



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Social Networking: Twitter**

## **Social Networking: Twitter**

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## Social Networking Eating Crow with a Twitter Chaser<sup>1</sup>

**February 22, 2011**

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. A flashback to 1986:

- **Locale:** St. Thomas, Virgin Islands. A bungalow overlooking green cliffs and a blue sea.
- **Why?** Taking a break from lectures in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on “Emerging Communications Technologies” (Subjects: Cellular networks, the Internet, and their underlying architectures.)
- **Vacation Activity:** Instead of viewing the cliffs and sea, reading world-wide standards dealing with mobile telephone networks.
- **Sidebar Observation:** Why my friends, who have come to know my social skills, offer that the “U” in my name stands for “Useless.”

During this time, I occasionally glanced at the scenery, but I was taken with the international “Red Book” standards that defined the operations for a second-generation mobile phone network. I had signed a contract with one of my publishers to write a book about the subject. Lucky for me, several of my clients were assuming leading roles in developing the hardware and software for the technology.

- Reporterette, who is accompanying me on this tour, is looking at everything but technical material. But she was (and is) an empathetic soul, “You seem involved in those pages. Anything interesting?”
- “Yeah. The new standard on mobile phones is brilliant! I can’t believe hundreds of committees could come up with such a fine creation.”
- “Hmm. Part of your book? Your next lecture?”
- “Yes...but there’s a puzzling part of the specification. One that seems out-of-place. Doesn’t make a lick of sense to me. It’s called Short Message Service...SMS. Seems a waste.”
- “What’s the waste?”
- “It’s part of the standard that establishes the procedures for exchanging text messages that I find perplexing. The standard allows you to send a message using your cell phone--- something like an abbreviated email. You have to enter the text on the cell phone key pad, which is designed for entering numbers. It will take a long time to shift back-and-forth on one numeric key to enter different characters. Why not just talk to the person on the phone instead of sending a tedious message? Seems a lot more efficient. It also limits a text message to only 140 characters---two or three sentences! What can you say in 140 letters?”

As it turns out, a lot. Ask the disposed despots in Tunisia and Egypt. Along with other social networking technologies. Twitter’s “140” was vital to the success of the recent exits of these men from their former dictatorships.

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<sup>1</sup> The Twitter logo on the cover of this report is a (new) trademark for the company. All rights reserved by Twitter.

In addition, text messaging on cell phones has provided an opportunity for humans to show our thumbs are useful for tasks other than cocking gun triggers.

Twitter is based on the ideas that came from the SMS standards. Some technicians call Twitter the “SMS of the Internet.”

I will not belabor my 1986 ignorance and naiveté. They speak for themselves. But in the second report, I’ll cut myself some slack and explain why I missed the short message and social networking revolution, as did many others.

For now, our hats are off to the founders of the social networking and microblogging technologies.

### **Post Script**

As I have claimed in the past, autocrats and their like are on the losing side of the political/ideological equation. Most people, given a choice, will opt for actually having choices.

Some of my readers continue to disagree with me, but I still hold that democracy, in the long run, travels better than its alternatives. Social networking is helping things along. Let’s hope it continues to partner with participatory societies.

Nonetheless, the initial euphoria of the Tunisia and Egypt peaceful coups will now sink-in to the reality of “What’s next?” The military and radical Islamics have the inside track, as they are already in place and organized. They are not aligned to anything more than their kick-backs and staying in control.

Let’s keep our fingers crossed.

## **Social Networking How Twitter Twitted the Telephone**

**March 2, 2011**

As stated in the first report, I missed the now obvious attraction of short exchanges of text over a phone connection. My two books on cellular, mobile networks (both) devoted one paragraph to the subject. Look-up “thickheaded” in the dictionary. There will be a picture of me.

My mind was set into the conventional way we communicate over the telephone: instantaneous talk---back and forth exchanges, sometimes lasting for many minutes, or even hours. And that’s the beauty of text messaging. We’ve all endured the tedious monologues from friends or relatives who consider the telephone their personal electronic megaphone. Not so with texting.

**Tone it down.** Twitter (and its partner SMS) establish a limit on our potential verbosity. Twitter forces us to be more succinct. It encourages the two-way exchange of information.

**Store and forward.** Twitter and similar technologies provide an immensely useful service to human communications: We do not have to respond instantaneously to a comment from someone. Because the communications is in text, it can be stored in memory. Thus, it is not subject to falling off the end of the communications link. It’s ready for our retrieval only when we have the time and inclination to retrieve it. Twitter allows us to multi-process. We can do all sorts of things as we twitter...parallel processing.

