

MEDIA, ARTS, AND CULTURE

Ipsographing the Subject or, The Contradictions of Twitter

MARK A. McCUTCHEON

Athabasca University, Athabasca, Alberta, Canada

#Briefing

Twitter (<http://twitter.com>) is a 'microblogging' program that US programmer and entrepreneur Jack Dorsey launched in 2006. It is similar to earlier 'Web 2.0' applications like blogs, podcasts, and social networks like Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>): the service is free to use, and with it a user can send short text messages of up to 140 characters in length. The brevity of Twitter's message capacity has prompted its description as a 'micro-' blog service; however, as corporate media and communications scholars have recently learned, it is the combination of soundbite-ready brevity, adaptability to portable devices, and broadcast reach that have distinguished Twitter's specific contribution to the Web 2.0 mediascape. It's like a digital telegraph system, except that your telegraph can be broadcast, not just sent to one recipient. Twitter messages, or 'tweets,' tend to be much shorter than average blog posts; they can be sent from computers, mobile phones, and other portable digital devices; and—depending on how a user sets one's account—tweets can be either reserved only for one's private circle of contacts, or published to the publicly available Web. The service has a strong bias towards public tweeting: the user who would only let 'approved' people follow one's tweets is advised that 'you WILL NOT be on the public timeline.' For users who leave their tweeting public (the default setting), all messages are displayed and archived at a web address unique to the user (for instance, my Twitter page is twitter.com/sonicfiction). In addition, message topics are also flagged by keyword and 'hash tags:' tagging a topic with # as a prefix (e.g. #IranElection) links it to all other messages that include the same tagged topic.

Dr. Mark A. McCutcheon is Assistant Professor with the Centres for Language and Literature and for Integrated Studies at Athabasca University, Alberta. He researches the Romantic and postcolonial contexts of popular culture, especially in new media and performance. He can be reached via e-mail at mccutcheon@athabascau.ca and via Twitter at <http://twitter.com/sonicfiction>.

The use of tagged topics and keywords makes tweets searchable by topic, and aggregates tweets into what the Twitter home page calls 'trending topics.' For example, at the time of writing, #IranElection has returned as a trending topic after several weeks on the topic sidelines. The display of aggregated topics is new to the Twitter home page as of late 2009; just a few months ago the home page only showed a short description of the service and a login prompt. The aggregator now both documents and develops trending topics: as more commercial advertisers, especially spammers, exploit the service, trending topics frequently show up as nonsensical keywords in unrelated tweets; for example, a recent rash of pornographic spam tweets included 'H1N1' to attract attention.

On any given day, Twitter's three lists of trending topics (sorted by minute, day, and week) show items that seem to confirm the service's reputation as trivial and self-indulgent. Right now, for instance, trending topics include the rappers Jay-Z and Kanye West, the TV shows *Heroes* and *Gossip Girl*, and anecdote-inviting topics like 'Pirate Day,' 'whatnottowear,' and 'inmyhood.' Then again, current topics also include Qaddafi, IranElection, and Sydney.

#Paradox of form: Filter and feed

Perhaps the mainstream media's surge of interest in Twitter this past year has had to do with its functions as both a news filter and a news feed. The trending topics that appear on the home page (and as a sidebar on the user's page) represent a kind of filter by aggregating tweets on the most popular topics among users. And yet clicking on any of these topics, or searching a topic by keyword or tagged phrase, yields a feed of results that is anything but filtered. I find that the page of tweets on any given trending topic makes for vertiginous reading: sorted by time posted, the tweets compose a kind of cento, a tissue of short quotations—quips, reports, retorts, SMS abbreviations, Internet links, and 're-tweets': tweets deemed worthy of relaying by other Twitter users. (See Okáčová 2009 for an introduction to the obscure cento genre.) As if the abrupt show of heteroglossia wasn't enough, the site automatically updates to show how many more tweets on a topic have been posted since you started looking. Clicking this announcement prompts a cascade of newer tweets, and if the topic is hot enough, it becomes impossible simply to read all the incoming posts—never mind undertake anything like vetting or fact-checking.

