Peter Spezia
December 3, 2011
COM 687

<u>Twitter and the Sports Reporter: A Digital Dissection</u>

One-hundred forty characters may seem like a severe limitation at first, but the potential possible uses are quite widespread. In that amount of text, the world may be wowed by a user's impeccable, well-timed wit regarding an astoundingly apt observation. Similarly, a communicative bond may be forged between a user and anyone around the world, be it a friend, celebrity, or random individual. Another application may be for a user to break the latest news to his social circle, using the fastest method possible. As the world moves into a more digital age, anything seems possible with Twitter – the waste of time turned brilliant social network. For a society that focuses on entire television networks devoted to it, sports journalism has been changed significantly because of Twitter. Whether the changes have been positive or negative, most skeptics cannot seem to look past the character limit that defines the service. After all, one-hundred forty characters can truly accomplish a lot, such as writing each of the previous sentences individually. While negative effects may exist as well, the social network Twitter has had a primarily positive impact in the world of sports journalism, due to the humanization of celebrity culture, speed of event reporting, and assimilation of the industry into the digital age.

Before analysis regarding Twitter's effect on sports journalism can begin, terms have to be defined so they make sense in the context of the argument. Twitter is a social network, in that users can register for the website's free services using a working email account. From there, a user personalizes his account and then may connect with other

users around the world. The function Twitter provides is to ask its users "What's happening," so that users may answer this query to the public in one-hundred forty characters or less. These status updates are referred to as "tweets" and as these messages amass over time, they create the information network that Twitter is today. Tweets operate entirely as user-generated content, leaving its writer in full control of the content and context. By exercising this control, users may tweet any message to the public at large, or start their message with what is referred to as a "mention." Mentions act as a way for a user to specifically direct their tweet to one or multiple users by using the @ symbol, followed by the intended target's username. These tweets that involve mentions are still viewable to the public, which is why Twitter also offers private messaging services, still limiting users to the one-hundred forty character limit.

However, tweets that are dumped in the public collection without some semblance of sorting have no meaning. In all the chaos, the organization of these messages is critical for Twitter. So, instead of opting for the often-used mutual friend method, Twitter implements an intriguing "following" and "follower" system. Following users generates a sort of constant status update feed in a very simple way. Therefore, if User A follows User B, all of User B's tweets that do not begin with a mention will show up in User A's news feed. Additionally, if one of User B's tweets begins with a mention of another user that User A is following, that tweet will also appear in User A's news feed. It is important to distinguish that the inverse does not apply on Twitter – if User A follows User B, User A's tweets do not appear on User B's feed. This makes the act of following a very unidirectional action, which allows a Twitter user to specifically customize his desired information flow. While many users create accounts on Twitter for this kind of news

feed, the goal of those who pride themselves in crafting and distributing tweets is to attain

as many followers as possible. As one might expect, when User A follows User B, User

A becomes a follower of User B. The more followers a user has, the larger audience the

user can reach with their tweets. To put it simply, the non-mutual action of following

creates a connected network of users that is unique to other website services before

Twitter's time.

As a result of this network connection, Twitter needed a feature that would allow

users to broadcast tweets from accounts they follow out to their followers. This is the

function of the "retweet," which can make special tweets viral and very popular. There

can be many reasons for why a person decides to retweet someone else's message, but it

is not difficult to see how a single tweet can be spread to so many users' feeds so quickly.

For example, if User B follows User A, and User A sends out a tweet, User B has the

option of retweeting User A's message. If he chooses to do so, User A's tweet is sent to

all of User B's followers, who may also choose to retweet User A's message to their

followers as well. The chain has seemingly infinite potential, allowing for the possibility

of millions of users to view a single tweet. With this kind of popularity, Twitter

implements a subject ranking algorithm that is based on the number of tweets that include

the specific subject. These "trending topics" are then organized into a top ten list and is

displayed on each user's news feed. Users also have the option to customize trend lists

based on geographic location, from users worldwide all the way down to users from a

city's surrounding area. Twitter also implements a system called "hashtagging," in which

users can use the # symbol in front of words or phrases to better link topics of tweets

together. For example, if users wanted to start a collection of tweets while watching the

Academy Awards, the tweets might include #oscars, in the hopes that #oscars becomes a trending topic. Essentially, trending topics and the use of hashtags provide a live, constantly updating source of information that tells Twitter users what people are discussing the most.

