

**An Exploration of Twitter's Popularity and Usefulness: Effects on the Media Industry,  
Business World and Beyond**

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### **Abstract**

Social media has been an increasingly popular aspect of person-to-person communication. Twitter, a Web site that allows users to inform people about the happenings in their life using a minute amount of text (140 characters), has received much publicity for its usage. From a media and business point of view, Twitter has made a home in the professional sphere. Because of the implementation of Twitter within these spheres, as well as its role in personal relationships, Twitter's effect on these areas, as well as its usage, has been evaluated. A combination of research found that Twitter may be able to continue its stroke of popularity by engaging two different audiences—paying business and media professionals, and gratuitous recreational users.

## Introduction

According to an article titled “Twitter Tally,” which was accessed on *Emarketer.com* on May 31, 2009, “14 million” people use Twitter, and that number is expected to influx by another four million in one year (“Twitter Tally,” 2009, para. 9). Because of this popularity, research performed for this paper was done in an attempt to understand how Twitter came to be the fascination it currently is.

To entirely understand the reasons for focusing specifically on Twitter for this research project, it is important to broach an intriguing comment made by a blogger at the 2008 Online News Association Conference. In a 2008 article that appeared in the *American Journalism Review* by Laurie White, Leslie Ann Bradshaw described Twitter as “. . . a natural extension of short-form communication that humans have always used to get their points across, like psalms, Haiku, hieroglyphics, graffiti, slang and text messaging” (White, 2008, para. 23). This quote encompasses the heart of the research that follows. In a brief sentence, it may have explained the way Twitter has touched such a variety of areas. Bradshaw drew a comparison between these impactful methods that people throughout time have used to form bonds with one another. In turn, this comment possibly suggested that Twitter may be an aspect of society from a cultural perspective, which influences the ways people coexist. Not only may it reaffirm its usefulness, but perhaps it suggests that it will evolve with time into something stronger and more groundbreaking. Therefore, if Twitter does fit into the list of these communication modes, this may send a powerful message to skeptics, who may see it as a mere trend unworthy of serious attention.

Despite the fact that reputable organizations such as “M&Ms,” “The American Red Cross,” and “Zappos” (Comm, 2009, p.229-230) all use Twitter, others have seen the site for

what it is lacking. In an article by Dan Frommer that appeared on *Businessinsider.com* accessed on May 18, 2009, Google's Eric Schmidt, CEO, remarked, "Speaking as a computer scientist, I view all of these as sort of poor man's email systems" (Frommer, 2009, para. 2). While his comments were not entirely negative, Schmidt detailed the ways Twitter fell behind electronic mail in regards to what can be accomplished with email versus twittering (Frommer, 2009).

Because Twitter has had such a variety of reception among professionals, both in the media industry and elsewhere, the research that follows has attempted to understand how these opinions came to light, as well as where the device is going in the future. It investigates the Twitter background and success, and has looked to understand what has brought the communication vehicle such popularity. In addition to this, this research has evaluated Twitter's effect on media and other business areas, and delved into the question of how Twitter will transform a free service into tangible profits.

## **Literature Review**

### *A Background of Twitter Origins*

In Bradley L. Jones' 2008 book *Web 2.0 Heroes: Interviews with 20 Web 2.0 Influencers*, Jones had a conversation with Biz Stone concerning the origins of Twitter and his co-founders, Evan Williams and Jack Dorsey. That same book discussed that contrary to what Twitter's success may lead the public to believe, the media wonder was not created to fulfill a business strategy. According to Jones' 2008 interview, Biz Stone, Evan Williams and Jack Dorsey created the project because of their mutual interest in online communication.

According to Jones (2008), Dorsey, an avid fan of the blogosphere, aspired to create a forum that was more primitive in its communication technique than that of blogs. The interview found that at that time, internet users could chat online and set what was commonly known as

away messages. Jones (2008) explained that the possibilities that this kind of technology possessed piqued Dorsey's interest. Based on that same book, bridging the gap between the notion of these away messages and the very convenient text message was the ideal way to rejuvenate blogging methods. Half a month later, Dorsey and Stone had formulated a beginning model of Twitter (Jones, 2008).

