

Twitter: A new breed of social networking

Bernardo Reynolds

DME, UMa

Departamento de Matemática e Engenharias

Universidade da Madeira, Funchal

bernardoreynolds@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

In the form of a different type of communication and different relationships motivated by not so common reasons, microblogging has come to set a new trend on social networks. Twitter.com, founded on March 2006, was the obvious choice as it is the leading microblogging platform around. In a immersive ethnographic study performed there, I've analyzed this new breed of relationships and communications between their users and suggest these two hypothesis form what I call, a new form of social networking.

Author Keywords

Twitter, Microblogging, social networks, online communities, social web, relationships, communication

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.3. [Group and Organization Interfaces]: Synchronous interaction & Asynchronous interaction

INTRODUCTION

While there is no doubt that Twitter fits Howard Rheingold's definition of online community, "cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough" [4], the category in which it falls within this definition, is not as linear. Microblogging, a pretty recent trend on online communities, is said to be "present tense blogging" [6]. A more specific definition is presented by Wikipedia, which states, "Micro-blogging is a form of multimedia blogging that allows users to send brief text updates (say, 140 characters or fewer) or micromedia such as photos or audio clips and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group which can be chosen by the user. These messages can be submitted by a variety of means, including text messaging, instant messaging, email, MP3 or the web." [11]. What is proposed on this study is that microblogging generates a new kind of social networking, based on different relationships between users and also a different way of communicating, one that is instant, broadcasted and with feedback [7]. These two hypothesis, distinct communication and distinct relationships, are tested against the most common form of social networking on the internet, the one represented by networks such as Facebook, MySpace, hi5 and other. The purpose and hypothesis tested on this paper, were formed

while performing an ethnographic study and in order to validate them, I performed a survey focusing on the relationships users maintain within Twitter and how they communicate, and compared this with other known networks.

TWITTER

Founded on March 2006 and launched in October of the same year, Twitter is the biggest microblogging platform around. My reference to it as a platform comes from the fact that users are allowed to engage on Twitter using not only the website but also third party applications¹ like Twhirl² or Twitterrific³ iPhone applications, namely Twinkle⁴, instant message services and even SMS. Twitter is known by being hard to explain [1] but on the other hand is a pretty simple service. Basically, it is a web application based around status [3] where users post tweets (status updates) of only 140 characters answering to the question "What are you doing?". This simplicity derived from its code and structure [8] enables a great level of regulation for both behaviour and privacy. Users post within their own space, what makes them responsible for their own tweets, increasing behaviour. As for privacy, if one enables the feature to make his tweets private, only his followers can read them, if not, they will be displayed on a section named public timeline. Its social aspect relies on following, users follow one another to get access to each other's tweets, which are displayed on the home section. As a social network, Twitter resembles Ray Oldenburg's notion of Third Places [7], inherent characteristics like self-selection while following people with the same common ground, the frequency users logon to the site in order to share what their doing and reading the same about their friends and last but not least, the main activity on Twitter is socializing and conversing.

Nonetheless, users have other affordances for Twitter.

¹ <http://mashable.com/2008/05/24/14-more-twitter-tools/>

² <http://www.twhirl.org/>

³ <http://iconfactory.com/software/twitterrific>

⁴ www.tapulous.com/twinkle/

News networks like CNN⁵ and BBC⁶ use it as newsfeed, users use it as a way to promote their blogs, to get reviews and advice on products, to vent about school and work, to do list/agenda, personal portfolio, etc.. [2]. Another use of Twitter, that is growing popular day by day, is taking advantage of the so called wisdom of the crowds. There a lot of users, specially the most experienced ones which have a lot of followers, posting tweets asking for a review on product or a website, asking for indications and all that you can imagine. Here's bright example of that:

jamescridland: is wondering if there's a social website that does "I've got/read this book, I thought it was good" - anyone?

