

10 Things Twitter Won't Tell You

The truth behind all those tweets. By [SARA GERMANO](#)

1. "Want to make a big impact? Good luck."

Twitter, the social-media platform that lets users communicate in short posts called tweets, has exploded since its launch in 2006, from 15,000 accounts then to 200 million today. "Active users" attract an average of just under 5,000 followers (those who choose to receive a given user's tweets automatically), according to independent research site Twitalyzer -- but the number of subscribers isn't necessarily the best measure of impact. "Not all Twitter accounts are created equal," says Twitalyzer creator Eric Peterson. *Harvard Business Review* found 10 percent of users create 90 percent of Twitter's content. But while Lady Gaga and President Obama rank among the most followed (roughly 12 million and 9 million, respectively), Twitalyzer each day deems a different user "most influential" -- like San Francisco "interaction designer" Joshua Kaufman, who has fewer than 7,000 followers. "It's not a popularity contest," says Peterson; it's the frequency and volume of communication -- how often and with whom you converse -- that determines who's making a mark. Twitter, for its part, says you can have an impact whether you have "five followers or 5 million."

2. "It's not just photos that you're sharing."

Ever snapped a photo with your phone, then uploaded it to post on Twitter? You may have shared more than just an image. ICanStalkU.com was set up by tech consultants to alert Twitter users that their smartphone pics are embedded with GPS data, making it so easy to determine your precise latitude and longitude that "a first grader could stalk someone," says cofounder Larry Pesce. For its part, Twitter's image-hosting service strips geotagged data from phone-uploaded pics, but third-party services like TwitPic are still vulnerable. Twitter has twice suspended ICanStalkU's account, calling the site's cautionary tweets spam. But Pesce says, "If we thought of it, someone else much more evil and smarter has been using it."

3. "Social media is a slippery slope."

You don't have to be a congressman with an unfortunate surname for Twitter to have a disruptive impact on your personal life. Tracy Musacchio, a college instructor in New York, says a friend "likes to Twitter-stalk" her, leading to off-line arguments about things she's tweeted. And couples therapists are reporting that discordant views on Twitter and other virtual-media etiquette are being cited more often as stressors in relationships. Tara Fritsch, a marriage counselor in Oklahoma, says she helps about half her clients with social media related issues. Sites like Twitter don't cause partners to be unfaithful, she says, but "simple opportunity" can lead some to take the plunge. (Twitter says it provides guidelines for acceptable behavior, but "no policy could prevent" users from engaging in extramarital affairs.) Bottom line: "Don't kid yourself into thinking that things that happen in the virtual world have no impact on the real world," Fritsch says.

4. "We're helping journalists..."

Many reporters and news outlets are turning to Twitter for instant material and sources for breaking stories. Its efficiency in generating swift and concise feedback on everything from viewer reactions to *American Idol* to on-the-ground developments after natural disasters have made Twitter a resource for journalists looking to tap into civic discussion. Gregory Galant, CEO of Sawhorse Media, says that before Twitter became mainstream, it was a forum for journalists. His website, Muck Rack, serves as a directory of journalists, which the public can use to verify

whether tweeters are credible reporters -- important, since news often gets broken on Twitter before major news outlets report it. For example, he says, in June 2009, "news of Michael Jackson's death was trending among the journalists we follow" before ever hitting the mainstream media.

5. "...but also hurting them."

The death of Osama bin Laden was tweeted by Donald Rumsfeld's chief of staff Keith Urbahn more than an hour before President Obama's official address to the nation and before most news outlets had posted it on their Web pages. That tweet turned out to be true. But as more top stories get broken on Twitter, journalists using the site to try to keep up with a never-ending news cycle sometimes rush to report information that isn't accurate. Thomson Reuters, for instance, was among several news outlets that erroneously tweeted Rep. Gabrielle Giffords was killed in the Arizona shooting in January. (A spokesperson for Reuters says the organization is now enforcing a stricter social-media policy.) And just how effective are the tweets by major news outlets in drawing users to their websites? According to a study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, which examined traffic at 21 top news sites in the U.S., links from Twitter drove visitors to only nine of those sites, and Twitter referrals accounted for 1 percent or so of total traffic, on average.

