Towards a Sociological Understanding of Social Media: Theorizing Twitter

Dhiraj Murthy
Bowdoin College, USA

Abstract

This article presents the first steps towards a sociological understanding of emergent social media. This article uses Twitter, the most popular social media website, as its focus. Recently, the social media site has been prominently associated with social movements in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. Rather than rush to breathlessly describe its novel role in shaping contemporary social movements, this article takes a step back and considers Twitter in historical and broad sociological terms. This article is not intended to provide empirical evidence or a fully formed theoretical understanding of Twitter, but rather to provide a selected literature review and a set of directions for sociologists. The article makes connections specifically to Erving Goffman's interactionist work, not only to make the claim that some existing sociological theory can be used to think critically about Twitter, but also to provide some initial thoughts on how such theoretical innovations can be developed.

Keywords

The first twitter of Spring, How melodious its ring
The first twitter of Spring, How melodious its ring, its ring
[…]
O'er the down and the dell […]
Song birds that flit, Singing cheerily twit, twitter twit, tra la la, tra la
(Callcott, 1863: 1–7)

Two Tasks: to defend the new against the old and to link the old with the new
(Nietzsche, 1873, cited in Rabinow, 2008: 101)

Corresponding author:
Dhiraj Murthy, Department of Sociology, Bowdoin College, 7000 College Station, Brunswick, Maine 04011–8470, USA.
Email: dmurthy@bowdoin.edu

In his late 18th-century play titled *The Telegraph, or, A New Way of Knowing Things* (1795), John Dent satirizes the effect of the telegraph at the time. As performed at the Theatre Royal in London, its protagonist, Sir Peter Curious, is dead set on getting a telegraph of his own so he can spy on his family and check if his wife, Lady Curious, is being unfaithful. Sir Peter describes the telegraph by saying it is 'an apparatus, by which you may find out what's doing in one's family, let it be ever so far off' (Dent, 1795: 9). The telegraph's ability to combine the immediacy of messages with interlocutors at great distances fascinates Sir Peter, leading him to add, 'if you say in Basinghall Street, "How d'ye do?" they'll answer you in five minutes, "Pretty well I thank you" in the blue mountains'(1795: 9). Sir Peter is particularly keen to spy on his family and eagerly awaits the arrival of the telegraph of his own so that 'I [Sir Peter] shall know to a certainty, what my Lady is about at Sydenham, and be convinced, whether I have any cause, or not, to suspect her of infidelity' (1795: 9–10). This notion that the telegraph will blur the boundaries of public and private culminates in a scene in which the coachman, gardener, butler and housekeeper begin confessing improprieties (including the butler stealing over a dozen bottles of champagne). They know that the days of raiding their boss's liquor cabinet are numbered as Sir Peter will, of course, find out about *everything* in the future through the telegraph (1795: 20–21).

Though Dent's play was written over 200 years ago, it is striking just how resonant it is with the contemporary reception to new media technologies which seek similarly to compress time and space (Harvey, 1989) as well as shrink or blur the boundaries between private and public. Modern-day Sir Peters snoop on loved ones or children through new web-based technologies including social networking sites (such as Facebook and Google+). In other words, Dent's play also highlights the issue of surveillance and technology. The relevance of his play is, however, much deeper in that the telegraph, his object of interest, has many parallels to Twitter, a prominent social media website in which users send updates restricted in length to 140 characters (termed 'tweets') to a global public. Like the telegraph, it is used to send short messages. Like the telegraph, it is a controversial technology. In the 18th and indeed 19th centuries, most lauded the telegraph (with *The Times*, 1796, calling it an 'ingenious and useful contrivance' and *Scientific American* heralding it as the bringer of a 'kinship of humanity', cited in Fischer, 1992: 2). Others at the time viewed it as a means to dumb down society and the harbinger of letter writing's death. Indeed, even in the early 20th century, discussions of the telegraph's impact on letter writing continued (e.g. *The Times*, 1900). Although these early critics saw the telegraph's immediacy and brevity as a threat to letter writing, ironically, the telegraph highlighted the permanence of letter writing in that it remained an important medium. Similarly, when the telephone was seen as potentially replacing telegrams, the permanence of the telegram becomes highlighted; as Peggy Olson in her ad campaign during an episode of the television series *Mad Men* remarks, 'You can't frame a phone call. A telegram is forever.' And, today, critics of Twitter such as Keen (2010) view social media as threatening blogging and other longer-length electronic media. But will the immediacy and brevity of Twitter, on the other hand, give permanence to earlier, longer-length electronic media? Additionally, as tweets are being archived by the American Library of Congress, will the next communicative technology give permanence to tweets?