Yet, the metaphorical elephant in the social network room is Facebook, so Twitter skeptics cannot help but question the differences between the two websites. The glaring difference is the message size, as Facebook has no character limit in its messages like Twitter does. Also, it has already been discussed that the establishment of interpersonal connection on each website is very different. While Facebook uses a friend system that requires mutual agreement from both parties, Twitter's individualized follow system does not need a user to approve a follow request, unless the targeted user's privacy settings specifically request it. Privacy remains a big difference between the two services because of the concepts that make the websites so successful. Twitter's settings regarding privacy are minimal, since its intent is for users to participate in a customized flow of information that is readily available to the public. On the other hand, Facebook's original intent was for already established friends to find and stay in contact with each other online. Even though privacy settings may be circumvented for corporate reasons over time, the options are extensive so that users can customize precisely who sees what on their personal profile. The last distinct difference between the two social networks is the issue of identity. Facebook emphasizes, but does not enforce, the use of real names in order for friends to find each other easier. Instead, Twitter relies on Internet handles or usernames, partnered optionally with first and last names, so that users can uniquely identify themselves in the information overload. Both services are excellent ways of connecting

with others online, but Facebook and Twitter are very different in their structure, privacy, and identity management.

With a fair understanding of Twitter in place, it is evident that the service can deliver the latest customized news to users. So why, for the purposes of this argument, is sports journalism worth emphasizing? National and world news may be more important in the long run, but few topics connect so many people together the way sports does. Those who discourage its impact on society tend to come from the perspective of "eschewing sport from envy, jealousy, and lack of comprehension to its trivialization as being merely entertainment" (Meân & Halone, 2010, p. 254). Rather, the core mechanics of many athletic, competitive events stay the same over time, allowing for these kinds of games to be taught and passed down over generations. As a result, most sports fans grow up rooting for specific teams, beginning the passion at an early age. Not only that, but fans of the same sport find a common interest with each other, which is intensified further if they are fans of the same team. What makes sports especially interesting, however, is the aspect of rivalry. Interpersonal bonds that are forged over fandom are intensified even more over the stakes that are involved in games or matches against rivals. The passions that can arise from competition give credence to another kind of metaphor that people apply to sports, claiming it to be a religion. Butterworth believes that this is not too far of a stretch, particularly in baseball, as "overly romanticized notions about the game's spiritual inspirations notwithstanding, the clarity of religious imagery in baseball gives it a quasi-religious symbolic power" (2005, p. 113). Sports give rise to icons and give people something to believe in, as following a team or a player acts as a way of life. As a

result, when a service such as Twitter allows fans to track the latest news, scores, or gossip in real time, it can shape the journalism industry in significant ways.

Before addressing Twitter's positive impacts on sports journalism, however, it would be fair to address some concessions and correct why these seemingly-negative issues may not be as bad as many consider. First, the complaint of the one-hundred forty character limit is actually a rather shallow one. The purpose of the limit appears to be so that users do not become overwhelmed by the massive amounts of text that users may generate. That is not to say that all users would type excessively, given the option, but it keeps the words to a short, digestible format. Besides, if those using Twitter wished to speak their mind in more than one-hundred forty characters, there are other website additions to Twitter that can link to a user's account. Twitlonger allows users to post more than the character limit, while Twitvid allows users to upload videos. Each service links back to the original Twitter account, but gives users a means to communicate beyond the limit, should they choose to do so. However, another purpose of the character limit seems to be for users to decide on the word choice and phrasing of their message very carefully. It is certainly possible to split a message up into multiple tweets, but to summarize one's thoughts into a specified limit emphasizes the power of pointedness. When observing Twitter usage, though, one cannot help but notice how often links to other websites play a role in tweet composition. This is likely due to the society of sharing that has become pervasive in social networks today. However, the fact that "an increasing amount of content shared on Facebook and Twitter consists of Web links that search engines cannot see or index" (Gordon, 2009, p. 8) is a dangerous proposition. Since these links are shortened to limit character usage, Google's goal of organizing and

compiling information is threatened by Twitter. Some would argue that this is a good thing, but it does not seem to have any bearing on how users craft their tweets or fill them with content.