6. "Third-party apps are like free R&D."

Like Facebook, Twitter isn't merely a website; as a social-media platform, it functions as a network, accessible through its domain on the Web or via third-party applications you can install on your smartphone or computer. These apps, such as HootSuite and TweetDeck (recently purchased by Twitter), enhance the experience by letting users organize their feeds in more sophisticated ways than Twitter.com allows. The company states that "90 percent of active Twitter users use official Twitter apps" to access the platform, but third-party research by Sysomos found that just 60 percent of all tweets come through proprietary apps. A spokesperson for Twitter says the disparity in numbers could be the result of the many avenues users have for accessing Twitter. Twitter views the growing apps market as "an important space" for both developers and the company. Its official Twitter app on the iTunes store (formerly Tweetie) is intended to reduce user confusion.

7. "We can predict the stock market."

If you're only using Twitter to keep up with friends and the offhand celebrity, you may be missing out on a veritable gold mine. By analyzing all tweets, researchers at Indiana University were able to assess the overall mood of the tweeting public and use it to predict the trajectory of the Dow Jones Industrial Average with 87 percent accuracy. But you don't need a Ph.D. to use Twitter for investing help; analysts are now tapping the site to get a jump on trading news before the morning bell. Bill Buhr, an IPO strategist at Morningstar, says his colleagues have tracked after-hours prices for stocks on Twitter when data was unavailable elsewhere. "It was very valuable," he says.

8. "When are we going public? Wouldn't you like to know."

Even before LinkedIn, in May, became the hottest IPO since Google, the business world was drooling over the eventual debut of popular social sites like Groupon (which in June announced its intention to go public) and, of course, Twitter. Officially, Twitter says it "has no plans for an IPO" and is keeping quiet on the matter, though many expect the company to go public sooner rather than later. Morningstar's Buhr says the market is ripe for it but that Twitter needs to solidify its leadership first -- it has had three CEOs in its relatively short existence -- and address concerns that it isn't efficiently monetizing its product. (Twitter agrees this is a top priority.) But if Twitter does decide to offer public shares, retail investors shouldn't fret over trying to get in right away, Buhr says; he advises waiting until the stock price comes down from what he expects to be an early trading frenzy. To the naysayers worried about another tech bubble, Buhr says, "a lot of these companies are already profitable."

9. "You'll just have to trust us."

When it comes to celeb tweeters, Twitter helps you distinguish authentic accounts from fakes, marking "verified" profiles with a blue check mark. But when it comes to the specifics on how they're earned, no one's telling. Charlie White and Meryl Davis, the 2011 World Figure Skating Champions in ice dance, use separate Twitter accounts to engage fans and alert them about public appearances, though only White has a verified account. Davis says Twitter contacted her several times about verifying her account during the 2010 Olympics, when the pair won a silver medal, but never got the seal. White says he was never contacted, but "I logged in one day, and it was just verified." Twitter policy says verified accounts are for those "who deal with identity confusion regularly on Twitter," though neither Davis nor White have had to fend off imposters. A Twitter spokesperson says verifications are handled "on a one-off basis," drawing on a variety of factors, and that "we often work with the people surrounding public figures."

10. "We have our own approach to advertising."

Advertising on Twitter doesn't appear in the form of banners or pop-ups so common on other sites, but rather, indirectly, through its suite of promoted accounts, tweets and "trends" (featured conversation topics). Sponsors pay Twitter to make their material more visible than others', but some marketers question that model. A recent example: Unilever sponsored a hashtag (a buzzword preceded by a pound sign, which links to tweets on a topic) during the nuptials of Prince William and Kate Middleton; users who clicked on *#RoyalWedding* looking for tweets about the couple also got directed to ads for ice cream bars. As a private company, Twitter need not disclose income, but eMarketer estimates it will generate \$150 million in ad revenue this year, compared with Facebook's estimated \$4 billion. Bottom line: Twitter needs to "make itself more relevant" to boost income, says Debra Aho Williamson, principal analyst at eMarketer.