Twitter – An artifact analysis

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# Abstract

The internet based social media tool known as Twitter is used to stay in touch with friends and all sorts of events and happenings across the globe. With a reported 320 million active users it ranks in as one of the largest social media platforms in the world today. Easy cross platform sharing from many other applications, on smart devices and desktop computers alike, allow users to share information with their followers with a touch of a button. Though, the 140 character limit for individual “Tweets”, the name used for each post, forces users to keep the content brief and to the point.

The company Odeo first envisioned in 2006 that Twitter would be used similarly to an SMS service. However it rapidly evolved into a system that was able to generate in excess of 400,000,000 dollars in advertising revenue in one year.

Journalism has benefited to no end from the Twitter platform, being able to quickly reach so many people at the same time. Though, under the constraint from the character limit journalists cannot always get their point across in totality. This was a cause for a change in strategy and lead to users manipulating their audiences into clicking links embedded within tweets that would direct them to the full article. This new phenomena was quickly coined ‘Click Bait’.

With the large amounts of regular users actively Tweeting their interests and feelings, clicking on certain links and following specific people, studies on human behaviour were able to be undertaken using data observed on the Twitter platform.

# Material

Twitter is an online service that is used for microblogging meaning that users can send 140 characters long text messages, also called tweets with links or photos and follow the tweets of other users. Only registered users can post to Twitter but unless user has defined her feed private the tweets can be read by everybody. Anyone can register to the service and there are users from all around the world.

Physically Twitter is distributed around the world. The data that Twitter consists of is stored in the database servers on semiconductor hard drives in silicon cells with different positions of floating gates. Part of the data is moving within internet protocol packets via wireless services and cables like the transatlantic fiber optic communications cable. The data is replicated to several servers to avoid interruptions. Twitter has a structure and functions that define its features and outlook to users. The interface looks similar each time it is loaded, but some content is dynamic and changes each time.

Reliable user statistics of Twitter are difficult to find. Twitter company that owning the service seem to be very protective of this information. Third party statistics that were found had significant dispersion and were considered unreliable. On their company page Twitter announces only that there are 320 million monthly active users and one billion unique visits to sites with embedded tweets. (September 30, 2015)

# Design

From the user’s perspective Twitter consists of different kinds of views that user interacts with touch screens, mouse, keyboard and/or monitor. The main view, when using a browser is “Home” where user can read the most recent posts of the users she follows. On “Notification” page user sees activities like retweeted posts, new followers, favourited tweets etc. These notifications can be ordered to email. User can personalise only the profile page with changing the banner, background and colour theme. From settings user controls some functionalities and interactions of Twitter like the information shared in public, security, billing information, email notifications, etc. The usage of Twitter can be enhanced by using Apps and users feed can be shared on websites with Widgets.

Users can send tweets from desktop or mobile devices, from a browser or platform specific applications. In addition to the above­mentioned the tweets can also be read from different kinds of screens (TV), third party applications (like Tweetdeck), feeds on websites or experimental interfaces. Tweets can be automated to be published simultaneously to and from some other social services like Facebook. There are also automated tweets like a scale that tweets the weight when used. Tweetbots used to create more traffic and followers have caused problems.

# Context

Twitter can appear in many environments. It has a virtual existence within different types of computers and mobile devices. Twitter supports over 35 different languages which makes it possible to be used in many countries. When using mobile devices the environment of Twitter can be anything or anywhere where there is a connection to internet.

# Significance

People use Twitter for multiple purposes. The initial usage was microblogging, telling the world where you are, what you do and was the coffee good. Twitter is useful for tailoring news feeds, following politicians or what are the latest happenings on one’s professional field. Twitter is the most used social platform during events and tv­shows enabling real time commenting and conversation. The records in tweets are made during big events like Olympics.

Significant user group is commercial users that use Twitter for marketing. For them Twitter provides tools to make campaigns and analyse and follow the results. In 2014 the advertisement revenue of Twitter was 479,078,000 dollars. There lies the significance of Twitter to its owners and stockholders.

All in all the significance of the service for it’s users is the other users as content providers audience and interaction. The users are significant to marketers as advertisement target groups.