A common critique of Twitter's role in journalism is the lack of filter that can exist. It is easy to see how misuse of Twitter can result in a public relations disaster. Since tweets do not go through the heavy editing and review processes that other celebrity public statements typically do, there exists a great deal of potential for a slip-up to occur. Once the button press occurs for the message to go live, there is no turning back. Deleting tweets is possible, but by the time that occurs, there are others online who have already witnessed the mistake, lending to the concept of digital permanence. For example, during the Egyptian protests in Cairo in February 2011, clothes designer Kenneth Cole found it fashionable to tweet "Millions are in uproar in #Cairo. Rumor is they heard our new spring collection is now available online at http://bit.ly/KCairo" ("Kenneth cole tweet," 2011). In hindsight, this appears entirely tasteless to attempt to promote a business by misunderstanding what the hashtag #Cairo actually means. However, this cannot be a critique of Twitter, as it is more of an issue with those who decide to use the service. After all, users are already forced to craft specifically what content they want to make public because of the character limit. Twitter does not compose tweets automatically for a user, so a possible solution to this problem may be for an editor to step in and review tweets that a public figure wishes to make before they go live. Many users find Twitter to be a refreshing experience because of this lack of filter, though, because when public figures tweet, it gives off the public perception of humanization through technology. Those who follow celebrity culture become tired of

the trite, manufactured statement, which allows a directly-connected service such as Twitter to give off an air of authenticity. Public relations disasters are a risk, but most users of Twitter perceive the lack of filter as a positive, refreshing change that far outweighs the potential negative benefits.

Unfortunately, the biggest Twitter danger to traditional journalism is the fabrication of rumor that spreads very quickly in a digital space. Unlike the lack of filter point, both Twitter itself and Twitter users are responsible for making this occur. Granted, Twitter's role in this is not too large and is mostly due to the retweet function, where user's can spread such rumors with hardly any personable accountability for doing so. When a tweet is retweeted, a user views the message on their news feed as it was generated by the original poster. While the one who retweeted it is noted in the fine print on the news feed, this can quickly become lost in translation when a tweet becomes viral and many people are retweeting the same message. However, many argue that social networks have turned society into a group of people that rely on instant gratification. This rears its ugly head in the form of viral rumor spreading, as those who are hungry for the latest bit of news act carelessly and do not check facts. Blogger Jason Schreier tested this in a social experiment shortly after the National Football League labor lockout lifted, allowing undrafted players to sign as free agents with any team. After starting a fake rumor involving a quarterback being signed to the Arizona Cardinals, this gained steam on Twitter, with the information making it all the way to the football team's official website. Accounts claiming repute even tried to pick up the trail when the same account fabricated a player entirely, claiming a team had signed this player (Schreier, 2011). Another example exists when a user performs a Google search for "twitter death rumors,"

showing the likes of Bill Cosby, Jim Carrey, and Missy Elliot denying reports on Twitter of their untimely passing. While simple fact-checking would go a long way, rumor-spreading is another example of Twitter exacerbating a public condition, instead of the technology being the sole cause.

This brings the argument back to the statement initially proposed – that Twitter has had a primarily positive impact in the world of sports journalism, due to the humanization of celebrity culture, speed of event reporting, and assimilation of the industry into the digital age. With the different websites and television networks that exist to cover celebrity culture, it is not surprising to discover how fascinated people are with the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Celebrities act as "part of the raw material through which we construct identities and engage in public discourse" (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 141). The changes in Western culture have placed those with fame on a pedestal, acting as if they are something to aspire to. As a result, Twitter becomes an ideal place for web-goers to flock to, because of the celebrity movement towards Twitter that has made it so popular. Famous folk take to twitter to perform acts of public recognition and brand maintenance, to affiliate with cultural aspects through retweets or sharing links, or to communicate intimately with fans (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 141). These actions can be handled personally by the celebrity or even managed by publicists, but it also leaves the celebrity open for critique. Usually, the benefits outweigh the negatives, as millions of followers hang on every character that is included in a celebrity's tweet.

This fascination is certainly not lost on the sports world, though. Teams now have their own Twitter accounts, which is helpful for fans to acquire the latest information on their favorite franchises. However, the celebrity culture carries over to athletes that have

their own personal accounts. Recently, more and more teams have created rules forbidding players to tweet during games or practices, but this is not the reason why athletes amass many followers. One of the biggest reasons Twitter has been positive for sports journalism is because of how accessible athletes now are. For fans, this seems to be the equivalent of a dream coming true, as they can directly contact those they look up to in hopes of a personal reply. Twitter often seems to be plagued with individuals who falsely claim to be celebrities in order to attract attention to their fake accounts. Fortunately though, the service took this into consideration early on and implemented a verification system to confirm that these high-profile users are who they claim to be. This is noted by a blue and white checkmark logo on a verified user's page, which means they have gone through the appropriate confirmation steps.