Though these broad historical arguments reveal similarities of emergent social media to older communication technologies, what makes Twitter distinct is also its departures

from the telegraph. Specifically, it is free to use, public (or perhaps semi-public), multicast (i.e. many to many), interactive, and networked. The power of Twitter and other social media is also that they are designed to provoke and call forth regular updates from their users. Highlighting these differences is key to a critical, yet balanced, understanding of the potential uniqueness of social media like Twitter.

This article seeks to extend and innovate existing sociological theory to understand emergent social media. To do this, Twitter is explored in light of work by Erving Goffman and other theorists. However, before trying to form a theoretical understanding of Twitter and social media in general, the technology needs first to be introduced.

Twitter as Social Media

Blair (1915) in his popular 20th-century stage song 'I hear a little Twitter and a Song' was, of course, referring to birdsong. However the website has become ubiquitous. For most internet-using adults, to hear a twitter today refers to one of the largest and most popular social media websites.[1] This section explains the medium itself and the ways in which it is organized. What this section does not do is provide a conclusive argument of how or why Twitter is different from other ways of interaction. Rather, like the rest of this article, this section intentionally aims to begin this conversation.

First, the distinction should be made between 'social network' and 'social media' technologies. The former, which encompass Facebook and LinkedIn amongst others, are defined by boyd and Ellison (2008: 211) as web services which facilitate users maintaining a 'public or semi-public profile within a bounded system' and through which they can 'articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection'. Some elide social networking and social media together. Though the two are not mutually exclusive, it is more useful to make clear that social media are mainly conceived of as a medium wherein 'ordinary' people in ordinary social networks (as opposed to professional journalists) can create user-generated 'news' (in a broadly defined sense). The 'social' part of social media refer to its distinction from 'traditional' media (Murthy, 2011). This new medium is designed to facilitate social interaction, the sharing of digital media, and collaboration. Social networks are also important to social media – especially in their ability to disseminate. Twitter has been labelled a 'microblog' technology due to the medium's restriction of posts to 140 characters or fewer. Microblogging services, like Twitter, are one type of social media. For the sake of clarity, I define microblogging as an internet-based service in which (1) users have a public profile in which they broadcast short public messages or updates whether they are directed to specific user(s) or not, (2) messages become publicly aggregated together across users, and (3) users can decide whose messages they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages; this is in distinction to most social networks where following each other is bi-directional (i.e. mutual).

Unlike social network sites where users often interact with people they know offline (boyd, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007), users of social media often consume media produced by people they have found of interest, leading to interactions with strangers and, albeit more rarely, celebrities. In my research on new media and a Muslim youth subculture (Murthy, 2010), a respondent of mine recounted how he posted a tweet disparaging Deepak Chopra only to find that Chopra himself responded and invited my respondent to

have a meal with him (an offer which was taken up).[2] This phenomenon is, of course, part of a larger trend in which web-based spaces are becoming more interactive (e.g. comments on online news articles and professors responding to ratings on sites like ratemyprofessors.com). Whether instances like this one involving Chopra are the exception or the norm, social media are designed to facilitate interactive multicasting (i.e. the broadcasting of many to many). Twitter, for example, makes it very easy for tweets to be 'retweeted' (i.e. forwarded) to one's set of followers, people who have subscribed to read that individual's tweets.

Tweets are a public version of Facebook's now well-known status update function. Twitter is similar to chat rooms in that dialogue between Twitter users occurs through the at-sign (e.g. a user can direct tweets to another user by prefixing a post with an at-sign before the target user's name). However, unlike many chat rooms, Twitter is public. Anyone can post a tweet directed to @barackobama or @KatyPerry and many do (Murthy, 2011). The boundaries of public and private are critical to understanding microblogging as well as its predecessor technologies. Rosenthal (2008: 159) helps make this distinction by observing that '[n]ewsletters by e-mail are still newsletters, but blogs bring personalized and interpersonal communication into the public domain'. For those unfamiliar with Twitter (and microblogging in general), upon logging in, a user is presented with their profile page. On Twitter, this page is known as a timeline. Its purpose is to act as a live feed which displays tweets both by the user as well as anyone the user is 'following'.[3] Similarly, users who are 'following' you will receive tweets you post in their timeline.[4]

If someone is following you whom you do not want to be followed by, you can block them. However, this does not preclude anyone from pointing their browser to your public Twitter profile and reading all of your tweets. It just means they are not publicly associated as a 'follower' of you and will not receive your tweets in their timeline.