### *Twitter Popularity*

According to an article titled "Research Casts Doubt Over Whether the Twitter Fad Will Last," which was accessed on May 4, 2009 on *Smartcompany.com*, the news industry itself has increased Twitter's popularity level. Because the well-known network "CNN" declared a race among certain pop culture icons to acquire the most "followers," Twitter popularity spiked (Stafford, 2009, para.4). The number of people or "unique visitors" the site received in the beginning of 2009 increased by close to four million in just one month's time, a statistic that does not take into account the amount of attention the site received through mobile device use (Gonda, 2009, para. 6).

### *Social Repercussions*

*Twitter's effect on personal communication and relationships.* Leitch (2009) reported that the force behind Twitter is not in the hands of each and every Twitter user, or in the micro level of activity. It has been through the bird's eye view of this new media, or its effect on a macro level, that has made it front page news (Leitch, 2009). According to Jones (2008), Biz Stone, co-creator of Twitter, reflected on the use of social media in society by saying, "It's something I've been calling 'social alchemy' because you put out these mundane updates that you're shopping for a sandwich in Berkeley, and that seems of little value until it happens to fall into the SMS of someone else's phone. . ." (Jones, 2008, p.148). Stone expanded on this by

saying, “A friend of yours happens to be in Berkeley and says, ‘Oh, I’m in Berkeley too! Let’s get a sandwich together.’ Suddenly you’re having a more meaningful conversation or more meaningful events occur because of a seemingly valueless update. It’s kind of like the idea of turning lead into gold” (Jones, 2008, p.148).

*Twitter’s power to create a trustworthy venue.* Jones (2008) found that along with the ways Twitter has maintained and improved relationships that may not last or exist without it, Twitter users are able to control who views their status with privacy tools that are made available to them when they first join. That same book explained that despite the ease of keeping strangers from viewing information, a mere ten percent of users opt to make their profile unavailable to people they do not know. As a result, Twitter is a place where communication exchanges have seemed to be embraced rather than unwelcomed, adding to the list of reasons that make Twitter successful (Jones, 2008).

### *Media Influence*

*Helpful twitter tools for journalists.* While Twitter has remodeled the way people stay in touch, it is also throwing the way media professionals practice journalism into question (Schuneman Symposium on Photojournalism and New Media, 2009). Whether creating content, formulating a place to obtain credible information, or synthesizing, and caring for, personal and professional relationships, Twitter has seeped into every phase of delivering information (White, 2008). According to a 2008 article that appeared in the *American Journalism Review* by Laurie White titled “All The News That’s Fit to Tweet,” Journalists who gathered for the Online News Association conference in September 2008 made Twitter a prominent topic for discussion. White found that professionals at the meeting pointed out how the new media phenomenon has become commonplace for reporters.

In addition to Twitter's more regular role in journalism, the article previously stated reported that add-on features have made Twitter even more useful. The article explained that a reporter can obtain information he or she wants about specific topics. "Tweetdeck and Twitterberry" enable arranging and gathering based on points of interest (White, 2008, para.19). Additionally, from light to serious topics, nearly everything can be learned about by contacting Twitter users (Comm, 2009). Discussing Twitter's role in the conference, White (2008) explained: "The ONA on Twitter underscored how important the 140-character-limit messaging service has become to some journalists, who use it not only to track trends but also to break stories" (para.4).

With past forms of news, such as newspapers, unraveling, those in the industry must embrace the changes that technology has thrust into the business (Schuneman Symposium on Photojournalism and New Media, 2009). White (2008) found that the blogosphere has had a firm grip on Twitter techniques. Not only do they know how to use it, but it has become a magnifying glass they use to inspect what other media professionals are and are not reporting (White, 2008).

*Ways Twitter has encroached on the media industry.* And while Twitter has helped some journalists, the new site seems to have created a sort of nervous energy among media professionals and journalism professors (Schuneman Symposium on Photojournalism and New Media, 2009). People are turning to Twitter in crisis situations, such as when a plane crash on the Hudson River in winter 2009 was initially made public through Twitter rather than traditional reporting methods (Miller, 2009). In the 2009 book, *Twitter Power: How to Dominate Your Market One Tweet at a Time*, marketing professional Joel Comm began his work by explaining the magnitude of Twitter's effect on the worldwide community. Comm pointed to the way the Mumbai bombings of November 2008 were initially reported by those with Twitter accounts

rather than journalism degrees. This same piece of literature explained that because Twitter gives people in-the-heat-of-the-moment sort of coverage, or story coverage that can happen in the wake of important occurrences, it does what a news crew cannot. According to Comm (2009), Twitter delivers a news service that obtains its content from real people living the story. Secondhand accounts by reporting professionals may not be able to compare (Comm, 2009).

