

TechMatters: Hear the Librarian Go Tweet, Tweet, Tweet: Beyond the Basics (Part II)

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At its core, Twitter is a simple, streamlined communication tool. Essentially, it was designed to allow users to do one task – share information with one another in real time – and to do it well. As a result, it offers only the features essential for achieving that goal. Over time, as Twitter use has evolved and users have found new ways to use the tool, a variety of third-party applications have been developed to meet user needs by offering additional options and functionality. In this article, we'll explore some of those needs and explore the “best of show” tools that might be used to meet them.


I don't have time to monitor Twitter all day long. How do I know if there are new tweets that I should check out?

For me, one of the barriers to embracing Twitter was the fact that I had to take time to visit the site throughout the day in order to see new tweets from those I follow. This mode of communication doesn't work for me. I need updates to be pushed to me or I'm not going to see them. Enter Echofon, a nifty little add-on to the Firefox browser that notifies you when friends post new tweets, let's you quickly view those tweets within a pop-up menu, and also allows you to post your own tweets.

Echofon:

<http://www.echofon.com>

After you download and install the extension, you need to supply Echofon for Firefox with your Twitter account information (user name and password) so that it can begin accessing your tweets. From that point on, whenever one of the people you are following posts a new tweet, it will appear in a small balloon in the bottom right corner of your browser.

Open up the Echofon window by clicking on the icon () in your status bar. Here you will find a list of the most recent tweets in your feed, along with a text input box where you can compose and post your own tweets (see Figure 1).

What if I want to archive tweets for later reference?

As we know, tweets tend to be ephemeral in nature. Although they never truly disappear from a stream, they do become unsearchable via Twitter's own search tool after about a week and a half. Of course, recent announcements by the Library of Congress



Figure 1: Echofon window shows tweet stream and text box for posting updates

(<http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2010/04/how-tweet-it-is-library-acquires-entire-twitter-archive/>) and Google (<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/04/replay-it-google-search-across-twitter.html>) suggest that this problem may soon be addressed as both plan to archive and make searchable the Twitter archive. In Google's case, they already go back as far as February 2010, with promises to eventually go back further; it is a pretty cool feature. However, it is uncertain how quickly this will be further developed and Google's method for displaying results is, based on Brad Sietz's and my tests, not particularly easy to format (e.g., sorting and displaying all the tweets for a particular day) and incomplete (e.g., not capturing a significant percentage of the #loex2010 tweets that we know, through following particular users, were posted).

So for now, this issue remains problematic for those interested in using Twitter as a professional development tool - - what if you have a busy week, and just can't find time to peruse your tweet stream? And what if that busy week corresponds to the LOEX Conference that you could not attend this year, but intended to follow via Twitter? Clearly, in this type of scenario you need a method to archive, and perhaps organize, tweets for later reference. Although this functionality is not available in Twitter's native interface, there are a number of third-party tools that have been developed for just this purpose. My personal favorite is TwInbox.

TwInbox:

http://www.techhit.com/TwInbox/twitter_plugin_outlook.html

TwInbox is an add-on for Microsoft Outlook that allows you to read and manage your tweets just as you do with e-mail messages. TwInbox is free, but it only works with a full version of Outlook 2003 or later, not Outlook Express.

Setup is easy. Just supply TwInbox with your Twitter user name and password, and designate a local folder where you want to store your tweets. The program will then begin importing and displaying your tweets via the Outlook interface (see Figure 2), where you may search, organize, and archive them just as you do with your e-mail messages. In addition, you can update your Twitter status from within Outlook and even setup predefined searches for tweets containing keywords of interest.

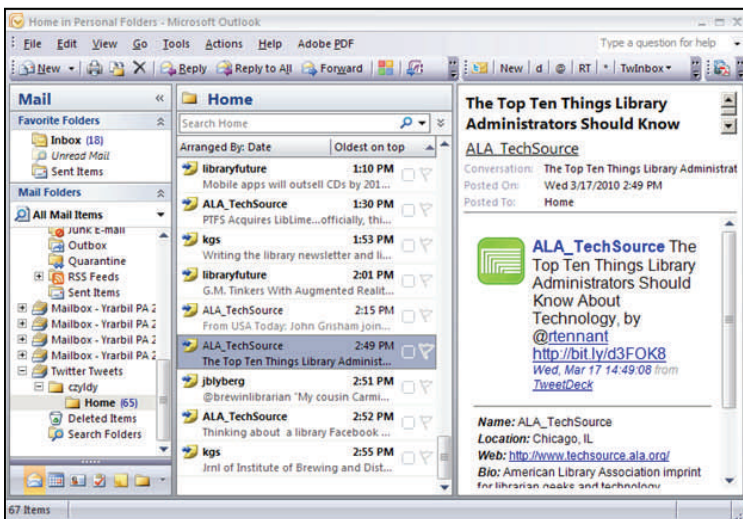


Figure 2: Read, organize, and archive tweets via the TwInbox Outlook plugin

Another Option - RSS Feeds & Feed Readers

If you don't use Outlook as a mail client, a simple alternative is to subscribe to the RSS feed of your personal tweet stream using the feed reader of your choice. You will find the link for your feed at the bottom of the right-hand column on your Twitter home page. How long feed items are archived will depend on the features of your reader. For long-term archiving, try Google Reader (<http://reader.google.com/>) which will allow you to search through and retrieve tweets back to the very first item tracked by your feed subscription.