I Tweet, Therefore I Am

Like all social media, Twitter has everything to do with self-presentation. Though not reductively Cartesian, the act of tweeting is born from individual contributions and, sociologically speaking, is about self-production. Indeed, microblogging services depend on regular posting by users. Without this regularity, the utility of social media such as Twitter diminishes significantly. Like status updates on Facebook, users of social media continue to post regularly as the status updating practice becomes a meaningful part of their identities (Boon and Sinclair, 2009; Nosko et al., 2010). Daily posts which indicate what one had for breakfast or what one is wearing can easily be relegated to the merely banal. But, as sociologists, we should recall Bourdieu's (1984) argument that the daily, sometimes 'banal', is pregnant with meaning. In the case of Twitter, 'banal' social media posts serve as an important vehicle of self-affirmation. We can read tweets such as 'had too many espresso shots today' as a means by which individuals affirm their identities in a constantly shifting, 'liquid modern' (Bauman, 2000) world. The seemingly banal tweet becomes an important tool to say 'look at me' or 'I exist'. This need to confirm their identities keeps regular users invested in the act of posting on social media websites on

a regular (sometimes daily or hourly basis). This is part of what Gackenbach (2007) calls 'inventing the self'.

Goffman (1981: 21) also notes how our daily communicative rituals have considerations of 'ego' and 'personal feelings'. It is useful to draw a comparison between mobile phone text messages and Twitter. Though the former is presumably a private bilateral communicative act, its content is often similar to Twitter. As Licoppe (2004: 143) found, mobile phone-mediated communication helps people tell each other about their days and this brought the communicating individuals 'closer'. And this feeling of 'closeness' is not lessened *per se* because of its mediated state. Rather, as Putnam (2000: 27) argues, internet-mediated communication presents a counterexample to the 'decline of connectedness' we see in many aspects of American community life. Shirky (2010) extends this argument by noting that in recent years the hours of television American youths watch has declined. Given the historical upward trend in their television consumption, this is noteworthy. Shirky (2010) attributes this to an increase in hours spent by these youth using social media and other internet applications.

Regardless, it is not difficult to make the argument that these forms of self-confirmation are redolent of the nihilism Heidegger associates with aspects of modernity. However, sociologically, it is critical that we recognize the importance of these posts to the identities of the posters. We can understand this through *Bildung*, which Herder (cited in Gadamer et al., 2004: 8) refers to as 'cultivating the human'. Gadamer et al. (2004: 8) explain *Bildung* as the 'concept of self-formation'. From the perspective of identity, Gadamer (2004: 10) sees *Bildung* as describing 'the result of the process of becoming' and, as such, 'constantly remains in a state of continual *Bildung*'. Though it is easy to view tweets merely as a crude mode of communication, doing so misses the impact tweets have on one's *Bildung*. For active users of Twitter, posting tweets is part of their identity maintenance and the constancy of active Twitter users confirms this relationship or, as a Cartesian aphorism: I tweet, therefore I am. Tying this back to Goffman, these changes in social communication are part of 'ego' and 'personal feelings' and are critical to understanding Twitter and, especially, its role in self-production. Though tweeting is part of becoming for its users, it departs from Cartesian dualism in that the former is contingent on a community of interactants, whereas the latter makes the argument that the individual mind is thinking and, as such, stands apart from community and, indeed, the body. Examining Twitter alongside Cartesian thought reveals that the former complicates the autonomous individuality of the latter. Specifically, Twitter seems to provide ways for individuals to assert and construct the self which are contingent on a larger dialogic community (Bakhtin and Holquist, 1981).

Twitter as Democratizing?

