Twitter As A Social Networking Service

Introduction

Websites have evolved from being simple static HTML web pages into platforms where the user is also the contributor paving the way for collective content generation and social interaction (1) (2). This is enabled by websites bringing together several key concepts like collaboration and contribution tools, web services, multi-platform support etc. The implementation of principles like web as a platform, user participation, importance to data over control, customization and user experience is referred to as Web 2.0. Social media websites, blogs, wikis and video sharing websites are some applications of Web 2.0 concepts (3). Twitter is an example of a Web 2.0 website which is a multi-platform, microblogging and social networking platform. In this essay, I will be analyzing Twitter's Web 2.0 features discussing its impact on the way people communicate and collaborate online.

What is Twitter?

Twitter-like many other social networking services provides a platform that connects people and allows them to interact with each other. The core concept of Twitter revolves around short messages that are limited to 280 characters encouraging users to be succinct with their posts (4)(p79). This type of social interaction is also called as microblogging which differs from traditional blogging in the overall size of the content allowing users to exchange ideas in the form of short sentences instead of full-page posts (5).

Twitter's social networking structure relies on the principle of "following" users without the need for the other users to follow in return. This is different from other social network mechanisms like adding a friend on Facebook or adding a connection on LinkedIn where both parties must agree to form the social connection. This structure provides Twitter the potential to be a social networking as well as a professional networking service since it makes it easy for everyone to follow others with similar interests (9). Its multiplatform ability allows users to share their posts in real-time from desktops or mobile devices alike (9).

Why is Twitter popular?

Microblogging combined with the simplicity of its social networking structure can be identified as the main reason for Twitter's popularity. Microblogging provides an uncomplicated and easy form of communication allowing users to quickly share their opinions (6) (p1).

Support of multiple platforms like desktop and mobile web, desktop and mobile apps, instant messaging, and other online channels has helped Twitter in attracting a large user base (7).

The concept of "following" which is the core of its social networking structure made Twitter a go-to platform for general public to connect with several celebrities, politicians and businesses who are able to post their opinions and updates to their followers directly which has created a never before seen channel for online interaction (7). This allowed users not only to follow people they

know but also enabled to them to connect with strangers who they find interesting, share their opinions in return and motivating them to support each other (9).

Apart from short messages, Twitter also allows sharing of rich media like photos, videos, hyperlinks etc which makes the platform very engaging to its users (9).

Twitter’s web 2.0 characteristics

User participation

User participation and personal expression is at the core of Twitter’s existence. Like every other social network Twitter provides a channel for users to connect and communicate with other users. Twitter brings together millions of users all around the planet who share their opinions and updates via short messages called tweets (8). A bulk of Twitter’s users use the platform as a source of information and news without necessarily creating content (8). They use it to keep themselves informed about the latest updates in their relevant field or from people or institutions they are interested in (8). The platform provides tools to react to, comment on or share tweets which increases the overall user engagement. This also encourages content creators to stay active as their posts are being shared and appreciated.

Rich user experience

As Twitter relies on user participation for its content, it provides several tools on its website to explore and organize the tweets posted. There is an exclusive section on the website called “Explore” which is further divided into categories like Trending, News, Sports etc. This section makes it easy for users especially for newcomers to delve into the vast world of tweets in an organized way (10). Users can also organize the accounts they follow into different lists, bookmark or share tweets and contact a user privately via messages. The platform also offers suggestions on whom to follow based on a user’s interests and existing connections. The website offers an interactive experience like a desktop-based application, by dynamically generating content and responding to user’s requests without the traditional page-to-page navigation.

Web services / APIs

Twitter’s developer platform provides several APIs that can be used by developers to create third party software and/or automate several operations. An example use case is a Twitter bot for a business using the API to automatically create and publish tweets based on certain circumstances or the bot responding to or acknowledging tweets from their customers (11). (12) from their study estimated that about 9% to 15% of Twitter accounts are bots. Several third-party applications have been developed using the API usually referred to as Twitter clients which provide further customization and advanced management (13). The platform also provides API to embed content from Twitter on any website and tools to quickly create and post tweets from external websites (14).

Folksonomy

Folksonomy is a user driven classification system where users apply tags to their online posts.

Hashtags, a form of Folksonomy are a defining characteristic of Web 2.0 and have become a common feature of all social networks. Twitter is credited as the platform that first incorporated Hashtags as a key feature which are used in grouping, tracking and searching through content (15). Users can mention hashtags in their tweets thereby associating certain category to their post which can then be used to click through or search for other related posts (15).

Twitter’s impact on communication and collaboration

Speed of information

Twitter enables speedy delivery of news to large numbers of audience in a way that was not possible before (17). The lack of reciprocity which allows anyone to follow anyone has created a unique phenomenon with Twitter where large number of people can follow certain accounts without the account holder’s explicit permission (18). A post shared by an account with big follower numbers reaches to several followers and when shared by those followers and so on, results in exponential distribution of the post.

Removal of barriers

Twitter has changed the way celebrities, businesses and institutions reach out to their fans, customers and members. They can now post their opinions or updates directly to their followers on Twitter creating a more personal connection than possible before. Celebrities chat with their fans, share photos and updates on their daily lives with their followers (17). Businesses market their products/services, announce new releases and provide updates directly on Twitter (22). The platform also allows communication the other way around where users can reach out with their appreciation, feedback or criticism by tagging account handles (23).

Bigger audience

Celebrities and famous institutions will obviously be in the top followed accounts list, but what Twitter made possible is to provide a bigger audience to online bloggers, activists and industry experts (17). The ability to instantly deliver a message or thought to thousands of followers has provided an unprecedented platform to publish their opinions and thoughts.

Online activism

Activists all over the world are using Twitter and other social networks to connect with like-minded people and build a community (19). The social networking structure of Twitter specifically makes it easy for influencers and collaborators to cast their voices, communicate, exchange ideas and run movements. #StopFundingHate, #ClimateChange, #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo are some of the examples of hashtag activism on Twitter and other social networks (21).

Conclusion

Twitter is a part microblogging and part social networking service that works on multiple platforms and provides real time communication and content sharing capabilities. With user participation at its core, focus on user experience, provision of APIs for external use and an eco-

system that classifies content with different levels of metadata, Twitter embodies all the key characteristics of Web 2.0. The simplicity of microblogging combined with the unique “follow” based social networking structure makes Twitter a powerful platform that has revolutionized several aspects of online communication and collaboration.