

6

Twitter: Is It a Fad or the “8-Bazillion Pound Gorilla?”

Twitter is quickly becoming the lens into all that moves us as individuals and also as a global society.*

OVERVIEW

A few weeks ago, when it was safe and sane to go for dinner in the middle of Bangkok, some colleagues and I were in the middle of dinner at a Japanese restaurant when a loud boom was heard in the distance.

All three of us reached immediately for our BlackBerries. A year ago, we might have e-mailed our editors to see what the news wires were reporting, or checked a television set for an update. But in Thailand's fast-moving and violent political crisis, there was no time to wait for those “old media” to tell us what was going on.

What we needed to know was: What were people tweeting?†

This account from Mark MacKinnon, which appeared in *The Globe and Mail*, really says it all. This is the new reality in crisis media management.

* Posted by Brian Solis, “I Tweet Therefore I Am,” BrianSolis Blog, www.brainsolis.com, May 14, 2010.

† Mark MacKinnon, “Twitter’s Role in Bangkok Conflict Unprecedented,” Bangkok—From *Saturday’s Globe and Mail* (*The Globe and Mail*), www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world, May 21, 2010.

We have seen in previous chapters how much the mainstream media are using Twitter when reporting a crisis. The microblog is a powerful, real-time reporting tool for citizen-journalists, first responders, and organizations alike. It has become the online circulatory system for news, pumping information between media organizations, consumers, and businesses throughout the world.

Twitter, like its social-networking cousins, is all-pervasive. As Brian Solis, a globally recognized digital analyst, sociologist, and futurist, says, social media is "an extension of who we are." These sites form "valuable social hubs that connect people,"^{*} and we see this time and time again in a crisis: from Mumbai to Iran, Australia to Haiti, and China to Bangkok; not to mention the Icelandic volcano eruption, the disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, Tiger Woods's dirty little scandal, and Toyota's recall woes.

Indeed, Twitter has proven to be a significant player in incident media. But Twitter has its detractors, who question its long-term feasibility. Is it a fad, as many still claim, or will it gain further strength and stability and become the mainstay for emergency and crisis communication? Will it become the motherboard on a computer, the gateway for status updates across all social media platforms, with entire teams in corporations devoted to tweeting, as some futurists and technology pundits predict? Will it grow to the size, stature, and omnipresence of an "8-bazillion pound gorilla,"[†] to coin business communicator and leading social media commentator Shel Holtz? Or will it go the way of once popular sites such as Second Life, as technology analyst firms such as Gartner have suggested?

In this chapter, we will further explore Twitter and see what we can learn from its history and, more importantly, how, when, and by whom it is being used in a crisis.

BACKGROUND

For anyone who has not yet been exposed to Twitter, we'd better not get ahead of ourselves with some enticing case studies without a proper definition.

^{*} Posted by Brian Solis, "We Are the Champions," BrianSolis Blog, www.briansolis.com, May 27, 2010.

[†] Shel Holtz, "Communication Applications from Crisis Communication and Social Media," Webinar: Lecture Three, <http://www.shelholtzwebinars.com>, May 4, 2009.

TWITTER: IS IT A FAD OR THE "8-BAZILLION POUND GORILLA?"

Twitter's home page, at the time of this writing (2010), describes itself as follows:

Twitter is a rich source of instant information. Stay updated. Keep others updated. It's a whole thing.*

Wikipedia defines *Twitter* as follows:

A social networking and microblogging service that enables its users to send and read messages known as *tweets*. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to the author's subscribers who are known as *followers*. Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow open access.†

To me, Twitter is part library, part news service, and part gossip—a modern-day town crier. Others have called it the *Post-it note of social networks*. At the very minimum, Twitter is a barometer for fascination, education, and obsession. It is real-time, so in a crisis, raw emotion is as frequent as real news. Twitter information will always be someone's perception of what they witnessed, what they have seen, what they have experienced. It is the voice of the people.

