**Twitter: Effects on Communication and a Comparison to Speech and Text**

**Abstract**

This essay provides a brief description of Twitter as well as a summary of a recent study whereby children's perceptions of Twitter and whether it would be effective as a communication tool were discussed. This was followed by an analysis of properties of Twitter and its impact on communication content, goals as well as crisis communication. A brief explanation, of how Twitter reinforces past modes of communication, and its general effects on society as well as language, was also given. Lastly, Twitter was compared as a medium of communication to text and speech characteristics according to the seven features by David Crystal.

## 1. Introduction

Twitter is a microblogging platform and a social networking site that allows users to post tweets, which are short messages, each with a 140-character limit. Users can post pictures and videos as well. The common uses of Twitter include, updating one's status, keeping up with the entertainment industry, staying current with world events or simply staying in contact with friends (Cook, 2009). It has been reported that there are 218.3 million monthly active users in 2013, though it was argued that many of these active users are bots (Grandoni, 2013).

## 2. Summary of relevant literature

A recent study investigated how primary school children in Turkey perceive Twitter and whether it would be a good communication tool for the education system as Twitter was perceived to be able to improve communication, and enhance one's creativity and critical thinking skills (Gunuc, Misirli, & Odabasi, 2013). However, findings from the study revealed the negative perceptions of the adolescent participants towards Twitter, due to its limitations, such as the absence of privacy for communication and the restrictive nature of tweets due to the character limit (Gunuc, Misirli, & Odabasi, 2013). Hence, Twitter did not prove to be a viable communication tool for educational purposes, though it could facilitate interactions between students and teachers. On the other hand, the results were significant in that, they supported the stimulation hypothesis, that is, online communication aids social interaction and communication (Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007; Gunuc, Misirli, & Odabasi, 2013). This was since, participants preferred social networks commonly used by their peers, of

which Twitter was not a common mode of communication and social

interactions(Gunuc, Misirli, & Odabasi, 2013).

## 3. Properties of Twitter and its effects on communication

Firstly, due to the accessibility and limited privacy of tweets, people are often

led to self-censorship, monitoring the type of information that they share - whether it

may be too personal or controversial (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury,

2013) for the audience that can access the tweets. Hence, this affects the content of

communication and implies deliberation as well as careful thought on the part of the

user. This is further supported by research which shows that tweets are well-

structured under linguistic analysis and a large amount of lexical words were also

found within the sample of tweets (Hu, Talamadupula, & Kambhampati, 2013).

Secondly, on Twitter, two properties result in more information-sharing

tweets, which produces a different line of communication goals besides simply

updating one's statuses. The first property is the instantaneous nature of posting

tweets and replying tweets, and the second is, the ability to hashtag which produces

hyperlinks that allows other users to access your tweets under an overarching topic, or

under the section of trending topics if the hashtag gains popularity (MacArthur, n.d.).

These two properties have also affected communication during disasters, in

the dissemination of information – from a top-down approach to a peer-to-peer

approach (Seong, & Han, 2013). The accessibility and hyperlinked networks that

Twitter enables, facilitates quick dissemination of information, even before

mainstream media does (Seong, & Han, 2013). For instance, the news on the 2008

Sichuan earthquake first broke out on Twitter before it did in mainstream media

outlets (Seong, & Han, 2013). Personal communication between people, both within

the disaster area, and beyond, are also greatly facilitated through Twitter, such as

during the 2011 earthquake in Japan – where the safety of Koreans in Japan were

verified by Korean users of Twitter (Seong, & Han, 2013). During and after the

earthquake, Twitter users in Japan also provided up-to-date information about the

situation through the sharing of news and their statuses (Seong, & Han, 2013). Hence,

it can be seen that Twitter is chosen as the main medium of communication as well as

staying up-to-date with recent news – functioning as a type of chat and a news outlet at the same time.

## 4. Modes of communication Twitter has enforced

In general, Twitter has reinforced past modes of communication, rather than enable new kinds of communication. A fairly recent study has analysed and compared Twitter to various historical records of diaries -  the result being that the two mediums share several similarities, such as social chronicling (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury, 2013), though the two mediums may be distinguished through technological advancements. Twitter, for instance, enables large amounts of feedback to be received and processed at a faster rate through the ability to reply tweets almost instantaneously, and this can be evidently seen in the existence of information-seeking and response tweets (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury, 2013). This is in contrast to historical diaries, which though serve also a social purpose, were passed around fairly slowly (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury, 2013).

## 4.1 General effects of Twitter on society

Firstly, Twitter offers a platform for social chronicling which is an activity whereby people attempt to share meaning and form connections through the noting down and sharing of their daily events (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury, 2013). In this way, Twitter serves to create and reinforce social bonds between people and groups within and across societies by enhancing the sense of unity and belonging among the online communities on Twitter.

Secondly, Twitter provides a platform for people to express themselves – their thoughts and opinions, whether it is about themselves or the world around them (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury, 2013). This encourages individuals to be more vocal, especially if they lack opportunities to be involved in public discourse (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury, 2013), hence offering an outlet for individuals in society to voice out their discontent, or simply offer their view on pertinent issues.

Lastly, Twitter offers a platform for self-evaluation through the reflection of the morality of one's actions in everyday events (Humphreys, Gill, Krishnamurthy, & Newbury, 2013). This can affect individuals in society should a more introspective and reflective culture develop out of this medium.

