

BOOK REVIEW

Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age

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Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age

Dhiraj Murthy

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220 pp.

\$22.95

ISBN: 978-0745-652-39-9 (paperback)

In an age of digital communication, are we saying so much more about so much less? More specifically, how has Twitter microblogging technology shaped the way modern humans communicate? And does this societal influence differ greatly from past innovations, such as the telegraph or the telephone? These are among the provocative questions that Dhiraj Murthy poses to his readers in *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age*, the latest in Polity Press' Digital Media and Society Series.

It is undeniable that as a communication platform, Twitter has increasingly infused itself into daily life—regardless of one's geographical location. Just ask the estimated 554.7 million people around the globe who actively use the

service, and post a collective 58 million “tweets” each day. Or, perhaps query one of the 135,000 new users joining the network daily (Statistic Brain, 2013).

True, critics will argue that these numbers, while impressive, still represent only a fraction of the world's total population. And yes, participation remains limited by one's personal wealth and ability to gain access to the Internet, smartphones or personal computers. At the same time, the societal impact is increasingly evident. For example, *The Guardian* recently reported that the Vatican had “married one of its oldest traditions to the world of social media” when it announced it would offer indulgences to Pope Francis' Twitter followers (Kington, 2013). This would have been unimaginable just seven years ago and impossible a decade ago.

While it seems as if this online social network has achieved so much in so little time the greater task for academe is understanding why, how, when and with what tools we, as a society, communicate—and to whom. A lofty goal at

best, this is in part, what Murthy attempts to accomplish in *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age*.

In his preface, Murthy indicates that the rise of technology does not necessarily “signal the death of meaningful communication” (p. x). Instead, the author believes that what Twitter technology and its ilk offer academics is the rare chance to re-examine communication and its impact on culture in a more basic way. He is insistent that this modern-day communication is simultaneously individualistic and communal.

The book views Twitter from two major perspectives. The first focuses on its purpose while attempting to contextualize the messaging platform before offering an examination of how mass communication theories have been applied in more practical research terms. The second theme, and larger portion of the book, focuses on empirical examples from the recent past examining how Twitter has affected everything from journalism and the response to natural disasters to social activism and health issues. By doing thus, Murthy attempts to demonstrate how technology gives users an outlet for individual thought, while at the same time engaging in a communal activity.

Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age argues that historical comparisons are used to emphasize that what might be considered a new media form really is not all that new when it comes to how technology arranges today’s social life as compared with past. Perhaps, the overarching point the author is trying to make is that communication remains as instinctual as breathing—regardless of the vehicle used to exchange ideas, concepts or information.

Certainly, Murthy’s opening explanation of what Twitter is and does reads as banal, particularly in a post-Arab Spring, post-Occupy Wall Street, post-Syrian Revolution world where stories touting the power of social media have saturated the news. His articulate and thorough definition is perhaps five years too late.

At the same time, the researcher is careful to define the differences between online social networks such as Facebook and the broader

social media function of Twitter. He notes: “a key difference here between social media and social network sites is the design of the former to be explicitly public geared towards interactive multicasting” (p. 11). And when combined into one platform—i.e. Twitter—Murthy claims that the result is a “real-time public, many-to-many broadcasting” that is only limited by the number of one’s followers (p. 11).

It is in this sphere where personal and professional lines blur. It is certainly a digital space where what one discloses and one’s subsequent privacy take on new meanings. It should also be noted that these definitions are critical to understanding not only the function of these technologies, but also for scholars going forward to understand how new, yet-to-be-invented communication platforms should be defined and examined in the historical context of mass communication.

In terms of theorizing the Twitter phenomenon, the author is correct when he raises the critical question: is this tool different in any meaningful way from previous technologies? His argument, based on seminal studies by Elihu Katz and other mass communication scholars, appears to be no. Opinion leaders of today function the same as they did in yesteryear. The only thing that has changed is the platform with which they are sharing influence. It leads Murthy to conclude that while this social network theoretically has the ability to expose one to a world of opinions, the reality is the actual influence of these many more voices are limited.

The book opines that the seduction of Twitter is the perception that there is power among its users to make significant contributions to an event. But among the cacophony of postings during any given event, regardless of the level of profoundness with which one writes, Murthy notes there is no guarantee that the tweets will even be read. It becomes the digital version of if-a-tree-falls-in-the-woods-but-no-one-hears-it-does-it-still-make-a-noise debate.

Does this mean that the larger the incident, the greater the chance of missing critical commentary in the form of a tweet? Recent case in

point: The July acquittal of George Zimmerman, the Florida neighborhood vigilante who killed Trayvon Martin in 2012. The Pew Research Center reported nearly 5 million tweets about the not-guilty verdict within the first 26 hours of the jurors' decision. Pew researchers noted 39% of all tweets aimed to share news, rather than proffer personal opinion (Jurkowitz & Vogt, 2013). With that many tweets posted, Murthy's argument would dare ask: how many of those posts were actually read? It is a harsh reminder that any medium must have an audience in order to exert influence.

In terms of journalism and Twitter, Murthy uses the January 2009 crash of U.S. Airways Flight 1549 into the Hudson River as among the earliest example of how citizen journalism and Twitter have changed news reporting. He remarks that anyone with a smartphone can snap a photo, upload it into the ether, and "report" an incident. And while the author does acknowledge the concerns this access brings in terms of disseminating information—or misinformation—to the news industry, he pays cursory attention to the concerns of information veracity. What's more, the greater concern about institutional reputations for publishing misinformation in attempt to be "first" is ignored. This chapter represents a missed opportunity to examine more extensively not only how news organizations are using the service, but also, murkier concerns about the ethical use of information posted to Twitter, and the muddy world of how social media and online social networking are redefining what constitutes a "friend" and the implication that definition has for professional journalists.

Murthy spends time expanding on what he calls the "update culture" among social media users and the role such updates play during natural disasters, noting that Twitter has become the go-to place for latest developments whether it be hurricane, flood, earthquake or tornado. And because events on the ground can shift dramatically—even as television broadcast-

ers offer viewers the latest news—the book maintains that social media have increasingly become an important source for details.

At the same time, the author's own research found that during the 2010 flooding in Pakistan, the number of people updating their posts diminished dramatically with tens of thousands posting a single tweet, but less than 10,000 returning to Twitter to post an update. The number of users posting six times on the flood was miniscule.

It would seem, then, that Murthy's own results suggest that this "update culture" is prevalent among a very small percentage of Twitter subscribers. Further, it could be argued that these findings only reinforce what Katz and Lazarsfeld explained in 1955, when they noted that opinion leaders play a role in influencing the masses. Even more so, these findings seem to negate the idea that Twitter—as Murthy purports—can expand the possibility of how many, and whose, voices pierce through the societal noise loud enough to generate mass attention. Instead, it would seem that much like other information platforms, it is only a select few users who are driving public opinion and much of this influence is based on their number of followers and to a lesser degree, the subjects they are addressing.

In his conclusion, Murthy states that Twitter is an attempt at "starting the conversation rather than concluding it" (p. 152). He also admits that in a medium as active as social media, a much wider range of areas remain to be examined. To be sure, this is an understatement. True to its aim, *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age* serves as an avenue toward opening that dialogue. It demonstrates perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing mass communication scholars today: keeping abreast of technology even as it is evolving. It is indeed a daunting challenge for any scholar, and one that the author has tackled boldly, despite the obvious disadvantages that come with examining an issue that remains a moving, digital target.

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