

Jack Dorsey on the Twitter ecosystem, journalism and how to reduce reply spam. Part II

9-11 minutes



Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey. (Credit: [Joi Ito](#) via Flickr)

On Wednesday we posted [the first half of an interview](#) with Twitter co-founder **Jack Dorsey** ([@jack](#)), in which he talked about the conceptual roots of the site. This is the second half of that talk. Here Dorsey speaks more about Twitter's contours as a communications medium, its evolution and how its strong suit -- so far, at least -- is in exposing the present moment, rather than the past.

In the first part of the interview you talked a lot about how both the inspiration and architecture of Twitter came largely from the mobile world. But it seems like more and more people are using it from static locations -- laptops and desktops -- where all the Web's info and tool sets are much more accessible.

The Web provides a very easy way to immediately grasp what's going on. It really offers the transparency, so you can see, especially with [the search engine](#), how people are using Twitter at one glance. The phone doesn't allow for that.

A lot of different [geographic] markets are using [SMS](#) [text messaging] more than here in the U.S. I think what we're seeing here with SMS is that people are still getting more comfortable with it. It's relatively new in the grand scheme of things. Europe has had it and been comfortable with it for over 10 years, and we just got comfortable in 2006. There's still some maturity in terms of using mobile technology in the American culture and what that means.

But the mobile aspect of the service is really engaging, and you see that a lot in these "massively shared experiences" that we've done well at: [natural disasters](#), [man-made disasters](#), events, conferences, [presidential elections](#). A lot of these people are not sitting in front of a laptop screen -- they're typing from their phone. We feel that even though we started with that, and it lessened a bit in relative proportion, it'll continue to increase.

Do people use the service differently depending on whether they're mobile or fixed?

Yes, that's one of the things about Twitter, is that the experience degrades gracefully. When you're out mobile and you're probably at a party or you're traveling, etc., you're sharing that experience. When you're in front of a computer, you have a little more time to compose yourself. You may have more thoughtfulness in your message, you may have more reflection. It's a little bit less off-the-cuff. And maybe a little bit slower as well, but at the same time, in terms of consumption of the information, you can just take in huge amounts of information in a very rich way in a short time.

So I think it really depends on what you're asking -- if it's production of the content or the consumption. But I absolutely feel that Twitter scales to every end of that spectrum.

How do you think of Twitter? Is it a service, a medium, a piece of software, what?

I feel that it's something new. I think it's a new way to communicate. It has a new take on the address book. It's a new way to interact with people. And at the same time, it does a very good job of exposing what's happening in the world right now: You can see what's ...

... trending globally, you can limit that locally and figure out what's trending within a five-mile radius of you, or you can use it socially and figure out what's trending within your own social network. That's where the newness is. I just haven't seen anything like that before.

When I think of Twitter, I think of -- it's really hard to define because we're still coming up with the vocabulary -- but I think it's defined a new behavior that's very different than what we've seen before. So yeah: new medium.

What's been one of the most surprising steps in Twitter's evolution for you?

Well, we really haven't changed the application or feature set in over two years. It's pretty much maintained the original vision since Day One. And that really adds a lot of weight to the concept and how much desire there is for communication of this sort.

Back in the day we thought, well, if we get to this many users or this level of relevancy in the mainstream, we're going to have to add a bunch of features, and make this or that group of people happy... but that really hasn't come to pass. The only substantial thing we've added to the service is search. Which is huge, but it doesn't change the fundamental aspect of what Twitter is. Search does a great job of exposing what's going on, but it's not changing the interaction dramatically, it's just making it much, much easier.

So the ability to have a service that really hasn't changed and is still growing by leaps and bounds is astonishing to me because it's like, wow, a simple concept like that -- the essence of some communication pulled out from other mediums -- really has wings on its own.

But even if the service itself isn't evolving, the community and ecosystem around it is growing.

And that's the trick. The concept is so simple and so open-ended that people can make of it whatever they wish. They seek value and they add value. I've always said that Twitter is whatever you make of it. Because the first complaint we hear from everyone is: Why would I want to join this stupid useless thing and know what my brother's eating for lunch? But that really misses the point because Twitter is fundamentally recipient-controlled -- you

choose to listen and you choose to leave. But you also choose what to put down and what to share. So if you decide to hook your plants up to Twitter and have it report when it needs to be watered, then that's a valid usage, or if you just decide to report what you're eating for lunch, that's a valid usage too.

How do you feel about the role Twitter is playing in news gathering and news creating?

Suddenly you have all these people on the street roaming about, and they're able to report on everything they see. So a certain mass of them can report on the earthquake they just felt, and another mass reports on what they felt about the Obama inauguration, and another group on the homeless issues in San Francisco. You've got a further richness to add to a typical journalistic process.

And when you have a mass of people updating about a particular thing, you're exposing a trend: This is happening right now in this location or on this topic. It gives you an immediacy and relevancy for what people are talking about right now.

Some people follow thousands or tens of thousands of people. What's the use of that? Doesn't it undercut half of the point of the service, which is to get a coherent stream of incoming information?

I don't know how people do it. I personally can't do it. I don't follow people in the traditional way. There are a few people whose messages I get delivered in real time via SMS. So those people are very close to me, or I'm around them. Like when I'm visiting New York, I turn on my New York friends just because I'm more interested in their particular interruptions. And then I follow like 300 people on the Web.

But I don't go back in time. You're kind of as good as your last update. That's what you're currently thinking or doing, or your current approach towards life. If that really interests me, I go to that person's profile page and read back a little bit. But in terms of my timeline, I'm just not obsessive about going all the way back in time and catching every single message that people have updated about. It's only relevant in the now, unless I'm fascinated by it.

I imagine that people follow a lot of people just to get a sense of, like, I've got a full room here, and I've got a lot of people that are giving wildly different opinions and updates -- I'll try them out for a time and if I don't like what they say next, I can very easily leave them. But like any other technology, we figure out what our relationship is to it. Some people want to go big right away and filter out, some people want to stay small and add people as they find them. And some people are constantly editing the balance between both. It's just important that the technology allows for all of those approaches.

Is there any idea of splitting or filtering the stream so you won't get so much '@reply traffic' -- where you can see the people you're following replying individually to their followers?

There's actually a setting. If you go to your settings page and you say, show me @replies ["at replies"] only from those I'm following. So if my co-founder Biz [Stone] replies to his friend Joe, if I set that setting I won't see that reply, I'll just see Biz's reply to anyone I'm following.

So it's kind of an unknown feature but we do have it in there, and I definitely keep it on because it's just way too much information. I don't need to see all these diverse conversations happening all over the Internet. I only care about those people that are conversing together that I know. So when Biz is replying to @ev[an Williams], then I'll see Biz's @reply.

Got it. Thanks for the tech support.

Yep.

-- David Sarno [[follow](#)]