One shortcoming of understanding social media through *Bildung* is that it does not capture the shift the medium has experienced from being an exclusively elite form to a more accessible one. An important question is whether the medium opened up access to the production of selves by tweeting. Turner (2010: 2) argues that contemporary media forms have experienced a 'demotic turn', which refers 'to the increasing visibility of the "ordinary person" as they have turned themselves into media content through celebrity

culture, reality TV, DIY websites, talk radio and the like'. Turner (2010: 3) makes the key point that the media have perhaps experienced a shift from 'broadcaster of cultural identities' to 'a translator or even an author of identities'. George Gilder (1994), a dot-com cyber evangelist, extended this idea much further, arguing that new media would be 'moving authority from elites and establishments [and that these …] new technologies [would] drastically change the cultural balance of power'. However, Turner is more cautious, pointing out that the 'demotic turn' seen in contemporary media should not be conflated with democratization and the end of the digital divide. Specifically, he argues against Hartley's (1999) notion of 'democratainment', arguing that, in neologisms such as this, the democratic is almost always secondary (Turner, 2010: 16). I agree with him when he argues that no 'amount of public participation in game shows, reality TV or DIY celebrity web-sites will alter the fact that, overall, the media industries still remain in control of the symbolic economy' (2010: 16). Furthermore, we should not underestimate the startling ability of states to pull the plug, as occurred in Egypt in 2011.

The natural question which arises is whether Twitter is different in any meaningful way. An argument can be made that, within Western society itself, Twitter and other microblogging sites do indeed represent a significant 'demotic turn' (i.e. ordinary people are able to break 'news', produce media content, or voice their opinions publicly). Microblogging, more than many web spaces, is event driven. Organizing social life by events presents opportunities for everyday people and traditional media industries to tweet side-by-side. One way to render this visible is through Twitter's 'trending topics' function, a list of the most popular subjects people are tweeting about. Interestingly, there are always 'demotic' trending topics such as what people are listening to, celebrities one hates, or the '#lesserbooks' trending topic which called for book titles which never made it to the shelf (e.g. 'Zen and the Art of Unicycle Maintenance'). Simultaneously, a significant number are based around breaking news events (e.g. the death of Michael Jackson or the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill). Although traditional media industries usually determine what events become considered important, many trending topics come into being through a single tweet or a small group of individuals. Many tweets referring to breaking news events contain hyperlinks to full-length newspaper articles.

Therefore, it is perhaps more useful to see Twitter and other social media as part of what Therborn (2000: 42) calls the 'event society' (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*). And Huyssen (2000: 25) translates it as 'society of experience', a turn toward social communication being event-based. Seen as part of the larger cosmology of Twitter, this reflects a particular aspect of modernity in which events, however transient or superficial, are of importance to society. Huyssen's explanation of *Erlebnisgesellschaft* captures these elements well. He writes that the term 'refers to a society that privileges intense but superficial experiences oriented toward instant happening in the present and consumption of goods, cultural events, and mass-marketed lifestyles' (2000: 25). Through this reading of *Erlebnisgesellschaft*, the intriguing question of what constitutes an 'event' itself emerges (e.g. does Charlie Sheen mouthing off to a reporter constitute an 'event'?)

Erlebnisgesellschaft seems to draw from Kierkegaard and Dru's (1962: 35) argument that 'ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is instant publicity everywhere.' Tempting as it is for some, applying Kierkegaard's 'nothing happens' argument to Twitter is a potentially dangerous one. Rather, as argued previously,

our interpersonal interactions on Twitter and other new media such as Facebook and LinkedIn are part of our daily happenings. And, following Adorno and Bernstein (1991), our daily interaction with media is very much a part of our larger socioeconomic life. For Adorno, our interactions with any media are routed through what he calls the 'culture industry', institutions which control the production and consumption of culture. What we listen to or what we read are all mediated by the culture industries and, from his perspective, its 'commercial character' (Adorno and Bernstein, 1991: 61). Ultimately, relegating Twitter to a space where 'nothing happens' not only ignores the fact that the interactions we have on Twitter are a product of larger social, political, and economic process, but it also smacks of elitism (a charge which Waldman, 1977, argues was, ironically, often levelled at Adorno). The latter part of Kierkegaard's argument, however, is critically important to understanding Twitter. There is definitely an 'immediate publicity everywhere' (Kierkegaard and Dru: 35) in that everything from one's daily happenings or musings become part of a publicity-driven culture. In a sense, Twitter markets us through our tweets and, as such, shifts us more towards 'an age of advertisement', where we are not necessarily advertising products, but rather ourselves (and our self-commodification). As research has shown (e.g. Livingstone, 2008), the amount of followers or friends one has on social media websites factors into how we perceive ourselves. And, following the inverse, cyber-bullying has the real potential to harm or even destroy one's self-image (Li, 2006). Although beyond the scope of this introductory article, larger questions are posed throughout the following section to provide directions for future work.

