

Twitter: Social Network or Implement of Global Change?

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### **Introduction**

On Friday, June 12, 2009, presidential elections were held in Iran. The government announced on Saturday morning that the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the winner by a victory margin of over 62%. This victory was immediately contested- so much so that by late morning, massive anti-government demonstrations were held around the country. With the knowledge of ongoing accusations of human rights abuses in Iran, it is possible to say that the people of Iran were not amused. By June 14, hundreds of thousands of people rallied in Tehran to support the defeated candidate Mir-Housain Mousavi. The people came together without aid of the government controlled media or telecommunications. News of the rallies spread by word-of-mouth and with the assistance of an interesting communications technology called "twitter". Twitter was following the tradition of other great and innovative technologies that were developed for one use, but quickly were adapted for something different. For example it is doubtful that Gutenberg thought of the future development of mass literacy or popular literature when he developed the movable type printing press in about 1440. Twitter was originally developed as a social-networking tool for individuals to send short messages to groups of their friends about what they were doing or thinking, in a one-to-many relationship. But things happened and twitter quickly became a communications tool used by politicians, journalists and business-people.

In this paper I will look at the roots of Twitter and its growing impact on global society. Additionally, I will show the relevance of Twitter to the educational and psychological theories developed and promoted by Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner.

### **Roots and structure of Twitter**

Twitter began its existence simply enough in San Francisco, California in 2006 Jack Dorsey, president of the podcasting company “Odeo”, was looking for a tool to communicate short messages to a small group of people. A daylong brainstorming session combined with the inspiration from TXTmob, a SMS service to send and received messages within small groups by invitation only.

At this point, it is relevant to understand the significance of SMS. Described by Wikipedia, SMS is “a communication service standardized in the GSM mobile communication system, using standardized communications protocols allowing the interchange of short text messages between mobile telephone devices.” SMS development began in the early 1980s Matti Makkonen, a Finnish mobile-communications engineer. The key idea was to utilize unused telephony resources to transport short (140 or 160 byte) text messages across multiple systems. Because of this idea, it called for immediate global collaboration between telecommunications companies and government to define the standards for implementing this technology. The first text messages were not actually sent the message “Merry Christmas” was sent December 2, 1992 by Neil Papworth to Richard Jarvis, both of Vodofone in England (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMS>). Reconcile the modest beginning of SMS message to the 4.1 Trillion SMS text messages sent in 2008 (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMS>).

We can see that by any account, SMS texting technology was a global standard when Jack Dorsey sat with his colleagues to find a way out of the creative slump that they were

experiencing. Their idea was to create a method of creating a personal social network to allow individuals (authors) to communicate with a defined group of subscribers (followers). One of their major innovations was to shift from a completely telephony based service to one that used the Internet for distribution to subscribers on both the web and on cell phones. Part of their inspiration came from the success of the photo-sharing service flickr. The original name for their service was “twitch”, but was soon abandoned because of the associated imagery. “Twitter” was chosen because the type of short type of information inferred the short tweets made by birds. Dorsey’s first tweet was “just setting up my twttr” sent to his colleagues at Odeo on March 21, 2006.

Usage grew steadily, primarily through work of mouth (and tweets) until one year later, when in March 2007, Twitter became the hit at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas. Within three days, usage went from 20,000 a day to 60,000. Festival attendees kept each other up-to-date on sessions, panelists, parties and information that were displayed on one of the two 60” plasma televisions placed in the hallways of the conference. The success seen at the South by Southwest festival led the company to reform itself one month later to Obvious Corporation, focusing exclusively on Twitter.

### **Twitter Now: the good and the bad**

Because of its relatively simple technology, easy to use interface (and exposure at the South by Southwest festival) Twitter has rapidly found its way into other fields. For example, in 2008, the Barak Obama campaign used Twitter extensively for publicity and to update followers on issues and campaign appearances. It was reported that during the

Mumbai terrorist attacks (also in 2008), there were about 80 tweets every 5 seconds. These tweets distributed information about victims, emergency phone numbers, and locations of hospitals. Unfortunately, the nature of social networks means that information like this is available to very body. It is known that the commanders of the Mumbai event were located in Pakistan and were following events on Mumbai on television and then issuing orders to the terrorists themselves via cell phones. It would not be a stretch of the imagination of us to think that the terrorists' commanders may have also been following tweets for up to date information to help them issue orders.

Twitter has been also been used by celebrities for publicity (for example, April, 2009's Ashton Kutcher duel with CNN to subscribe a million users). Corporations are using twitter to update customers about new products (as well as upgrades and fixes to existing ones). In mid-2008, Mark Manguera and Roy Choy of Los Angeles started the Kogi-truck, a mobile restaurant specializing in Korean burritos. With no set location, they jumped on the twitter bandwagon to publicize their truck's daily location. By mid 2009- they had 36,000 subscribers following their three trucks daily movements. Astronauts have used twitter to provide near real-time mission status with NASA scientists as well as sharing information with the public on several scheduled space-earth events.

Twitter is being integrated into education and academia around the world. In Austria, twitter is used for real-time evaluation of college instructors. In large history courses taught at the University of Texas at Dallas, twitter is used in class discussions for students

to express views about the class topics. The size limitations of a twitter message (140 characters) forces students to be focused and on-topic when they post information.