...and the answers came thick and fast...

andybee: @jamescridland Shelfari?
jjn1: there's a Facebook app called Visual Bookshelf (or some such)...
fidothe: @jamescridland <http://allconsuming.net/>
billt: @jamescridland <http://www.librarything.com/> - and you can get a cuecat scanner to enter your own library really fast
perreau: I have a feeling the people behind <http://www.gurgle.com> are building one. Not Mothercare, the development folks.
davebriggs: @jamescridland I run <http://palimpsest.org.uk/forum> which is old school but reasonably high minded
pete_bug: @jamescridland this one is pretty good: www.anobii.com
matstace: @jamescridland my wife uses "visual bookshelf" facebook app, not sure if there's a stand-alone site for it though.
asimaythink: @jamescridland Maybe goodreads.com (untested)?
tristanf: @jamescridland LibraryThing
frankieroberto: @tristanf @jamescridland LibraryThing is great, but the problem is that we don't consume books online, so it's quite an effort to add them...
tristanf: @frankieroberto Which I guess is why I don't use it jamescridland is grateful for the book social media suggestions. I asked on behalf of my brother, who is now happily using librarything
billt: @jamescridland tell him to get <http://www.librarything.com/cuecat> - it's brill (works on Mac too!)
mydogminton: @jamescridland Just as you mentioned www.librarything.com/ I had stumbled across webby nominee www.bookglutton.com
Nico_Macdonald: @jamescridland I use

⁵ <https://twitter.com/cnn>

⁶ <http://twitter.com/BBC>

LibraryThing <http://www.librarything.com/> but it hasn't taken off yet in our world.
Nico_Macdonald: @jamescridland Goodreads <http://www.goodreads.com/> is a little less rough feeling. On FB Virtual Bookshelf is good, and has social tools.

Who needs Google when you've got the wisdom of the Twitter crowd? [9]

METHODOLOGY

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study is test that microblogging affords a new way of social networking. The hypothesis considered to do so, are the communication and the relationships maintained on Twitter are dramatically different when compared to the most common form of social networking afforded by networks such as Facebook, MySpace and hi5 [10]. I've studied Twitter by performing an immersive ethnographic study [2] based on participant observation, reading documents and other papers on Twitter and a structured online questionnaire. For the participant observation I registered myself on the website using truthful information, name, picture and bio. As Twitter hasn't hit mainstream [1] I had to convince some of my friends to register and then start following and also used the location system provided by the iPhone application Twinkle, to follow some nearby people. After realizing some of the concepts I am presenting on this study I elaborated a questionnaire to better understand them. The questionnaire was mostly spread on Twitter as it was directed to it's users and the sample collected for this paper was of 138 participants. Aside from demographics like origin, age, gender, occupation and Twitter usage related questions such as membership time, veracity of profile information, tweets per day and main uses of Twitter, the questions asked in order to test the hypothesis were the following:

1. What portion of your Twitter friends do you frequently meet face-to-face?

The following questions were asked in comparison with networks such as Facebook, MySpace, Beebo, hi5 and Friendster and on scale varying from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree", providing the option "Don't Know". These networks were chosen upon the fact that they are the most common form of social network existing online. [10]

1. In terms of social networking features and functionality, Twitter is the same as...
2. My friends on Twitter offer the same kind of social support as my friends on...
3. I interact more frequently with my friends on Twitter than my friends on...
4. I feel closer to my friends on Twitter than to my

friends on...

5. I would most likely engage in a conversation on Twitter than on...

RESULTS

Results were the following:

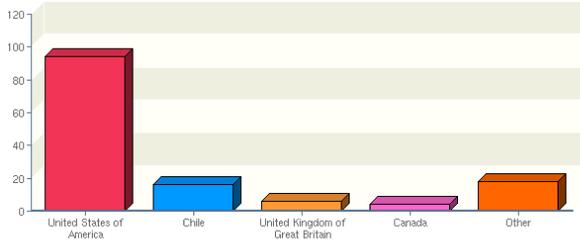


Figure 1. Participants origin.

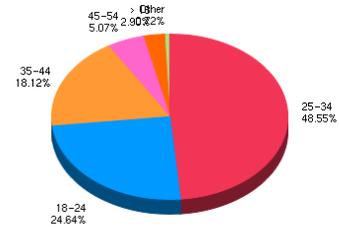


Figure 2. Participants age.

