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White paper

Twitter ... next best thing or just a tweet overrated ?

When I was asked to write this white paper about Twitter, I originally thought that surely, in keeping with the spirit of the thing, I should write it in chunks of 140 characters or less?

"Twitter could save ur life in a pinch. It brings ppl together in new and interesting ways."

"But it doesn't half waste time. I feel like I spend half the day on it. Have even set up Twitter account for cat. Is out of control."

"Maybe should take Twitter break. Or at least prune back number of ppl I am following. This is getting ridiculous."

Why is it that this quirky service only lets you communicate in such short blocks of text? Because, when it was originally created in 2006, the developers wanted people to be able to 'tweet' via SMS.

Mind you, if there's one thing we've learned about technology in this decade, it's that disruptive businesses come from the weirdest places, and they're extremely hard to predict. Twitter started off as a fun service that people could use to keep their friends updated about what was happening in their lives. Since then, it has evolved and taken on a different and more significant purpose.

Rather than simply being a service that enables you to tell your pals what you had for breakfast this morning, Twitter has evolved into a cross between a community forum, a wiki, and an email system. You can send direct, private messages in it, send replies to specific people that the whole world can see, and also tag your posts according to specific topics. This last development was a community-driven effort, created by Twitter's users.



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This is partly what makes Twitter the poster child for Web 2.0 culture. Online services this decade have been about participation. Services like Flickr, Facebook and Myspace survive on the willingness of their users to share their information within the system. Twitter relies on that too, but also takes things a step further; you just know that something is going to be successful when its users become co-

developers, not just sharing their own data, but creating whole subsystems to adapt and enhance the service.

Why have people bought into this service so quickly, and enabled it to become so disruptive? Part of the attraction is that it's so quick and easy to use. I have a blog, but it's more neglected than a puppy three weeks after Christmas. I rarely have time to spend an hour writing an entry. But Twitter lets a person post

their thoughts and discoveries quickly, in the downtime between, say, the last phone call and the next cup of coffee.

But services don't survive on ease of use alone. There have to be other benefits. Twitter offers these in spades. One analyst I know says that it's changed the entire way he does business.

In the past, when he wanted to take a position on something, he would call four or five industry contacts and ask them what they thought about an issue. These days, he searches the list of 800 trusted people that he follows on Twitter, plugging in the subject that he's interested in. He then spends some time reading what they've posted, and capturing the zeitgeist. What better way to quickly sample a base of smart people? It's like a form of collective intelligence.

The other neat thing about the service is that it forces people to be short. An editor I know prefers to take pitches via Twitter, because people have to be concise in what they say. It means that he has to read less, which can be a godsend, especially on press day.

It's also possible to solicit the Twitter community's help more proactively. Recently, I ran into a problem. A company had promised to deliver an article for a newsletter that I edit. It mailed me seven days before the deadline and cancelled the article, citing a lack of resources. I suddenly had three pages of blank space to fill, and very little time to fill it. I tweeted my predicament. Within two hours, 15 companies came back with proposals for articles that they could deliver within the week. Not only did I solve my problem, but I also practically filled the entire next edition of the newsletter.

There have been other examples of community support on Twitter. Anecdotes involving people losing all of their money and their passports when travelling, and tweeting their community of followers for help. Alerts for missing children sent out via Twitter. And of course, community reporting.

Events such as the terrorist attacks in Mumbai, and the recent controversy over the Iranian election, were reported about on the ground via the micro-blogging service. When the bird-stricken US Airways flight ditched in the Hudson, the first image of the event was posted via the third party service TwitPic - which uses Twitter accounts to post pictures - before paid reporters arrived on the scene.



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Companies have only just begun to explore the potential of Twitter. Let's whittle away for a moment some of the more mundane and irritating uses of the service. Most Twitter users will have been followed by accounts obviously set up purely for marketing purposes. Some users will also have received twitter spam, designed by cyber crooks to lure them to Twitter feeds which will be laden with links to malicious Web sites. Then there are publications that insist on using their Twitter accounts purely to post headlines that could just as easily have been delivered via a more conventional mechanism such as RSS.

But some of the more innovative uses of the service in the future could include enterprise-focused Twitter feeds that could be used to make companies run more efficiently. How about a Twitter feed from the canteen to let you know that it will be serving up noodles in five minutes? Machine-based

Twitter accounts controlled by computers could be even more useful. Imagine, for example, a photocopier that tweets to let the office manager know that it is out of paper. How about vending machines that tweet when they're down to their last five cans of pop? What cheaper and better way for to schedule delivery jobs for the week?

But there are downsides to Twitter. The tendency to suck every available productive minute out of your day is one of them. Companies have already had to contend with the productivity issues surrounding other Web 2.0 sites such as Facebook and MySpace, and many will see Twitter as one more drain on employee time.

