TechMatters: Hear the Librarian Go Tweet, Tweet, Tweet: an introduction to Twitter (Part I)

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twit-ter (verb) –

1. to utter a succession of small, tremulous sounds, as a bird.

2. to talk lightly and rapidly, esp. of trivial matters; chatter.

(from http://dictionary.com)

What exactly is Twitter?

Despite the definitions offered above, those of us who work in libraries know that Twitter is more than a verb. Over the past two and a half years, Twitter (http://twitter.com) has grown into a widely used social networking tool.

According to its website, Twitter is a "real-time short messaging service that works over multiple networks and devices." Simply put, Twitter allows users to post short messages of 140 characters or less, referred to as "tweets," in answer to the simple question "What's happening?" Those messages are posted on a profile page, made searchable via Twitter search (http://search.twitter.com), and made available to everyone who subscribes to, or "follows," a user's updates.

OK, so why should I care?

According to Pew Internet's Fall 2009 report on "Twitter and Status Updating" (http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/17-Twitter-and-status-updating-Fall-2009.aspx), the number of internet users now on Twitter (or some other status update service) has almost doubled over the past year to around one in five. Clearly, if we aspire to "go where our users are," then Twitter is fast becoming one of those places we need to start to explore.

Fortunately, many libraries have already taken the Twitter plunge. So, the easiest way to get an idea of how libraries are already using Twitter is to take a tour of some of their feeds. A good starting point for finding those feeds is Florida State MLIS student Lindy Brown's list of "Libraries on Twitter" (http://lindybrown.com/blog/2009/01/libraries-on-twitter-updated-list/), which is updated regularly. As you'll see, libraries are using Twitter to engage with patrons in a variety of ways, including posting library announcements, announcing new book arrivals, sending reminders about upcoming events, providing reference service, and more.

### All right, how do I get started?

Perhaps the best way to get a handle on how Twitter works, and to determine whether or not it is a tool you want to use in your library, is to simply setup an account and start to explore. To get started, just navigate to the Twitter home page (http://twitter.com) and click on the prominent green button labeled "Sign up now." As you will see in Figure 1, you only need to provide a name, username, password, and e-mail address to setup an account. The username, which needs to be unique, is used to form part of the URL for your profile page, so if you are setting up an account for your organization you will probably want to use the name of your library as the username.

Figure 1: "Join the Conversation" by setting up a Twitter account

When you first create your account, Twitter will give you the option of checking your e-mail contact list (e.g., from Gmail, Yahoo, or Outlook) to determine if any of your friends are using Twitter. In order to do so, you need to provide your e-mail password. If you aren't interested, just click the "skip this step" link to continue. During the initial setup process, Twitter will also suggest some celebrity and corporate users (e.g., Ellen DeGeneres, Starbucks) that you might want to follow. Again, you can "skip this step" and worry about adding followers later.

As you will see in Figure 2, a Twitter home page is fairly basic. The prime real estate on the page is dedi-

cated to the "What's happening?" box where you compose and submit your updates. Start typing in the box and you will see the counter above the box start to countdown the number of characters you have remaining for use in your tweet. Across the top of the page you will find the menu for your account. Here you can access your profile page, and change the settings on your account. If you are creating an account for your library, you'll probably want to access the settings page and add the URL for your home page, and maybe add a one-sentence, (160 characters maximum), "bio" describing your organization.
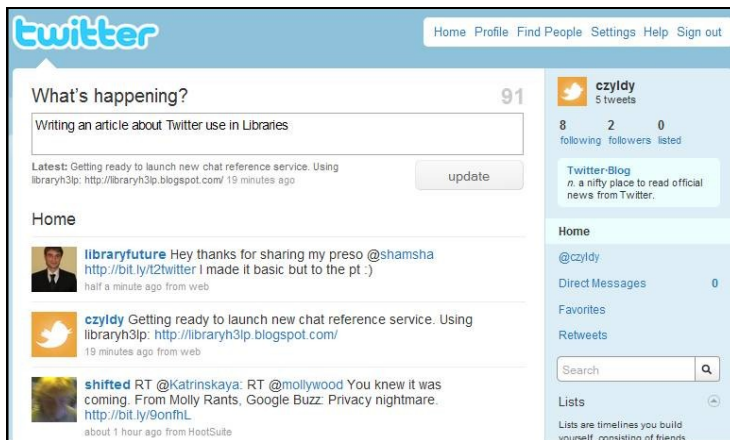
Figure 2: A Twitter profile page

Since Twitter is a "social networking" tool, its primary value lies in the connections you establish with other users. To get started, you will want to begin "following" other users, which means that their tweets will appear in your Twitter feed. Because there is no limit on the number of people or organizations that you can follow, an important factor to keep in mind when making your selections is that you really don't need to worry about trying to keep up with everyone's tweets – it's basically impossible, as there is so much data constantly coming at you. Perhaps the best way to use Twitter is to treat it like dipping your toes in the information stream, at a particular point in time. You get a sense for what's going on right now (and that's the thing about Twitter – it REALLY focuses on the present) and if you don't get to it for a couple of days, who cares? Just decide to plunge back in whenever you feel like it.

