



Twitter: social communication in the digital age

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‘amphibious sociology’ which could redistribute methods reflexively and enable exploration of the new opportunities and challenges. She looks at the relationship between sociology and the media and argues that just like animals which live both in water and on land, we also live in at least two media as we exist ‘in a dynamic or live space that is the product of artificial paratextual forces’. This, Lury contends, is a need for both the study and inhabitation of the media, enabling a redesigning of sociology.

This is a fascinating collection of interest not just to sociologists, but to researchers from other disciplines and digital scholars. It brings the possibilities of cutting-edge contemporary research methods to life and introduces different ways of thinking about and doing social research. Whilst the digital space is exciting, Back cautions that new methods and devices for capturing data produce new methodological problems as well as opportunities. He challenges overly bureaucratic procedures or what he terms ‘ethical hypochondria’ (p. 15), regarding the use and analysis of live/digital data. Given the confusion about ethics in online and digital research, this is an area the book could have given more attention to: perhaps this is a fifth theme that would be useful to add in future editions. That said *Live methods* makes a valuable contribution to debates about sociological research in the digital age.

Notes on contributor

Lisa Sugiura is a third-year PhD student undertaking interdisciplinary research combining sociology, criminology, health sciences, law and computer science to understand a new ‘problem’, that of people buying medicines on the Web. Her work uses a range of traditional and digital methods.

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Twitter: social communication in the digital age, by Dhiraj Murthy, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, 193 pp., 15.99 pounds (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-5239-9

There is a need for more academic research into the microblogging social media platform Twitter. This medium has played an important role in political events and journalism – many people, including journalists themselves, now learn about breaking news from their Twitter feed. Twitter is also integral to contemporary public relations and the promotion of products and celebrities, as well as in the construction of social networks and communities related to many different interests. As a sociologist, I find my own use of Twitter for professional purposes to be an important way of developing connections with people working in the same areas and sharing information.

When I began writing this review, I wondered whether any other academic book had been published specifically on Twitter. A quick search of Amazon revealed that there were dozens of popular books of the ‘How to use Twitter’ or ‘Twitter for business’ genre, even some ‘Twitter for the over-60s’-style handbooks. However scholarly books on Twitter were far fewer. I found one book on how Twitter and blogging are changing popular culture and another on epigenetics in the age of Twitter. A search of my university’s holdings identified a

third book on the discourse of Twitter and other social media. Journal articles addressing the social aspects of Twitter are far more numerous: I found over one hundred results when I searched the Sociological Abstracts online database (several of which were published in this journal, including two articles by the author of the book here reviewed).

Given this lack of scholarly book-length analyses of Twitter, it is safe to say that Dhiraj Murthy, a sociologist based in the USA, has produced a book on a topic that has yet to be fully explored in extended form. His book, part of a Polity series on Digital Media and Society, includes seven chapters in addition to a short conclusion. Three chapters serve to provide background details. The remaining four report empirical findings from studies conducted by the author and others on the use of Twitter in journalism, in response to disasters, for political activism, and in relation to health and illness. Each chapter is rather short: Murthy has clearly made the decision to provide a succinct overview rather than covering his topics in any great depth.

Murthy begins with a chapter on ‘What is Twitter?’ that explains in basic terms how it works: redundant for Twitter users themselves but important for those who are unfamiliar with the medium. The next chapter is addressed at contextualizing Twitter. Here Murthy makes various comparisons of Twitter with such technologies as the telegraph and transistor radio, seeking to highlight both similarities and differences of the medium with older communication technologies.

None of this early discussion is particularly sociological. The third chapter, ‘Theorizing Twitter’, finally begins to develop a more scholarly argument that takes up a range of theoretical perspectives. Following brief discussions each of Twitter as a digital ‘object’, self-presentation via Twitter, the question of whether Twitter is democratizing, Twitter and the ‘event society’, Twitter and homophily (the bringing together of like-minded people), and telepresence and immediacy, Murthy draws predominantly on Goffman’s work on the dramaturgical aspects of social interaction and communication. He spends some time developing an argument that uses Goffman’s concepts of ‘ritualization’, ‘participation framework’, and ‘embedding’ to analyse the conventions of tweeting and how Twitter utterances are used and circulated.

