

Analyzing a New Genre: Twitter & Tweets

Introduction

Twitter is an emerging medium of communication that has had great influence on culture since its inception in 2006. The internet has always allowed celebrities to communicate like “regular people” and regular people to become celebrities, but this process seems to accelerate with the ease of 140-character micro-blogging.

I first encountered Twitter when my friends and colleagues used the website for social networking. As I continued to use Twitter, however, I discovered that there was much more to this application than merely updating friends on what I had for lunch. What I originally thought was only a mass text message turned out to be a global exchange of opinions, ideas, and resources: a common place for the world to communicate freely with anyone who was willing.

I started using Twitter on April 25, 2009, and just today I tweeted my 766th tweet. I’m far from being the most experienced Twitter user, but given that 40% of Twitter users quit within the first two weeks, I am past a significant threshold.

A Description of Twitter

Twitter is not unlike tandem social networking and blogging website such as Facebook or MySpace. In its broadest description, users post information and interact with others’ information. More specifically, Twitter can be summarized by five common actions: tweeting, following, replying, re-tweeting, and accumulating followers.

Tweeting

Tweeting is the correct term to describe posting content to Twitter (a post is referred to as a “tweet”). A user can tweet via the web, via text message, or via a Twitter client¹. Tweets can range in subject (we will look at subject matter more closely later), but the traditional subject for Tweets is an answer to the question, “What are you doing?” Tweets are limited to 140 characters or spaces.

Following

If a user (for sake of simplicity, let’s call her Joan) finds Shaquille O’Neal’s² tweets interesting, she might choose to “follow” him. When Joan follows Mr. O’Neil, his tweets will show up on the timeline on her homepage, along with the tweets of the other users Joan follows. Joan can follow as many or as few people as she desires. When Joan follows Mr. O’Neil, twitter will notify Mr. O’Neil that Joan is following him, but he does not have to formally acknowledge or confirm her request to follow him. Likewise, Mr. O’Neil is not required to follow Joan in return.

On every user’s homepage, there are two numbers: the number of people they are following, and the number of people following them. In other words, on Joan’s homepage, it shows the number of people Joan is following, and the number of people Joan is following. Since Twitter does not require Mr. O’Neil to follow Joan in return, these two numbers maybe very different. The people Joan follows are often referred to as Joan’s *friends*. The people that follow Joan are called Joan’s *followers*.

Replying

¹ i.e. software designed to allow users to post content to Twitter without visiting the website. This is especially useful for users that access Twitter with their smart phones.

² Username: “THE_REAL_SHAQ”

Suppose that Mr. O'Neil tweets something impolite about Ashton Kutcher's mother,³ and Joan takes offense. Joan can reply to Mr. O'Neil's comments by typing his username with a "@" in front like this: "@THE_REAL_SHAQ". A list of his replies will be accessible to Mr. O'Neil from his homepage, and he will have the option to reply back to Joan. If Mr. O'Neil does choose to reply to Joan, his reply would not show up on the homepages of all 2.4 million of his followers. Instead, the reply would only be visible on the homepages of both Mr. O'Neil and Joan, and any user that followed both of them.

It is important to clarify that even though Mr. O'Neil's reply to Joan would not show up on all of his user's homepages, all of Mr. O'Neil's tweets *including replies* are listed on his homepage. This means that every tweet is visible to everyone, even if it does not show up on a user's homepage.

As it is hard to imagine a professional basketball legend taking time to answer Joan, a homemaker from Minnesota, it is important to imagine that these interactions often occur between users who already know each other. If, for example, Joan's sister, Marge, also has a Twitter account, it is easy to imagine how these interacting tweets could more frequently. If Joan tweets about cooking pot roast for dinner, Marge might reply that she would like the recipe and so on.