For journalists on the other hand, Twitter is a blessing in disguise. Not only are athletes open via another means of communication, but the personalization that is involved in every statement just begs for analysis. Athletes tend to observe other sporting events and will tend to post observations to their followers, which are prime targets for the latest news-worthy scoop. One of the biggest examples of this occurred during National Football Conference championship game held on January 23, 2011. The game pitted the Green Bay Packers against the Chicago Bears in a highly-contested matchup of division rivals. Part-way through the third quarter, Chicago quarterback Jay Cutler appeared to injure his knee while his team was losing 14-0. As he was replaced by backup Todd Collins, Cutler was shown by television cameras to be standing and walking on the sidelines. Chicago would go on to lose the game, but the social network frenzy was just beginning. For fans and reporters to wonder if Cutler was really hurt, as the star

quarterback wondered the sidelines, was one thing. The intrigue laid in what NFL athletes were saying about Cutler as they watched the game from their homes, with their seasons already over. Ultimately, it turned out that Cutler had sprained his MCL, an injury that would have normally sidelined him for three to four weeks, yet his public image took a hit because of social networks like Twitter. One notable quote came from Arizona Cardinals defensive lineman Darnell Dockett, who tweeted "If I'm on chicago team jay cutler has to wait till me and the team shower get dressed and leave before he comes in the locker room! #FACT" (2011). The media caught wind of these remarks solely because of how accessible professional athletes are, giving them stories and scoops they would have never had access to before. As a result of the media-focused culture, sports journalism has benefited greatly from the humanization that occurs with professional athletes on Twitter, opening them up to fans and critique alike.

In a fast-paced socially networked world, Twitter has also been a positive impact on sports journalism with the speed of reporting. Traditional media forms rely on extensive fact checking, making sure everything is correct before the report is either written or broadcast. Twitter throws a wrench in these plans, because the speed of digital message transfer can beat journalists to the scoop, in a business where being first is critical. Essentially, as Alfred Hermida puts it, "This news model is in a period of transition, however, as social media technologies like Twitter facilitate the immediate dissemination of digital fragments of news and information from official and unofficial sources over a variety of systems and devices" (2010, p. 298). Studies have shown how journalists, while initially apathetic about Twitter, have come to embrace it. In fact, scholars and businessmen alike have determined that "press coverage is not simply a

transparent method to distribute information but can function as a force of change itself, influencing the ways these technologies are diffused, utilized and regulated" (Arceneaux & Weiss, 2010, p. 1263). Twitter has shown to be a force to be reckoned with breaking important stories first, but it needs to controlled and standardized before issues like rumor-mongering are quelled. Still, the potential is there to be fully maximized in the future, but there are other possible benefits that exist from reporting with Twitter.

Overall, this new reporting model that involves social networks can lead to not only faster reports, but better reports. With reputable reporters taking the proper precautions, such as noting whether a scoop is a rumor or has been confirmed, they can break the story first on Twitter. From there, they can continue to follow up on the story and report as they normally would, with a full debriefing prepared for television or a website. In the early days of this social network implementation, however, journalists are noticing limitations in where and when they can report on Twitter. At the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing, reporters and athletes alike encountered new rules, as officials considered the event the first Olympic Games to be dominated by social media. Not only were athletes restricted to tweet certain things based on International Olympic Committee rules, the Chinese government forbade topics such as Falun Gong and Tiananmen Square (Hutchins & Mikosza, 2010). Back in the United States, National Football League beat writers are also starting to feel limitations imposed by teams and organizations. Denver Broncos writer Lindsay Jones recounted the moment when star linebacker Elvis Dumervil injured himself during practice early in the season with a torn pectoral muscle and did not return in 2008. Since Broncos rules did not allow for cell phone use on the practice field, Jones elaborated that "when something newsworthy

happens on the practice field, it is a race to get outside the gate to be the first to post something" (2010, p. 56). An adjustment period has taken place, but as time has passed, writers have appeared to become better at reporting via Twitter with practice. It is only in the early stages, but the positive outcomes of social network integration into sports media are evident. Provided they are backed by reputable sources, it is likely that the future will see news stories broken on Twitter as soon as possible, before they are backed up by full reports. Ideally, because of this, Twitter will help spur changes in not only the speed, but the accuracy of reports as well.

Finally, Twitter has already made changes in sports journalism that have caused the industry to assimilate elements of digital media into traditional, analog media. Specifically, television programs have already started to make use of viewer feedback through social networks like Twitter. A popular use of social networks is sharing links or information, so users often feel inclined to communicate similar things to their favorite media outlets. Most networks and programs on television have their own dedicated Twitter accounts and often request for feedback from their viewers. Therefore, even if all fans share with their favorite programs is an opinion, this is still highly valuable from a content viewpoint. *Sportscenter* has set a standard for sports reporting on television for years on the ESPN network. Since Twitter became a prominent digital media force, the show has implemented segments after notable stories to gauge select viewer reactions from their Twitter account. Naturally, these viewer feedback messages are selected based on an intense editing process so that the tweets fit television standards and practices. For the comparatively minimal work involved, though, the payoff is extremely high. Viewers that have their tweets shown on national television are more loyal to the program, in the

same way a fan reacts to when a favorite celebrity personally replies to a tweet. Similarly, other viewers are more likely to contribute feedback for those national airtime hopes. ESPN and other networks have done well to engage viewers in their programming by using Twitter and other social networks, which is just one example of how media is starting to embrace digital culture.