Twitter began its life in 2006 as a result of an attempt to break a creative slump in a brainstorming session. Quite the brain wave!

According to Wikipedia,‡ American software architect and businessman Jack Dorsey introduced the idea of an individual using a Short Message Service (SMS) to communicate with a small group. Dorsey and software engineer Biz Stone decided that SMS text suited the status message idea and built a prototype of Twitter in about two weeks. Investor and entrepreneur Evan Williams, formerly of Google, joined the creative pair, and Twitter was on its way to making history.

Its growth and overall awareness have been staggering. At the time of writing, Twitter had more than 105 million registered accounts with the average age of users hovering around 39. While Facebook has more registered users (500 million and counting at the time of writing), the

* Twitter Home Page, www.twitter.com, May 15, 2010.

† Wikipedia, "Twitter," <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>, May 15, 2010.

‡ Mark Glaser, "Twitter Founders Thrive on Micro-Blogging Constraints," Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), <http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2007/05/twitter-founders-thrive-on-micro-blogging-constraints137.html>, May 17, 2007. (Retrieved November 5, 2008.)

popular microblog is catching up in terms of awareness. According to the American research firm, Edison Research, Twitter's awareness exploded from 5 percent in 2008 to 26 percent in 2009 to near ubiquity at 87 percent in 2010, only 1 percentage point less than Facebook.*

While growth has slowed, after increases of up to 1382 percent in one year (2008–2009), Twitter's power is undeniable. It is a sign of mainstream acceptance when "Lord" Google comes a-courting, in this case with dollars. According to Brian Solis, Google paid to receive the full real-time Twitter "fire hose" in December 2009, with feeds in 40 languages and a linking feature to help users find the most relevant content shared.†

The numbers tell the story and show the growing trend of searching within networks (no doubt one reason why Google is taking real-time feeds from Twitter). In May 2010, Twitter was predicting that it would reach a billion searches per day!

POINTLESS BABBLE: A CRITIC'S TAKE

While Twitter has many fans, there are many who still question its feasibility for long-term use and influence. In its September 2009 cover story, *The Ragan Report* claimed that "communicators think it's a fad."‡ Their case: Users are tired of the pointless babble, such as "I'm eating a ham sandwich," says Gerald Baron in his September 28, 2009, Crisisblogger entry, "Where Does Twitter Go from Here?"§ Ragan and PollStream polled professional communicators and found that 54 percent of responders claim that it will plateau. Of those polled, 40 percent do not have a microblogging plan, for reasons such as "fearful managers, lack of time and staff, or simply not believing it would benefit the company."¶

Gerard Braud, crisis communication expert, points out three of Twitter's key shortcomings. For one, at the time of our interview in late

* Edison Research/Arbitron Internet and Multimedia Series, "Twitter Usage in America: 2010 Report," April 29, 2010.

† Posted by Brian Solis, "The State and Future of Twitter 2010: Part Three," BrianSolis Blog, <http://www.briansolis.com/2010/04/the-state-and-future-of-twitter-2010-part-three>, April 23, 2010.

‡ Lindsey Miller, "Is Twitter Just a Fad? Corporate Communicators Say 'Yes,'" *The Ragan Report*, September 2009, pp. 17–18. (Note: This article is based on an IE Twitter poll conducted by Ragan Communications and PollStream.)

§ Posted by Gerald Baron, "Where Does Twitter Go from Here?" Crisisblogger Blog, www.crisisblogger.com, September 28, 2009.

¶ Lindsey Miller, "Is Twitter Just a Fad? Corporate Communicators Say 'Yes,'" *The Ragan Report*, September 2009, pp. 17–18. (Note: This article is based on an IE Twitter poll conducted by Ragan Communications and PollStream.)

TWITTER: IS IT A FAD OR THE "8-BAZILLION POUND GORILLA?"

