Twitter and the Rise of Personal Publics

CHAPTER 1

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#private or #public? communication on Twitter is both and neither at the same time

Since its first public release in 2006, Twitter has established itself as the leading microblogging platform in most parts of the world. Its widespread adoption and integration with other parts of the digital networked media ecosystem have sparked public debate, pop-cultural responses, and academic research alike. Like other "new media," Twitter is both underdetermined and recombinant (Lievrouw, 2002), making it subject to the interpretative flexibility of the particular social groups involved in developing and appropriating the technology (van Dijck, 2011). Thus, there are many different practices of Twitter use: a teenager in suburban USA will tweet differently from a German professional football team, from a British comedian, and from a political party in Spain. Still, they all participate in a shared media technology with particular functionalities and communicative architecture, so it is worthwhile to examine these characteristics and (some of) their consequences.

In particular, this text will focus on the connections between Twitter practices and changes in our understanding of the public. It starts by describing

Twitter as a communicative space, framed by the three dimensions of software, relations, and rules. Based on these analytical remarks, it is then argued that Twitter contributes to the emergence of a new type of "publicness": the personal public. This concept as well as its consequences for journalism and for our understanding of privacy are discussed, followed by a conclusion which situates the ideas presented here in the overall transformation of mediated communication.

TWITTER AS A COMMUNICATIVE SPACE

The main argument to be developed is that Twitter is providing a particular communicative space which is affording the emergence of a new type of publicness: the "personal public". As argued elsewhere (Schmidt, 2011a, pp. 107–133), personal publics are one of the most important characteristics of the social Web, and as such, are not confined to Twitter. We can observe them most prominently on social network sites such as Facebook, but also on video-sharing platforms or on blogs—but have to note that not all communication based on these media technologies is to be considered a personal public (much the same as not everything printed on paper is to be considered a newspaper, or not everything broadcast on TV is a news show).

Rather, we should consider personal publics as an ideal type of communicative space, defined—and placed in contrast to the "traditional" publics afforded by journalistic mass media—by three elements: in personal publics, information is

1. Being selected and displayed according to criteria of personal relevance (rather than following journalistic news factors),
2. Being addressed to an audience which consists of network ties made explicit (rather than being broadcast to a dispersed, unknown mass audience), and finally, communication in personal publics is
3. Being conducted mainly in a conversational mode (rather than in the one-way mode of "publishing").

What exactly are the elements of Twitter as a communicative space that enable the emergence of personal publics? We can identify them along three analytical dimensions that structure communicative space online—thus framing situated social action within these spaces, without determining it (see Schmidt, 2007, for a similar discussion for blogging): technological features and affordances; social and textual relations; and shared rules.

Twitter is an Internet-based communication technology that allows users to distribute short messages (tweets) of 140 characters or fewer on the World Wide Web or through smartphone apps. Over the last years, various additional features have been included in the backend and the interface, such as the facilities for picture upload and display, or the automatic shortening of URLs to save characters in tweets. (See Chapter 3 by Halavais in this volume for a more detailed analysis of the co-evolution of the Twitter service and its practices.) Through an API (Application Programming Interface), third-party applications which offer additional functionalities can be connected to the service.

But the main affordances which distinguish Twitter from other forms of online distribution of messages such as IRC, email, or discussion boards are the particular ways that articulated relations—the nexus of social ties and textual references, based on code-enabled connections—are used to structure the flow of communication and to filter information. Firstly, Twitter relies on articulated social connections to establish "sender-audience" relationships. While single tweets as well as the collection of past tweets of a particular user are usually publicly accessible through permalinks, the basic concept guiding Twitter use is the idea of "following". Becoming a follower of a user is similar to subscribing to their updates, so their tweets will show up (together with those of the other people you follow) in your timeline, the reverse-chronologically sorted collection of updates. Contrary to social network sites such as Facebook, where social relationships are required to be reciprocal, the follower/followee relationship can (but does not have to) be unilateral (for large-scale studies on the resulting network properties see, for example, Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Wu, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011). The articulated social relationships are also used to calculate similarities with other users (e.g., Twitter displays how many of my followers also follow them), thus suggesting them as potentially interesting.

Besides this basic social relationship, Twitter communication is further based on textual references made explicit via a combination of communicative practices and software affordances. In order to address or reply to a particular user, the @-sign followed by the account name is used. The equivalent to forwarding a message is the retweet, through which a user distributes a tweet to their own followers while preserving the reference to the original sender (on the importance of retweets as a communicative tool, see also Chapter 2 by Bruns & Moe in this volume). In both cases, communicative references to other Twitter users are not only made visible, but navigable as well: people can follow the @-link or the retweet link to see the context of a conversation or the background of a particular user.

