
Minimalists and Zealots: Genres of Participation in Following on Twitter

Eric Baumer

Department of Informatics
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697-3440 USA
ebaumer@ics.uci.edu

Allison Leis

International Studies
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697 USA
aleas@uci.edu

Abstract

There is a nascent but growing body of research on various aspects of microblogging, most of which are commonly explored in research on social media. In this paper, we draw attention to a central but often-overlooked aspect of social media: reading. We discuss early experiences from a small, qualitative study of following on Twitter, describing a distinction between zealous and minimalist users of Twitter, and raise several points for discussion.

Keywords

Twitter, reading, following, microblogging.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Human factors

What's Happening?

Early in their development, social media were often hailed as the democratization of production, enabling virtually anyone with an internet connection to produce and publish content with relative speed, ease, and minimal cost. Research on social media has suggested

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that the media being produced, i.e., the end products, may not be as important at the social processes, practices, and participation on which they are predicated [3]. Many of these processes pertain to production: writing blog posts, editing entries on a wiki, writing on a friend's wall, or twittering about "what's happening" [2].

However, relatively little work has explored the other side of social media. How are these socially produced media being consumed, and how are those processes of consumption related to, and interconnected with, the social processes of production? Based on an early study of blogs and bloggers, Nardi et al. argued that "blogging is as much about reading as writing, as much about listening as talking" [5:231]. The first author of this paper has done work studying reading practices in blogging [1], arguing that bloggers and readers are involved a process of collaborative co-creation of a blog. This paper argues for applying a similar perspective to services such as Twitter. In terms of understanding the social practices of microblogging, it is important not only to explore how and why people twitter, but also how and why people follow.

Reading and Following

This study draws largely on the perspective suggested by Baumer et al. [1] in terms of focusing not on micro/blog posts as an object of study but rather on the interactions between bloggers and readers. Why, then, is it relevant to apply this perspective to microblogging? Are not reading and following two different activities?

Reading and following resemble each other in many ways. From a technical perspective, microblogging follows a similar asymmetrical publish-subscribe model

as blogging: micro/bloggers write/twitter, and readers/followers receive those posts/tweets. From a social perspective, as well, many similar processes are at work: micro/bloggers present a certain identity and construct narratives about themselves, and readers/followers are engaged in the process of perceiving and interpreting those identities and narratives.

However, reading and following are distinct activities. Part of the purpose of this study is to understand how following of microblog/gers both resembles and differs from reading of blogs. How do length limits on tweets impact reading practices? How do followers use mobile devices to receive moment-by-moment tweets? How does the use of such mobile devices both draw on and differ from practices of using other mobile technologies (e.g., cell phones and SMS), as well as other social media (e.g., reading blog posts or Facebook status updates)? Is the distinction between microbloggers and followers more or less blurry than that between bloggers and readers? This work aims to develop a better understanding not only of following on Twitter, but also more generally of readership in social media.

Methods

This paper includes preliminary findings from a study of following on Twitter. This study draws on ethnographic methods, using qualitative, semi-structured interviews. We also employ participant observation by following on Twitter the participants in our study, not only to understand better for ourselves the experience of following, but also to see whom our participants follow. The initial findings described below are based on interviews with 6 participants. These are not meant to be conclusive results, but rather generative and

potentially provocative in terms of suggesting potential areas and directions for future work.

Preliminary Findings

From Minimalist to Zeal

Our early data suggests two potential genres of participation [cf. 3] among Twitter users: minimalists and zealots. Minimalists follow around 10 to 30 people, mostly close personal friends, and use Twitter primarily as a means of socializing. These users were introduced to Twitter through others, similar to Nardi et al.'s [5] bloggers; one participant joined at the insistence of her sister, who works in public relations and "knew about [Twitter] waaay before" it was mainstream. Some minimalists will use applications, such as Twirl or Twitterific, but at the suggestion of others.

Zealots, on the other hand, follow in the low hundreds of people, a mix of friends, colleagues, and information sources, and they use Twitter largely for professional or information-seeking purposes. Zealots generally made a conscious choice to seek out and start using Twitter. All zealots used applications to access Twitter, and had tried out or switched between a number of different apps and, in many cases, were still in the process of choosing an app.

Participants made varying comparisons between Twitter and Facebook. For the zealots, Twitter was seen as a less formal, less structured version of Facebook, a lightweight means of articulating and enacting social connections. Minimalists, on the other hand, tended to see Twitter as more intimate, as a way of connecting "with people [they] actually care about and want to hear from." This difference may stem from the varying motivations for using Twitter.

The minimalist and the zealot are not distinct groups to which a participant belongs, but rather ideal types, end points of a continuum along with participants lie. Furthermore, these ideal types helped organize our thinking in this early stage of data collection and analysis.

Common Threads

Despite their differences, a few commonalities emerged among our participants. None used the trending topics regularly. One participant said, "if I'm really really bored I might read though them, but I don't really care." Another said that, by the time a topic is trending, she is already aware of it and does not learn anything new from Twitter.

All participants shared a common pattern of adoption. Each initially signed up for Twitter, did not use it for a time, and then returned with regular usage. As one participant put it, "it took me a while for Twitter to catch on." However, there does not seem to be a single common cause that led people back to increased participation. Examining this pattern further will be an important goal in continuing this study.

Discussion

The distinction between zealots and minimalists is in some ways reminiscent of peripheral and central participation [4]. However, based on our early analyses, it does not seem that many users are transitioning from being minimalists to being zealots (or vice versa). This leads us to question the applicability of legitimate peripheral participation to such social media. Do such peripheral users often move to the center, or do they remain peripheral? Are the users whom we might view as peripheral actually peripheral, or might they in fact

be central? We are particularly interested in how reading and following might be seen variously as peripheral or central practices.

In some ways, our study resembles the work of Nonnecke and Preece on lurkers [6,7], who cite a number of methodological difficulties. For example, lurkers are those who, by definition, rarely respond to discussion posts, and are thus difficult to recruit, let alone to study. Our recruitment has relied primarily on flyers, email, tweets, and snowball-sampling; our data collection is based largely on semi-structured interviews. We would be interested in methods used by others for recruitment and data collection. Do others have experience or advice pertaining to diary studies, experience sampling, structured interviews based on previous tweets, or other methods? We are particularly interested in how these methods might be leveraged to understand practices of reading and following.

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