To find specific individuals or organizations to follow, you may use the "Find People" search tool. Of course, this approach can be tricky if you don't already know of other Twitter users who post in your area of in-

terest. Alternately, a web search should uncover online lists and directories of Twitter users and feeds related to particular areas of interest. Here are two such sites that I have found useful:

100 Best Twitter Feeds for Librarians of the Future
http://www.onlinecourses.org/2009/08/18/100-best-twitter-feeds-for-librarians-of-the-future/

Don't let the page title fool you, this site provides a good basic list for everybody, whether you are "futuristic" or not, of library professionals, news feeds, and organizations that any library professional might be interested in following. A few personal favorites include Jenny Levine (@shifted), Joe Murphy (@libraryfuture), and ALA TechSource (@ALA_TechSource).

Just Tweet It – Librarians Directory
http://justtweetit.com/education/librarians/

This site provides listings of "Tweeters" in a variety of different fields. The link that I have provided will take you to the "librarian" section of the directory. Add yourself to the directory and maybe someone will decide to follow you!

Once you identify a user you want to follow, simply navigate to their feed page and click on the "Follow" button. Once you start posting your own tweets, you will find that others will begin to "follow" you.

But, how can I use it to support library instruction?

There are a variety of ways in which Twitter might be used to promote library instruction, support student learning, and provide opportunities for professional growth for those working in the field.

Marketing Library Instruction

Many libraries use their Twitter to feed to announce and send out reminders about upcoming instruction sessions. In addition, many use Twitter to send their followers quick tips and tricks to educate them about library resources and help them maximize their use of those

ogy – if they can 'invent' the concepts themselves using what they already know, they're constructing connections in their minds

- If students struggle to come up with concepts, use questions to help guide their thinking instead of telling them the answers

- Let them invest time in coming up with concepts themselves; you're helping them develop problem-solving and thinking abilities, not just a set of technical skills

Endnotes

1   Ausubel's theory is explained in Ausubel, D. P. (1968). *Educational psychology: A cognitive view*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

2   See http://tinyurl.com/ylpdt9q for an example concept map if you're not familiar with them.

3   For more on the benefits of the Learning Cycle model, see Deming, J., & Cracolice, M. (2004). Learning how to think. *Science Teacher*, *71*(3), 42-47.

4   http://espgame.org/

tools. In both of these instances, libraries are operating in a traditional marketing mode by pushing information out to their users.

However, Twitter is not a one-way communication tool. One of its strengths is that it allows you to engage in a conversation with your followers by "tweeting" questions. So, for example you might ask your followers to provide feedback about the types of services and/or instruction opportunities they would like the library to provide.

Engaging with Students

For those teaching classes over the course of a few weeks or a whole semester, Twitter may offer another avenue to connect with your students, many of whom use their cell phones more often than their email accounts. Use Twitter to send short "burst" announcements such as reminders about tests and assignment deadlines. Also, suggest supplemental readings, post relevant news stories, or point students to useful research tools you may not have had time to cover in class.

Consider requiring students to join Twitter, and have them "follow" everyone in the class including you. Engage students in conversations about topics covered in class by "tweeting" questions, and encourage students to tweet their questions as well. Recommend other professionals engaged in the field of study for students to follow.

Professional Development

Use Twitter to enhance your own professional growth and development. Identify and follow librarians who are active in the field, as well as organizations that discuss topic of interest to you.

You might also use Twitter to find out what's happening at conferences you do (or don't) attend. Some conferences establish their own Twitter accounts and post information that you can follow (e.g., http://twitter.com/offcamp_conf). In addition, some conference attendees "live tweet" the sessions that they attend. Many conferences (or conference attendees) establish a hashtag, which is like a subject heading, to allow Twitter users to label their tweets (e.g., #LOEX2010) for identification through Twitter search. Search using these tags and see what people are responding to, in both a positive or negative way, about the conference.

One thing to keep in mind, however, is the somewhat ephemeral nature of tweets. Although they don't disappear from a user's Twitter stream, they do become unsearchable very quickly. According to Twitter's documentation, the search limit "is currently around 1.5 weeks." As a result, you really need to think of Twitter as a "current awareness" tool, and not as an information repository.

Great! Is there anything else I should know?

In this article, we've only covered the Twitter basics. There are a variety of more advanced features, as well as third party tools, which can be used to help users to get the most out of Twitter. Next issue, we'll explore the best of those tools.