**Multicasting.** In my St. Thomas cottage, I owned a first generation cell phone that could place a call to one person. And the call was only voice. No Twitter and the like. No texting. No sending a message to a wide audience.

Also, at this remote location there was no cell phone coverage anyway. I owned the phone, but I could not use it. Today, we see cell phone towers (antennas) even in remote locations. Just about everyone has a cell phone.

A few weeks ago, I was at a Starbucks. A homeless man came to the store with a grocery carriage full of contents that reflected his travels on life’s highways. He walked in, sat down at vacant table, and proclaimed to no one and everyone, “Just need to charge my phone!” Sure enough, he plugged-in his phone, ordered nothing, and sat for while. I suppose with his monthly cell phone bill, he couldn’t afford a latte.

In 1986, the one-to-many capabilities of the Internet were not part of cell phone technology. Today, it is an easy task to send one message to many people or to post a message for all to read. Some of my younger readers might wonder why I even write about this capability, but its inception was instrumental to the success of social networking---and it is now instrumental to the current social and political revolutions.

This wonderful invention came about because of the Web and a lesser-known feature of the Internet called IP (Internet Protocol) multicasting. Now-a-days, we can setup (or our technicians can) a message to be sent and/or made available to a world-wide audience. Usually, we need only key-in one name (Web or email) and software translates this one ID to perhaps thousands or even millions of addresses.

Think of it! A short time ago, you or I could not reach anyone unless we made a point-to-point call. Yes, conference calls have long existed---where multi-parties talk to one another, but they required prior set-ups with the phone company. Today, our Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube revelations can be made known to almost anyone who has a cell phone. And the communications are almost instantaneous.

The power of an autocrat stems partially from his ability to prevent his subjects from communicating with one another. His minions are kept in the dark, usually unaware of the preponderance of fellow disenfranchised and agitated citizens.

The Internet, IP multicasting, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and the Web have changed the landscape for these despots. They are confronted with an unfamiliar paradigm and do not know how to deal with it.

One telling feature of a failed state is its repression of Internet and cell phone accesses. I say “failed” in the sense of giving its citizens choice about how they communicate.

China will likely become the most influential nation in the world, but unless it allows its people to communicate, it’s nothing more than a wealthy, but failed state.

Some of my readers have told me my Pollyanna views about the inevitability of self-rule are just that: Pollyannaish. In the short range, I cannot offer an argument that the removal of autocrats in Tunisia and Egypt will lead immediately to people having a choice about how they are governed. I cannot argue this point even convincingly to myself. But in the long run, disenfranchised citizens, given the weapon of mass communications through social networks, are eventually going to push the despots out the door. They may be replaced by other despots, but they will eventually be replaced.

A disclaimer: I do not text. I rarely do YouTube. I have a Facebook account, but rarely view it.<sup>2</sup> I resort to audio communications or sometimes lengthy emails. My practice does not mean I do not like social networking. Quite the opposite, most of my views on Twitter and others are positive. Still, in the fourth and last report of this subject, I’ll offer some “cons” about the technologies and the societal implications of social networking.

By the way, if you want to read a funny, somewhat bizarre story about my first encounter with an alleged cell phone user, see this next sidebar. Otherwise,

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<sup>2</sup> Someone (obviously, one of my friends, who will not admit to the act) put a photo of me in a Speedo swimsuit on my page. That’s an intrusion of privacy but part of the very idea of social networking. Privacy? You have little.

Your on the Street Reporter is signing off for now.

The year was 1983. Reporterette and I had moved to southern California from Virginia so I could be closer to a company I owned with four others. We rented a place on Lido Island located in the Newport Beach harbor. It was trendy and beyond our lifestyle preference, but we decided to explore the so-called “beautiful people” culture, at least for a year or so.

We were the only family who drove a Toyota on the entire island. One of our neighbors drove a Porsche convertible. We were friendly and exchanged pleasantries when we came across each other.

One Sunday morning I noticed he was washing his car, and I also noticed he had what appeared to be a cell phone antenna on the trunk of the car. I figured it was a new AMPS cell phone, which had been in the market for a couple weeks.<sup>3</sup> I was eager to learn about AMPS and eventually wrote about and consulted on the technology. For now, I was a neophyte.