Towards a Sociological Understanding of Twitter

The study of social media is a new area of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities. Twitter, like any new communication technology, shapes our social world. As Raymond Williams (1974) famously cautioned, technology shaping our social world is different to determining it, or as Fischer (1992: 5), in reference to the telephone, puts it: 'fundamental' shifts in communication technology change 'the conditions of daily life, [but they…] do not determine the basic character of that life'. Specifically, Fischer (1992: 5) sees the telephone as not 'radically alter[ing] American ways of life'. Rather, Americans used the telephone 'to more vigorously pursue their characteristic ways of life'. In other words, the telephone facilitated the intensification of pre-existing characteristics of social life (Fischer, 1992: 5). In the case of Twitter, it may be intensifying pre-existing characteristics of an erosion of the private in which more quotidian aspects of our lives are publicly shared. These are some of the new messages made possible by the new medium. We learn about other people's daily rituals, habits, happenings, and the places they visit. Not only do we potentially get a certain level of richness which we do not get in other mediated communication, but we also are exposed to a certain candour. Following Habermas's (1970: 372) notion that 'all speech […] is oriented towards the idea of truth', we are perhaps getting more truthful portrayals of some sides of people, which were previously kept in the private sphere or what Goffman (1959: 119) calls the 'backstage', which constitutes 'places where the camera is not focused at the moment'. Or, most likely, we are getting a posed view of the backstage: we see what people want us to/let us see. These are pressing questions

to which sociologists can offer valuable insights. This article begins this conversation by specifically extending Goffman's theoretical work to better understand Twitter.

Goffman's corpus of interactionist work gives sociologists a set of tools which can be developed to understand social media, including Twitter. Specifically, recent work like that of Knorr Cetina (2009) has argued that Goffman's work can be useful for understanding mediated interactions. In the case of Twitter, the work of Goffman and his interactionist followers is helpful in understanding the concepts relating to self-production discussed earlier. For the benefit of those unfamiliar with his work, I first introduce some basics of Goffman in terms of face-to-face dialogic interaction before delving into Twitter. Goffman's (1981) approach places primacy on interaction and views our face-to-face social situations as critical. From one vantage point, to understand Twitter is to understand how we 'talk'. Goffman conceptualizes 'talk' through three themes: 'ritualization', 'participation framework', and 'embedding'. The first refers to his argument that the 'movements, looks, and vocal sounds we make as an unintended byproduct of speaking and listening never seem to remain innocent' (1981: 2). A key aspect of ritualization is that we acquire gestural conventions over our lifetime and that these gestures cannot be captured by the term 'expression' (1981: 3). Second, 'participation framework' refers to Goffman's theory that 'those who happen to be in perceptual range of the event will have some sort of participation status relative to it' and that these positions can be analysed (1981: 3). Lastly, 'embedding' refers to the 'insufficiently appreciated fact that words we speak are often not our own, at least our current "own"' and that 'who can speak is restricted to the parties present' (1981: 3). He adds that 'although who speaks is situationally circumscribed, in whose name words are spoken is certainly not'. Goffman (1981: 3) emphasizes that '[u]ttered words have utterers', but utterances 'have subjects (implied or explicit)'. He concludes that the subjects may ultimately point to the utterer, but 'there is nothing in the syntax of utterances to require this coincidence' (1981: 3).

I have intentionally outlined Goffman's three key themes surrounding 'talk' although he is referring to unmediated rather than mediated talk. The literature extending Goffman's ideas about talk to mediated communication is now established (Adkins and Nasarczyk, 2009; Bryant and Miron, 2004; Riva and Galimberti, 1998; Spitzberg, 2006; Walther, 1996). Indeed, in an issue of this journal, Rettie (2009) successfully extends Goffman to mobile phone communication. Knorr Cetina's (2009) work on stock market traders is particularly innovative in extending Goffman to interactive new media. She argues that their social interactions with other traders can be thought of as 'synthetic situations', which are 'entirely constituted by on-screen projections' (2009: 65). Knorr Cetina begins the process of extending the idea of 'synthetic' to Goffman's concept of 'situation', but stops at the 'synthetic situation'. To understand Twitter and other emerging media, we would be well served by extending Knorr Cetina's idea of the synthetic to Goffman's concepts of 'embedding' and 'encounters'. Building from this literature, I use Goffman's three key themes surrounding 'talk' (ritualization, participation framework, and embedding) to make some initial extensions of his work to the mediated space of Twitter.

