

Effects of Social Media on Language

There's no denying that social media has transformed the way we interact with each other. From sharing our thoughts and photos to planning a night out, most people tend to organise their social lives, or at least have it significantly influence them, through some form of technology-based engagement. But, has this shift away from more physical interaction actually affected the way we speak and write English?

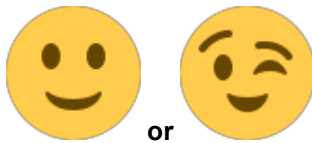
Speed freaks: the increasing rate of communication

What social media has done is enable us to communicate with a much larger number of people on a global scale in a way that we only really used to be able to do on a local level. This is great when it means we're keeping friendships alive over great distances, but it's also increasing the demands placed on an individual to keep a much larger number of relationships going simultaneously. For example, the average number of friends a person has on Facebook in the UK is around 300 – even if you're only actually really friends with, say, 10% of that number that's still 30 friendships to be maintaining.

The result? An ever-increasing speed of communication. Facebook lets you communicate quickly, effectively and, most importantly, efficiently because written exchanges are concise and shared between all the friends you are connected with, meaning you only need to write them once. On Twitter there's a 140 character limit, so even if you're not against the clock you are quite literally forced to make the statement brief.

LOL! OMG! TTYL!

The use of acronyms (an abbreviation formed from the initial letters of other words and pronounced as a word) are now commonplace substitutes to whole sentences; LOL (laugh out loud), OMG (Oh my God), TTYL (talk to you later) are just a few that demonstrate how social media speeds things up by lessening the need to write longer phrases and reduces space.



Emoticons (a representation of a facial expression such as a smile or frown, formed by various combinations of keyboard characters) and used to convey what the user is feeling or to express the intended tone without actually having to write it. You could argue that this is a lazy form of writing, but social media isn't a process of creative writing (at least not in the traditional sense), it's a fast and convenient way of interacting with an audience.

The impact of this on speech in the real world

Language is an evolving thing. It's naive to think that the language of social media isn't having an effect on the way we use English in day-to-day life. It's more appropriate to consider just how much of an effect it's having on the way we communicate.

A whole host of words originating from social media and the wider Internet have become so commonplace that they've now slipped into popular usage, and we don't even realize it. Just a few interesting words that have their origins in technology are blogosphere (the collective word for personal websites called blogs), troll (someone who creates conflict online by starting arguments or upsetting people) and buzzword (a word or phrase that is fashionable at a

particular time or in a particular context). Even some acronyms have made the transition into everyday speech as words, 'lol' for example.

Another curious phenomenon we've seen in recent years is the reappropriation of existing words and words based on brands to refer primarily to their social media context. Reappropriation is the cultural process by which a group claims words that were previously used in a certain way and gives them a new meaning. In this way the people who engage with social media are quite literally creating new words and giving new meanings to existing words.

'Friended' and 'unfriended' are two examples of words that have been given a new meaning due to their usage online. The word 'friend' and 'befriend' is from Old English originating in the 13th Century, but it has been given an entirely new meaning thanks to Facebook (the process of adding or removing someone from your circle of friends). 'Like' and 'viral' are other popular examples of words that have had their meaning reappropriated by social media.

There are even instances of online brands becoming so powerful that words have crept into the **English language** based on them. 'Google' is the world's leading search engine and it has become so universal in its usage that the phrase 'Google it' has virtually replaced the phrase 'search for it' in common speech. There are examples of this lifted directly from social media too; 'tweet it' refers to writing a message using Twitter, but has essentially come to mean 'share it'.

So, has social media changed the way we speak and write English? Yes, undeniably.

Just think, ten years ago, if someone you'd just met asked you to "be their friend" or "Instagram" a photo of their lunch you'd have scratched your head and wondered if in fact they were feeling alright

By Jon Reed

From **unfriend** to **selfie**, social media is clearly having an impact on language. As someone who writes about social media I'm aware of not only how fast these online platforms change, but also of how they influence the language in which I write.

