-users aged 18-34 utilize Twitter or a similar social media/networking site (Lenhart, 2009). Not only is this figure significant but it is influential young adults (and not predominantly teenage users) flocking to this medium. This growing user base is tweeting about professional events, political issues, and, of course, their personal lives. This demographic (18-34) is also an important barometer of the consumption of traditional print media in the US as just over a third read a print newspaper during the week almost a half read a Sunday newspaper (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006). However, research has shown that print media readership is declining (Gulati and Just, 2006, Wahl, 2006) and that, as Vivian Schiller (cited in Emmett, 2008) of NYTimes.com observes 'social media [...] is one of several essential strategies for disseminating news online – and for surviving [as a news organization].' As Zeichke (2009) notes, news organizations are increasingly sending tweets with the headlines of their breaking news stories.

However, as news organizations, including state-sponsored media such as the BBC increasingly use Twitter, should government bodies follow suit? This paper has argued that there are advantages for governments (especially local governments). Disseminating local information via Twitter is an attractive means for cutting costs during the current economic recession. However, there remain persisting digital divides in the UK and elsewhere which keep marginalized and vulnerable populations away from Twitter. This paper has argued that government bodies (local, state, and national in the UK and elsewhere) may want to consider using text message-based services as a cost-effective means to target these populations. The question of the integrity of information on Twitter discussed earlier is also ameliorated through text-based messaging. Employing this medium is not mutually exclusive to Twitter. Rather, both mediums could be used in tandem to promote greater inclusivity in terms of information flow. Ultimately, it is critical that government bodies look beyond the zeitgeist of Twitter and similar mediums as its cool, en vogue gloss masks the fact that Twitter is socially stratified. Policy decisions which not only harness such technologies, but also take care to keep information flowing to marginalized and vulnerable populations will ultimately better serve constituencies as a whole.

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Notes

¹ As long as the user has not restricted access to their tweets. A minority of users make their tweets 'protected', a status by which only approved 'followers' of their tweets have access to them. In this case, a Twitter-based 'conversation' could only occur with permitted followers.

² See <http://twitpic.com/135xa>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/user/swanseacitycouncil>

⁴ <http://www.kenttv.com/>

⁵ http://www.peterborough.gov.uk/news/latest_news/peterborough_city_council_gets.aspx

⁶ <http://www.frontlinesms.com/>