Drawing from 'ritualization', tweets seem a-gestural and the term 'expression' seems perfectly able to capture what the tweeting individual is trying to 'express'. However, it

is easy to forget that any computer-mediated communication has acquired gestural conventions which also 'never seem to remain innocent'. Though the gestural conventions may be mediated through graphical avatars, emoticons, or even unintended typed characters, these can be considered 'gestures' and they are laden with meaning. For example, on Twitter, one can decipher a sigh or pause through subtle and not-so-subtle textual cues (e.g. '…' for an explicit pause). This is a critical point and one supported by the literature that users 'compensate textually' in computer-mediated communication (Herring, 2008).

In terms of participation framework, computer-mediated communication which is public has a 'perceptual range' which cannot actually be fully perceived by the speaker of the word. That being said, there is a 'perceptual range' which is at least partially perceived by the sender of the tweet and those who receive the tweet in their Twitter timelines have a 'participation status relative' (Goffman, 1981: 3) to the tweets. What I mean by this is that the person sending the tweet knows that there is a potential audience for it and that the readers of the tweet have different participation statuses relative to the tweet. Specifically, a tweet by an individual or group may have triggered the tweet. Or it could be a more subtle relationship. Regardless, this participation status is important to understanding social communication on Twitter.

Lastly, and most importantly, is Goffman's idea of embedding. For him, embedding signifies the distinction between the situational circumscription of speaker and the fluidity of who 'owns' those utterances. Specifically, he argues that utterances have subjects, but the original utterer need not be preserved in the utterance itself. Additionally, Goffman (1981: 3) observes that this 'embedding capacity' is part of our general linguistic ability to embed utterances in 'any remove in time', rather than just in 'the situated present'. Goffman's theoretical perspective is particularly suited to understanding Twitter because of his development of embedding. Specifically, when they have been broadcasted to the Twitter universe ('Twitterverse') tweets become removed from the situational circumscription which face-to-face communication provides. Like the utterances Goffman is referring to, tweet utterances also have subjects. However, the circulation of tweets is more largely dependent on whose name the utterance is being attributed to, rather than who is the original utterer. Specifically, if an unknown person sends a fabulously interesting tweet, it is most likely destined never to be read. Of course, this is true of any communication in that reception depends on audience. However, the ability of Twitter to re-embed tweets into the situational space of another Twitter user (through retweets) generates wholly new audiences which feel the utterance to be originating from the retweeter. This is particularly interesting because the retweet most often bears reference to the original Twitterer (through an @ reference, e.g. @whitehouse). However, this part of the tweet is usually unconsciously or consciously ignored (see Figure 1). Of course, some recipients of retweets do pay particular attention to the original Twitterer (and decide to follow them, etc.) and future empirical research will no doubt shed more light on this.[5]

Furthermore, embedding is also particularly useful in theorizing Twitter as it also refers to our linguistic ability to temporalize utterances fluidly. Although Twitter, as a medium, can be synchronous in communicative interactions (if Twitterer and tweet recipient are both online at the same time), it most often has some element of
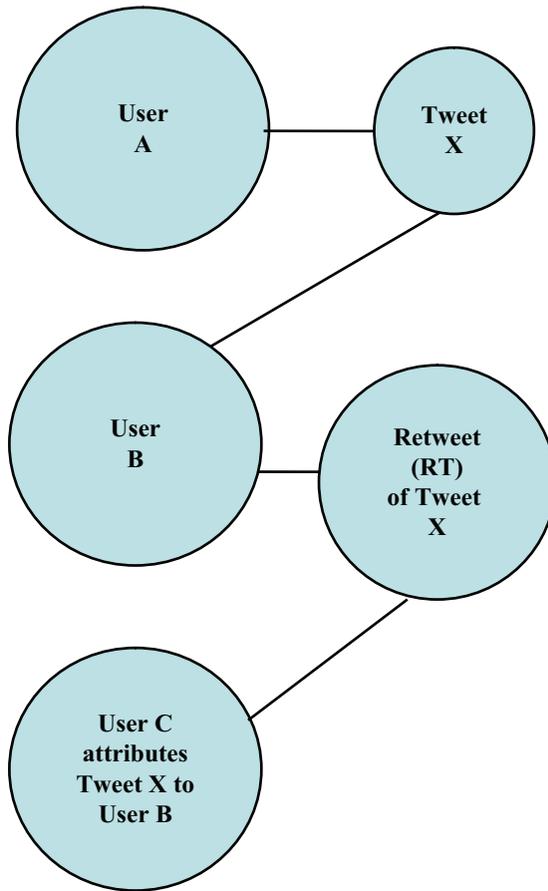
Figure 1. Twitter attribution

