TWITTER AND SOCIETY
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Epilogue
Why Study Twitter?

Cornelius Puschmann, Axel Bruns, Merja Mahrt, Katrin Weller, and Jean Burgess

Each of the thirty-one contributions in this volume implicitly spells out its own answer to this question. Surprisingly perhaps even for such a highly interdisciplinary volume as this one, these answers vary considerably in their approaches, their objectives, and their underlying assumptions about the object of study. This diversity of scholarly perspectives on Twitter, barely half a decade since it first emerged as a popular platform, highlights its versatility. Beginning as a side project to a now-forgotten podcasting platform, rising to popularity as a social network service focussed around mundane communication and therefore widely lambasted as a cesspool of vanity and triviality by incredulous journalists (including technology journalists), it was later embraced by those same journalists, governments, and businesses as a crucial source of real-time information on everything from natural disasters to celebrity gossip, and from debates over sexual violence to Vatican politics.
Studies of Twitter not only use many approaches (from computational modelling to critical inquiry), they also analyse a very wide range of phenomena (from fandom to disaster preparedness), and follow many different, implicit assumptions about Twitter’s core purpose. Is Twitter a site of public debate? A tool for journalism, activism, education, and public relations? A data source for scientists, pollsters, and marketers? The mass of data generated each day by a user base exceeding 500 million accounts around the globe alone makes it both fascinating and impossible to describe holistically. What Twitter is, to celebrities, activists, pundits, marketers, and private individuals, is futile to answer without overlooking, as danah boyd (2006) has put it with regard to blogging, “the efficacy of the practice”. The practice of using Twitter signifies something to those who engage in it that is difficult to describe only in terms of the data that is produced. Twitter is a platform, a piece of infrastructure comparable to the Internet itself, and it does a wide range of things for a diverse network of user communities.

Why should we study Twitter? An obvious answer would be that it is a global phenomenon, growing in users and posts every day. Another is that it is increasingly entrenched in our media ecology, an instrument that few politicians, journalists, or marketers would want to miss. And yet another is that through Twitter, researchers gain access to huge volumes of data, a treasure trove of digital traces, waiting to be mined for precious insights into people’s behaviours, their moods, their consumption patterns, their language, and their voting behaviours. All of these are excellent reasons, yet there may be even more important grounds on which social scientists should study Twitter, reasons that point to how social media platforms increasingly influence certain aspects of our lives, as we can increasingly access them whenever and wherever we want, and millions of individuals around the globe use them.

Twitter’s embeddedness in everyday social and communicative interactions across so many nations of the developed world, and its role as a very public, global, real-time communications channel highlight the fact that it—alongside other major social media, like Facebook or YouTube—provides a window on contemporary society as such, at national and global levels. We named this collection *Twitter and Society* for that reason: because the interrelations between Twitter and society which the chapters in this volume explore and explain make this book not just a collection of articles in an emerging field of ‘Twitter Studies’, but one which is able to develop our understanding of social and societal trends at the present moment by bringing together work that happens to draw on Twitter as its primary locus of observation.
In doing so, we seek to connect with the broader stream of Internet research, which is concerned not simply with an exhaustive investigation of the next shiny new tool or technology, as valuable as such efforts may be in their own right (sometimes they are described somewhat derisively as ‘toaster studies’ by the Internet research community), but which seeks to discover the deeper patterns of user activity that tell us much more about users’ interests, motivations, and attitudes, and that generate insights which exist independent of the specific communications platforms that may be popular at any one point. From mailing lists and newsgroups to Facebook and Twitter, for example, the use of computer-mediated communication platforms for social networking and community interaction now looks back on a 50-year history, and while its particular historical formations also shine a light on the politics of the specific platforms in each period, perhaps the more fascinating observation to be made from this history is that of humanity’s relentless drive to communicate, to gather, exchange, and organise knowledge, and to develop the community structures that enable and sustain such processes. At its best, Internet research is able to reflect back to us, by studying these online processes, just who we are and how we work as a society or a range of societies, and how we operate differently in contexts ranging from everyday social life to high-stakes politics, from acute crisis events to televised mass entertainment, from activism to marketing.

