

Describe one medium of communication not discussed in class and compare it to both speech and text.

Abstract

In this paper, I examine the features of Twitter as a relatively new mode of communication and compare it to the features of speech and text. It appears that Twitter exhibits features of both speech and text; however is more like the latter on the whole. The language used on Twitter is certainly different from traditional interaction. With the convenience of sharing information and expressing views, Twitter has many users worldwide. While Twitter is generally a place with users who have good internet etiquette, there are also users that have abused it. Twitter has thus become a double-edged sword that has both benefitted and harmed society. In all, Twitter has in many ways changed the way the world communicates, especially in the setting of a technology-driven world we have today.

Keywords: Twitter, communication, internet, language

INTRODUCTION

Communication now comes in forms that stretch beyond face-to-face conversations and handwritten letters. With technological advancements, individuals are now able to express their thoughts and interact with others through the virtual space in a matter of seconds. Communicating virtually is now made possible with social media platforms such as Twitter.

Twitter is a micro-blogging site which allows users to express their views and share information with other users. Users create unique Twitter handles (or usernames) to identify themselves, and they typically create a community of followers who are usually either friends they are personally already acquainted with, and/or other users who share similar ideas and interests as them. Twitter users are able to send out and share bite-sized posts which are strictly restricted to 140 characters per post. Users are also able to connect through the ‘hashtags’ system, which allows similarly-discussed topics to be grouped together. Additionally, Twitter also provides users with the option of ‘retweeting’ tweets they typically agree with, and mark those they like with a ‘favourite’. Clearly, with 271 million users who are active monthly (Twitter, 2014), Twitter serves as a useful tool for communication in today’s world. It is available in about 35 languages (Twitter, 2014) and it even has been

developed into a mobile application, thus making it even more convenient for individuals to share information.

With influential people such as celebrities and even politicians turning to Twitter it is little wonder that it has gained popularity amongst the masses. The President of the United States even took his campaigning to Twitter during the 2008 elections (Bae & Lee, 2012), and again in 2012 after seeing how impactful this move was in helping him reach out to supporters who were increasingly involved in social media. Additionally, the public is also increasingly involved in political discussions on Twitter (Jungherr, 2014). What is it about Twitter that creates such an impact on internet users? Certainly it is in many ways different from the traditional speech and text, yet in many other ways also shares features which are similar to speech and text. This paper will include a discussion on these similarities and differences, its uses in communication today, as well as its impact on society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In preparing for this write-up, several useful literatures surfaced in allowing us to understand the nature of Twitter as a relatively new medium of communication. For instance, Crystal (2006) provided insights into the linguistic patterns and etiquettes of the Web. The discussion in his work includes the unique aspects of language-use online, as opposed to typical written texts. In his work, Crystal introduced the seven features of speech and text, providing further explanation on these features. His work has largely aided in the formulation of this paper. Celli and Rossi (2013) explored the relationships of Twitter users by looking into 200,000 posts including re-tweets and replies. From the study, it is evident that the more emotionally stable users who are more emotionally secure form greater links and larger networks with other users. Clearly, users who are well-received will have more users to agree with their views as demonstrated by the numerous re-tweets their posts receive. In addition, Twitter (2014) has provided me with several important insights into the Twitter corporation including relevant statistics as well as how certain entities have benefitted from using Twitter as a medium of communication.

DISCUSSION

Crystal (2006) mentions that due to the nature of the internet which is different from real life interaction, users often find themselves expanding and reinventing their vocabulary knowledge to capture the essence of their experiences. This is because internet communication largely relies on language-use, unlike physical communication which typically also involves factors such as tone and body language. Inevitably, those factors are difficult to be captured using words. Notably, the language used in Twitter would then defer vastly from traditional speech and text. Given the constraints of each post, a typical user would be faced with a challenge to capture the essence of the intended message in less than 140 characters.