## 4.2 General effects of Twitter on language

Twitter affects the language styles of users as a whole, though within Twitter itself, language styles may be noted to differ according to the communicative goals of the tweets (Paris, Thomas, & Wan, 2012). Generally, there are two views towards the common language style of Twitter. One is that users exhibit a curt, informal and emotive language style, considering the microblogging nature of Twitter, and its 140-character limit. In this language style, one could also find the ubiquitousness of Internet slang and abbreviations, as well as messages fraught with grammatical errors (Hu, Talamadupula, & Kambhampati, 2013).

However, research has also found that in comparison to text messages (SMS) and online chat, the language style tends to be more reserved, formal and less conversational due to its primary purpose of sharing information (Hu, Talamadupula, & Kambhampati, 2013). This is in line with the opposing view, that Twitter leans towards a language style found in more formal media (Hu, Talamadupula, & Kambhampati, 2013), which research supports in some ways. Data shows that informal forms such as, 'u' in place of 'you', are not representative of the language style of the general population of users, rather, it reflects the individualistic style of certain users (Hu, Talamadupula, & Kambhampati, 2013). Hence, the 140-character limit does not result in an informal language style as commonly thought, rather it encourages a concise yet formal style of language (Hu, Talamadupula, & Kambhampati, 2013).

## 5. Seven features introduced by Crystal (2006, Ch 3–6)

Firstly, in comparing the features of Twitter as a communication medium to speech-like and text-like characteristics – is Twitter time-bound, or space-bound (Bond, 2014)? Tweets can be argued to be more of the latter, similar to the characteristics of writing, as it is relatively permanent unless the user chooses to

delete the tweet. Also, in replying tweets, one can comment or reply anytime after the tweet is posted, and one can also read the posted tweet regardless of the amount of time that has passed since the tweet, and tweets are therefore not time bound. On the other hand, there can be a direct line of communication between a speaker and a known addressee (Bond, 2014), which is similar to the characteristics of speech, through the use of the symbol, "@", which allows the user to mention the chosen participants of the conversation. However, users can also choose to be indirect with the addressee unknown (Bond, 2014), similar to traditional writing, with no particular audience in mind, but simply updating one's status or sharing news for anyone to view.

Secondly, in the aspect of spontaneity (Bond, 2014), Twitter shares more text-like characteristics due to the lag between production and reception, even though this lag may be fairly short with recent technological advancements, yet one cannot ensure that the intended receipients or audience would read the tweets immediately after they were posted. Also, sentence boundaries are typically distinct and readers can choose to review and reexamine in depth the content of the tweet, much like readers can do with text in traditional media.

Thirdly, Twitter tends towards text-like characteristics in being visually decontextualised, since tweets consist mainly of text. However, deictic expressions are common due to the microblogging and instantaneous nature of Twitter, hence it is similar to speech in this way. Extralinguistic possibilities are also observed in Twitter with pictures, which is similar to text, though the usage of emoticons and videos may be argued to be similar to speech-like characteristics in the extralinguistic cues they may offer, such as facial expressions.

Next, communication on Twitter can be similar to characteristics of speech in being loosely structured. Contractions such as, 'isn't', along with informal vocabulary, can be frequently observed if the user chooses to employ an informal language style. Obscenity can also be observed, much like speech. However, as per the study mentioned before, language styles on Twitter tend to be more formal, though users may intentionally choose to employ an informal style (Hu,

Talamadupula, & Kambhampati, 2013), hence this feature of loose structure is debatable in the case of Twitter.

In addition, Twitter is similar to speech in its socially interactivity, being well suited to social functions such as maintaining social relationships and networks, as well as expressing attitudes and opinions (Bond, 2014). However, no prosody and non-verbal features such as gestures may be observed in tweets, with the exception being through pictures and videos, though it can be noted that one can imitate tone through the capitalisation of letters – implying shock, anger and other similar emotions. One could imitate facial expressions and gestures as well, through emoticons and emojis. Tweets can also serve to record facts and communicate thoughts or ideas, much like text.

Furthermore, tweets can be immediately revisable – errors can be removed without the reader ever seeing them, much like writing, though this is not so for posted tweets. Posted tweets, however, can be deleted and an error-free version can be posted. Interruptions are also not visible in between typing different segments of the tweet, which is, once again, similar to writing. Also, tweets are repeatedly revisable before posting – another text-like characteristic.

Lastly, tweets can be graphically rich, much like text, with pictures and videos, though it can be argued that text in tweets can mimick prosody in speech such as loudness through capitalisation of letters, though this is fairly limited. Sounds can also be mimicked, such as, "haha", helping tweets adopt speech-like characteristics.

## 6. Conclusion

Overall, as a medium of communication, Twitter offers a greater and quicker accessibility to information, whilst serving social purposes and establishing networks between people. Research has also shown surprising evidence for a more formal style of lanugage on Twitter, despite beliefs that the character restrictions and microblogging nature of Twitter has resulted in ungrammatical, informal and unstructured language styles. Comparing Twitter to speech-like and text-like characteristics using the seven features offered by David Crystal, it was found that

Twitter shares more text-like characteristics, though it does contain some speech-like characteristics as well.

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