asynchronicity. However, when tweets are retweeted, they become re-embedded into the situated present of the recipient. And if that recipient retweets, the new recipients also view the tweet utterance in their situated present. Because in virtual spaces 'the interacting parties meet in time rather than in a place' (Knorr Cetina, 2009: 79), it is useful to think of what I term 'synthetic embedding', which places primacy on 'response presence' (Goffman, 1983) rather than physical place. That being said, synthetic embedding, like physical embedding, reformulates the space it is embedded in, which happens to be a virtual space.

The difference with Twitter is that the audience range of tweets is not always in congruence with the perceptual range (or indeed intended range) of the original Twitterer. Specifically, the original Twitter poster intends the tweet to circulate to their immediate followers. They are not always consciously aware that their tweets have the potential to

travel further. This is a key distinction between synthetic embedding and embedding. Kwak et al. (2010: 6) note that once a tweet is retweeted (regardless of the number of followers the original Twitterer has), it reaches an audience (mean) size of 1000. This is quite significant, as an 'everyday' tweet posted by an ordinary individual has a potentially large readership if it is retweeted. Therefore, like any utterances with intended audiences, tweets are not only synthetically embedded in some time frame, but also audience contexts. And if tweets do become retweeted, they experience synthetic re-embedding in both a different temporal frame and potentially different social context.

The above does not take into account replies to tweets and the responses to these replies. Rather, it has been restricted to a single tweet utterance and the ways in which we can theorize its production, perception, and reproduction. However, a critical function of Twitter and reason for its popularity is the ability for users to reply to one another. When replying to a tweet or directing a tweet to a specific user, the site prefixes the reply with an '@' and the intended recipient sees this in their Twitter page when they log on. Like face-to-face communication, utterances on Twitter generate responses. Similarly, these responses are, following Goffman (1981: 5) 'realized at different points in "sequence time"'. Conversations on Twitter become marked by the exchange of responses which can be aggregated into a sequence (by time) and this forms a 'coherent' conversation. This assumes that the response exchanges can be paired into 'dialogic units' as Goffman (1981: 6) refers to them. However, having a conversation on Twitter can be more like sitting in a room with a door, not knowing who is going to pop their head around and respond or who is listening behind the door. Additionally, it could be several people coming through that door within seconds of each other. This is compounded by the fact that the number of other rooms grows larger every time someone retweets your tweets to their followers. Also, if the user identification of the originating Twitterer is retained (through an at-sign), the originating Twitterer has the ability to see who is retweeting and responding. They can choose to become a respondent to a retweeter, thereby opening the door to one or many of these other rooms.

Ultimately, there is a sense of boundedness of the retweet to the new utterer. However, anyone, not just the originating Twitterer, can open any of these doors or they can form a new room and 'own' the tweet. This type of computer-mediated communication does have a history in forms of copy and paste communication (e.g. if someone copied a discussion idea from one email list to another, they become considered the original utterer). However, within the etiquette of emailing lists, the original utterer is preserved and it is customary for an original poster (OP), even if on another site or mailing list, to be referred to or thanked (Hansen et al., 2010).

Of course, a distinguishing aspect of communication on Twitter is also its terseness. Trying to communicate in the restricted format of 140 characters seems unduly limited to some. And to Twitter's critics (e.g. Keen, 2010), it may even be considered a threat to our current modes of communication. Critics also argue that new media more generally are leading to the impoverishment of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc. (Tucker, 2009). However, one can make the argument that these types of communication on Twitter (sharing links to news stories, updates on where one is, what one is doing, etc.) are also expressed tersely not only in other mediated forms, but in face-to-face communication as well. Goffman refers to these as 'truncated verbal forms' (1981: 7). Specifically, not all