(i) Features of Twitter

Speech Like	Text Like
Time bound	Space bound
Spontaneous	Contrived
Face-to-face	Visually decontextualized
Loosely structured	Elaborately structured
Socially interactive	Factually communicative
Immediately revisable	Repeatedly revisable
Prosodically rich	Graphically rich

Table 1

Twitter is a new-age medium of communication which shares common features with both speech and text. For instance, considering the seven features described by Crystal (2006) summarised in Table 1, Twitter is in many ways similar to text. Twitter is not space bound to a certain extent; this is especially so for users who do not privatise their accounts. In this manner, the user will not be aware of who is reading his posts. It is also not permanent as users have the option of deleting their posts from their accounts. Similarly, to an extent Twitter can also be said to be time bound. Even though the users are typically not present in

one setting, it is possible for the ‘speaker’, which in this case, the sender of the tweet, to have a particular receiver in mind. This can be manifested with the user directing his tweet post to other specific users by including the twitter handle of the said user(s). Unlike the spontaneous nature of Speech, Twitter models after text in a manner that they tend to be contrived. A Twitter user would typically think of a subject to post, and given the character limit, has to carefully plan on what he would want to include in the post. However, it is also possible for tweet posts to be spontaneous to an extent. This is most likely the case when a user wishes to reply to the tweet post of a friend, possibly engaging in a witty exchange as would a person be in a typical conversation. Twitter posts are similar to text in a way that deictic expressions are not typically used on their own to avoid ambiguity or misinterpretation of meaning. As such, it is rather visually decontextualized.

Additionally, as would a writer of a piece of text be, Twitter also features revisability, although to a limited extent. The user would be able to make changes to the unpublished tweet post should he find some elements of it to be unsatisfactory or unnecessary. This is similar to a draft of a text, such as an unsent letter. Twitter allows users to be both formal and informal, albeit the latter is a more common phenomenon amongst the general masses. As such, Twitter posts can be both loosely structured as well as elaborately structured, depending on the degree of formality required. Clearly, Twitter posts by officials and politicians would lean more toward the formal side. Even so, most of these more ‘formal’ posts would typically be structured slightly more loosely in a bid to sound more approachable to the common man. However, in such cases, obscenity and slang are still avoided. At the same time, contractions are often used in the construction of tweets.

Although it appears that Twitter is mainly text-like, due to its highly interactive nature, it is socially interactive, which is a speech-like feature. In a typical face-to-face conversation, the interlocutors are able to provide a response with each passing expression. Similarly, Twitter broadcasts messages of users in real-time, allowing them to provide replies and ‘retweets’ immediately. Unlike the traditional text medium of communication such as mailed letters, Twitter enables conversations to continue without having users to wait. This is of course, subject to the availability of the user; if one is not connected to the news feed, he would be unable to view and reply messages in real-time.

Furthermore, it has been noted that the Web is graphically rich (Crystal, 2006) as compared to any recorded written language. In this aspect, one would analyse the diversity of written manifestation of language, focusing linguistic features such as spelling and vocabulary. With this in mind, Twitter is in many ways graphically rich as in the case of Text. Despite and perhaps due to the very restricted nature of Twitter posts, the language used in Twitter emerges as a kind of its own. Acronyms are often used, for instance to express emotions felt, as succinctly as possible. The following table explains the meaning behind several commonly used acronyms.

Acronym	Meaning
LOL	Laugh Out Loud
ROFL	Roll On Floor Laughing
WTH	What the hell?
BTW	By the way
YOLO	You Only Live Once

Table 2

Most of these terms can be used in isolation, or collaboratively with words to convey a particular message. It is evident that with the diverse use of language as demonstrated above, Twitter is indeed graphically rich. Acronyms are usually created to express an experience or emotions in a short manner possible. However, it becomes problematic when lengthy terms are created into acronyms which do not come as intuitive to the masses. As such, it does not serve its purpose to create a shortened term which is easily understood by the general internet community. Additionally, Twitter allows users to include pictures and videos in their posts, to further aid them in relaying their messages in an effective manner, and a manner which allows people to better understand the point they wish to make.