# History

Initial idea of Twitter was developed by board members of the company Odeo. The idea of an individual using SMS services to communicate with a group of people was introduced by Jack Dorsey. The original name was twttr but was soon changed to Twitter. The first public release was on July 15, 2006 and in 2007 there was 400000 tweets posted per quarter. Since it’s publication the basic functionalities have been enhanced with additional features like sidebar of trending topics in 2009, photo sharing service in 2011, verified accounts on 2009 and many more.

# Interpretation

There are studies on Twitter usage for example analyzing the words used in tweets. Studies have been made on happiness, engagement on the classes while tweeting, the influence of average users and celebrities, interlinkage between within professional fields etc.

# Affordances

Twitter allows a direct way of informing and being informed. To post a tweet consisting of a maximum of 140 characters requires less than a minute in time, and

this tweet has the capability of reaching an endless crowd. In addition, the user can stay updated with happenings and events although he or she is not able to be present at the actual location of the event. This is enabled by the categorization of hashtags that is intuitive and easy to use, and becomes highly helpful when the user wants to be informed about e.g. a bigger accident that has taken place on a location of his or her interest.

# Constraints

This direct way of information flow is not only an affordance, it highly constraints the content of the tweets. Given only 140 characters, the writer has to grab the readers’ attention straight away, which controls the language in the messages. As long as the content is of a personal matter this effect might not have too much of an impact, but considering journalism the length of the tweets gets crucial effects.

When the online journalism has grown and each journalist has to compete for the attention of the readers with a countless number of other content makers, the introduction of the message has to be outstanding. This phenomenon has given birth to a new concept – the click bait. In the context of journalism this means headlines that are sensationalised and/or misleading, just to reach through the noise of online news.

In the Twitter context, where the messages are short and the amount of them is countless, this is an effect that is highly present. The user has to be aware of and critical to this in order to not be too affected by this constraining media form.

# Twitter – enabling or constraining?

The affordances of Twitter lies in its directness and that the content is formed by its audience. But at the same time these affordances form constraints, those of the short message form and the fact that anyone can write and share anything. If the user is unaware of the effect of these constraints and doesn’t have a critical approach to the messages, these constraints are no longer just constraints but misleading properties that in the long can affect and distort the users conception of the world. In other words, to the critical user Twitter is an enabling artifact, but to the unaware user this a constraining, message distorting social media tool.

# Translation

Since Twitter is an artifact that enables simple categorizing by hashtags, and this is the property that we would like to take advantage of in our translation of this social media tool.

The form of the new artifact would be a Twitter account administered by a curator or a director of communications at an art museum, or a person in charge of a certain art exhibition. The curator tweets about complex and detailed paintings included in the

collection of the museum, in the way that he or she posts captions of a painting to which certain hashtags are to be added, considering what is shown in the caption.

*Example:* The director of communications at The Royal Museums of Fine Art of Belgium posts a tweet including a caption of The Fall of the Rebel Angels by Pieter Bruegel. The caption shows angels and geese, and the director adds hashtags such as #RMoB\_angels and #RMoB\_geese (RMoB is added as a specific shortening for the museum, enabling other museums to use the same kind of categorization in their own communication).

The emotional investment of this new artifact emerges when a visitor examines a certain painting in a certain museum. He or she can search for tweets posted by the director of the museum and find the picture captions from the painting in question.

Now the visitor is able to observe details that he or she otherwise would most likely not pay attention to. In addition the visitor gets a tool to analyse the content in the painting. He or she observes the amount of tweets about certain objects and get a direct understanding of what the painting consists of.

*Example:* A visitor in The Royal Museums of Fine Art of Belgium examines The Fall of the Rebel Angels and searches for tweets about the painting on the Twitter wall of the museum. He or she finds a tweet to which the hashtag #RMoB\_geese is added, clicks on it and finds two tweets with captions that includes geese. Hereafter the visitor is able to find the geese in the original painting.

The new artifact is a highly interactive one, since the visitor is able to comment on every tweet and ask questions to the curator of the museum about the paintings. In addition, he or she is able to post own tweets with the same hashtags, adding content to the discussion and examination of complex paintings.

# References

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