So herein lies a paradox of Twitter: the same aggregators that filter the hottest topics also feed those topics with anything and everything

posted about them. Or, to put it in tweet-friendly short form: Twitter's feed counteracts its filter. I recently made the mistake of scanning the 'H1N1' topic when it re-emerged as a trending topic about a week ago. The resulting deluge of wisecracks, cellphone dispatches from classrooms, links to international media stories, and unsupported speculations was maybe the most unhelpful and anxiety-inducing encounter I've had with mass media since September 11, 2001. Suffice to say, I didn't come away feeling any better informed about the issue. Rather, worse—and more confused as well. Celebrity gossip, hot links, and random rants aside, the 'newsworthy' content available on Twitter activates at once the technological and the postmodern sublime: its interface performs a kind of real-time information overload, as extant posts pastiche perspectives on a topic, and new posts pour down to displace them; while the content and source of these posts demands a critical reading defied by their sheer volume. While Twitter's homepage invites us to 'discover what's happening right now,' its content requires us to problematize 'what's happening' as not an empirical event, but a negative dialectic question: *Is it happening?* (Lyotard 1993, 254).

#Dialectic of function: Trivia versus traction

Twitter's feed function (with its high turnover of new posts and the textual disposability that it suggests) and its frequent filtration of entertainment topics point to a related Twitter paradox: its reputation for both inconsequential trivia and political praxis. This paradox frames the majority of Twitter's coverage in — and adoption by — the corporate news media. Early reports about Twitter as a new social-media service tended to characterize its brevity as faddish (and vaguely symptomatic of 'digital-native' youth), and its content as trivial — until tweets from Mumbai in November 2008 and Iran earlier this year began dramatically contradicting the triviality of tweets, and commanding substantial global audiences, prompting news programmers to recognize in Twitter's previously ridiculed brevity an eminently economical source of soundbites. Tweets have since quickly made their way into regular reporting on CNN and other news channels and programs.

While the same concerns about filtration, overload, and veracity obtain, the use of Twitter in the Iran election in the summer of 2009 represents a dramatic rejuvenation of the 'borderless' idealism that popularized the Internet in the 1990s; for the same reason, it also provided the corporate news media with an ideally hegemonic narrative about new media and neoliberal globalization, in which 'ordinary' (read: Westernized

and middle-class) Iranians became militant citizen journalists, risking (and in too many cases giving) their lives to expose a repressive state apparatus in the name of democracy. The Iran election (which as I said recurs as a Twitter topic, even if it has dropped from the corporate news radar) thus gave new clout and traction to the public perception of Twitter as something more than yet another Web 2.0 application: a program whose strengths are design simplicity and cross-platform adaptability, resulting in what is essentially broadband telegraphy: simultaneously peer-to-peer and broadcast communication, from anywhere or anything online or satellite-linked.

#Dilemma of Twitteracy: Corruption or creativity?

Woven into the debate over Twitter's triviality versus its efficacy is a perennial and familiar discourse of new media as a threat to language, memory, and cognition. In early 2009, British neuroscientist Lady Susan Greenfield argued that social media like Twitter 'are devoid of cohesive narrative and long-term significance,' and hypothesized that 'the mid-21st century mind might almost be infantilised, characterised by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathise and a shaky sense of identity' (quoted in Wintour 2009, ¶2-4). Such speculations aren't just tricky to substantiate, they also reproduce a line of media criticism that includes complaints about e-mail composition (declared 'awful' by *Time* magazine in 1994 [Elmer-Dewitt 1994, ¶4]) and reaches back through Western history: to Swift's 1712 *Proposal for Correcting the English Tongue*, in which he anticipated complaints against text messaging (in chauvinistic terms that suggest something of the bias behind his modern-day counterparts): 'This perpetual Disposition to shorten our Words, by retrenching the Vowels, is nothing else but a tendency to lapse into the Barbarity of those Northern Nations from whom we are descended, and whose Languages labour all under the same Defect' (26). And, further back, to the anonymous 'Advice' published for what in 1682 was the relatively new print industry, bemoaning (this time in gendered language)

the innumerable insolences of that Presse [in] softening our Language, and so to confound the rules of spelling, that the weake and ignorant may justify their involuntary slips from such voluntarie errors as you commit; or from a more generall ground whereby now of late days, Libertie of writing is become as reasonable, as libertie of beleiving [sic]

and worship: And so there should remain no such thing as true and false spelling in the English Tongue. (Swift 1712, 8)

And, ultimately, to the fourth-century BC story of Theuth, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, where the Egyptian god is blamed for inventing a new medium only useful for forgetting: 'You, who are the father of writing, have out of fondness for your off-spring attributed to it quite the opposite of its real function. Those who acquire it will cease to exercise their memory and become forgetful' (quoted in Postman 1992, 4).