### *Twitter Success*

*The accessibility made possible through mobile communication.* According to the book previously mentioned, to truly understand how Twitter is threatening to journalists, the idea of text messaging must be addressed. When Twitter was being formulated, merging the popularity of texting and online communication messages, such as “updates,” was high on its list of goals (Comm, 2009, p. 23). Comm explained that with the feature of being able to send tweets through something that people have on them at all times—a cellular phone—people can inform a large group with a single text. Comm further wrote that the reason that it is so effective in sharing information is that it is not just a text to someone in the mobile device’s phonebook. That text is sent to the Twitter account, which via that account, alerts “followers” through a tweet (Comm, 2009, p. 23-24).

*Site simplicity.* Leitch (2009) found that along with texting, the difference between creating a blog and maintaining a blog can explain the success and popularity of Twitter. Leitch explained that the demand for a substantial amount of content is not the same with microblogging as it is with blogging. On Twitter, people who wish to share their messages do it in a short-and-sweet style, giving only the essentials (Leitch, 2009).

### *Business Techniques*

Social media sites are commonplace. And yet, Twitter is standing out among social media

networks. From a marketing perspective, understanding and harnessing the possibilities of Twitter is extremely important for all professionals aiming to thrive (Comm, 2009). From corporate giants to tiny mom and pop businesses, Twitter has made entrepreneurs reevaluate their advertising and marketing methods (Miller, 2009). According to Miller (2009), a small spa in California, “True Massage and Wellness,” has notified patrons about money-saving opportunities that arise when the work calendar is particularly empty (para. 19). On a greater scale, the Dell cooperation keeps track of customer likes and dislikes with Twitter (Miller, 2009). After several negative comments about their “Mini 9 Laptops,” Dell reworked the product with Twitter remarks in mind (Miller, 2009, para. 21). The near latte empire, “Starbucks,” has done the same, making Twitter a sort of online comment forum (Miller, 2009, para. 22).

Ohio University’s student-run newspaper, *The Post*, spotlighted two local businesses in Athens, Ohio, who were taking advantage of Twitter in a 2009 article. Reporter Jordan Valinsky found that “Goodfellas Pizza” and “Athens Relaxation Station” use Twitter accounts to advertise. In the 2009 article, the owner of Goodfellas Pizza, Rachel Richie, explained, “Say I have ten extra pepperoni rolls and I need to put something out right now, rather than check Facebook a few times, I wanted something in real-time, and I send a short, quick hit to everyone at once” (Valinsky, 2009, para. 7).

Miller (2009) found that healthcare has benefited from this communication trend as well. The article reported that doctors have seen this as an opportunity to help one another with treating patients. Recently, medical personnel of Detroit’s Henry Ford Hospital engaged in Twitter to document what was going on during a brain surgery. (Miller, 2009) The article previously stated explained that there are possibilities that Twitter could be similar to a 9-1-1 system, letting doctors know when their patients are having health problems. This could be used

to document trends and changes, allowing them to explore certain health conditions in the field (Miller, 2009).

According to an *Associated Press* article, which was accessed through the *Las Vegas Sun* Web site on May 11, 2009, several United States defense sectors have activated “Twitter and Facebook” accounts to contact possible future service members (“Pentagon looks to,” 2009, para. 1). In the athletic arena, Twitter has taken a number one spot with players of various competitive games (LePeilbet, 2009). LePeilbet (2009) found that a sport that is intensely invested in the Twitter game is “Women’s Professional Soccer,” a league where nearly two dozen of team members engage in Twitter (para. 3).

#### *Twitter’s Sustainability*

In an April 2009 article that appeared on *Smartcompany.com*, Patrick Stafford reported on the longevity of Twitter. After evaluating information from “Neilson Online,” Stafford (2009) wrote that nearly two thirds of those who hop on the social networking bandwagon via Twitter do not maintain an active account (para. 1). According to David Martin, Neilson Online vice president’s remarks in the 2009 Stafford article, two predecessors of Twitter, “Facebook and MySpace,” experienced an approximate 80 percent “retention rate” when these sites were first launched ( Stafford, 2009, para. 6). Currently, Twitter’s number was found to be half of that figure (Stafford, 2009).