I approached him, and we began to have this conversation. I paraphrase, but it’s pretty close:

- “Good morning. Say, I just noticed the antenna. Is it one of those new cell phones? How do you like it? How’s the coverage?”
- “Naw. It’s a toy antenna.”
- “Toy?”
- “Yeah, I don’t have a real one. So, when I’m driving around, I just pull out...see that toy red phone in the seat? I pick it up pretend I’m talking.”
- “No!”
- “Yeah, gets lot of attention.”
- ...”Eh, why not just get a real one.”
- “Dude, see this car I’m driving?”
- “Yeah, I’ve been admiring it.”
- “I can’t afford a cell phone. Damn car payments are killing me”
- I wanted to say, “So is your vanity,” but I let it ride.

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<sup>3</sup> The Advanced Mobile Phone Service (AMPS) was a first generation (1G) cell phone technology. Today, the carriers are rolling-out 4G.

**Social Networking  
Berlitz School of Twitter**

(Note: For this report, I go by my initials, U.D.,  
which many of my old friends still call me.)

**March 2, 2011**

**Twitter:**

HFYOTSR  
TL2RHNHALOL. LLOL FAC!  
FYI, TWTR USES A  
! on A:  
TG2BT but BON, ILA  
FTR, IM A: eg, Ud....as in Uuuud

**Translation:**

Hello from Your On the Street Reporter.  
The last two reports have not had a lot of laughs. Let's laugh out loud for a change!  
For your information, Twitter uses acronyms.  
I have a comment on acronyms:  
Too good to be true but believe it or not, I love acronyms.  
For the record, I'm an acronym: For example, Ud....as in Uuuud.

**Twitter:**

U'd TNK I'd like TWTR.  
WIM DOE..! FUD  
ABYCTAODNT  
WDR IMO TWTR:

**Translation:**

You would think I'd like Twitter.  
Woe is me, it depends on one's experience with it...I've fear, uncertainty and disinformation  
about the topic...which is not what I want to say, but I can't find an acronym in the *Texting  
Dictionary of Acronyms* to explain my problem.  
And besides, you can't teach an old dog new tricks.  
With due respect, in my opinion, Twitter:

Is creating a subclass of semi-literate conversationalists, who don't know the definition of literate  
to begin with, and can converse solely with streams of illogical acronyms---and only in half-  
duplex mode. What happened to the age-old tradition of everyone talking at once? And everyone  
interrupting everyone else? Twitter's too mucking polite, especially if you've got Italian blood in  
you.



Plus, it's just too succinct. Too Hemingwayesque. It does not encourage a lot of bullshit, especially if you've got Texas blood in you.

And you thought I was going to take sides? Nope, I split down the middle.

The technology of the Short Message Service 140 character limit posed a big problem for the first and second generation cell phone key pad users. Using conventional English, keying-in "For crying out loud" instead of "4COL" on the phone would have been time-consuming and a poor use of limited space.

Twitter was invented to circumvent the very limitations of the technology that gave it its birth. Beautiful irony.

Don't let us disparage the new language itself. Assessing its impact on our current language is another matter; one we take-up in the fourth and last report of this series.

Okay, we're having some fun. A few more strokes:

**Twitter:**

DPUP ABT TWTR! NTTAWWT. NNWW :)  
ILL. BIHSABL, IWATL TST :)

**Translation:**

Don't pop your pants about Twitter! Not that there's anything wrong with that. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink ☺.

I love limericks. Because I have such a busy life, I am writing a Twitter limerick to save time ☺

**Twitter:**

*WHTTG,*  
*IRWLOP*

*2 140 L,*  
*TAM BLKs...*

*& & ,*  
*ISABP.*

*BMNM,*  
*TWTR's TTTC.*

**Translation:**

*While Twitter has taken the globe,  
it requires we limit our probes  
to 140 letters,  
that also means blanks...*

*and periods and commas;  
it seems a big prank.*

*But make no mistake,  
Twitter's taken the cake.*

My Irish friends have likely disowned me.

For the last report in this series, we'll return to the somber mode and address some of the problems with abbreviated texting and then move to a more general theme---one I explored in my book on optical networks. It's called information overload.

4EAE,  
Your on the Street Reporter

**Translation:**

For ever and ever....as long as you don't hit DLT.

## **Social Networking Twitter Twits Decide to Twit Twitter**

**March 2, 2011**

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. One of the most widely circulated criticisms of Twitter is its discouragement of the proper use of a language, thereby potentially rendering a society into a less-expressive way of communicating, thus, reducing the ability of a society to communicate accurately.