The security issues with Twitter are already well known. Several worms have been produced that replicate using the service. These have thus far been little more than an irritation, but could easily be turned into something more malicious using cross-site scripting. Even as I write this, a security researcher is preparing a "month of Twitter bugs", in which he will publicise a security flaw in the service for each day of a single month.

One of the problems with Twitter (that is not limited to this

particular Web 2.0 service) is the use of application programming interfaces. An API enables third-party services to hook into Twitter and enhance what it offers. This is how Twitpic works. But researchers have highlighted potential flaws in third-party services that could be used to exploit Twitter accounts.

As people begin to rely increasingly on this service – and in some cases prioritise it over email – that will become an increasing problem.

There are other challenges, too. For one thing, micro-blogging is even harder to control than conventional blogging. You think inappropriate blog posts are a problem? Consider how much damage someone can do in 140 characters or less, in 60 seconds, with an ill-thought-out statement.

Take, for example, the regrettable case of David George-Cosh, at the time a reporter for Canadian paper the National Post, and marketing professional April Dunford. These two aired public grievances via Twitter in February 2009, in a case which has become legendary among communications types. George-Cosh, irritated at Dunford failing to return a call, telephoned her and took her to task. Dunford, annoyed by the exchange, tweeted it (but to her credit, didn't name him).

"@SirDavid" was singularly unimpressed by her tweet, and proceeded to publicly reply to her via Twitter, using a variety of expletives. Unfortunately, he was the technology reporter for the paper, which caused the many blog commentators documenting the affair to raise their collective eyebrow still further.

Then, there was the unfortunate incident in Croydon. An employee at the London borough's Council made an insulting comment about an Evening Standard journalist. The comment was supposed to be a direct message, which would have made it a private exchange between two Twitter accounts. Unfortunately, it was posted publicly, causing the Council to suspend its Twitter account, and presumably reminding the embarrassed employee of the importance of a single letter (the 'D' which should prefix any direct message).



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No catalogue of Twitter embarrassments would be complete without the story of the executive from PR company Ketchum, who was delivering a presentation on digital media to the worldwide communications group at the company's client, FedEx. FedEx is based in Memphis, and the executive in question used Twitter to make some disparaging comments about the city, which he apparently wasn't happy at having to visit. Unfortunately for him, a FedEx employee saw his Tweet, and sent a blistering response – which he also copied to various higher-ups at both FedEx and Ketchum. Ouch.

Such gaffes are inevitable as people come to terms with a new and innovative communications medium. These cases may be

embarrassing and harmful to an individual's reputation, but they are not grounds for legal action. How long will it be, however, before a company has cause to ask for tweets made by an employee as part of a discovery process during litigation? The challenge of logging and archiving tweets made by employees from company computers will be yet another challenge for already harried IT managers, who have had to try and control a proliferation of communications channels.

But for me, the overriding concern about Twitter is more cultural, and psychological. Over the past 20 years, we have been forced to dramatically alter the way that we consume information. Before the web became so ubiquitous, we would generally read documents in a linear fashion, from start to finish.

Then, hypertext emerged. Suddenly, a document was not a discrete entity. It became a leaping off point for many other documents, which would be symbolically embedded in its text. As someone in my late 30s who grew up without the Internet, I find it difficult to navigate the choices that this presents me with – and I am a technology writer. I am supposed to be good at this stuff.

Our children, unencumbered by that pre-web baggage, will grow up accustomed to reading documents in a non-linear fashion.

Twitter represents the next step in that journey. In this service, the document as an entity ceases to exist. Instead, we are faced with a fragmented river of information, bereft of hierarchical structure, which we must navigate as best we can.

As such services scale, and as the number of people that the average person follows increases, I wonder what it means for the experience of reading and consuming information. How will this affect our ability to process information critically, rather than just consume it at face value? How will we cope with the implicit intellectual guilt of never having enough time to consume all of the information available, which is thrown at us not as a small collection of long articles, but as a cacophony of tiny ones?

I don't think that any of us have really understood just how significant that cognitive timebomb will be – and how it will change not just our perceptions of the world, but those of our children. And more to the point, what is the next step in this journey? How much more fragmented can our information become?

But my addled old brain will just have to keep up. And so will yours, if you have any sense. Not only is Twitter so darn addictive, it's also saved my bacon on numerous occasions, given me new perspectives on a topic, and even bagged me articles with national newspapers, after I tweeted something and an editor picked it up as a story idea.

All in all, I'd say that it's the sort of thing that you'd be a fool not to be involved in, especially if you're involved in forming and communicating ideas. Those people not involved in Twitter risk missing out on a whole conversation, however disjointed and chaotic it may be.



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