An additional interesting and meaningful by-product of twitter is the development of a shorthand language by users to accommodate the 140-character message limit. It is possible to compare this to the manner in which discreet disciplines and professions have also created their own dialects and shorthand speech. One only needs to listen to a journeyman from any field peak with a colleague journeyman to understand (or not) how words and phrases are adapted to specific needs. Twitter aficionados have adopted abbreviations such as LOL (laughing out loud) and punctuation marks such as :) (a smiley-face ☺) that is now part of the lexicon of contemporary society.

### **Relevance- past, present and future**

One important point that we can see is that twitter is a dynamic application. During the 3.5 years of its existence, twitter has evolved from a simple tool for communicating short, often benign messages with a select group of friends to a global tool that moves populations. This metamorphosis enjoins us to ask several interesting questions about twitter:

- Does the transformation of twitter from a social networking site to a tool for commerce, education, public policy etc. represent a unique process or does it signify a greater trend in technology?
- Does twitter actively contribute to social and individual narratives or is it simply a tool for recording and/or archiving data? In other words is twitter a verb or a noun?

- Is twitter a symbol or is it a language?
- Is twitter merely a tool or does it represent a larger cultural phenomenon?
- Can humans find authentic meaning in twitter?

The answers to these questions can be as dynamic and flexible as attempting to define twitter itself: is an application, service or process? Perhaps a good definition is found in Bruner who wrote, “A cultural psychology is an interpretative psychology, in much the sense that history and anthropology and linguistics are interpretative disciplines. But that does not mean that it need be unprincipled or without methods, even hard-nosed ones. It seeks out the rules that human beings bring to bear in creating meanings in cultural contexts.” (Bruner, 1990, p. 118). Using this definition, we can infer that Twitter is simply an application for computers and telephones- it is humans who assign the ultimate definition and meaning,

We understand that the nature of contemporary digital technology is that it is in a constant stage of flux. Technology drives applications and uses, which in turn drives technology. Finding answers and definitions to the questions that are constant is like trying to shoot at a moving target with piece of chewing gum and a slingshot. The target is difficult to hit and the gum is difficult to stick. Yet, there are ways that we can put this endeavor into the kids of cultural contexts described by Bruner as well as Vygotsky. We see that the most elemental use of twitter above all is the desire to communicate and find meaning in our individual lives. Simple mundane messages such as “Let’s go to Kogi 2nite” or more charged messages such as what might have been written in Iran in June

2009: “the election was a lie. Rally to support Mousavi tomorrow at noon” both examples share a common function- the need for communication.

Humans as a species are limited to how we communicate and to how many we can communicate with at a given time. In face-to-face conversations, we are limited to those in our proximity who can hear our words. Over the past 100 years, our ability to make tools that amplify our words and spread them to geographically distant locations has grown exponentially. “Cultures characteristically devise “prosthetic devices” that permit us to transcend “raw” biological limits on memory capacity or the limits on our auditory range.” (Bruner, 1990, p. 34). We are driven to do this by a rational that sometimes may be irrational, yet still is one of the crucial defining aspects of humanity, the desire to tell our stories. “...a critical point about the organizing principal of folk psychology as being narrative in nature rather than logical or categorical. Folk psychology is about human agents doing things on the basis of their beliefs and desires striving for goals meeting those obstacles which they best or which best them, all over an extended time” (Bruner 1990, p. 43).

It is clear that twitter has had an impact on language itself. The 140-character limit forces and inspires users to communicate using a hybrid language of letters and punctuation marks. This twitter-speak has migrated to other media- one only needs to look at newspapers, billboards or television to see examples of this migration. Twitter is still too new to know the strength of its impact on language- time will tell. But, we do see that there is history in the idea behind the relationship between society and the development

of language. Writing “Signs and symbols serve children first and foremost as a means of social contact with other people. The cognitive and communicative functions of language then become the basis of a new and superior activity in children...(Vygotsky, 1978, p. 29.), Lev Vygotsky may be addressing the development of children, but it could be argued that this process can be also inferred in adults. This then can be applied to the development of twitter- first and foremost, twitter was developed as a means for creating social connections with other people. Higher cognitive and communicative functions then followed as people learned the tool. Twitter also represents another development of the human nature to pass on stories and narratives. “I tried to indicate how the young, by native endowment and by exposure, came to participate in culture by using language in its narrative discourse *in vivo*. I even speculated that the structure of human grammar much have arisen out of a proto-linguistic push to narrate.” (Bruner, 1990, p. 138).

### **Conclusion**

Twitter has achieved a dizzying expansion since it first came on to the scene on 2006. Starting as a method for individuals to communicate with a group, it transformed into a tool that is used to influence national and global society, politics and commerce. Like any tool, it can be used for different tasks. I am reminded of my days as a carpenter when I discovered that a hammer has many different uses. It can pound a nail into a board or pull it out; it can be used as a lever or as a fulcrum. The specific use is defined by the need of the carpenter at a specific time and twitter as a tool is also defined by the users at any given time. This development is a natural process in human communication and cognition, but the final use will ultimately be a surprise.

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