David Thornburg documents this tradition of hostility to new media in education, from defenses of bark against chalk slates in 1703, defenses of slates against paper in 1815, defenses of pencil against ink in 1907, defenses of nib pens against disposable ballpoints in 1950 (quoted in Anderson 2009).

In all cases, the once-menacing new medium later becomes the established norm against which to criticize new technologies; and this discursive pattern recurs in most Western systems of cultural production (see McCutcheon 2007 for a short history of this pattern in the music industry). And in most cases, the argument against new media is based on a specious premise of profound, *potential* social and psychological harm that masks the economic interests advancing the argument. (In this respect, the music industry is a more transparently mercenary exception.)

Opposing this ancient line of argument, other scholars and critics point to the creative opportunities that new media afford. Summarizing the findings of the recent Stanford Study of Writing (<http://ssw.stanford.edu/research/research.php>), Clive Thompson suggests that social media like Twitter foster rhetorical savvy, audience awareness, and editing skill among their users: 'online media are pushing literacy into cool directions. The brevity of texting and status updating teaches young people to deploy haiku-like concision' (1992, ¶8). And they can apparently teach obscure literary genres, too: one blog has posted a 'cento' comprised of selected comments on a Youtube video (Rutherford 2009). Following Thornburg, contemporary distance-education theorists like George Siemens and Terry Anderson counter the pedagogical antagonism to new media with a theory of connectivism, which recognizes the sociocultural and educational values of network-building, including identification, cross-pollination, altruism, and autonomous organization (Anderson 2009).

So the case that tends to be made against Twitter today is a familiar one, sharpened perhaps by the recent financial woes of print media. Hence

the *National Post*'s recent editorial complaints about 'young people [...] now fill[ing] cyberspace with sentences that are poorly punctuated' (Fulford 2009, A13) and about the 'Facebook generation's love of run-on sentences' (Wallace 2009, A12). Ostensibly part of a special section for National Punctuation Day, these columns are really about promoting and protecting the print industry from its digital nemesis—which is, at the same time, a junior member of the corporate business establishment. It is in this economic context that I'll ground my own critical reservations about Twitter and subjectivity, lest any of the foregoing expose me to accusations of techno-fetishism.

#Twitternomics: communication as commodity

There's a concern about subjectivity that tends to get sidelined by traditionally scripted debates over whether Twitter 'infantilizes the 21st-century mind,' even as social media users themselves periodically raise it: I'm thinking of the concern over users' intellectual property — everything from the pictures we post to the 'haiku-like' status updates we publish — and the grey area of copyright, commoditization, and exploitation this property is subjected to when individual users circulate it through—and effectively consign it too —media vehicles owned by corporations. Twitter advertises itself as a small start-up that has yet to turn a profit—a fact that's given its own share of grist to the corporate media PR mill. But a corporation it is, and while its service terms currently attribute all content ownership to the users that post it, such terms are always subject to change, especially where increasing profit is concerned (as Facebook users are perennially learning, between changes to that service's terms and attempts to identify the investors financing its rich data mine).

One significant implication of using corporate services like Twitter for increasingly routine and popular forms of personal and political communication is the default commoditization of any and all communications delivered through such services. Twitter may offer itself (for the time being) as a free service whose only (and itself not inconsiderable) cost is access to online or uplinked hardware. But it entails other kinds of cost, other externalities. Enthusiasts who refute the commodity character of tweets must turn a blind eye to one of its most obvious symptoms: the tide of commercial spam that has washed over Twitter as readily as it has already flooded e-mail. (I have blocked numerous potential 'followers' in freelance marketing and media consultants, pornography vendors, online retailers, and fast-food

franchises; some would-be followers seem to tweet about nothing more than how to automatically follow large numbers of Twitter users.)