I'm not a linguist or a social psychologist. Fact is, I'm no longer anything. Now, when I fill-in an application for a discount card at Safeway, I respond to the "Occupation?" question by writing "retired" as the answer. That declaration consigns me to personal irrelevancy.

Anyway, I am not knowledgeable enough to comment on these issues. But I do have some ideas about certain aspects of social networking that are indications of where humans' societies have been moving since Gutenberg and his press came along around 1439: We are spending less-and-less time creating, but we are absorbing more-and-more information.

This observation is---from the standpoint of criticism---neutral. It is an observation having both positive and negative connotations:

### **Too Much or Too Little?**

If only the citizens of Sudan had access to the information we in Western societies have. If only they were burdened with entering cogent phrases into intelligent search engines. We first-world citizens are lucky to have evolved into a position to where we must massively filter the data surrounding us into meaningful information.

Personally, I like having this problem, but some studies indicate the preponderance of choices existing in a human mind can lead to confusion---even anxiety, resulting in less than optimal decisions. These studies use MRIs to demonstrate the breakdown of certain areas of the brain that deal with queuing-up and analyzing (too many) choices.

These parts of the brain breakdown, for example, when a grocery shopper is confronted with over 100 variations of Campbell's Vegetable Soup.

Get a life! Pull a can off the shelf of Italian-Spiced Zucchini Flavored with A-1 Sauce. Put it in your basket and go on to the next section where you have  $10^{10}$  choices of Gorgonzola cheese.

If you're unable to make choices in life about...okay, more weighty issues, such as the best mortgage plan or the optimum retirement plan, just go to the Internet and let a piece of software take you to a conclusion.

I have trouble not being facetious about this topic, which gets a lot of coverage in the media. Which would you prefer: Having too few choices or having too many?

### **Speed of Information Dissemination and Assimilation**

On another level, Twitter permits the fast exchange of information. The information might not be all that inspiring but it usually gets the point across.

As I mentioned in an earlier writing:<sup>4</sup> Events unfold much faster today than they did in the past. I don't necessarily mean we are driving faster cars or flying in faster airplanes. I mean we are doing more things and often doing them more quickly. Fast food restaurants are given their name for a good reason.

Our attention span seems to be shorter. TV clips have conditioned our minds to think in sound bites lasting a few seconds.

Perhaps we should recognize that doing everything faster does not unto itself translate into a contented existence or a better life. For my mental well-being, I try to keep in mind a statement by Henry David Thoreau in his *Walden*, "After all, the man whose horse trots a mile in a minute does not [necessarily] carry the most important message."

Maybe our quick and abbreviated modes of communications are resulting in the diminishing quality of what we communicate. Again, I don't know, but the thought has crossed my mind.

So what? Is quality of discourse all that important? Get in a verb and noun...often not even a verb, and the communication has been achieved. That's what Twitter does.

### **Quality of Human Discourse**

Nothing precludes someone writing a letter or an email, one that is constructed with care and respect of language. That is not what Twitter is intended to do, so let's not pile-on Twitter for what it does: succinct, efficient correspondence.

Still, take a look at this passage of a letter written by my great grandfather (James Black) to his wife (Patience) during the American Civil War. James was serving in the Confederate Army in Texas:

June 17, 1862. Fort Hebert, Texas

My darling Patience, Last night while walking my lonely post between the hours of twelve and two o'clock, my thoughts were wafted on eagle wings to thy presence. I almost forgot that we were separated so far from each other; yet my dear Patience, I hope the time is near at hand for the consummation of all your hopes and wishes respecting my speedy return. I feel as if I could resign the wealth of worlds for one loving embrace from thee, my cherished wife. My love, the hours of parting will be doubly repaid by the hours of meeting. Then my dearest—and content yourself in my absence.

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<sup>4</sup> *The Light Side of Little Texas.*

Whatever you may think of this text, maudlin or beautiful, it conveys a depth of communications so far removed from today's emails and Twitters that it seems to be from another world. Yet, this letter was the email and Twitter of its day.

I leave it to you to answer these questions: Are we missing something with our Twitters and Facebooks? With the fast paces of our lives? With our focus on multi-processing? With the resultant inability to adequately assimilate and thus fully contemplate those very images we communicate to each other? Are we really communicating, or are we just skimming the surface?

TNKS 4 Listening.