Finally, Twitter affords the formation of relations between users and texts (single tweets as well as whole conversations) through the use of hashtags, which consist of the "#" symbol followed by a word or phrase. Because hashtags are made searchable by the interface, they connect tweets from users who have no preexisting follower/followee relationship. Hashtags are unmoderated, so any user can introduce and use them, giving rise to a wide and uncontrolled variety of hashtags. This results in possible ambiguities in meaning and spelling, but processes of suggestion, imitation, and learning, as well as Twitter's "trending topic" functionality promote a shared use of certain hashtags for current events, cultural expression, or engagement in ongoing conversations.

The particular affordances of Twitter as a software service, together with the social and textual affordances articulated in ongoing use, form a communicative space which is partly stable (e.g., the connections between followers and followees) and partly highly dynamic (e.g., the tweets using a popular hashtag). It differs from other forms of online communication in that there is no "shared location" where users and their contributions become visible (as in a thread within a discussion board, a blog posting or Facebook status update with subsequent comments, or a chatroom). Rather, communication on Twitter is happening in networked, distributed conversations: single tweets forming the basic units and serving as "micro-content" (Dash, 2002) or "nanostories" (Wasik, 2009) are bundled (a) in the constant stream of information within a personal timeline, filtered via social connections made explicit, as well as (b) in the spontaneous and *ad hoc* "hashtag publics" (Bruns & Burgess, 2011), filtered via shared keywords and phrases.

But technological features and emerging networks of people and text alone do not suffice to constitute (and describe) a communicative space. A third structural aspect is necessary—shared routines and expectations about "how to do things", or in this chapter's context: how to use Twitter. They include shared understandings about which topics are appropriate or not for communication (which in turn is related to the issue of privacy, see below), but also more detailed expectations about the presentation, style, or tonality of tweets, as well as about the use of Twitter as part of a larger media ecology. While the opportunities and boundaries set by the Twitter interface (e.g., the limit of 140 characters per tweet) are valid for all users, shared rules might range from rather general norms and expectations to those more particular to certain groups or contexts of use.

The idea of authenticity, for example, is widely shared, and fake accounts are seen as a transgression of communicative expectations (see also Chapter 14 by Mowbray in this volume). Twitter supports this norm not only by providing

a mechanism to verify the accounts of politicians or celebrities, it also prohibits impersonation in its own "Twitter Rules," stating: "you may not impersonate others through the Twitter service in a manner that does or is intended to mislead, confuse, or deceive others" (Twitter, 2012d).

This points to a different perspective on Twitter rules, which addresses the power to impose (positive or negative) sanctions. As shared norms and expectations have varying degrees of formality, there are different social agents involved in shaping and enforcing these rules: as a business entity providing Web-based services, Twitter has its own Terms of Service which users have to accept and abide by in order to participate on the platform; failure to do so might lead to the suspension or termination of an account. Additionally, Twitter offers a full set of policies, guidelines, and best-practice documents (Twitter, 2012b) which not only cover impersonation and parody accounts, but also topics such as promoted products (Twitter, 2012c), or the use of tweets in media broadcasts (Twitter, 2012a). Some of them are strongly tied to general legal frameworks, such as copyright, free speech, or the protection of minors, and might, as such, also include other sanctions if breached.

Most of the rules framing the everyday use of Twitter will, however, remain implicit. They might be invoked and contested in the context of misunderstandings, failed communication, or other conflicts between users, when they are made explicit to negotiate and regulate behaviour which has been deemed inappropriate. Thus, knowing how to use Twitter is not restricted to being able to set up an account or use the interface of its website or app. Rather, it also includes implicit knowledge with which users demonstrate that they are "getting" Twitter. Possession of this implicit knowledge about shared routines and expectations becomes a condition of inclusion or exclusion in the "community of practice" of Twitter as a whole, as well as of participating in particular subcultures via Twitter (see Baym, 2010, Ch. 4, pp. 72–98, for a general overview on the role of practice and norms in computer-mediated communities).

PERSONAL PUBLICS ON TWITTER

The previous remarks have described Twitter as a communicative space framed by three structural dimensions of technological affordances, social and textual relationships, and shared rules and expectations. Against this background, we can revisit the idea of personal publics (where information is selected by criteria of personal relevance for a known, networked audience in a conversational mode).