Con Frantzeskos, a professional who specializes in understanding media such as Twitter, explained in that same 2009 Stafford article that the way Twitter’s site is structured must be revamped. The article found that while it draws people in, the level of stickiness needed to maintain Twitterers may not be sufficient to upkeep success. Frantzeskos went on to argue that Twitter does not tailor to people’s needs and wants like other internet services (Stafford, 2009).

Frantzeskos explained, “The first thing Twitter would have to do is bring in prioritization of people you would want to follow. I’d suggest there’s a means to prioritize topics or people, and that is necessary for Twitter to help retention rates” (Stafford, 2009, para. 13).

And yet, another professional in that same 2009 Stafford article, Kevin Yank of *Sitepoint.com*, combated Frantzeskos argument. Yank cited ways that Twitter offers methods that enable a person to alter their account abilities. According to Stafford’s article, Yank explained, “If you use a really complicated client like TweetDeck you can split up the people you follow into groups and display things the way you want, but that’s additional functionality and is not forced upon every user” (Stafford, 2009, para. 19).

#### *Dotcom Bust Comparison*

In an article that appeared on the *New York Magazine* Web site, accessed on April 27, 2009, magazine journalist Will Leitch made an interesting comparison between the Twitter rage and the “dot-com bust” (Leitch, 2009, p. 1). To understand the comparison, a brief description of what this occurrence was exactly must be provided. In an article titled “How They Beat The 2000-01 Dotcom Bust,” accessed from *AlooTechie.com* on May 3, 2009, Satrajit Sen interviewed several communication professionals who went through the infamous internet debacle in the first years of the new millennium. Sen (2009) spoke with Mahendra Swarup, a veteran of this stage of the internet business. In the interview, Swarup explained that this “dot-com crisis” was a product of the business community’s poor assessment of what the World Wide Web was capable of in terms of profit (para. 5). Swarup elaborated by saying that the money coming in was much less than the amount created from online “advertisements,” which was the foundation of funding in many cases (Sen, 2009, para. 5). Consequently, many found themselves in the undesirable position of depending on money from only this tactic, which was rendered a moot attempt due to

the insignificant amount of people that the ads reached (Sen, 2009).

Leitch, who worked at one of these companies just before 2000, wrote about one of the Twitter originators, Biz Stone, in the *New York Magazine* article previously mentioned. Leitch wrote, “He sounds like everyone I worked with back in the dot-com days. He has the hot product. He might be right. But back then, we all thought we were right, too” (p. 2).

### *Twitter and the Profitability Question*

*Current status regarding making money from service.* With comments from Leitch’s article in mind, it seems fair to assume that money must find its way into the business of Twittering. According to the 2009 Schuneman Symposium, professionals in every realm of journalism seem to be wondering what form the business practices of the communication field will take on. The symposium explained that the traditional mould of using advertising dollars to fund news operations may soon be a strategy of the past. And Twitter, too, has seemed unsure of what new financial ideas will foster a substantial and lasting profit for this new company (Leitch, 2009).

Stone explained in his interview with Bradley Jones, author of the 2008 book *Web 2.0 Heroes: Interviews with 20 Web 2.0 Influencers*, that money is not their primary concern at the moment. The interview explained that instead, they choose to maintain their attention on the quality of Twitter. The initial stages of inventing and creating something that has staying power in an age where technology becomes outdated within minutes is more critical than formulating a method to generate profit (Jones, 2008). Jones’ (2008) interview with Stone found that proper function and necessity are keys. And if those two are present, Stone explained that it is appropriate to execute tactics to produce money (Jones, 2008).

*Possible plans for profit in the future.* The Jones' book explained that eventually, Twitter will make its profit using several different strategies. Having different plans to attack the profit problem is a reflection of the many ways Twitter itself can be utilized (Jones, 2008). According to a 2009 article written by Michael Learmonth that appeared in *Advertising Age*, many theories have circulated about how this communication trend will succeed. The use of "verified accounts" has been one option (para. 10). A method causing twitterers to give money to the site, verified accounts could make people appear more legitimate and credible (Learmonth, 2009). This article previously mentioned suggested that those he or she is sending messages to, whether it is for business or personal purposes, would have the security of knowing that this twitterer is actually who he or she claims to be. In addition to verified accounts, Learmonth (2009) reported that Twitter could have sites that are company specific. Just as a company has an intranet site for their workers, they could have a Twitter that would only be accessible to them as well (Learmonth, 2009).