2009, Braud thinks that Twitter fits the "shiny new object syndrome."^{*} Users are excited by its novelty, but will soon push it aside for the next great thing. Next, he questions its viability as an ongoing communication tool because of the time it takes to monitor Twitter. You can only successfully monitor and update if you have the "luxury of warm bodies,"[†] he said. Finally, Braud is concerned about Twitter's stability. It can be easily overloaded: The flurry of tweets surrounding Michael Jackson's death brought Twitter to its knees. In such cases, using Twitter as your main communication vehicle is like relying on cell phones: convenient, yes, but when the networks are overloaded and do not work in a crisis? Frustrating and potentially disastrous.

My 20-something daughter, in addition, does not understand how Twitter can match the power of connection and growing influence of Facebook. She cites the recent Facebook fan club activity that has advocated successfully for the resurrection of *Hey Hey Saturday*, a very popular Australian TV variety show from the 1990s. Facebook's power is that people, once powerless individuals, can unite to become a force that compels an organization—in this case a TV network—to act in their best interest. Does Twitter, for all of its benefits, have this power? she questions.

SAVING LIVES, SAVING REPUTATIONS

Never before has a social media website played the kind of role in a conflict that Twitter has played in Thailand's nine-week-old anti-government uprising, keeping people informed even as it amplified the hate on both sides of the country's divide. Some say Twitter—or rather its users—may have even saved lives as fighting consumed the streets of Bangkok.[‡]

—Mark MacKinnon, *The Globe and Mail*, May 21, 2010

Debate about Twitter's future remains; however, one thing is certain: the absolute need to include Twitter into your monitoring and listening plan for both issues and crisis management.

Here, its influence is illustrated in the 2010 Thailand riots. The patterns of coverage were similar in the Haitian earthquake, the elections in Iran, and the deadly bushfires in Australia in February 2009. Citizen-journalists, concerned bystanders, the injured and hurt, mainstream

^{*} Gerard Braud, interview with author, July 9, 2009.

[†] Ibid.

[‡] Mark MacKinnon, "Twitter's Role in Bangkok Conflict Unprecedented," Bangkok—From *Saturday's Globe and Mail* (*The Globe and Mail*), www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world, May 21, 2010.

reporters, first responders, protesters, government agencies, and relief workers all tweeted, becoming, to paraphrase London-based journalist Andrew Spooner, our own news wire service, breaking stories and events instantly.*

For emergency responders and relief organizations, Twitter has become an essential tool in crisis media management. American Red Cross, for example, has used the micromessaging blog to get information out ever since the California wildfires in 2007.

Since Hurricane Katrina, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which had more than 12,000 followers at the time of writing, has also effectively used Twitter. The organization has held news conferences with Director David Paulison on the site with a full transcript and audio/video from the session posted online. FEMA has also been smart to realize Twitter's leveraging power. For example, during the Boulder, Colorado, wildfires in early 2009, one of the most active tweeters was a graduate student doing extensive individual research. FEMA worked with the student to engage and interact with her network of followers to amplify messages about the federal response to the fires.

Probably the best and most consistent example of how organizations effectively use Twitter in a crisis is the Los Angeles Fire Department (LAFD). Much has been written about its early adoption of Twitter, which it has used almost since inception. The department has multiple accounts but uses its main page (@LAFD) to focus on breaking news stories, alerts, and advisories. As of May 2010, @LAFD had nearly 8,000 followers and even higher spikes during emergency situations.

Like many responsible for managing emergency communication, LAFD's goal is to keep people from being cut off from information in a crisis like they were during Hurricane Katrina. Keith Humphrey, LAFD's public service officer, explains that the people housed at the Superdome during the disaster "were darn hungry. They were darn thirsty, but they were not dying from hunger or thirst. What they were dying from a little bit at a time was a lack of information. We were dying from a lack of information as well. We didn't know what was going on. It was a two-way lack of conversing."[†]

* Andrew Spooner, cited in "Twitter's Role in Bangkok Conflict Unprecedented," UpdatedNews, <http://updatednews.ca/?p=20734>, May 22, 2010.