For many users, Twitter is "personal media" (Lüders, 2008), in that they have a large degree of control over what and how they communicate. Contrary to, for example, social media editors for corporate accounts or mainstream media brands on Twitter, they neither have to comply with internal guidelines, PR and corporate communications policies, nor have to adhere to the criteria for newsworthiness which journalists have internalised in their professional education (see Clayman & Reisner, 1998). Rather, both selection and presentation of content to be tweeted can follow criteria of personal relevance. Traditionally, the Twitter interface has mirrored this broad scope of topics to be communicated by just asking "What's happening?" Additionally, the integration of Twitter with other online services (e.g., photo-sharing sites such as Instagram, video platforms such as YouTube, or news sites such as nytimes.com) makes it easy to share activities and content from those sites with one's followers. Thus, Twitter can become a personal hub for sharing a mediated everyday life.

Selecting and presenting information of personal relevance is emerging as a shared rule and expectation. This is assisted by the possibility of addressing particular audiences on Twitter. While mainstream media such as TV, radio, and print distribute information to a wide, unknown, and dispersed mass audience, users on Twitter have at least a latent knowledge of the size and composition of their audience: they can see how many followers they have, and they can—in principle—click on each of their followers' accounts to learn more about the people who have chosen to subscribe to their tweets. This will also make visible the heterogeneity of their audience, as there might be people from a variety of social contexts among the followers (see Marwick & boyd, 2010, for a more detailed discussion of the strategies for dealing with the possibility of collapsing social contexts on Twitter). So, even if two users have audiences of similar size, their compositions themselves will not be the same—rather, every Twitter user has their own particular and unique audience, which forms as an articulated network instead of a dispersed mass.

The third aspect distinguishing personal publics from mass-media publics is their respective communicative mode. Mass-media publics, on the one hand, are based on a mode of publishing or broadcasting, where dedicated senders distribute information without being able to receive feedback through the same technical channel. Personal publics, on the other hand, are characterised by the communicative mode of "conversation," where the strict separation of sender and receiver is blurred. (However, one might, for analytical reasons, still identify sender and receiver in any given communicative episode. On Twitter, the idea of "follower" and "followee" mirrors this distinction of com-

municative roles.) Accordingly, people expect to be able to retweet or reply to other tweets, or, conversely, to be replied to or retweeted. The software interface, and in particular the various functionalities for displaying and searching for @replies, retweets, and hashtags, supports these practices, and helps users engage in distributed conversations. And although Twitter is based on written communication, many tweets do resemble oral communication in their style and tonality (Tufekci, 2011). Thus, they contribute to the maintenance of a "connected presence" (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005), enabling people to stay in touch over distance by sharing seemingly mundane and trivial information which nevertheless serves to reassure participants of shared social bonds.

Again, it has to be emphasised that not all communication on Twitter necessarily takes place in personal publics, and that personal publics are not restricted to Twitter. Rather, personal publics should be considered as an ideal type of communicative structure that concurrently complements and modifies other aspects of public communication. Two consequences of the rise of personal publics will be discussed in the remainder of this chapter: their relation to traditional media, and the changes in our understanding of privacy that personal publics bring about.

Twitter has been adopted quickly not only by "regular" users, but also by political activists, parties, and candidates; and by companies, brands, and celebrities (see Marwick & boyd, 2011, as well as the chapters in the second half of this book for a more thorough discussion of practices of Twitter use). They all profit—in different ways—from the alternative ways of addressing and distributing information which Twitter provides, and can circumvent the mechanisms of gatekeeping and journalistic intermediation that characterise traditional mainstream media. In turn, other users can adapt their routines of information management and directly follow interesting sources (such as a celebrity or a politician), instead of having to rely on information about them being filtered and "packaged" by journalists. Thus, users can build their own radar of information sources by selecting and following only those accounts or conversations that (promise to) provide content that is relevant to them.

Professional media are, of course, reacting to this shift in informational practices (see Chapter 26 by Neuberger, vom Hofe, & Nuernbergk, as well as Chapter 27 by Hermida in this book for a more thorough discussion). A growing number of news sites include "tweet this" functions in their stories in order to facilitate the spread of their content, and media brands as well as individual journalists are increasingly present on Twitter themselves. This appropriation of Twitter and its integration into professional journalistic routines is contrib-

uting to the three trends Meikle & Young (2012, pp. 47ff.) have identified as the main characteristics of news in convergent media industries: news on Twitter is becoming debundled and linkable (rather than packaged in discrete bundles of news, such as a weekday edition or an 8 p.m. newscast); news involves sharing information among audiences (rather than distributing the information to the audience); and news is becoming conversational (rather than remaining a monologue).