In contrast, Twitter is not prosodically rich like speech. It is not possible to express emotions on Twitter without the presence of features such as tone and rhythm. However, to compensate the absence of such features, Twitter users often express their feelings through

the use of emoticons, made up of letters and other symbols. The following table demonstrates some of the basic emoticons typically used in tweet posts. Given the 140-character limit imposed on users, emoticons allow them to express more with less.

Emoticon	Emotion Expressed
:)	Happy
:(Sad
(T.T)	Crying face
(:/)	Apologetic face

Table 3

(ii) The impact of Twitter on society

Apart from serving as a means of communication, Twitter can also be a platform for abuse. Inevitably, cyber-bullying is widespread in today's society. It has been reported that there are about 15,000 tweets daily which are associated to bullying acts (Fitzgerald, 2012). The Internet allows individuals to maintain a certain degree of anonymity, at least on the surface.

It is possible to set up Twitter accounts created for the sole purpose of trolling. On the other hand, it is also possible for users with legitimate, active Twitter accounts to abuse the function and convenience of Twitter by posting offensive comments to other users. Seeing how convenient and widespread Twitter is at present, users are able to send out abusive or offensive comments without having to deal with fear or physical retaliation, as would a typical face-to-face conversation would require. In addition, with the option of anonymity in virtual space, it makes it easier for users to pass off abusive comments even to complete strangers. Even though a user might make the decision to delete or revise such a post, the fact remains that it has already been broadcasted for the public to see. Furthermore, with the internet being viral in nature, such a post could already create a problem leaving the user with little chances to mitigate the issue. Clearly, this surfaces the insensitivity in individuals within the society.

However, all is not lost with the emergence of Twitter. There have been numerous cases whereby Twitter was used as a platform to raise awareness on charity and noble causes. One of the more prominent success stories featured by Twitter is the project initiated by a Scott Harrison which focuses on raising awareness on the global water shortage situation (Twitter, 2014). It was claimed that this project went viral through the retweets and relaying of information on the cause of the project. With the dissemination of tweets containing facts about the world's potable water shortage, \$15 million was successfully raised. His tweets contained unique videos that tell the story of dirty water being circulated in Manhattan. In this aspect, the ability to include pictures and videos to tweet posts to emphasise the importance on an intended message, places Twitter as a more powerful tool of communication, as compared to traditional speech and text. Furthermore, Celli and Rossi (2013) mentioned that chains of retweets are closely linked to the fact that stable users are able to influence other users. This makes it easier for influential people such as politicians or cause enthusiasts such as for the case of Scott Harrison to disseminate their intended message to a wide audience in the virtual world.

As compared to spreading information through text such as flyers, or speeches as would a traditional campaign be, Twitter complements the campaigning experience since it allows reaction to be collected in real time. Politicians or campaign champions are able to be in touch with the on-going conversations on Twitter. Furthermore, the public is increasingly seen to be more involved in politics as they would have been just a few decades ago.

CONCLUSION

Communication allows individuals to connect and share information. Regardless of time and location, with the development of new technology, people are able to interact without having to be in each other's physical presence. Through the discussion, it appears that Twitter does share certain similar features with both speech and text, albeit the inclination for it to be text-like is greater. Twitter has enabled individuals with similar interests to connect in a more convenient and efficient way. Friends and acquaintances no longer need to undergo a long duration of waiting to write and receive replies. Twitter does not only benefit individuals. Additionally, Twitter has proven to benefit politicians as well as

large firms (Zimmerman & Sahlin, 2010) in helping them to connect with their supporters. It certainly breaks down some barriers, creating a more informal platform for conversations and valuable feedback to take place. At the same time, it is significant that the language-use on Twitter is certainly one that has evolved along with technology. It is notably more brief and disseminated more quickly – a possible reflection of the society today.

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