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Internet Connection

Exploring the Potential of Twitter as a Research Tool

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Twitter (www.twitter.com) has become kind of a popular culture punch line. It's often used as a shorthand to represent how self-obsessed and self-involved the American culture has become, and while Twitter does lend itself to a kind of needless sharing ("I just bought new shoes!"), it also has some potentially useful features.

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to post and read 140-character status messages. These short bursts of information, called tweets, can be anything from what someone had for lunch to feedback on a live event, like a presidential press conference.

Much of the library literature focuses on Twitter as either a patron outreach tool or as a way to collect patron feedback. However, Twitter offers some functionality that might be especially helpful to librarians in the behavioral and social sciences—functionality that could also prove helpful to faculty researching and/or teaching within those disciplines.

One of the ways Twitter could be helpful is as a search tool. Most search tools are historical by nature because they're searching older information that took some time to assemble (Arnold 2009, 8). Even a standard Google search does not provide a way to search results chronologically. A standard Google News search provides that ability; however, it does not index as much as a generic Google search. Twitter, which relies on users posting quick and often responsive messages about what is going on at any given moment, is more appropriate for capturing hypercurrent information. In effect, it allows searchers to capture the Zeitgeist of certain events, based upon the perspective of certain people, in this case, Twitter users. So while it does not reliably provide a sample representative of the United States, Twitter does provide some insights into what certain people are talking about. For

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instance, as part of her examination of Barack Obama's popularity during his 2008 presidential campaign, Cetina examined Twitter as one of Obama's outreach tools (2009, 135).

We can see another example when comparing Twitter and Google Trends. The Google Trends tool (www.google.com/trends) allows users to track search terms, but it does not necessarily tell you what people are saying about an event. So while it does give researchers some semblance of what certain people are interested in via the search volume of keywords, it does not really convey what the masses are saying about the idea. A recent Google Trends search of Obama healthcare shows search volume for those terms and links to some blogs and news stories. A Twitter keyword search on the same topic shows what Twitter users are actually saying about the two ideas and also reveals the links they are using to facilitate their discussion.

Searching specific ideas using keyword searches on Twitter can have tremendous research applications. Eysenbach recently wrote about the infodemiological implications of sites like Twitter, allowing researchers to potentially track diseases based upon mentions in tweets:

> Public health professionals also need to know about surges in information demand, be it to address "epidemics of fear" by supplying the public with appropriate information, or to detect real disease outbreaks for which spikes in Internet searches or chatter in newsgroups and postings on microblogs (Twitter etc) may be an early predictor (2009).

This type of usage has tremendous potential for social and behavioral sciences researchers, in terms of seeing both what topics are reverberating with the public as well as what Twitter users are actually saying about the topic. Twitter gives the ability to track both the subject and content of conversations.

Twitter also has some functionality that allows searchers to make their searches more precise. One way to do that is with the use of a hashtag (#), which users use to describe (or "tag," in the parlance of Web 2.0) tweets with a subject. This concept is probably better known to librarians as a subject heading. The hashtag lets users search the subject of a tweet, rather than the specific content. So while a search for sociology could turn up a fair number of tweets from students broadcasting they are in sociology class or doing sociology homework, a search for #sociology should only reveal tweets where the user has chosen to identify the subject of the tweet as a whole as sociology. This can be especially helpful for some types of searches. One good example are tweets originating from conferences. Most conferences now announce a hashtag to describe tweets referring to that conference. The most recent American Sociological Association (ASA) meeting used the hashtag #asa09, meaning to find all tweets about that

particular conference, all one needs to do is search Twitter for #asa09. Faculty unable to attend a conference might find this way of catching up to be especially helpful. Whereas most conference Websites will display some representation of what was discussed without much filtering or analysis, searching tweets will connect users to content deemed interesting enough to tweet about. Often, tweets will even explore conference material in an in-depth manner. Or, to be more precise, they'll link to a more in-depth analysis. It's certainly not a conference replacement, but it is a way to get some of the conference experience, especially the between-session talk, without leaving the office. For librarians, who often cannot afford to attend nonlibrary conferences in disciplines for which they are responsible, this can be a huge boon in terms of providing resources and materials.

Twitter, at its core, provides access to conversations. This also makes it easy to find people to follow within Twitter. A Twitter user follows the updates, or tweets, of people she follows. Following is the action that allows a Twitter user to see the tweets composed by all of the people a user chooses to follow. Within Twitter, all users can be followed or follow. Keyword searching, as well as hashtag searching, allows a Twitter user to find people to follow. If someone is tweeting something on a topic in which another Twitter user is interested, he can follow the user and receive all of their subsequent updates. This feature could be helpful if you are following a thought leader, an author, or even a faculty member at your own institution. You can use the people you follow to find other users you also might want to follow, making use of a virtual recommendation service. Going back to our A.S.A. example, if one was to follow everyone who posted something with the #asa09 hashtag, one would have a list of people involved in sociology to the extent they tweeted about the A.S.A. annual meeting in some way. Reading their tweets could connect a Twitter user to articles and developments within sociology. Looking at who those A.S.A. Twitter users respond to (within Twitter, responses to a specific person are prefaced with @ and the username of the person being responded to) and follow, one could grow their follower list even more. Once again, we see potential for faculty teaching and researching within the social and behavioral sciences disciplines. In this case, we see Twitter's potential as an alternative news and information stream. At its best and most ideal, it can become a mass-curated news feed. At its worst, it can become an endless list of what sociologists are eating for lunch.

Twitter has a huge social component, but that does not mean the social interactions within Twitter necessarily mirror real life social ones. Huberman, Romero, and Wu's study of social networks within Twitter found "that a link between any two people does not necessarily imply an interaction between them . . . most of the links declared within Twitter were meaningless from an interaction point of view" (2009). So while it is not wise to draw any kind of relationship conclusions based upon someone's followers and who they

follow, it can still be useful to look at users' networks to see if you might be interested in tracking some of the same tweets.

Twitter, conceptualized at its loftiest, could also represent the future of the exchange of scholarly ideas. Weissmann contends, perhaps somewhat tongue-in-cheek, that intellect Walter Benjamin would have enjoyed a tool like Twitter because of the way it allowed people to readily and easily exchange ideas (2009, 2017–18). Of course, the limitations on the number of characters allowed for a tweet make expanding upon these ideas a bit more challenging, if not impossible.

While Twitter serves as the medium for the exchange of some scholarly ideas, it's difficult to say how many quality ideas cross the Twitter transom and if those 140-character ideas are of any substantial academic value. Right now, Twitter is all about its potential. It has potential as a news delivery system. It has some potential as a way of gathering viewpoints on current topics. Finally, Twitter has some potential to connect people by their interests. If a social service like Facebook has entrenched its users in a world of people they already know in some way, Twitter, often at its best, connects strangers through ideas.

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