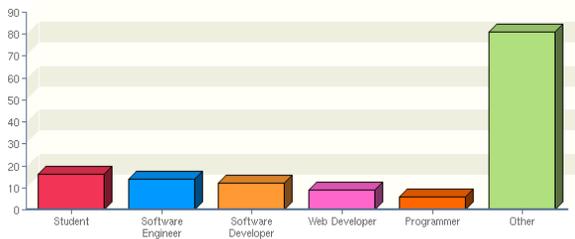


Figure 3. Participants occupation

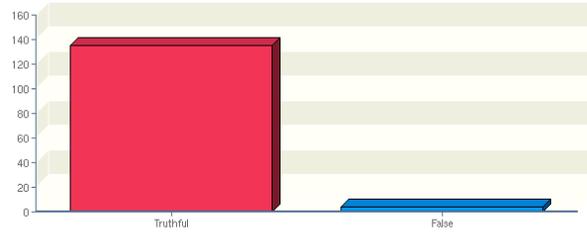


Figure 4. Profile info veracity

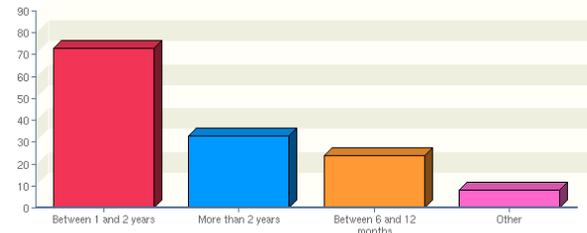


Figure 5. Time on Twitter

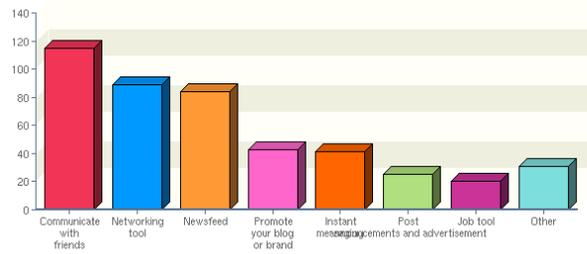


Figure 6. Main uses of Twitter

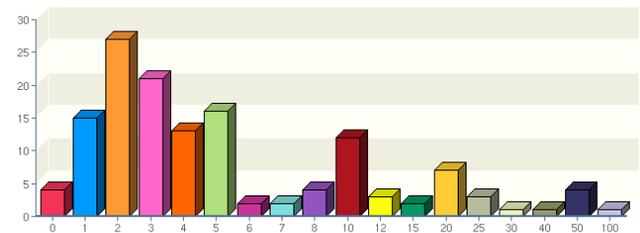


Figure 7. Tweets posted per day

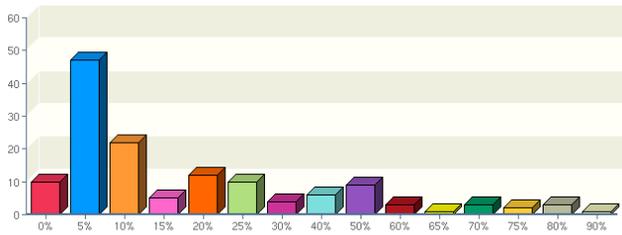


Figure 8. % of Twitter friends participants said to meet face-to-face

Network	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Facebook	3.6% 5	13.8% 19	11.6% 16	22.5% 31	38.4% 53	10.1% 14
MySpace	1.4% 2	0.7% 1	8.0% 11	16.7% 23	48.6% 67	24.6% 34

Figure 9. Answer to: "In terms of social networking features and functionality, Twitter is the same as ..."

Network	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Facebook	31.9% 44	26.1% 36	18.8% 26	10.9% 15	3.6% 5	8.7% 12
MySpace	40.6% 56	7.2% 10	3.6% 5	2.9% 4	2.2% 3	43.5% 60

Figure 10. Answer to: "I interact more frequently with my friends on Twitter than on ..."

Network	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
Facebook	38.4% 53	25.4% 35	17.4% 24	8.7% 12	2.9% 4	7.2% 10
MySpace	50.0% 69	7.2% 10	5.8% 8	2.9% 4	0.7% 1	33.3% 46

Figure 11. Answer to: "I interact more frequently with my friends on Twitter than on ..."

