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# Microblogging: What and How Can We Learn From It?

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**Abstract**

Microblogging, the act of broadcasting short, real-time messages, is a relatively new communication practice allowing people to share information they are less likely to express using existing technologies (e.g. email, phone, IM or weblogs). We use microblogging as an umbrella term to include the posting of status updates to social network sites such as Facebook, and message-exchange services like Twitter, Jaiku, and Yammer. Microblogging has become popular quickly, catching researchers' interests as both a means of public, social information exchange, and a medium for collaboration and communication in the work context. The goal of this workshop is to provide a forum for researchers and practitioners from academia and industry to exchange insights into microblogging as a communication practice in enterprises, academic and social settings. We aim to develop an agenda for what and how we can learn from and better study this phenomenon.

**Keywords**

Microblogging, Social networking, Social computing, Computer-mediated communication.

**ACM Classification Keywords**

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

**General Terms**

Human Factors.

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### Introduction

Short, real-time messages have become an increasingly popular and socially acceptable means of information exchange. These include, for example, answering the question, "What are you doing?" on Twitter or, "What's on your mind?" in Facebook. We have made sense of this new medium by terming it "microblogging", a throwback to the arguably more studied and widely understood social broadcast technology: blogging. However, microblogging is only mildly reminiscent of blogging; this communication medium sits somewhere between text messages, IM status messages, blogs and social network sites. The HCI community has yet to figure out how to make sense of and study this relatively new phenomenon; at the same time, microblogging as a communication practice has gained attention in enterprise for potentially enhancing communication and information sharing in organizations. While we struggle with the omnipresent question of "Why would I use such a technology?", services like Twitter and Yammer have become widely used. Despite our confusion, it can be argued that HCI researchers agree that the microblogging services are powerful communication channels, evidenced by Twitter usage at the CHI 2009 conference by both the organizing committee and participants.

### Background

Microblogging, a means of broadcasting information about one's activities, opinions, and status, has been embraced world-wide; in the case of Twitter, millions of 140-character updates are generated each day [11]. The content of these updates varies from sharing daily life activities with friends/families/co-workers; sharing information/news and opinions with interested observers; and seeking knowledge and expertise in

public tweets [4, 10]. To summarize, microblogging services seem to offer a new communication channel for people to broadcast and share personal updates about what they are reading, thinking, and experiencing that they would never bother to share via more other familiar channels (e.g., email, phone, IM, or blogging). Emotionally, by checking others' updates, people appear to use microblogging services to achieve a level of cyberspace presence, being "out there" and to feel another layer of connection with friends and the world [4, 6].

Although academic studies published on this topic are increasing, the research is still in a very early stage. Some early works have analyzed tweets from Twitter, using both content and social network analysis techniques to identify types and categories of users' tweeting attentions, as well as other topological and geographic properties of social network sites [3, 4, 5]. Beyond status broadcasting, several studies investigated the conversational aspects of microblogging practices [2], and researchers studied how people use @ symbol and hashtag # to facilitate interactions on Twitter. One initial qualitative study efforts by Zhao and Rosson [10] provided some insights of how Twitter technology affordances (brevity, mobility, broadcast nature) may help reduce the cost of posting and checking updates. However, we still lack an in-depth understanding about what needs and goals drive microblog use, and what the social and behavioral consequences of microblogging are.

The increasingly popular use of microblogging services for lightweight communication makes microblogging as a practice an ideal candidate media for informal communication and collaboration at work.

Microblogging adoption in organizations is also in its early stages, and researchers are in the process of making sense of what role microblogging technologies play in organizations. Zhao and Rosson [10] proposed a first conceptual framework, indicating beneficial consequences (relational and personal benefits) that microblogging may have impacts on informal communication at work. Drawing from interviews with Twitter users in a large corporation, they illustrated the proposed potential benefits with participants' experiences of tweeting with colleagues in the organization. In another focus group study, Twitter users were invited to SAP Labs for a discussion of potential microblogging adoption in enterprise [9]. The results suggested a set of potential important factors, including privacy concerns, communication benefits, and perceptions regarding signal-to-noise ratio.

### Key Questions to Discuss

While microblogging technologies gain attention from business communities, we still lack an in-depth understanding of this new social phenomenon. A number of issues open to study may include motivations, individual differences, privacy concerns, and other social behavior consequences (e.g., personal broadcasting, overhearing). The workshop will provide the first forum for researchers to discuss what and how we can learn from the social and work practices and what aspects are useful for guiding the design and study of enterprise microblogging practices. Several key topics will be used to stimulate the discussion, including:

- What drives people to engage in microblogging? What are the subconscious needs and cognitive goals of microblogging?

- How is this technology changing people's social behavior? How have users adopted it as part of their daily life activities?
- What are the privacy issues? Will microblogging services enable "Big Brother" style monitoring?
- What are the differences between microblogging as a service (Twitter, Yammer, Jaiku, etc.) and as a feature (Facebook status updates, MySpace mood updates, etc.)? When is it appropriate to include microblogging features in a pre-existing technology?
- To what extent might it affect informal communication at work, group awareness, information/knowledge sharing, and organizational innovation? What other aspects can be used for studying microblogging's potential impact at work?
- What theories can be used to guide studies? How it might drive development of theories in CMC and HCI broadly?

### Workshop Organizers

**Julia Grace** studies social and collaborative computing as part of the IBM Almaden USER (User Sciences and Experience) Research Group. She has been an active Twitter user for 2 years, and has been fascinated by the tremendous growth of social broadcast technologies. She is currently leading and involved with several research projects at IBM Almaden, which revolve around microblogging behaviors.

**Dejin Zhao** is a PhD student, studying with Mary Beth Rosson at Pennsylvania State University. He studies how microblogging might help enhance informal communication and information awareness at work. He published one of the first works in the field, "How and

Why People Twitter: The Role that Microblogging Plays in Informal Communication at Work” in GROUP 2009.

**danah boyd** is a Social Media Researcher at Microsoft Research and a Fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet and Society. Her ongoing work on social media phenomena led her to study Twitter. She has been tweeting about tweeting since 2006, creating research recursion only possible through social media.

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