Re-Tweeting

Another way that users like Joan can interact with other users' tweets is re-tweeting. There are two common methods of re-tweeting. To re-tweet Mr. O'Neil's tweet, Joan can either type: "RT @THE_REAL_SHAQ" before a copy of his tweet, or

³ Something Mr. O'Neil seems to do often. Mr. Kutcher (username: aplusk) is the most followed user on Twitter with 3.8 million followers, and Mr. O'Neil is in 9th place with 2.4 million followers. Twitterholic.com. "The Twitterholic.com Top 100 Twitterholics Based On Followers." Available from <http://www.twitterholic.com>. Internet; accessed 14 Oct 2009.

including “via @THE_REAL_SHAQ” at the end of her copy of his tweet. Re-tweeting is a way of saying, “I like your tweet” and advertising users that you enjoy following.

Accumulating Followers

The unofficial goal of a Twitter user is to accumulate more followers. There is no easy way of making this happen, but the most common advice is to 1.) follow as many people as possible and 2.) tweet often. As Joan follows more and more users, her name appears on more and more “followers” lists. If other users visit her homepage and see that she tweets interesting things often, they are likely to follow her as well.

The “Tweet” as a Genre

After considering the prevalence of Twitter in our culture, it is obvious that the Tweet is a new genre that is worth analyzing. This analysis is broken into four parts: Form, Subject Matter, Audience, and Perspective.

Form

In its purest definition, a tweet is a 140-character answer to the question “What are you doing?”, but the form of the tweet is most readily identified by its “parent genres” the blog post and the text message. Like a blog post, Twitter users update their tweets often⁴ so readers expect tweets to be somewhat insignificant, but as witty and insightful as possible in a “slice of life” fashion. Like a text message, tweets are limited by a character capacity⁵. This challenges Twitter users to communicate their content, wit, and insight as concisely and compactly as possible. Some Twitter users use text message-style

⁴ For Twitter, this means several times a day. A blogger, in contrast, updates less frequently. However, the same principle of significance coupled with insight still applies.

⁵ The 140 character capacity was set by mobile phone providers when text messaging became popular.

acronyms and abbreviations, but the most successful users stick to good English and grammar. In this sense, writing a great tweet can be a fun and challenging task.

Subject Matter

The creators of Twitter originally designed the website with social networking as a main intent. Above the field for users to fill in their tweet is the ever-present question that tweets are supposed to answer: “What are you doing?” Yet Twitter users are tweeting about a lot more things than their daily activities. A group of researchers from Pear Analytics studied 2,000 over the period of two weeks and sorted them into six groups:⁶

1. News
2. Spam
3. Self-Promotion
4. Pointless Babble
5. Conversational
6. Pass-Along Value

According to the study, conversational tweets only take up 37.55% of average tweets. The tweets categorized “Pointless Babble” was the most popular category at 40.55% and “Pass-Along Value” was third most popular category with 8.7%.

An informal survey of my own homepage’s timeline shows that these trends in subject matter are generally true in my experience as well. However, I would like to highlight a few sub-categories.

First, I have noticed that much of the “Conversational” content present in my timeline could be described more accurately as “Something Interesting I Just Saw or Did.” This is particularly interesting because Twitter is one of the view genres for which this subject

⁶ Pear Analytics, “Twitter Study Reveals Interesting Results About Usage—40% is ‘Pointless Babble’” available from <http://www.pearanalytics.com/blog/2009/twitter-study-reveals-interesting-results-40-percent-pointless-babble>; Internet; accessed 06 Oct 2009.

matter is appropriate. Suppose Joan was at the grocery store and ran into Brett Favre in the produce section. Which genres could she use to communicate and describe this experience? She could write about it in her personal journal, but then no one would be able to read it. She could blog about the experience, but she would have to wait until she got home to her computer. She could text message her friend, but which one first? Twitter is unique in that Joan can communicate with many of her friends, moments after the experience. This immediacy is unique to the genre of tweets.

This sense of immediacy also makes Twitter a useful tool for newspapers and other news outlets to communicate headlines and announcements. As I surveyed my timeline in comparison with the Pear Analytics study, I found that many of the tweets were announcements or headlines from local and national news sources that I follow. Suppose on the way home from the grocery store, Joan gets stuck in a traffic jam on the highway. If Joan is following her local news station on twitter, she can see that they have tweeted a bulletin about an accident two miles ahead, and a link to instructions on how to avoid the traffic jam.

