

7 things you should know about...

Microblogging

Scenario

Every spring, Dr. LeClerc accompanies a class of undergraduates to Paris, where they immerse themselves in Parisian society and study French cinema. This year, he decides to experiment with Twitter as a way to capture student observations and reflections. He assigns a unique hashtag for the class and instructs the students to “tweet” about their impressions of the city. Using a host of third-party Twitter applications, students submit short text posts, upload photos, and post audio or video comments. In particular, Dr. LeClerc encourages the students to create short videos that symbolize their learning experiences and embody the spirit of the city.

As the quarter progresses, students post short reflections about an outing they took to a French movie studio and an intense discussion with a film director. Aside from the group activities, the students work on independent projects, and they follow each other's posts to see what their classmates are doing in various parts of the city. Each student's posts represent a unique perspective on Paris and French cinema, and the aggregate of all of the posts with the course hashtag represents the collective experience of the class.

Back on campus, graduate students in Dr. Shannon's course Documentary and New Media intently follow the microblog, which serves as raw material for a documentary the class is producing. Through their own Twitter accounts, the graduate students offer suggestions to the students overseas, ask for additional information about specific posts, and request video clips of particular places and events in Paris. The resulting documentary combines audio and video posted by the students in France with commentary and other footage supplied by the graduate students on campus. The video captures not only French cinema but also the unfolding story of the undergraduates' visit to Paris, their immersion in French culture, and their learning experiences.

The graduate class uses Twitter to promote their documentary to the public, and the Twitter account for the film class collects hundreds of followers. When a first cut of the video is finished and available on the department website, the team announces it on Twitter. Many who watch the documentary use Twitter to post comments and suggest improvements. The team discusses this feedback and makes changes based on what they learn. A new announcement goes out on Twitter for the “final cut,” which is featured prominently on the university website.

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What is it?

Microblogging is the practice of posting small pieces of digital content—which could be text, pictures, links, short videos, or other media—on the Internet. Microblogging has become popular among groups of friends and professional colleagues who frequently update content and follow each other's posts, creating a sense of online community. Twitter is currently the best-known microblogging site, its popularity supported by a growing collection of add-on applications that enable different and often more engaging microblog updates, such as TwitPic for uploading pictures or PollyTrade for buying and selling stocks. Meanwhile, a number of competing microblog applications—some open source, many aimed at specific interest groups—continue to challenge Twitter's popularity. This resulting profusion of tools is helping to define new possibilities for this type of communication.

Who's doing it?

In mainstream culture, microblogging has become an extremely popular channel for both professional and personal pursuits. Friends use it to keep in touch, business associates use it to coordinate meetings or share useful resources, and celebrities and politicians (or their publicists) microblog about concert dates, lectures, book releases, or tour schedules. For higher education, microblogging is an increasingly important tool for communities of practice, enabling scholars to communicate informally on subjects of shared interest and to open windows into their own projects, sparking interest and discovery among peers. Some universities are considering using microblogging in the curriculum to emphasize timeliness, student engagement, and aggregation of artifacts relevant to course content and experience. At some institutions, faculty offer course-centric microblogging streams to create a backchannel among students in the classroom. Stephen Prothero, professor of religion at Boston University, has set himself the challenge of using Twitter to sum up eight major religions, in a maximum of 140 characters per post. The microblogs he offers will feed into a book that he is writing on the same topic.

How does it work?

To post a microblog or to read those posted by others, subscribers must typically create accounts, which are linked with cell phones, e-mail accounts, instant messaging, web pages—any medium they will use to send updates. Users can then post updates or

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“follow” the posts of other people. These posts might consist of short text snippets (maximum number of characters specified by the application), a photo, an audio clip, or a few seconds of video, any of which can be shared publicly or with a selected group of subscribers. As updates are added, they are aggregated into a personal stream of information, sometimes fused with updates from other users they have chosen to follow. Users tag posts with keywords so that others can search topics and follow comments and conversations. Those who have accounts at multiple services might use an aggregator such as FriendFeed or Socialthing!, which deliver streams from several social networking sites to a single location and also allow customization of filters and streams.

Why is it significant?

Microblogging offers a portable communication mode that feels organic and spontaneous to many and has captured the public imagination. The promise of instant publication with few restrictions on content means that microblogging services can offer instant news coverage from individuals witnessing or directly involved in events as they unfold, something that can be especially valuable for issues not covered by traditional news sources. In the aftermath of the disputed recent presidential election in Iran, for example, official news outlets found access and communication restricted, but the microblogging world went into hyperdrive as onlookers posted up-to-the-minute personal accounts from inside the country and followers elsewhere offered commentary. In such a context, microblogs may give voice to a segment of society that is otherwise not heard. Marketers follow posts on microblogging sites to track trends and mine data about the success of products, performances, or services. On a smaller scale, when used by work groups as a collaborative tool, a microblogging application can invite colleagues to share information while providing an easy means for them to stay connected through a project life cycle—from brainstorming to troubleshooting to evaluation.

What are the downsides?

The conversational world of microblogging is not to everyone's taste. Some see it as ephemeral, self-indulgent, or a waste of time, and posts or applications that indicate where microbloggers are and when they will be away from home pose a potential risk to users. Stweet, a mashup of Twitter and Google maps, for example, enables followers to watch a street-level image that indicates where individuals are when they post to Twitter. Such applications, when added to the day-in-the-life character of what is being recorded and the ubiquity of technology, could enable stalker-like behavior and put the famous and the vulnerable at risk—from citizen paparazzi or those with criminal intent. Moreover, the casual nature of microblogging and its immediacy continue to be a concern with regard to the release of sensitive information, which would be much less likely to be made public through the more deliberate, vetted processes of traditional publishing.

Where is it going?

The posting of microblogs has enjoyed a popular upsurge this year, with add-ons appearing regularly that enable more sophisticated updates and interaction with other applications. By enabling or simplifying a variety of communication channels, these add-on tools are making subtle changes to the character of microblogs, whether allowing users to conduct informal polling among followers or allowing them to set up several blog posts to be sent at specified times. As the range of such tools grows, users might be able to send appointment reminders and project deadlines or, for example, to poll a study group before deciding to rewrite the conclusion of a joint paper. The introduction of new tools, and in particular the increasing ease with which multimedia can be posted, will determine where microblogging goes in the near term. Use of microblogging may reintroduce the epigram or aphorism as a literary form—supported this time by visuals—while scholars can include supporting media as they comment or consult on ongoing projects. Applications that invite users to update with video, voice clips, and photos or to mark up content sent by another with editing or art tools may move collaboration on art projects to the speed of conversation.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

In academe, microblogging is used to offer a backchannel forum during live classes, to send reminders of test dates and project deadlines, to build online community, and to offer notification of class cancellations due to bad weather. As with many communication modes enabled by electronic tools, care must be taken to separate signal from noise. For large classes, filters might be advisable to keep from overwhelming a microblog conversation, but learning teams, smaller seminar classes, and project-based activities could all benefit from the collaborative opportunities offered by these tools. Study groups can offer multiple points of view on a topic, conduct research from different library locations, or send a virtual shout-out to colleagues about a discovery or the results of an experiment so that all members can discuss what that means to the project at hand. By offering a variety of media and increasingly sophisticated tools, microblogging fosters communication for students that seems more natural and enjoyable and could inspire them in new genres of performances or art.