I found this chapter somewhat disappointing and frustrating, as apart from the use of Goffman, each of these perspectives received only perfunctory attention. Nor were their connections developed, so that the reader is left with a scattering of potentially interesting ways of conceptualizing Twitter as a social phenomenon that never develops any kind of substantive argument. Even though the final section on Goffman is more developed, no links are made between this section and the previous topics and the chapter therefore lacks coherence. Nor are the theoretical positions established in this chapter drawn upon to any great extent in the chapters that follow.

This book’s major original contribution to academic research on Twitter is the reporting of the empirical studies in the final four chapters. Murthy provides details across a range of geographical locations on how Twitter has been used by both professional and citizen journalists; to convey news and information about disasters such as the 2011 Tokyo earthquake and the floods in Pakistan in 2010; in activist movements such as those associated with the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2010–2011; and finally by patient support groups, health care workers, and medical researchers. However these chapters are largely descriptive rather than analytical. It is here that Murthy could have gone further by bringing together the arguments of his ‘Theorizing Twitter’ chapter with this research, but this he does not attempt.

The book would best be used as a sociological introduction to Twitter. Given Murthy’s focus predominantly on the ‘public face’ of this medium – its use for political and risk communication purposes – there is little here that contributes to understanding how subjectivity, intimacy or social relations are configured via Twitter. However for those seeking an introductory approach and who

are interested in empirical findings on the four main topics addressed by Murthy, the book offers a start in what will surely become a growing area of investigation for those interested in the sociology of social media.

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Media life: we are media, by Mark Deuze, Cambridge, Oxford and Boston, Polity Press, 2012, 256 pp., \$24 (paperback), ISBN-10: 0745650007, ISBN-13: 978-0745650005

Mark Deuze’s *Media Life* paints a bleak picture of our current media drenched existence, and puts modern society under a microscope to reveal how we now live, breathe, and *are* media in every aspect of our daily activities. Deuze brings to together the leading thinkers, and discourse in philosophy, psychology, neuroscience, architecture, design, media studies, digital art theory, human–computer interaction, and electronic engineering to debate the status of our immersion in media and technology. Deuze uses entertainment media (TV, DVD, films, music, video games, etc.), information media (news, educational books, Internet, etc.), social media (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, etc.), communication and technological devices (mobile phones, computers, sensing devices, etc.) – interchangeably, all are ‘media’. He observes that we swim in media, to be without media is like taking a fish out of water: media is so integral to daily life that we cannot function without even the most basic of media.

Starting in Chapter 1, *Media Life*, is an analysis of city living, urban space, and how modern architecture has become a mediascape, increasingly developed to fully integrate network communications, social media, media entertainment, and technology into our personal, social, and urban landscape. Deuze paraphrases Lev Manovich who states that in media life is a life ... *of constant communication and conversation ... hackable and remixable ... always dynamic, unpredictable and permanently under construction ...* (p. 3 paraphrasing Manovich, 2009, p. 319). Deuze declares that the world has become so complex, with its pervasive and massively mediated reality (p. 5) that we need additional media to manage the complexity of our mediated lives. The immediacy of media disorients us from our physical world and spatial reality, disconnecting us from our bodies’ senses, which normally interprets and demystify our environment. He quotes Manuel Castells, who states that timeless time and temporal immediacy create ... *a flat horizon, with no beginning, no end, no sequence ...* (p. 6, quoting Castells, 2010/1996, pp. 491–499), which collapses and expands the past, present, and future into an always real-time reality, indicating that the hyper-textual non-linear experience of surfing the web is now how we experience our lives. Deuze illustrates how we create,