† Hilton Collins (LAFD), "Emergency Managers and First Responders Use Twitter and Facebook to Update Communities," www.emergencymgmt.com/safety/, July 27, 2009.

TWITTER: IS IT A FAD OR THE "8-BAZILLION POUND GORILLA?"

Twitter can also help control rumors and misinformation that could, if left untouched, put your reputation at risk. Take the example of the U.S. Air Force. According to Government 2.0 Club, an American organization that leverages social media to improve government, a witness falsely reported a crash of an Air Force C-17; but moments thereafter, the story was appearing as breaking news on CNN. Within 17 minutes, the Air Force used Twitter to counter the reports, resulting in CNN's retraction of the story less than an hour later. The Air Force's ability to respond was phenomenal in that they immediately took control of the rumor at lightning speed.*

UK High Court Serves First Writ on Twitter

Twitter's legitimacy has gone beyond the corridors of power to the hallowed halls of justice. High courts have been getting in on the action, too.

In late 2009, Britain's High Court ordered its first injunction via Twitter. According to Reuters UK, the High Court did so as that "was the best way to reach an anonymous Tweeter who had been impersonating someone." Solicitors from Griffin Law sought the injunction against @blaneysblarney, arguing that it was impersonating right-wing blogger Donal Blaney. (Incidentally, when I searched for that Twitter handle, there was no one of that name in the results. The injunction obviously worked!)

As Reuters wrote, "the legal first could have widespread implications for blogosphere." Twitter has recognized the issue, however, and launched a system to verify the authenticity of tweets. For example, Bill Gates, President Obama, and the Dalai Lama all have "verified" accounts, marked by a blue tick on their home pages.†

BREAKING NEWS: TWITTER AND THE MEDIA

As seen in Chapter 3, Twitter has also transformed the media, making the traditional mainstream stations and publications virtually reliant on its users and technology. With millions of eyes and ears armed with Flip cameras, netbooks, and smartphones, tweeters can disseminate information faster with their eyewitness accounts than any newsroom has ever had the ability to do.

News outlets have responded to this trend by incorporating Twitter in their broadcasts. Fox News regularly reaches out to its viewers for instant updates during severe weather conditions. CNN cultivates, actively encourages, and regularly incorporates Twitter feeds into news stories as eyewitness accounts. Instead of reaching for the phone or sending news crews

* Posted by "lkthrockclose" (Lisa Throckmorton), "Twitter in Crisis Communications with the Air Force," Government 2.0 Club Blog, www.government20club.org, March 28, 2009.

† Matthew Jones, "UK High Court Serves First Writ on Twitter," Reuters, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5904HC20091001>, posted 5:29 PM EDT, October 1, 2009.

to the scene, the network receives instant news, images, and video from viewers via their mobile Twitter accounts. What a boom for mainstream media, as they struggle with dwindling audiences, to have such connections to their viewers, not to mention the leads and sources. The media can cherry-pick their way through the information, particularly if they have a large following like CNN. (At the time of writing, CNN had more than a million followers; BBC more than 400,000; and Fox News over 200,000.)

Probably the most famous breaking news story on Twitter was US Airways' miraculous Hudson River landing on January 15, 2009. Broken on TwitPic by US Airways passenger Janis Klum, the news of the incident was reported all over Twitter before any mainstream news outlet even knew about it. By the time the TwitPic server crashed from a surge of users trying to access the photo, more than 7,000 people had seen it and many had copied it on their blogs or distributed it through many other channels, including mainstream media.

As I am writing, millions of people are tweeting madly about BP and the massive oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Hugh Hefner (of Playboy fame) tweets, "Man can walk on the moon but can't fix an *oil spill* destroying the environment? What the f...!"^{*} Indeed!