According to that same article, another approach is to tailor Twitter to make it function as a search mechanism rather than simply an instrument to update people with messages. Steps have already been taken in this direction after Twitter purchased "Summize" (Learmonth, 2009, para. 4). This has given Twitter "search" capabilities, which have taken effect on aspects of the site (Learmonth, 2009, para. 4).

Despite these ideas, Leitch (2009) reported that founders have not yet fit the income portion of the puzzle into place. While the validated account and company-specific Twitter theories are on the table, offering people "friend feeds" for a price is another route that has been explored (Leitch, 2009, p. 2).

Something that is not as likely a possibility is implementing the use of the traditional

advertising model (Leitch, 2009.) Learmonth (2009) explained, “In a sense, Twitter faces the Facebook problem in that it has created an ecosystem of Twitter-based business from which it does not profit, and marketers don’t need to pay to use the service” (para.9). The Twitter trio rejected Facebook’s offer of 500 million dollars (Leitch, 2009). Additionally, according to the *New York Times* Web site accessed on May 29, 2009, the news has reported that Apple is another prospective buyer, with an expensive price range of “700 million dollars” (Sorkin, 2009, para. 1). Still, that same article explained that Biz Stone expressed that buyers will not be able to shop for Twitter at this point in time. Rob Gonda, in a blog post accessed May 17, 2009, explained that paid membership for Twitter use by those who simply use it recreationally will not be well-received. Gonda (2009) found that this tactic may be suited for business users though.

### **Conclusion**

As a result of the research discussed in this paper, it is possible that Twitter may maintain popularity while transforming into a profit-producing service. According to Comm (2009), Twitter made itself different than other services used to keep people connected because it is basic. As seen on the Web site, messages are short, taking up only 140 characters in a small, white text box. A video appearing on the Twitter login page accessed on May 31, 2009, titled “Twitter in Plain English” by Common Craft states that “Real life happens between blog posts and email.” This phrase may shortly encapsulate one of the reasons for its fame. It may be that Twitter fans see tweets as a quality rather than quantity approach to communication, which may be attached to blogging. With the video previously mentioned in mind, Twitter could allow people to focus on the details of their life. And in a time of recession, perhaps sharing small, less serious information bites may take people’s minds off the greater, more stressful picture.

Another testament to Twitter’s ability to last is its filtration into business organizations.

According to Comm (2009), Miller (2009) and Valinsky (2009), people in the computer industry to people working in local pizza shops have used the site, which takes notice of their customers' personal desires. It appears through these articles that this usage has employed a beneficial relationship between entrepreneur and client. Because of this, people's obsession with Twitter may be credited to its ability to improve the services provided by businesses. This higher quality service may deliver a better product, in turn, making the purchase more worthwhile and justified in a hard economic era.

The final piece of evidence that suggests Twitter is not a fleeting form of communication that is merely in style at the moment is its involvement with the media. According to White (2008) and Comm (2009), Twitter has been used to explain what is going on in the world by people who are not professional journalists. Because of Comm's remarks concerning the great variety of people using Twitter, journalists may be able to utilize the site to write unique stories by interviewing users they follow. As White (2008) previously indicated, those in the blogging industry have made Twitter a part of their work routine, placing them ahead of certain journalists who have not yet done so.

Because of Twitter's effects on both personal and professional circles, in conjunction with its ease of use, Twitter could turn the idea of profit into a reality. As Gonda (2009) suggested, Twitter may be able to keep a large user base by separating leisure twitterers from business twitterers, only making users using it professionally pay a fee. And while Learmonth (2009) mentioned the concept of verified accounts, Gonda's suggestions may be the most logical, as those using it recreationally will doubtfully choose to retain membership if payment is required.

Therefore, while the content on Twitter is small, the ramifications of it have been great.

And it is that idea of what can spring from these 140-characters that make Twitter a micro-blogging instrument that could be a lasting form of lucrative communication.

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