In developing this collection, therefore, we have come back time and again to Richard Rogers’s (2009) dictum that we ought to redefine our ambitions as scholars, from studying the Internet to “studying culture and society with the Internet” (p. 29). We hope that Twitter and Society has succeeded not just at presenting a collection of work on Twitter as such, but also in tracing Twitter’s emerging role in society, documenting its growing impact on society, and exploring to what extent it is possible to use the study of Twitter as a lens through which we may observe contemporary society. By their nature, lenses amplify, skew, and distort what they depict, and we must not make the mistake of taking such observations simply at face value; Twitter is no more perfect a representation of contemporary societal structures and trends than newspapers, television, or any other popular medium is able to be. But studying society with Twitter can highlight different aspects of contemporary life from doing so through the lens of other media and communications tools, and it is the aggregate and productively contradictory picture which emerges from a combination of all of these observations which is ultimately of the greatest value. Twitter and Society seeks to make a contribution to that bigger picture.
Lenses can have blind spots, and undoubtedly this collection pays greater attention to some areas of Twitter research than it does to others. It leans slightly towards the humanities side of the humanities and social sciences continuum; and while international, it is far from complete in its inclusiveness—indeed, with its focus on the Twitter platform, it inherently excludes other microblogging services like Sina Weibo, which is hugely popular in China. Aside from those issues, the very flexibility of Twitter as a platform for public, interpersonal, and private communication means that its potential uses are vast and diverse, and that researchers are presented with an endless array of possible case studies and areas of investigation. Future editions of this and other books on Twitter research will face an even more difficult challenge of choosing and organising their chapters. This is a challenge to look forward to.

Significantly, the further development of Twitter studies also depends on the further development of Twitter itself, of course—and while several of the contributions to the present volume touch on the platform politics of Twitter (and Twitter, Inc.’s role in them), much more could and should be said about them still. As with any proprietary platform, Twitter usage practices by individual and corporate users, as well as Twitter research approaches, exist in a precarious state that is bound up with the technological choices, commercial fortunes, and internal politics of the company which operates the platform; we are all no more than guests here, with a limited ability to bend or ignore the rules which govern this space.

**SOCIETY IN 140 CHARACTERS**

At the very heart of Twitter’s success there has always been a simple technical limitation that may initially look more like a bug than a feature: the restriction of messages to 140 characters. Originally, there were very simple reasons for this restriction, as Richard Rogers explains in the foreword to this collection: Twitter developers sought to ensure backwards compatibility with the 160-character limit of short messages from mobile phones. But its effects highlight the far-reaching consequences of design choices for a sociotechnical system that connects people through nothing but a set of very basic, software-encoded, communicative rules—what could be called Twitter’s underlying sociotechnical grammar. Twitter opened up a world of impossible discourses through the restriction to 140 characters: discourses that could never have come to pass had the creators of the service not chosen to constrain users’ ability to compose messages in this way.
The result was a medium whose style is closer to oral than written communication, and closer to synchronous messaging than asynchronous discussion threads. Much of the criticism of Twitter—for example, the widely cited Pear Analytics (2009) study categorising 40% of what is posted there as “pointless babble”—highlights how much of a break with then-current design trends for social media this represented. Such clichéd accusations of irrelevance show how uncomfortable those accustomed to platforms that privilege long, complex texts were and may still be with this concept, yet this focus on short, quick messaging is also precisely what makes Twitter so useful in particular contexts. This approach has scale built into it: it represents an ingenious solution to the problem of having to divide a limited amount of attention span across a very large number of communicators.

Such limitations to our ability to use the full range of available communicative tools often turn out to be highly productive of innovative new solutions: much as early e-mail users responded to the lack of visual cues, introduced by the text-only format, by inventing a canon of now ubiquitous emoticons and other paratextual markers, so do user-generated Twitter features such as @messaging and retweeting point to the gradual development of new communicative conventions, as users negotiated this new space for communal expression and interaction. These conventions, these user-initiated innovations, were necessary to order and organise discourse in specific, intelligible, and predictable ways, and only they have made Twitter what it is today.

It is far from surprising, therefore, that attempts to tinker with this winning, if restrictive, formula have met with little success in the past. Twitter client TweetDeck’s ‘long tweet’ functionality—which enabled users to post longer messages whose first words would be tweeted alongside a deck.ly link to the rest of the message—was widely criticised as breaking up the fast and easy interactivity of Twitter conversations, and has quietly disappeared from view. Twitter, Inc.’s own attempt to streamline retweeting, by offering a one-click ‘retweet button’ that posted an existing tweet verbatim to one’s own feed, failed to account for the fact that many users wanted to engage, by adding their own comments, with the messages they sought to retweet; continued use of such ‘manual’ retweeting by a large section of the Twitter user base has meant that even most of Twitter’s own user interfaces now once again offer a choice between ‘button’ (verbatim) and ‘manual’ (editable) retweeting functionality.