Television programs have already implemented Twitter feedback nicely into their shows, but there are still strides that can be made to better implement Twitter feedback. Worldwide athletic events occur in real-time and as social networks are perceptive to the latest breaking news from them, results find their way around the world in a matter of seconds. However, television networks still schedule these international events on a tape delay for American audiences because it is most beneficial for ratings (Grossman, 2011). This is an outdated way of thinking, as those who are web-savvy will tend to watch video streams or get updates online so that they do not have to wait. As they do so, these potential viewers are interacting with others using Twitter and other social networks. Clearly, as Twitter continues to advance in the future, television networks will continue to miss out on a digital audience if they continue to delay live airings of sporting events simply for ratings.

Similarly, fans of television are rather perceptive of flaws that occur during broadcasts and are quick to point them out on a service like Twitter. One such example occurred during a United States/Brazil match during the 2011 Women's World Cup. Grossman notes how a saved penalty kick was whistled as fraudulent because of a player who moved too early, yet the American announcers were mistaken on the infracting player (2011). Ian Darke and Julie Foudy of ESPN thought the referee infracted the

goalie, when it was actually another player entirely and thus kept criticizing the officials because of the call. Twitter ran rampant with users lambasting the supposedly biased announcers, yet ESPN never caught onto the mistake that was obvious through social networks and never corrected the error. Current media outlets would not only benefit for user feedback as content, but also for quality control. Viewers often have far more input to provide than studio heads realize, so Twitter could become better integrated in the future with this kind of addition.

To conclude, Twitter is not a perfect system. Its character limit, lack of filter, and potential for spreading rumors can be dangerous to some capacity, yet have positive spins or ideas for future corrections to them as well. The social network is valuable in the world of sports journalism because it embraces the accessibility of athletes in a celebrity-centric culture. Twitter can also lead to faster and better reporting, in addition to having aspects of fast-paced network implemented into currently established media forms. For a service that is constantly gaining users and repute, that is a fairly good start. There is certainly more work to be done before Twitter's full potential can be realized. However, that is difficult to imagine when messages with one-hundred forty characters in them seem to be churned out every second.

WORKS CITED

Arceneaux, N., & Weiss, A. S. (2010). Seems stupid until you try it: Press coverage of

      twitter, 2006–9. *New Media & Society*, *12*(8), 1262-1279.

Butterworth, M. L. (2005). Ritual in the "church of baseball": Suppressing the Discourse

      of Democracy after 9/11. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, *2*, 107-

      129.

Dockett, D. (2011, January 23). *Twitter / @ddockett*. Retrieved from

      http://twitter.com/ddockett/status/29319787611947008

Gordon, R. (2009). Social media: The ground shifts. *Nieman Reports*, *63*(3), 7-9.

Grossman, B. (2011, July 18). How sports producers are becoming twits. *Broadcasting &*

      Cable, *141*(28), 33.

Hermida, A. (2010). Twittering the news: The emergence of ambient journalism.

Journalism Practice, *4*(3), 297-308.

Hutchins, B., & Mikosza, J. (2010). The web 2.0 olympics: Athlete blogging, social

      networking and policy contradictions at the 2008 beijing games. *Convergence:*

      The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, *16*(3), 279-

      297.

Kenneth cole tweet uses #cairo to promote spring collection. (2011, February 3).

      Huffington Post. Retrieved from

      http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/03/kenneth-cole-tweet-uses-

      c_n_818226.html

Jones, L. (2010). The sports tweet: New routines on an old beat. *Nieman Reports*, *64*(4),

      56-58.

Marwick, A., & Boyd, D. (2011). To see and be seen: Celebrity practice on twitter.

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media

Technologies, *17*(2), 139-158.

Meân, L., & Halone, K. (2010). Sport, language, and culture: Issues and intersections.

Journal of Language and Social Psychology, *29*(3), 253-260.

Schreier, J. (2011, July 27). [Web log message]. Retrieved from

http://jasonschreier.com/2011/07/27/twitter-killing-journalism/