

All Atwitter

*A history of Twitter, its impact on our culture, and
an assessment of our president's Twitter habit*

By Christopher Milligan

Delivered at the Literary Club on September 25, 2017

Social media. We know the term better by example than definition. Social media is Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It's also YouTube, LinkedIn, and Reddit. Along with Snapchat, Whatsapp, Pinterest, and any number of new entries in the field every day.

Social media is the most significant aspect of Web 2.0, a term that technology writer David Pogue defined in 2008 as "interactive websites where we, the public, supply the content." Social media sites provide broadcast channels for all of us to create and upload photos, videos, commentaries, and those one- or two-sentence quips called tweets. Based in San Francisco and with offices in major cities around the world, Twitter, Inc. provides a public platform for short messages created by users. (Of course, these messages are known as tweets.) Those who register for Twitter—all you need is a valid email address—can create their own messages as well and respond to those of others.

Twitter arrived on the scene in 2006. At that time, users could access the service through the website, but they could also send and receive tweets as text messages. The more people you followed, the more often your phone would vibrate, alerting you to a new tweet.

Because these tweets were sent as text messages to mobile phones, they had to comply with a character limit. With the arrival of smart phones—the iPhone was introduced in 2007—the need for a character limit went away. Nevertheless, Twitter retains this vestige of its early days: each tweet may contain no more than 140 characters. It's become the defining characteristic of Twitter.

In his 2013 book *Hatching Twitter*, Nick Bilton traces the company's origins back to Blogger, an earlier web service started by one of Twitter's founders. Blogger allowed users to publish their thoughts and photos like entries in a diary. The company's founding motto was "Push-Button Blogging for the People." This meant all people and all content. "It meant," writes Bilton, "that anyone should be able to publish whatever

they wanted.” This free-speech ethos carried through into Twitter’s founding and operating philosophy. It should come as no surprise then that access to Twitter has been blocked in China, Iran, and North Korea.

These days, most Twitter users access the platform solely on their smart phones. Users tap on an app icon—the white silhouette of a cheery little bird rising in flight against a blue background. As soon as the app opens, the updates populate your screen—posts from the Twitter users you follow plus an occasional ad. And you start scrolling. For my own feed, I might see posts from Walt Mossberg, the retired tech columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, food writer Michael Pollan, surgeon and author Atul Gawande, or posts by media outlets like the Business Courier or WIRED magazine.

Some posts are text only. Some have photos. Many are links to articles published by traditional media sources. Users may choose to react to the posts with a reply or by clicking the heart icon to indicate a “like.” They can also share a post with their own followers by retweeting.

When the Pew Research Center began tracking social media use in 2005, only 5% of the US adult population used a social media platform. Now, in just over a decade, nearly 7 in 10 use at least one social media site. The big fish is Facebook with 68% of US adults reporting usage. For Twitter, reported usage is 21%. It’s more popular with the 18-to-29 age group, where one in three report usage, than it is with those over 65, where only one in twenty report usage.

As with other social media, most Twitter users are consumers rather than producers. They read tweets, but don’t tweet much themselves. Those who do tweet create a lot of content. On average, Twitter’s 328 million users post a total of 500 million tweets per day.

So, who’s popular on Twitter? Let’s look at the Twitter accounts with the most followers. Of the top 30 accounts, three are media outlets—CNN, CNN Breaking News, and The New York Times. Three are social media platforms—YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter. The rest of the Twitter Top 30 are individuals. There are two professional athletes, three comedians, and three business tycoons—Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and yes, that famous-for-being-famous celebrity, Kim Kardashian. There are two US presidents. One named Barack; the other Donald. The rest—the remaining 14 accounts—are, astonishingly, pop singers. Among them are Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift, and Lady Gaga.

As I looked at this list, it struck me that there were no authors or journalists or scientists or composers or scholars. In fact, among the 24 individuals most followed on Twitter, there are only four college graduates—Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey, comedian Jimmy Fallon, and Donald J. Trump.

The account @realdonaldtrump was created in the spring of 2009. At the time Donald Trump was hosting *Celebrity Apprentice* and appearing regularly on the *Late Night with David Lettermen*. In fact, the very first tweet from Trump's account read

"Be sure to tune in and watch Donald Trump on Late Night with David Letterman as he presents the Top Ten List tonight!"

The early Trump tweets were often self-promotional:

"Trump SoHo opens this Friday and it is fantastic!"

"The premiere of 'Donald J. Trump's Fabulous World of Golf' is tomorrow night at 9"

Some were inspirational:

"Your higher self is in direct opposition to your comfort zone."

