

Twitter / Tweet / Social Networking / End-User Innovation



Everyone is talking about it and many are using it: With an astonishingly fast growing community that nearly doubles every month, **Twitter** is on its way to internet domination, to becoming the biggest and most popular **social network**. Quick, short and simple – those are the main features that are helping Twitter to triumph over rivals like *Facebook* and *MySpace*.

Twitter is a joint stock company founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Biz Stone and Evan Williams in the context of a research and development project within the San Francisco podcasting company Odeo. Forty-three staff members are working for Twitter, which is backed by several million dollars of venture capital. The financial crisis has slowed down the financial infusions, however (Bloomberg.com). But Twitter has remained free of charge for all users, both commercial and non-commercial ones.

The original intention was to let other people or friends know via short messages what the sender is doing at the moment, how he or she feels and what he or she is thinking about. Users appreciate Twitter because it combines so many functions: They can stay in touch with friends, make new friends, write short blogs (instead of long ones), and remain updated at all times – of course for free.

Twitter is already known worldwide, although most users live in the United States. They have online profiles on the Twitter homepage and they can write their messages, called **tweets**, which are micro-journal entries. It is amazing how much content can be compressed into a single tweet, which consists of only 140 characters, often with a number of abbreviations. The recipients, called “followers”, are able to receive and reply to this information on their mobile phones or online, for instance via Google Talk. The contributions of the people whom one follows are presented in a log, and are shown in a chronologically sorted list of entries. The author can decide whether he/she wants to make the news accessible to all users or only to a certain group. What is special is that information is kept concise and that it flows swiftly. This way dynamic group communication arises.

Critics say that Twitter promotes the spreading of trivial information and results in “information overload”. Indeed, many users do not have anything significant to say but still want to let the world know that they had pizza for lunch. Twitter maintains that, on the contrary, the service helps to prevent information overload as every user chooses whose tweets he wants to receive and is able to block unwanted information. Furthermore, nobody is obliged to respond to a tweet. The Twitter homepage states that everyone can easily step in and out of the information flow.

This leads to the probably biggest secret of Twitter’s success: the possibility for every user to employ Twitter as it suits him/her. The fast growth of the community proves this theory. Many users simply want to follow others and know what they are doing, thus feeling close to them. This service becomes especially exciting if people follow the tweets of celebrities and politicians. One remarkable example might be Ashton Kutcher’s page, which has over 2.6 million followers! Other users have business interests. Besides, tweets can serve as announcements to the general public. Even the Siegen police department has a Twitter account and can flash warnings to the population of Siegen.

Time Magazine (15 June 2009) has pointed out another aspect contributing to Twitter’s growing popularity: **end-user innovation**. Because of Twitter’s software architecture allowing programmers to add or adjust certain features, resourceful community members have adapted Twitter to their own needs and created third-party applications. For instance, “hashtaging”, a system linking metadata (such as keywords) to the messages, make searches possible.

Two years after Twitter started up online, the German version *bleeper.de* followed, with almost the same concept. "What are you doing right now?" – this is the main question for bleeper.de and its maker Alexa Wagner. Here, as with the forerunner Twitter, you can stay in contact with your friends and families, briefly stating what you are doing. Like Twitter, the bleeps have a maximum of 140 characters. You can write or read the bleeps via the web or mobile phone. Bleeper users can connect themselves to their Twitter account, which encourages and simplifies switching back and forth between the two platforms. Many assessments in the internet say that connecting from bleeper to twitter is a good idea, but that the applications of bleeper are not yet fully developed. Also the number of users is limited.

Twitter is very well-known and just more popular than the German bleeper.

Various professional sectors implement Twitter. Companies use Twitter to provide product information and to communicate with their customers. Besides, the micro-blogging also functions as an instrument for marketing and market research (e.g. product development). The US space agency NASA maintains Twitter feeds for various projects. Twitter is used increasingly in politics. For instance, the election campaign teams of the US presidential candidate Barack Obama communicated via Twitter. News agencies like the BBC have also begun to use it. Furthermore young Iranians, particularly in the political opposition, used the tool to express their thoughts about the outcome of the elections and to communicate with people from all over the world, despite the government restrictions in the relatively isolated, religious police state. They organized their protest movement with the help of the platform. News of current events can be twittered fast, faster than the spreading of news with edited media.

Risk is involved, however. Users can write anything, whether it is true or not. Authors can plant rumours and send false reports. Moreover everything that has been written on the internet will last forever, even you delete it – you must keep this in mind when writing a tweet. Privacy does not exist when everyone can view user photos and details of someone's life. Potential employers may be able to read information which could prove disadvantageous for job applicants. The urge to create a *fictional identity*, which is encouraged by virtual communication, might have negative long-term social consequences.

In the end it can be said that Twitter is infectious. To many non-users Twitter seems silly and pointless at first, but most of them change their opinion when they actually start twittering. This is why Twitter will probably continue its strong rise. In February the United States web traffic analysis service Compete.com ranked Twitter as the third most widely used social network worldwide, tendency rising. The future of social networks, whatever form they will take, seems to be guaranteed.