communication needs to be verbose. If we are asking someone which direction a subway station is or how much a newspaper costs, a couple of words will satisfy the questioner. Those, such as Keen (2010), who argue that Twitter heralds the death of meaningful communication may be failing to appreciate this. The key to understanding 'talk' on Twitter is not to get drawn into a privileging of verbosity in speech acts. This is a slippery slope ending, more often than not, in stratified communication. Rather, the assumption needs to be made that the actors in Twitter are satisfied by the sub-140 character responses they receive. Following Goffman (1981: 10), perhaps the most important conclusion is that a 'basic normative assumption about talk is that, whatever else, it should be correctly interpretable in the special sense of conveying to the intended recipients what the sender more or less wanted to get across'. They need not 'agree' with the message, they just need to be in agreement 'as to what they have heard' (1981: 10). Or more concisely put: 'illocutionary force is at stake, not perlocutionary effect' (1981: 10). I would add though that the recipients of tweets may not be intended and that illocutionary force can be diminished as tweets become more and more removed from the original tweeting speaker. However, the medium ultimately tends towards the privileging of verbatim tweets rather than insuring the preservation of intended meaning (i.e. what the original speaker 'wanted to get across'). Additionally, the diminishing of the illocutionary force of tweets may be accelerated when non-native English speakers enter the predominantly English Twitterverse. But, paradoxically, Twitter may be increasing illocutionary force for non-native speakers of the global *lingua franca* who enter into this English-dominated media space because it may require less English-language competency.

Conclusion

Sir Peter, a character in the play mentioned at the start of this article, believes that once he gets hold of a telegraph, he 'shall then be acquainted with every thing, and find [his] Lady Curious out in all her tricks, and [his] servants too' (Dent, 1795: 10–11). Though not 'tricks', Twitter (and social media more generally) has enabled its users to become more acquainted with certain everyday aspects of fellow users' lives. For example, when people follow the tweets of those they have met at conferences, they will most likely be exposed to their daily music listening habits, sports interests, current location, and shopping wish-lists, amongst other things. Many see this as a means to get to know people at a more multidimensional level. Additionally, they see aspects of people's lives which are normally 'backstage' (Goffman, 1959). On the other hand, an argument can be made that Twitter represents Bauman's (2000) 'runaway world'; or, from Heidegger's (1977: 25) perspective, 'the fate of our age', 'the inevitableness of an unalterable course'. Granted, the boundaries of public and private have shifted remarkably in modernity (Murdock, 1993). However, speaking in the context of the telegraph and telephone, some emergent communication technologies have had the same effect historically. Rather than view Twitter as 'the fate of our age', another potential approach is to consider the power of Twitter to democratize consumption. Do Twitter and other social media give consumers greater choice by not having elite-centered broadcasting dominate? From this standpoint, Twitter users are individual consumers who make reflective decisions on what information they want coming up on their Twitter feeds.

Like the telegraph, a new and revolutionary technology in its time, Twitter, currently the most prominent social media site, is experiencing immense growth as well as harsh criticisms. Also like the telegraph, Twitter's users are ultimately trying to say something to each other. In his patent application, James Boaz (1802: 2) talks about one ship approaching another and using an optical telegraph to say, 'I wish to speak with you'. Though far less cumbersome than the 25 lamps of Boaz's telegraph signalling system, perhaps Twitter's millions of users are just trying to do the same: 'I wish to speak with you'.

This article has sought to start the conversation of sociological understandings of emergent social media including Twitter by extending interactionist and other sociological work. It is envisioned that future sociological work can help empirically answer some of the questions posed, which include if or how Twitter has changed self-production, how we communicate, interaction orders, the synchronicity of social interaction, the way people use language (including shifts in verbosity), and power relations between interactants. Ultimately, our uses of social media are products of larger social and economic forces and sociology as a discipline is well placed to answer these timely questions.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   Other sites include Blellow, Jaiku, Plurk, and Foursquare.
2   Personal interview.
3   To 'follow' on Twitter is akin to subscribing to another user's tweets.
4   They will also receive any retweets (tweets a user has forwarded to them) in their timeline.
5   My current research explores this question within the context of health messages on Twitter.

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Dhiraj Murthy is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Bowdoin College, USA. His research interests include social media, virtual organizations, online communities, and digital ethnography. He has recently published his work in *Sociology*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Media, Culture, & Society*. He has a forthcoming book with Polity Press entitled *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age*.