The words that surround us every day influence the words we use. Since so much of the written language we see is now on the screens of our computers, tablets, and smartphones, language now evolves partly through our interaction with technology. And because the language we use to communicate with each other tends to be more malleable than formal writing, the combination of informal, personal communication and the mass audience afforded by social media is a recipe for rapid change.

From the introduction of new words to new meanings for old words to changes in the way we communicate, social media is making its presence felt.

New ways of communicating

An alphabet soup of acronyms, abbreviations, and **neologisms** has grown up around technologically mediated communication to help us be understood. I'm old enough to have learned the acronyms we now think of as **textspeak** on the online forums and 'Internet relay chat' (IRC) that pre-dated text messaging. On IRC, acronyms help speed up a real-time typed conversation. On mobile phones they minimize the

inconvenience of typing with tiny keys. And on Twitter they help you make the most of your 140 characters.

[Emoticons](#) such as ;-)) and acronyms such as *LOL* ('laughing out loud' — which has just celebrated its 25th birthday) add useful elements of non-verbal communication — or annoy people with their overuse. This extends to playful asterisk-enclosed stage directions describing supposed physical actions or facial expressions (though use with caution: it turns out that *innocent face* is [no defence in court](#)).

An important element of Twitter syntax is the hashtag — a clickable keyword used to categorize tweets. Hashtags have also spread to other social media platforms — and they've even reached everyday speech, but hopefully spoofs such as Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake's [sketch on *The Tonight Show*](#) will dissuade us from using them too frequently. But you will find hashtags all over popular culture, from greetings cards and t-shirts to the dialogue of sitcom characters.

Syntax aside, social media has also prompted a more subtle revolution in the way we communicate. We share more personal information, but also communicate with larger audiences. Our communication styles consequently become more informal and more open, and this seeps into other areas of life and culture. When writing on social media, we are also more succinct, get to the point quicker, operate within the New words and meanings

Facebook has also done more than most platforms to offer up new meanings for common words such as *asfriend*, *like*, *status*, *wall*, *page*, and *profile*. Other new meanings which crop up on social media channels also reflect the dark side of social media: a [troll](#) is no longer just a character from Norse folklore, but someone who makes offensive or provocative comments online; a [sock puppet](#) is no longer solely a puppet made from an old sock, but a self-serving fake online persona; and [astroturfing](#) is no longer simply laying a plastic lawn but also a fake online grass-roots movement.

Social media is making it easier than ever to contribute to the evolution of language. You no longer have to be published through traditional avenues to bring word trends to the attention of the masses. While journalists have long provided the earliest known uses of topical terms — everything from 1794's *pew-rent* in *The Times* to [beatboxing](#) in *The Guardian* (1987) — the net has been widened by the "[net](#)." A case in point is Oxford Dictionaries 2013 Word of the Year, *selfie*: the earliest use of the word [has been traced to an Australian Internet forum](#). With forums, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media channels offering instant interaction with wide audiences, it's never been easier to help a word gain traction from your armchair.

Keeping current

Some people may feel left behind by all this. If you're a lawyer grappling with the new geek speak, you may need to [use up court time](#) to have terms such as [Rickrolling](#) explained to you. And yes, some of us despair at how use of this informal medium can lead to an equally casual attitude to grammar. But the truth is

that social media is great for word nerds. It provides a rich playground for experimenting with, developing, and subverting language.

It can also be a great way keep up with these changes. Pay attention to discussions in your social networks and you can spot emerging new words, new uses of words — and maybe even coin one yourself.

creative constraints of 140 characters on Twitter, or aspire to brevity with blogs.

By [Mallory Jean Tenore](#) • March 11, 2013

[It's easy to assume](#) that new forms of technology [have dumbed down the English language](#). Text messaging has reduced phrases to letters (CU L8r) and tweets have so many abbreviations and hashtags they're barely legible.