DISCUSSION

I'm going to start this part of the paper by discussing the two hypothesis tested. Starting by the one and only mean of communication on Twitter, the tweets. The fact the whole communication is based on them is unlike any other forms of communication seen on social networks. Being by concept an answer to the question "What are you doing?" which has to be answered with only 140 characters is alone a factor contributing to this distinction. Another distinctive factor on Twitter's communication is it's type, it facilitates both synchronous and asynchronous communication. While blogging is by nature asynchronous and Twitter follows that tendency, my results show that 30% of the users use Twitter as an instant messaging service, which falls into the

synchronous communication category. The fact Twitter affords other uses (65% of the users use it as networking tool, 61% as a newsfeed) besides communicating with friends, which is it's main use (83.33%) according to the data collected also supports this hypothesis. Users also agreed they would most likely engage in a conversation on Twitter than on any other of the networks in the following order: 37.4% strongly agreed, 8.1% agreed while 3% disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed.

Now onto our second hypothesis, the distinction of the relationships withheld on Twitter as opposed to the ones withheld on online communities such as Facebook, MySpace and other. While there is an unexpected correlation ($p \leq 0.0001$) between the membership period on Twitter with the percentage of Twitter friends a user meets face-to-face, when users were asked which percentage of their Twitter friends they frequently meet face-to-face, 5% and 10% were the most common answers, with 34% and 16% respectively. Another clear indicator that relationships in Twitter differ from the other networks is the fact users agreed (27% strongly and 8.6% just agreed versus a 7.2% of neutral, 4.2% of disagreement and 1.7% of strong disagreement) they interact more frequently with their Twitter friends.

Twitter is a relatively new and great way of social networking and provides a huge richness of content considering how simple it is. Although it's developers have made a great job on the design in terms of information overload and display, I still think a grouping feature would dramatically improve Twitter. This is not new, many others (paper,) have highlighted this flaw and the data I collected, specifically on the different uses of Twitter is an indicator of the lack of this feature. Another thing Twitter is lacking some work on, is encouraging newbies. The usage start is rather difficult and that was something I personally experienced and informally asked to some users who agreed. There is a lot of people signing up and leaving. I agree with the fact Twitter hasn't hit mainstream (Chang, 2008), but the future is bright. There are already some interesting mashups⁷ using google maps and Twitter but with GPS coming to every mobile phone as cameras did, Twitter has a huge advantage as location based platform.⁸ While on one hand is kind of creepy to think of Twitter as this big friend-mashup where your friends and followers are aware of both what you're doing and where you're doing it, on the other it's definitely useful. Not to say that it would boost Twitter usage.

REFERENCES

[1] Chang, Melissa. I like Twitter, but it has a big problem (2008).

⁷ <http://www.twittrvision.com>

⁸ <http://rainersimon.wordpress.com/2007/04/29/twitter-as-a-platform-for-location-based-services/>

<http://www.16thletter.com/2008/04/i-like-twitter-but-it-has-a-big-problem/>

[2] Stamatiou P., McCree J., Marshall T., Robertson M. Twitter CS4803: Design of Online Communities (2008).

[3] Malik, Om. Sillicon Valleys all Twtr. (2006)

<http://gigaom.com/2006/07/15/valleys-all-twtr>

[4] Rheingold, H. A slice of life in my virtual community. Global Networks: Computers and International Communication (pp. 57-80). Cambrige: MA: MIT Press.

[5] Iskold, A. Evolution of Communication: From Email to Twitter and Beyond

http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/evolution_of_communication.php

[6] Stone, B. Let there be Twitter.

<http://www.bizstone.com/2006/07/let-there-be-twtr.html>

[7] Oldenberg, R. The great good place. Chapter 2, pages 20-42. (1989)

[8] Lessig, L. Code and other laws of cyberspace: Basic Books. Chapter 7. (1999)

[9] Cridland, J. The wisdom of the (Twitter) crowd.

<http://james.cridland.net/blog/2008/the-wisdom-of-the-twitter-crowd/> (2008)

[10] Social network service page on Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_network_service

[11] Microblogging page on Wikipedia

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Microblogging>