Thus, when building the personalised news radar for their own personal public on Twitter, users might choose to also subscribe to the Twitter account of their favorite newspaper or TV news station, or to a number of them, to get a more diverse set of perspectives on current events. They can share and comment on those news items with their own audience, and even get in touch with journalists to correct errors or suggest related information. This not only changes the mechanisms and expectations of audience participation in journalism (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012), but also turns Twitter into a place where conversation and publication converge. In personal publics, news reporting and instances of professional communication can share the same space with personal musings, phatic communication (Miller, 2008), and social grooming.

This convergence of the public and the personal is already pointing to the second main consequence of the rise of personal publics: they contribute to the shift in our understanding of mediated privacy and publicness (exemplary for the debate on this deep and complex change, see the debate between Ford, 2011, and Jurgenson & Rey, 2012). As users are selecting and sharing information of personal relevance based on the central norm of authenticity with an intended audience composed of articulated social ties, they are making information accessible that might be considered private, such as holiday stories, impressions from family events, one's current location or emotional state, etc. While these might be considered and dismissed as instances of "digital exhibitionism" by some, closer inspection shows that a reconfiguration of the practices and context of everyday impression management and relationship management in extended social worlds is taking place.

As has been argued above, such tweets are becoming part of personalised news streams within articulated networks of strong and weak ties. The decision to tweet or withhold a certain opinion, link, piece of information, etc., will be based on the user's perception of their own audience: how large is it, and how many people from which role contexts are among the followers? Since Twitter use, as other communicative practices, will become routinised over time, usually not every single tweet is scrutinised before sending. Rather, users form a

general idea of their followers as an "intended audience" (Schmidt, 2011b) or "imagined audience" (Litt, 2012), which they will use to assess the appropriateness of information. In some situations, users might also address a particular group within their audience, for example, when participating in a hashtag conversation. By selectively disclosing information, either based on the perception of their intended audience or to an explicitly addressed audience, users engage in privacy management.

Characteristics of Twitter as networked digital media, however, complicate these practices of self-disclosure and audience control. Following boyd (2008), we can identify the four aspects of persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability of digital information which make it difficult to assess the empirical audience—who is actually taking notice of a given tweet?—and almost impossible to constrain the potential audience of those who might, in the near or distant future, have access to it. Thus, personal publics on Twitter challenge users to "maintain equilibrium between a contextual social norm of personal authenticity that encourages information-sharing and phatic communication (the oft-cited 'what I had for breakfast') with the need to keep information private, or at least concealed from certain audiences" (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 124).

CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed Twitter from a sociological point of view, situating its individual use within different structural aspects which both frame and result from this use. It has argued, in particular, that Twitter provides a communicative space which is formed by particular technological features, by emerging social and textual relationships, as well as by shared norms and expectations guiding the use of Twitter. These elements enable the emergence of personal publics, a new kind of publicness which consists of information selected and presented according to personal relevance, shared with an (intended) audience of articulated social ties in a conversational mode.

While the focus of this chapter and the book has been on Twitter, the ideas developed here can arguably be applied to other genres of networked digital media which—in combination with other large-scale, long-term developments such as globalisation and the rise of networks as a central morphology for social organisation (Castells, 2000; Tomlinson, 1999)—contribute to profound changes in contemporary societies. Personal publics afforded by social media are one of the most visible results of shifts in everyday identity management, relationship management, and information management: they allow people to express

and work on aspects of their own identity, while maintaining and expanding social connections of different degrees. In addition, they help people manage the abundance of information around them by introducing filter mechanisms which are personal and social at the same time.

To argue, as Keen (2008) has done, that personal publics promote a "cult of the amateur", where trivial babble dominates over thoughtful knowledge of the experts, is to miss the point. We should, rather, acknowledge the potential for inclusion and participation inherent in these new ways of communication, expression, sharing, and socialising. Papacharissi (2010) called this nexus of the individual and the social the "private sphere", in which

> the citizen is alone, but not lonely or isolated. The citizen is connected, and operates in a mode and with political language determined by him or her. Operating from a civically *privé* environment, the citizen enters the public spectrum by negotiating aspects of his/her privacy as necessary, depending on the urgency and relevance of particular situations. (p. 132)

Although not mentioned directly by Papacharissi, we should consider personal publics on Twitter as one of the "places" where this private sphere becomes manifest. Not all of the many different practices of Twitter use will eventually lead to personal publics as defined in the previous remarks. But those which do so provide opportunities for participation and social inclusion, because people communicate and share things that are important to them within an extended network of social ties. In this respect, Twitter is indeed and profoundly social media.

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