Less obvious, though, are the ways in which social media is strengthening the English language. A South by Southwest panel, "[Slap My Words Up: Language in the Digital World](#)," addressed this topic on Sunday. Panelists were Fast Company's Neal Ungerleider, McKinney's Gail Marie; Digitaria's Kristina Eastham; and Sean Carton, director for digital communication commerce and culture at the University of Baltimore.

Here are five ways that [social media is having a positive effect on writing](#) and the English language.

INCREASES AWARENESS OF MISTAKES, HELPS PREVENT THEM

Instead of looking at social media sites as platforms for making mistakes, the panelists said, look at them as platforms for *catching* mistakes. Ungerleider said that when Fast Company readers see errors, they often point them out via social media.

"Twitter has become the arbiter of language for us," he said. "If we have a misspelling, people will let us know."

Having an audience, particularly a vocal one, helps. Knowing your tweet, Facebook post or Instagram caption is potentially going to reach thousands of people can be a good incentive to proofread your social media posts. The fact that tweets can spread so quickly (even if you've deleted them) is another good reason to proofread them.

DIFFERENTIATES WRITERS

If your audience writes sloppily on social media sites, that's not an excuse to start doing the same. Instead, think of it as an opportunity to differentiate yourself by writing well.

You can also differentiate yourself by advancing the conversation on social networks. I was reminded of this when the panelists shared a quote by [Peter Lunenfeld](#), a digital media critic and theorist.

“The growth of blogs, Twitter and Facebook considered in tandem with Tumblr and other social softwares that enable posting and tagging accounts creates an environment of continuous partial production.”

Journalists can turn that partial production (strings of tweets, Facebook posts, etc.) into a full production -- a story, a project, an interactive -- that offers the analysis and context you can't find in a 140-character tweet.

SPOTLIGHTS SHORT WRITING

Social media shows us the value of short storytelling. With Vine videos, [we have just six seconds to get a message across](#). Similarly, Twitter's 140-character limit forces us to make every word count. The site is a constant reminder that writing short and well isn't easy.

“Shorter is better -- if you can do it well,” Marie told the SXSW crowd. “It takes some level of skill.” Audience member [Claire Willett responded](#) “that's a biiiiiig if.”

There are some journalists [who do an especially good job writing short on Twitter](#) -- including Xeni Jardin ([@Xeni](#)), Frank Bruni ([@FrankBruni](#)) and Joanna Smith ([@SmithJoanna](#)).

REMINDS US THAT CHANGE IS CONSTANT

The panelists said people's concerns about digital media reflect concerns from the past. “Is technology taking us back to the future?” Marie asked. She shared a quote from new media research developer [Paulien Dresscher](#):

“Just as Socrates was concerned that the invention of writing would make people forgetful, people today are worried about the degree to which we are permanently shaped by digital technologies.”

Language is always evolving, and technology is a healthy part of that evolution. In some ways, technology has taken us full circle.

“When we first began to write things and moved away from oral culture, it changed the way things worked,” Carton said. “Now we’re moving to a post-printed era. If you look at the characteristics of social media ... it’s much more like oral culture than written culture” because it's so conversational.

CREATES NEW WORDS, MEANINGS

Sites such as [Wordnik](#) and [Urban Dictionary](#) have [entries for misspelled words](#) like “[dunno](#),” “[18r](#)” and “[aight](#).” Wordnik founder and lexicographer [Erin McKean has told me](#): “If a word is persuasive enough, and if your usage is provocative enough and feels real enough, you can make a word mean what you want it to mean.” The panelists alluded to this when sharing [a breakdown of the definitions of “heyyyyy.”](#)

Many recent neologisms have originated through social media.

“I’d say that the big keystone of success is if you can work a word into the English language based on your brand or based on your technology.” Case in point: “googled,” “friended,” “liked,” “tweeted,” “instagrammed” and “storified.”

The word “friending,” Marie said, has actually “been a transitive word since the 13th century.” We just tend to use the word “befriend” instead.