Other trends I see on my timeline are contests and announcements about sales and discounts from some of my favorite retailers. Twitter has become a powerful marketing tool (categorized in the list above as “self-promotion”), and businesses are taking notice. Businesses use Twitter to let customers know about specials, discounts, and sales—at no cost to them. Moreover, businesses can actually get consumers to help them market by encouraging re-tweeting with contests.

Twitter has also proved to be a powerful political tool. I follow a number of political and religious leaders that I respect. On a daily basis, I receive bite size philosophy and

quotes straight from these users' desks. Currently, President Barack Obama has 2,331,306 followers that he (or his assistant) updates daily on happenings in the White House, important articles, and ways citizens (like Joan) can make a difference in their world. Twitter provides a unique medium for political leaders to present their ideology to a voluntary audience in bite size pieces on a daily basis.

Audience

Another unique aspect of Twitter is that is both anonymous and public. While Facebook communicates very specific information about users but limits visibility to a select few (i.e. personal and private), Twitter aims to communicate very anonymous information about users and has unlimited visibility. Joan's Facebook account might have her last name, marital status, and city of origin, and is only visible to people she chooses. Joan's Twitter account, on the other hand, only includes her first name and a 160-character description of her interests, and is viewable by virtually anyone, and is searchable by an internet search engine.

The public nature of Twitter ought not be interpreted as an invasion of privacy, because it is assumed that there is safety in the vastness of Twitter and the level of ambiguity the smart Twitter user (like Joan) chooses to maintain in her tweets.

The anonymity of the author and audience has an important impact on the tweet genre's constructs. The tweet ought to be meaningful on its own—without the reader having to know the writer's past experiences or current environment. This becomes particularly interesting within the context of the tweet's form. Can Joan successfully and wittily communicate meeting Brett Favre in the produce aisle in less than 140 characters without revealing the name of the grocery store, or her last name? Sure. But can she

successfully complain about her boss? Not without risking disciplinary action. Twitter users must be constantly keeping their vast and unknown audience in mind when tweeting.

This becomes particularly interesting when considering celebrities who tweet. Celebrity Twitter Icons, such as Shaquille O'Neil and Ashton Kutcher must be especially judicious when tweeting, because their audience knows much more about them than they know about Joan. If Mr. Kutcher chooses to tweet which night club he will be visiting on a particular evening, he has broadcasted his plans to, literally, the world, and has opened himself up to a number of compromising situations.

Perspective

One of my pet peeves is when Twitter users link their tweets to their Facebook status, so that every time they tweet, their Facebook status gets simultaneously updated. This is problematic for several reasons⁷, but one of the most egregious is the fact that tweets are meant to be written in first person, while Facebook statuses are meant to be in third person. We know this is the case because Twitter is answering the question "What are you doing?" and Facebook starts the sentence for you: "Joan is...."

Since both blogs and text messages are written in first person, it fits well that Twitter would also be written in first person. However, this genre construct can be challenged. It is common to see second person and occasionally, third person, being used as well.

Conclusion

⁷ Another reason this is a problem is that it is socially understood that Facebook statuses are meant to be updated once or twice daily, where as tweets are expected more often. It is also complicated when tweets transferred to Facebook include @username type replies that have no meaning within Facebook.

Twitter is a unique genre in that it combines conciseness, immediacy, and anonymity to communicate on a variety of subjects. What remains to be seen is whether this genre has staying power in the fast paced world of communication and internet social networking. While Twitter has grown rapidly, it fails to maintain 40% of it's users past the first two weeks. Part of the reason so many people quit early on in the process is that Twitter takes commitment and effort to truly experience the benefits of the medium. Many users are understandably not that patient. Yet, as Twitter continues to grow, it's widespread appeal may prove to outweigh it's drawbacks. At this point it is difficult to tell whether Twitter is a fad or the beginning of a brand new genre. Only time will tell us if Twitter has the staying power.

Bibliography

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