
Tune in, Tweet on, Twit out: Information Snacking on Twitter

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Abstract

Microblogging via services such as Twitter is changing the way we share and access information. We report findings from three studies that explored everyday information seeking and sharing activities: local news consumption, shopping, and recommendation making by concierges in the hotel industry. Although our focus was not Twitter per se, the service is increasingly seen as having value for solving specific situational information needs. Through examples we illustrate how Twitter has evolved from a service for sharing personal status messages to being used as a source for pursuing one-off, disposable information requests.

Keywords

Microblogging, social computing, computer-mediated communication, news, shopping, recommendations, information seeking, information sharing

Introduction

As Java et al. describe in their 2007 study, microblogging is a form of content production in which “users can describe their current status in short posts distributed by instant messages, mobile phones, email or the Web” [7]. Microblogging services include Twitter and Tumblr, and social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn offer similar status update-type features. Since its launch in mid-2006 Twitter has evolved from such a simple Internet and text message-

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based communication system to a powerful platform for distributing and consuming all types of information.

Nearly 20% of Internet users in the United States share and read information on Twitter [4], and soon the service will surpass 100 million users worldwide [2]. Several research studies have explored the types of information users share on Twitter and why [7][8], how users annotate information to converse with one another through text-based symbols and retweeting messages to others [5][1], and word-of-mouth information sharing between companies and consumers and amongst consumers [6].

For this workshop we offer our findings from three recent studies. While microblogging via Twitter was not the focus of these studies, it helped us to understand content consumption in various ways. Interested in Twitter's growth, we present these findings in order to drive conversations about the niche that Twitter fills for supporting everyday information-seeking activities.

Study #1: Consuming Local News

Our first study addressed the reading of local news [3]. For the purposes of the study we defined local news to be news associated with a geographically defined neighborhood. Specifically, we interviewed consumers of local news in the San Francisco Bay Area in terms of the shifts in their local news reading practices in recent years – shifts we discovered were brought about in large part by reductions in print runs and in the quality of printed local newspapers as much as by the newly available online content channels.

Less than a third of our interviewees used Twitter to stay abreast of local news; we found considerably

greater use of Facebook for news sharing. However, of the third that did use Twitter, we found the greatest value was the perceived timeliness of the news, whether it be local, national or international – something that has been highly valued in unfolding news stories such as disaster situations [9]. Content shared/viewed was usually through short URLs. Most people made careful selections about who they followed for news, as a way to judge the credibility content and reduce the volume of streams they needed to keep track of. That said, we did find evidence ‘fact checking’ of content posted on Twitter that did not have clear provenance, and an irritation with repeated content.

More generally, Twitter underscores the fluidity of the concept of “local” – local news can refer to one's immediate neighborhood, places where people used to live and or affiliation/interest group. Several people reported looking for Twitter feeds for locations they used to live or were temporarily visiting – for example, looking for a local newsfeed in a ‘foreign’ city in a readable language, following that feed for the duration of the visit and then removing the connection when they leave. In addition, Tweet statistics and summaries are often used to see what is “buzzing” around a topic or location – a conversational finger on the location specific news pulse. Despite expressed concerns with repeated content, people reported that they themselves had retweeted content that they felt would be of interest to others.

Study #2: Search & Shopping

Our second related study considered the handoff between desktop and mobile-based search when consumers shop for everyday items. Through a collection of shadow-observational, interview, and diary

studies we developed a catalogue of challenges in the mobile search experience while shopping. Mobile search often returns hard-to-read lists of results and fails to adequately fulfill in situ shopping needs (e.g., product reviews, price comparisons, availability).

To overcome these and similar challenges one third of our participants used Twitter for assistance. We observed three kinds of Twitter use for mobile search in situ. First, posting status updates often returned incidental recommendations. Posting one's current activity in a location, such as "searching for coffee in Union Square" frequently returned unsolicited recommendations from followers. Second, participants intentionally tweeted their queries directly to their followers. One participant with thousands of followers visited a new city and tweeted "where should I eat dinner?" Within minutes he received several recommendations. He could have turned to restaurant review sources such as Yelp and Urban Spoon, however he chose Twitter because it quickly provided relevant information with less effort. Third, participants followed their favorite brands¹ on Twitter in order to better plan online and offline shopping activities. Twitter allowed for a transition from a hunting-style model of shopping (i.e., surfing among multiple web sites to find deals), to one oriented around gathering these offers into a single place (i.e., an individual's personalized Twitter feed). Shoppers expended less time and effort, and consumed more relevant information since they played a key role selecting that information.

¹ Sample brands included Anthropologie (<http://twitter.com/Anthropologie>), Rue La La (http://twitter.com/Rue_La_La), and Woot (<http://twitter.com/woot>).

Study #3: Concierges & Recommendations

Our third study explored information seeking and recommendation models through a field and interview study of hotel concierges. As part of our investigation, we followed twenty hotel concierge Twitterers; all were affiliated with a name brand hotel in a metropolitan area of the United States.

Concierges are clear about their need for timely information but also about the careful management of their own public persona, as well as that of their hotel brand; this extends to their use of Twitter. Twitter offers concierges two forms of value. First, concierges use Twitter to find out what deals, events and activities are ongoing in a city – again a timely finger on the city's pulse. Concierges pride themselves on knowing their city, and Twitter clearly enhances their ability to have a general overview while being apprised of specific details. When it came to tweeting themselves, although many of the hotel-related streams we followed were clearly written by hotel concierges, we saw a reticence to link personal Twitter accounts with the hotel accounts and a shying away from offering personal endorsements for venues or activities. Concierges to some extent maintain their relationships with local vendors and with their management by maintaining neutrality in public. Concierges prefer to represent their hotel brand, tweeting approved marketing materials; however, sometimes they tweet about local events and lodging discounts. Concierges make in-person recommendations, sometimes strong ones, but only when it is possible to engage guests in a dialogue to understand their needs and desires, testing and refining recommendations to improve the likelihood of a successful 'match' to the guests' needs.

Conclusion

Our data illustrate that Twitter is now a growing source for broadly consumable information, not just current status or "daily chatter" [7]. Rather, our participants suggest that Twitter is primarily useful for situation/setting/time specific information "snacking", more akin to "sharing information and URLs" and "reporting news" [7]. Although we have not done a content analysis of a representative sample of the Twitter stream, for our participants Twitter usage is akin to a radio-like information source, turned on or dialed into as needed to pragmatically address "in the moment" curiosity or information needs. Following this metaphor, people tuned into specific "stations" (e.g., people and organizations). They also searched Twitter via hash tags and key words. Participants did not see Twitter as an agora, a marketplace to spend time and socialize with others, or a means to foster social co-presence. Rather than sharing personal information, building identity, forging connections with others, or seeking support or fulfillment of other phatic needs, as so often the rhetoric around sharing sites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Flickr, our participants were more utilitarian in their use of Twitter. For them, Twitter is an information resource, an awareness platform for time sensitive content, a service for getting an overview of the current zeitgeist and a social search service.

Much has been said about the value Twitter can and has provided during emergencies [9]. Our results similarly show that Twitter is no longer just a system to provide simple status updates of personal information; Twitter can and does play a significant role in time-sensitive information seeking and decision making in less urgent, everyday activities.

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