This is not to claim that none of the interventions by Twitter, Inc. or third-party client providers stand a chance of being widely adopted by the Twitter user base, however. The sprawling ecosystem of URL shorteners—from market
leaders such as bit.ly to bespoke services which offer a personalised short URL that incorporates the user’s nickname or initials—demonstrates that tools and functionality which are widely seen as enhancing the Twitter experience are able to find a large audience, even in spite of the fact that Twitter, Inc.’s introduction of its own mandatory URL shortener, t.co, now makes the use of such additional shortening services unnecessary in principle. Similarly, there are many tools for sharing images, audio, and video materials which enjoy substantial popularity on Twitter—to such an extent that Twitter, Inc. has increasingly seen the need to offer its own, built-in functionality in order to retain user traffic on its own site, rather than lose it to third-party providers.

As this book goes to print, in fact, Twitter has just introduced its Vine service for sharing short videos. Vine introduces artificial constraints similar to Twitter’s original 140-character limit by capping the length of its videos at a maximum of six seconds, thereby also carving out a different market niche from mainstream video-sharing sites such as YouTube; it remains to be seen whether this limitation will turn out to be similarly productive of innovative uses as the 140-character limit has proved for Twitter’s text messages, or whether the considerably greater effort which must go into shooting, editing, and uploading videos means that sharing Vine videos remains a niche pursuit for a small section of the Twitter population only.

Yet other functionality developments, usually initiated by third-party providers, utilise the affordances of the Twitter platform for a range of increasingly more esoteric applications. From the early Twitter bots which reported on the state of the office coffee machine or the coming and going of household pets through cat flaps to attempts to use Twitter as a sensor network for earthquake detection, potential applications appear limited only by their developers’ imaginations. Recent initiatives have sought to institute micropayment systems where tweets directed at a designated account result in funds transfers; or have encouraged residents in northeastern Japan to use Twitter to report the readings of household Geiger counters in order to create a more comprehensive picture of radioactive pollution following the 2011 nuclear meltdown in Fukushima.

Beyond the success or failure of individual initiatives, this proliferation of projects demonstrates that Twitter—like other network infrastructures before it—has become a backbone for a much wider range of manual and automated communicative exchanges than its inventors may have envisaged initially. While it would be no more difficult—and possibly more effective—to use the underlying Internet infrastructure itself to report current coffee machine status or local radiation levels, to do so in a public tweet affords this information
wider visibility, and thereby also enables users other than original sender and intended recipient to access and systematically collect such information, if they choose to do so.

In addition to its role as a public, instant communications medium, therefore, Twitter has now also become a key source of open data on a wide range of personal and societal practices around the world, and the importance of this role must not be underestimated. This constitutes a somewhat problematic role, as not all Twitter users will be aware that their apparently ‘private’ exchanges with a handful of Twitter friends and followers are also visible to virtually anyone else online, unless they are conducted through direct messages or from ‘protected’ accounts; at the same time, where such ‘big data’ on large-scale user activity patterns on Twitter are being used while giving due consideration to ethical and privacy concerns, they enable entirely new approaches to studying society with the Internet.

It is especially in this way, ultimately, that the myriad of 140-character messages which are posted to the global Twitter network every day combine to offer a view of communicative trends in contemporary society which is unprecedented in its level of detail. Never before have researchers in the humanities and social sciences had access to such a rich tapestry of everyday, real-time communication—and in spite of the impressive steps already undertaken by the contributors to the present collection and by their many peers in related fields whose work we were unable to accommodate here, much more remains to be done to fully develop our suite of methodologies, tools, and conceptual frameworks for the study of Twitter and society—and beyond, of other platforms and other media futures.

Twitter, Inc.’s increasingly restrictive policies governing data access and data use pose a significant challenge to the future of work on Twitter, and potentially foreshadow a social data ecosystem ever more tightly controlled by corporate interests. However, as we have seen with the 140-character limit which is imposed on tweets, such constraints can sometimes lead to creative workarounds—hacks which in turn result in useful innovations that would not have emerged otherwise. From little things, big things do indeed grow. In this spirit is our hope that the current collection may serve as a stepping stone for fruitful future research.
REFERENCES


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