THE POWER OF 140 CHARACTERS

For crisis communicators, Twitter and its principle of short, instantaneous updates has tremendous strengths and depth as a tool to quickly disseminate news, messages, and information. It's hard to dismiss Twitter's flexibility and speed in a crisis. You can update frequently, you can make short announcements that link to more in-depth information, and you can answer questions and get immediate feedback. These are crucial attributes in a crisis when people want to see and hear that you are engaged and, more importantly, doing something quickly about the problem. Crisis pundits, journalists, and I all agree: there is no faster channel than Twitter to get a message to your audiences.

Twitter also offers the capacity for, and nearly requires, authenticity and transparency—both vital ingredients for a well-managed crisis. People respond well to genuine emotion, authentic tone, and immediate dialogue—and the format and tone used in Twitter-talk require all of these components. It's for this reason that many governments and state and federal organizations around the world have officially adopted Twitter into

^{*} Twitter post by: Hugh Hefner, May 2010.

their emergency management programs. For example, the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd used Twitter extensively during the devastating bushfires in Victoria, Australia, to express his support, to extend condolences, and to tell affected people where and how to access government assistance.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

We can no longer ignore or minimize the changes unfolding before us. Everything begins without fully knowing what to do, why it's important and whether or not we're doing everything the right way. But it is in the process of *engagement* that we learn and mature.*

—Brian Solis, *"We Are the Champions,"* May 27, 2010

Hopefully, these examples will have demonstrated the compelling reasons for using Twitter in a crisis. As a communicator for your organization or brand, if you are not using Twitter, you are likely being ignored by a huge contingency of your audience. Today, consumers and mainstream media are heavily reliant on the microblog for their news and information. Nothing is hidden from Twitter. And when the online conversation is about you, not only do you want to be part of it, but you want to serve as the "official" Twitter voice of your brand.

Now, we must look at exactly how to incorporate this tool in your crisis media strategy. Remember the good old days when we used templates for our crisis media releases and stand-by statements so that they could move quickly? It is actually just the same in Twitterville. Apply that same principle to Twitter (and other social media). Not only will it save you valuable time (and you need that in today's lightning-fast age of communication), but it lets management know that you are prepared to operate in that space during a crisis.

The words that you use will be similar to what you have used in the old days—just reduced to 140 characters. For example:

Aware of incident XXX. More information as soon as possible. Follow @XYZ for latest news and updates. (104 characters)

If you're not yet Twitter-fluent, my advice is to do whatever it takes to get up to speed with the tool, immediately. Make sure that Twitter (and

* Posted by Brian Solis, *"We Are the Champions,"* BrianSolis Blog, www.briansolis.com, May 27, 2010.

other key social networks like Facebook) is part of your drills, exercises, and crisis media training, and explain to the executive team how it can and will all work in a crisis. Give them examples that illustrate the power of these tools, such as showing them the number of tweets there were in the first 24 hours of Domino's Pizza's online drama with its two rogue employees, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the Toyota recall, or the Icelandic volcano eruption (in Box 6.1 you will see just how the airlines used Twitter to get their messages out in that crisis). Whatever your industry, a variety of incidents can serve as excellent examples of Twitter's power and influence.

You must also decide far in advance of a crisis how and when the technology will be utilized, as well as who will serve as the official Twitter "voice." When an incident occurs, you have precious moments to act, and these decisions must be made ahead of time.

Twitter is a powerful news channel, sometimes a much-needed counselor and support as we saw in the deadly bushfires in the Australia, and a direct communication link between organizations and their audiences. It also empowers individuals when others want to silence those voices. We saw this power magnificently and bravely represented in the Iranian elections.

Time will tell whether Twitter does indeed become the 8-bazillion-pound gorilla of crisis communication. But I, for one, am willing to take that bet.

BOX 6.1 TWITTER EXAMPLES: THE ICELANDIC VOLCANO

Social media proved to be a boon for the airline industry—probably the only silver lining in an otherwise frightful few weeks for the travel industry. There was widespread usage on Twitter when #ashtag was created with more than 55,000 mentions in just 7 days.