“It’s interesting to look at how the word ‘friending’ is changing the word ‘friend,’” Carton said. “On Facebook, they’re not your friends in the traditional sense; they’re your acquaintances.” He noted that he’s still waiting for someone to come up with a shorter version of “www.”

Eastham wants someone to create a word to describe a person you’re introduced to via email. For now, she’s come up with her own word: “Equaintance.”

With 80 percent of teen Internet users frequenting social media sites, it’s no wonder our real world social lives are seeing some changes. Though some parents worry about a future of poor grammar and verbal *textspeak*, most signs point to a more promising reality. Social media use requires some unique adaptations, but it also provides us with a whole new way to communicate.

We’re Learning a New Language

Social media sites like Twitter that impose a character limit force users to condense their thoughts. For many, this results in excessive use of textspeak. This type of shorthand involves a whole new language of abbreviations.

Some popular terms like LOL (for “laugh out loud”) have evolved into unique words that have a meaning greater than their original abbreviation. LOL is now used to add a joking or lighthearted inflection to messages almost like a type of punctuation. It doesn’t always indicate literal laughter. This is just one example of how Internet and text shorthand is becoming a language all its own.

We Write for a Larger Audience

Where writing was once a solitary activity, it has now become a very social way to communicate. Before the Internet, most people wrote to communicate with one other person. Now we reach hundreds or thousands of people with a single post. We [search for laptop deals](#) with an eye to wireless connectivity in order to stay connected and communicate with a global audience at a moment’s notice. Rather than eroding our writing

skills, this has sharpened them. Blogging, in particular, is a powerful way for people to improve their writing.

We Have to Discern Between *Textspeak* and Proper Grammar

There are many different types of communications in the world of social media. [Textspeak](#) and overuse of abbreviations or slang is not appropriate for every setting. Social media users have to learn the proper time and place for different types of writing. While Twitter is forgiving of *textspeak*, Facebook's longer text limits encourage proper grammar. While shorthand does slip into Facebook, emails, blogs, and even some written papers, most writers are still aware of how to write properly, and do so often.

We Often Overshare

Social media quickly breaks down personal barriers. People will post things to their Facebook accounts that they probably never would have called dozens of people over the phone to share. These little tidbits open up a whole new world of conversational opportunities when we see our friends in person.

Before social media, jumping into a conversation about breastfeeding with a coworker may have felt awkward. After seeing her pictures and posts online, however, it's much easier to broach the subject. While there are certainly pros and cons to oversharing, this proves that social media isn't as isolating as some believe.

We're More Concise

Another side effect of Twitter's text limit is the ability to get to the point faster. Gone is small talk. Kiss goodbye to lengthy intros. The sweeping prose of earlier generations is giving way to a new way of writing that's more concise, jumping right to the point. Blogging has contributed to this as well, since most successful bloggers know they only have a few seconds to draw a reader in before he clicks away. Short punchy sentences and the active voice are taking over as the most popular way to communicate in writing.

We See Fewer Eyes when Speaking in Public

Public speakers are noticing a real change in the way they have to communicate with their audiences. Where speakers once saw the eyes of their listeners, they're now seeing the backs of laptops and tops of heads. This is because many attendees are typing notes or tweeting updates throughout the presentation. Speaking to this type of audience is an unsettling experience for some, but it's just one more change that we'll have to adapt to.

We're Easily Distracted in Social Situations

With the prevalence of smartphones and popularity of texting, chances are you've been with someone who was there, but not quite there. It's not uncommon to see people glued to their technology even in social settings. If you can't recall a time this has happened, you might be the offender yourself. Though we're no less social, we are more distracted. Putting down our social media connections to focus on the ones right in front of us is something that takes a real effort.

Social media is definitely changing the way we communicate, but in many ways it's for the better as we expand our social circles and explore new horizons through our online connections.

Written by: Miles Young | Edited and Compiled by: Karan Chopra

Photo Credit: [Flickr](#)/Melina Sampaio Manfrinatti