And, once in a while, even reflective:

"My persona will never be that of a wallflower - I'd rather build walls than cling to them."

It wasn't until the summer of 2011 that Trump began tweeting about politics, and he came out with guns blazing. Here are a few early examples:

"@BarackObama has sold guns to Mexican drug lords while his DOJ erodes our 2nd Amendment rights."

"Obama is addicted to spending America into insolvency. His record proves it."

"Congratulations to @RealSheriffJoe on his successful Cold Case Posse investigation which claims @BarackObama's 'birth certificate' is fake"

Throughout the presidential campaign, Donald Trump used Twitter regularly and—it must be said—to spectacular effect. After the election, it seemed certain that President Trump would moderate his tone. The campaign was over; there was the dignity of the office to consider. Surely he would revert to his self-promoting tweets. After all, he himself had assured the American people, “I will be so presidential you will be bored.”

But, as we now know, the tweeting continued. President Trump tweeted about a “so-called” judge. He tweeted that Nordstrom had treated Ivanka “so unfairly.” He tweeted that The New York Times, CNN, and all three big TV networks’ news divisions were fake news and “the enemy of the American people.” He tweeted that CNBC host Mika Brezezinski was “dumb as a rock.” And in ten separate tweets since taking office, he referred to Hillary Clinton as “Crooked Hillary.”

The president’s supporters offer quick explanations for all of these tweets. Trump is just speaking his mind. He’s being honest. He’s a New Yorker. He’s a fighter. He’s a counter puncher.

This past April a reporter for the *Financial Times* asked the President if he regrets any of his tweets. “I don’t regret anything,” he responded. “Because there is nothing you can do about it. You know, if you issue hundreds of tweets, and every once in a while you have a clinker, that’s not so bad.”

Steve Bannon, former White House chief strategist, offered a similar explanation for Trump’s sometimes strident tweets, in his interview with Charlie Rose. “You’re gonna get some good there, and every now and again you’re gonna get some less good—okay—but you’re just gonna have to live with it.”

This strikes me as a curious explanation—that the “less good” tweets are simply the expected random result of extraordinary output. That if you tweet often enough, like it or not, “clinkers” or “less good” things will be written. It brings to mind the Infinite Monkey Theorem. Plainly stated the proposition goes like this: Given an unlimited amount of time, a monkey, randomly striking keys on a typewriter, will eventually type the entire text of Hamlet.” It just happens—through no fault or agency of the monkey.

In a September 2016 piece for *The Atlantic*, Salena Zito, a Pittsburgh-based journalist covering national politics wrote of Trump, “The press takes him literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally.”

Zito was the first to use this rhetorical turn—“literally, but not seriously.” It’s a handy expression, but I don’t think there’s much to it beyond the idea of reading between the lines of Trump’s words for the real meaning. It’s as if to say, listen to Trump’s intensity,

not his expressed intentions or ideas. This is a conundrum. What are we to make of Trump's words if we don't take them seriously?

Twitter is immediate. You have the thought, tap it into your phone, and press Tweet. Within seconds it appears not for your review, but for the entire world to see. No trial-balloons with a select audience. No review by a communications team. It's immediate. And it's immediately permanent, a point that Twitter co-founder and CEO Jack Dorsey made in an interview with WIRED magazine earlier this year. "It's really important that we maintain open channels to our leaders, whether we like what they're saying or not," Dorsey said. "And the fact that tweets stick around is becoming critical to accountability."

Twitter faces many issues as it looks ahead. How does the platform grow the user base? How does it serve up interesting content that keeps users engaged for longer periods of time? How does the company address cyberbullying and fake accounts? Is its revenue model sustainable?

There are legal questions too. Is a tweet from the president an official communication? Can the President issue a pardon via Twitter? Do citizens have a First Amendment right to follow and reply to Trump on Twitter?

How in the world does all this play out? It's hard to know, but I'm sure of a few things. Twitter will adapt and survive well into its second decade. Twitter will not block President Trump. President Trump will continue to tweet "clinkers" now and again. People will be offended, sometimes justifiably. Oh, and the other certainty? We won't be bored.

Coda

If you have found yourself over the past year or two lamenting the state of social media and public discourse, especially in relation to presidential politics, I offer this reminder: In the election of 1800, a newspaper attacked the sitting president John Adams, calling him "a hideous hermaphroditical character which has neither the force and firmness of a man, nor the gentleness and sensibility of a woman." I checked: it's 133 characters, perfectly suitable for today's Twitter audience.