BRITISH AIRWAYS

We're asking customers with bookings up to 2 May to delay travel if they can, to free up seats for stranded passengers. (<http://bit.ly/cUmnwM> about 10 hours ago via TweetDeck)

If you're still trying to get to your original destination & haven't rebooked/cancelled, pls provide us w/ some details. (<http://bit.ly/apnDGg> about 10 hours ago via TweetDeck)

TWITTER: IS IT A FAD OR THE "8-BAZILLION POUND GORILLA?"

We're doing all we can to help the tens of thousands of customers who've been delayed around the world by these unprecedented circumstances. (About 11 hours ago via TweetDeck)

@TomPearman you can cancel your ticket on ba.com or speak to your travel agent if you booked through them. (7:25 AM Apr 21st via TweetDeck in reply to TomPearman)

KLM

Are you stranded? Need an earlier flight? check out <http://www.facebook.com/klm> and click 'rebook' so we can help you! (About 5 hours ago via Web)

@arikoskinen—Please do not share your personal data or booking codes in tweets with requests for rebooking. Please send us a Direct Message! (About 7 hours ago via Web in reply to @arikoskinen)

VIRGIN ATLANTIC

@clubskii—Our lines are really busy, but working hard to answer asap. Please hold on, you are in a long queue.

@Graham_Walsh Glad you got on a flight tomorrow Graham. Have a safe flight home.

Online Check In is now OPEN, except for renumbered flights. See link for renumbered flights: <http://www.tinyurl.com/vaatwash>. (4:22 AM Apr 21st via Web)

Update: UK airspace is opening. We're working on a flying programme right now. More info after 11pm BST tonight. (#ashtag 1:37 PM Apr 20th via Web)

Source: Shashank Nigam, "How Social Media Helped Travelers during the Icelandic Volcano Eruption," Mashable, <http://mashable.com/2010/04/22/social-media-iceland-volcano>, April 2010.

SECTION I SUMMARY

We have discussed a lot in this section—everything from the definition of a crisis, media's role in affecting public opinion, and ethics in journalism to trends in news coverage, as well as Twitter's role in crisis media management.

There is no doubt that we stand on shifting sand in the evolution of news. Clearly, the new media and social journalists are playing a huge role in not only the distribution of news and in the manner in which it is written but in the future of the old legacy media. As a hybrid melting pot of views emerges, we have learned that the new and the old need each other.

The "kingdom of news" has new rulers. And it is mostly us, the news consumers, who are leading the charge, along with think tanks, activists, and partisans. We have become the new, powerful *fifth estate*.

We have multiple platforms in which to share our news. We forage, hunt, and gather so *we can get the news we want when we want it* from a variety of sources rather than have it arrive at appointed times, hearing only the news they want us to hear and from their dais. Rarely do we receive our news from only one news platform.

Whether your crisis is hyperlocal or global with impact on a grand scale, it is quite simple: Your crisis media plan and communication strategy *must* incorporate social media and value it as a key channel to help you get your message out in an unfiltered and timely manner. Remember, preparation and speed are of the essence in a crisis, and social media allow you to act swiftly. You need those carrier pigeons equipped with jet propulsion packs!

Incorporate social media as part of your plans in a proactive way. See it as a two-way street, not just for getting your message out but as a channel for hearing from your stakeholders, understanding their concerns, and addressing them. You must be prepared to act more on your feet than ever before, but the good news is that social media can be a very effective tool to averting a full-blown crisis or, at a minimum, mitigating it. The heartbeat is simply faster online—whether we like it or not. The bottom line really is this: Ignore the social media at your peril.

And finally, remember that the traditional media are, in the main, a highly principled lot driven, yes, by ratings, but as much by their need to defend and uphold "democratic" principles, that obligate them in their duty to "serve society" in a crisis.