The technological parameters of Twitter also convey its commodity character (though perhaps more subtly than Facebook's matching of advertising to personal profile content). Twitter's textual economy (i.e. its 140-character limit) normalizes for communication the neoliberal ideology that fiscal austerity is the only way to run a public service. Not that there's any limit to the number of one's tweets, or the capacity of other social media applications to distribute vastly larger forms of communication and content; 'Woofertime' (<http://woofertime.com>) has recently emerged as a 1400-character-minimum 'macroblog' answer to Twitter. But Twitter's technological formalization of the soundbite as a popular currency for peer and broadcast exchange does overdetermine content in certain ways, as suggested by the fresh attention being paid in its wake to the purportedly endangered practice of paying attention. Mike Elgan's article (2008) on 'attention control' exemplifies this argument, while Cory Doctorow's tips for 'writing in the age of distraction' (2009) provide a model resource for retaining a focused work schedule for writers of all kinds. I say 'purported' to disclaim making any empirical or statistical claim, but anecdotal observation and conversations with many colleagues these days do tend to support the notion that the proliferation of information and communication technologies, social media, and other online and uplinked applications and devices is significantly impacting the social and psychological processes of cognitive concentration and focused attention.

#Twitter in public space: performing documentation, documenting performance

Let me share one anecdote from my own social life, a once-respectable calendar of club and party nights sharply transformed (and indeed matured) by the domestic responsibilities of parenting. Until this past summer, the last time I'd gone out for a proper night of dancing at a club was (alas) five years ago. At the same club, in fact. This unplanned constancy of venue maybe helped to dramatize the difference I saw in the crowd's forms of social performativity. That earlier club night had taken place right on the cusp of 'Web 2.0'; cell phones were already well on their way to becoming the twenty-first century's Swiss Army knife, but Twitter wouldn't yet have been a glimmer in Jack Dorsey's eye, and the iPhone was still being incubated in an Apple R&D vat somewhere. Flash-forward to 2009, and what was quite visibly different about the dance crowd in this

club was how frequently, even compulsively, clubgoers seemed to be checking their cell phone or PDA. It was like texting had replaced the smoking that had been banned shortly before I stopped clubbing. (Prior to this, I could recall only one dance event where I had noticed cell phones in frequent use: a rave in 2001 where a web page projected text messages sent to it by partygoers—not all that different from the way Twitter users now tweet en masse about specific events, except displayed on one big screen.)

While similarly informal and unscientific, other kinds of studies and evidence corroborate my impression. Browse Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>) for social events, for example: the *de facto* public depository of amateur photojournalism today houses snaps of every kind of social occasion, from club nights to pride parades to Burning Man and beyond, into countless *demimondes*. You will soon see portable digiphenalia ubiquitously, conspicuously, and sometimes self-consciously showcased by the photo subjects who own and use them. Or consider this midsummer Facebook update from a friend who's a new(ish) father: 'Dear dads at the park: get your nose out of your blackberry and play with your kids. It's shameful that other children are asking me to play with them as you won't. Losers.' (Ironically, he sent this via his iPhone.) The user-friendliness of personal hardware and the multilateral accessibility of social media are together creating new modes of performing documentation and documenting performance that reconfigure not only the distinctions between asynchronous and synchronous communications (recall the real-time 'chat'-like rapidity with which new tweets appear on any hot topic, reframing the screen record as a live stage) but also, and more significantly, the already-changing divisions between public and private life.

#Towards a critical vocabulary for social media: ipsography of the dsubject

To be sure, Twitter and iPhone alone are not driving these dramatic changes in the way personal media interact with public performance. And once upon a time, the pocket notebook and pencil may well have seemed like a similar public nuisance. But the apparent swiftness and pervasiveness with which versatile networked devices (like the iPhone) and robust, virtualized communication applications (like Twitter) have infiltrated public space today demands that we attend to the dialectical, paradoxical, and chiasmic contradictions of these technologies (as I have tried to do in the reflections above), and that we develop a critical and

theoretical vocabulary adequate to thinking through the changes, challenges, and limits they represent. To this latter end, I'd like to propose two related terms towards such a vocabulary. First, I'd like to rescue from obsolescence the word *ipsography*: the process of self-recording, the recording of the self. This word ably connotes the compulsive documentation of the self with an application like Twitter, the public recording of private practices, and of course the durable hegemony of liberal individualism that underwrites it.