Help! With so many social networking options for communicating with our patrons, including Twitter, Facebook, and the library blog, how do we choose which to support?

Actually, with the help of the following tool, which al-

lows you to post updates to multiple networks simultaneously, you may not need to make a choice. The way I see it, time (or lack of it) need not be the deciding factor in selecting between social networking tools. Rather, you should focus on identifying the tools your users favor for maintaining contact with you and then work on establishing a meaningful presence in those locations. A tool like Ping.fm can help you establish that presence in multiple locations without requiring a significant increase in effort.

Ping.fm :

<http://ping.fm/>

Ping.fm is a free, online service designed specifically to allow you to post updates to all of your social networks in one simple step. Supported networks include Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Blogger, Delicious, Flickr, and more. For a complete list, see <http://ping.fm/networks/>.

In order to use this service you first setup a free account, which requires only an e-mail address and password. Next, use the "Add More Networks" link in the Ping dashboard (see Figure 3) to identify and authenticate with the social networks you want to post to via Ping. Once you have all of your networks configured, you may compose and post your updates using the Ping message box.

In addition to using the Ping.fm web interface, your account can also be setup to allow posting from a variety of services including e-mail, text message, and instant messaging. You will find instructions for enabling each type of service on your Ping.fm account page.

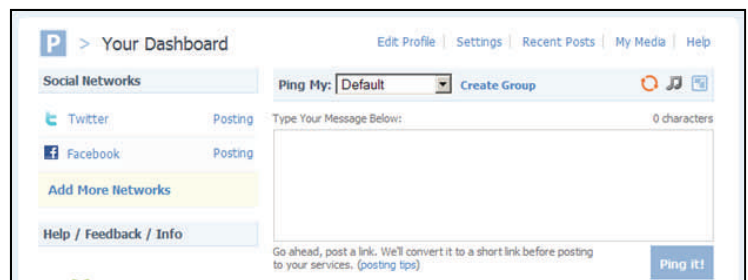


Figure 3: Use the Ping.fm service to post updates to all of your social networks at the same time

Great! But, are there any tools that offer all of these features in one place?

In my opinion, no one perfect tool exists offering all of the features I want in one place to allow me to manage my 'Twitterverse'. However, there are a few that come close: specifically TweetDeck and Hootsuite. Although a full dis-

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ple cases the students were enamored by the design options and did not think through the final display quality. A couple of the resulting slides were hard to read through densely patterned backgrounds. Thus, next time we will include a brief overview of graphic design elements when moving into the slide production phase of the session.

Looking forward to hosting this event in the coming years, we see several possibilities for building on this summer's success. We would like to discard the rushed library tour that followed the student poster presentations. Instead we see potentially running this program right in the Reference area of the library (as opposed to being cut off in a difficult to get at classroom). We feel that working in the Reference area would allow the students to discover the physical space in the same organic manner as the digital space. The summer tends to be a quiet time at Case Library as there is no full summer term offered by the university. Also, the extra time could be devoted to addressing the design aspects of the slides.

Of course, we also hope to continue to make connections between our assignment and the OUS programming—making the orientation relevant to their work in the program. We recognize the need to work with the OUS administrators to choose a topic that allows for easy recall, but we feel there are many for which this is the case. We don't want to tax the student's capabilities—we want them to find information, feel successful and empowered to use our resources!

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discussion of these tools is beyond the scope of this short article, here is a brief description of these top two contenders and the features that they offer.

TweetDeck

<http://www.tweetdeck.com/>

TweetDeck is a free, standalone application designed to allow you to organize and manage your Twitter experience. It is available for the desktop (both PC and Mac), as well as for the iPhone and iPad. The TweetDeck interface allows you to arrange your incoming tweets into categorized columns which may include groups (e.g., friends, work, blogs, etc.), results of saved searches, mentions, and direct messages. From within TweetDeck you may compose and post tweets, share photos and videos, and auto create shortened URLs. You can also manage and update you Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn accounts via the TweetDeck interface.

It was our intention to create a fun, social and challenging event for the Summer Institute session. We felt that a challenging assignment in a comfortable atmosphere would stand out to the group and help reinforce the notion of the library as a place to seek assistance. Our goal was achieved this past summer and we see great potential for growth in the program in coming years.

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Hootsuite

<http://hootsuite.com/>

Hootsuite offers many of the same features and functionalities as TweetDeck. You can organize your tweet streams into tabs and columns, compose and post tweets, as well as manage multiple social networking tools via one interface. The primary difference is that Hootsuite is a web application, so you don't need to download and install anything to your computer. In addition, Hootsuite provides tweet scheduling functionality, robust statistics, and the ability to manage multiple Twitter accounts via a single interface.

These are only a few of the many third-party applications developed to extend Twitter's basic functionality. There are many others, and deciding which will work best for you is really an individual decision. Just search "best twitter tools" in your favorite search engine and you'll find lists of great options. My advice ... just dive in and explore!