And yet — and here is the final contradiction Twitter has got me thinking about — this very self that is so compulsively recorded is a self both divided and distributed. This self is divided, in the unevenly divided attention it pays to the virtual ICT environment, on one hand, and the concrete, corporeal space that it — or its double — inhabits at any given time. A division of subjectivity between practices of representation and processes of being present, perhaps (and while poststructuralist theory holds that being present is itself a representational practice, it also acknowledges the multiplicity and provisionality of the 'self' modeled here). And this self is distributed, of course, not only between its virtual and 'real-world' milieus, but more radically — that is, with far less user-end control — within the virtual milieu, where the self is not only an aggregate of its representations, but also their potentially infinite redistributions: archiving, syndication, re-tweets, linking, paraphrase, plagiarism, etc.

Exit, then, the constructed, twentieth-century subject, and enter the connected, twenty-first-century *dubject*: a self recording and recorded, a self dubbed and doubled, a self spaced, between cyberspace and real time. Connoting both the *subject* of critical theory — the complex of social forces articulated and reproduced through an individual body—and the *dub* of Jamaican recording-industry science (Davis 2004) — the differentiated duplication of a track to emphasize its multiple spatial and sonic possibilities — the *dubject* seems to me a fitting title for the increasingly familiar figure of today's mediatized *flâneur*, no longer alone in the crowd, but transacting through the looking-glass of a technology like Twitter with its other selves and their distributed social circles, the glow of that teeming world in the strobe-lit darkness of the party making faintly visible the hand that holds it.

References

- Anderson, Terry. 2009. "The Networked Future of Athabasca University Pedagogy." Learning Services Conference, Athabasca University, 3 October. <<http://hdl.handle.net/2149/2313>>.
- Davis, Erik. 2004. "Roots and Wires: Polyrhythmic Cyberspace and the Black Electronic." *Techgnosis* <<http://www.techgnosis.com/cyberconf.html>>.
- Doctorow, Cory. 2009. "Writing in the Age of Distraction." *Locus* online 7 January. <<http://www.locusmag.com/Features/2009/01/cory-doctorow-writing-in-age-of.html>>.
- Elgan, Mike. 2008. "Work ethic 2.0: Attention control." *Internet News* 29 December. <<http://www.internetnews.com/commentary/print.php/3793561>>.
- Elmer-Dewitt, Philip. 1994. "Bards of the Internet." *Time* 4 July. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,981013,00.html>>.
- Fulford, Robert. 2009. "Language Crime." *National Post* 24 September. A13.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. 1993. "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde." (1985). In *Postmodernism: A Reader*. Ed. Thomas Docherty. New York: Columbia University Press. 244-56.
- McCutcheon, Mark A. 2007. "Techno, *Frankenstein* and copyright." *Popular Music* 26 no.2: 259-280.
- Okáčová, Marie. 2009. "Centones: Recycled Art or the Embodiment of Absolute Intertextuality?" *Kakanien Revisited* 11 March. <http://www.kakanien.ac.at/beitr/graeca_latina/MOkacova1.pdf>.
- Postman, Neil. 1992. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Vintage.
- Rutherford, Erik. 2009. "O Mighty Techno Viking! A Cento." Ryeberg Curated Video 27 June. <<http://ryeberg.com/curated-videos/o-mighty-techno-viking-a-comments-section-cento/>>.
- Swift, Jonathan. 1712. *A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue; in a Letter to the Most Honourable Robert Earl of Oxford and Mortimer, Lord High Treasurer of Great Britain*. 2nd ed. London: Benjamin Tooke.
- Thompson, Clive. 2009. "Clive Thompson on the New Literacy." *Wired* 24 August. <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/people/magazine/17-09/st_thompson>.
- Thornburg, David D. 1992. *Edutrends 2010: Restructuring, Technology, and the Future of Education*. San Carlos: Starsong.
- Wallace, Kenyon. 2009. "Facebook generation's love of run-on sentences." *National Post* 24 September. A12.
- Wintour, Patrick. 2009. "Facebook and Bebo risk 'infantilising' the human mind." *Guardian* 24 February. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/feb/24/social-networking-site-changing-childrens-brains>>.