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What's up @twitter?

With user numbers falling and the platform's share price plummeting, could Twitter actually be finished?

BY MATTHEW ROCK

Big events break on Twitter. Stories and crises develop. Leaders and celebrities make announcements, statements and swift rebuttals. When Kanye West wanted to tap up Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg for \$1bn, he didn't contact him via Facebook; he tweeted him – perhaps the strongest possible sign of Twitter's pre-eminence among the world's influential.

For public relations professionals and the media, Twitter is a spider's web-meets-beehive: a place where they can weave a delicious, intricate mesh of sticky and enduring relationships.

As a result, in-house communications teams, PR agencies and consultants have spent thousands of hours in Twitter workshops learning how to attract a journalist's interest in 140 characters; how to snuff out a story with just the right blend of clarity and blandness; who to follow; how to entice them into following you; which influencers trigger real change in a market; and how long it's reasonable to wait for a response to a DM.

All this explains why the comms industry has got itself so animated about Twitter's recent travails: flat user numbers, disappointing revenues, accumulating losses, haemorrhaging staff, parachuting co-founder Jack Dorsey back into the CEO's seat, and, of course, the heretical decision to enable 10,000-character posts. The #RIPTwitter hashtag did a roaring trade in response and led to the unimaginable, existential worry: what if Twitter is on its last legs?

Influence decided to seek the counsel of the comms industry's wisest owls.

One swallow does not a summer make [enough bird gags – Ed] and, according to our panel of experts, one

set of crappy results doesn't spell the end for Twitter. "Greedy, short-term investors are doing their best to ruin Twitter, but it isn't yet a busted flush," insists international public relations adviser Stuart Bruce.

Twitter's core problem, of course, is that its performance is relentlessly measured against Facebook's. At times, the two social media giants have enjoyed comparable stock-market valuations, but now the discrepancy is vast, not to say humiliating: \$300bn-plus for Facebook and a meagre \$10bn for our chirrupy friend.

But the comparison feels increasingly inadequate. Facebook is a force of nature, a sales and advertising behemoth; Twitter, by contrast, is a close-knit nexus of influence, what the *New York Times* journalist Farhad Manjoo calls "the nerve centre of the world's journalists, politicians, activists and agitants" with "an unrivalled capacity to influence real things in the real world."

In reality, Twitter's commercial performance isn't too shabby. Revenues have topped \$2bn and, while it still racks up half-a-billion-dollar losses, it has a \$3.5bn war chest that just might enable it to make a blinding acquisition to turn its fortunes around. Periscope, which only cost Twitter \$86m, could be 'the One', and \$3.5bn will buy Twitter a fair few decent startups, just not at WhatsApp valuations.

QUALITY, NOT QUANTITY

Hard-nosed investors may have kicked off about Twitter's 'flat' user numbers, but most emerging companies wouldn't sniff at a consumer base of 300 million from which to build a profitable business.

Anil Dash, chief executive of ThinkUp, has commented: "Maybe Twitter is not meant to be the most popular band in

the world. Maybe it's meant to be merely Pearl Jam and not U2." Stuart Bruce uses a more meejah analogy: "Can't Facebook be for the masses and Twitter for the few? *The Economist* doesn't need the same mass readership as *The Sun*."

Long term, this is the rub: does Twitter aspire for ultra mass-market penetration (a billion users is the bellwether number in social media land), or can it successfully monetise its classier, more influential user base?

Here, it's worth drilling into the profile of those users in more detail. On page 46, courtesy of Lissted founder Adam Parker, is a graph based on data of the 2.53 million accounts Lissted rates as having a high likelihood of being influential.

Over to ex-accountant Parker to explain: "It shows the proportion of [the 2.53 million most influential] users who have tweeted in the past 90 days, broken down by how many years they've been on the platform.

"You can see that almost 90% of the accounts are active on this basis. The proportion is also fairly consistent across profile age – suggesting the vast majority of key users are still active."

A software company lives and dies by the quality of its current product, the strength and relevance of new features coming through, and that ineffable sense that its app is ahead of the pack.

In many ways, Twitter still has that special magic. Its core features – tweets, retweets, hashtags, follows – are now part of our language and, more importantly, determine how we see the world. And the insights that Twitter can reveal – through trends, follower numbers and Twitter analytics – are the closest thing we have to a barometer of current interest.

But some new features have caused people to lose faith in Twitter. →

Moments and the algorithmic timeline both feel a bit copycat and, well, not quite Twitterish. Given that many users see their profiles as intrinsic to their personal brand, such changes, even if only cosmetic, can seem significant.

So when Twitter announced that it would enable 10,000-character posts, there was a feeling that it had crossed the point of no return.

Actually, observes Bruce, “the whole moving to 10,000 characters thing is a bit of a red herring. The tweets you see will still be 140 characters, but the idea is that links will take you to a place still within Twitter’s walled garden, rather than to a third-party site.” It’s hardly sacrilegious for Twitter to want to hang on to the eyeballs, and the conversations, data and insights that it derives from those eyeballs. It’s pretty much the same commercial logic that all the major social media players apply to their traffic. As Parker observes, “The extended option means users could choose to post that content directly, rather than on a blog platform.

“Twitter is already used to share links to longer-form content elsewhere; is clicking to expand so different to clicking on a link?”

What’s different about Twitter (and, to a degree, LinkedIn) is that it’s both an open and (in many cases) a professional platform. Unlike Facebook, where your updates are typically confined to your friends, on Twitter anyone can see your tweets and tweeted links.



Emotionally, it’s in hyper-sensitive territory. Any changes to Twitter’s product sets off alarm bells, especially among journalists and the PR community, whose jobs require sensitivity to the details of messages, editing and intellectual ownership.

“Twitter is popular with journalists because of its (largely) public nature,” says Parker. “Posting in the public domain is just what they do, and they want to get attention for their stories – whereas, for many people, the risk involved with posting on such a platform doesn’t appeal. The more private nature of Facebook, and even

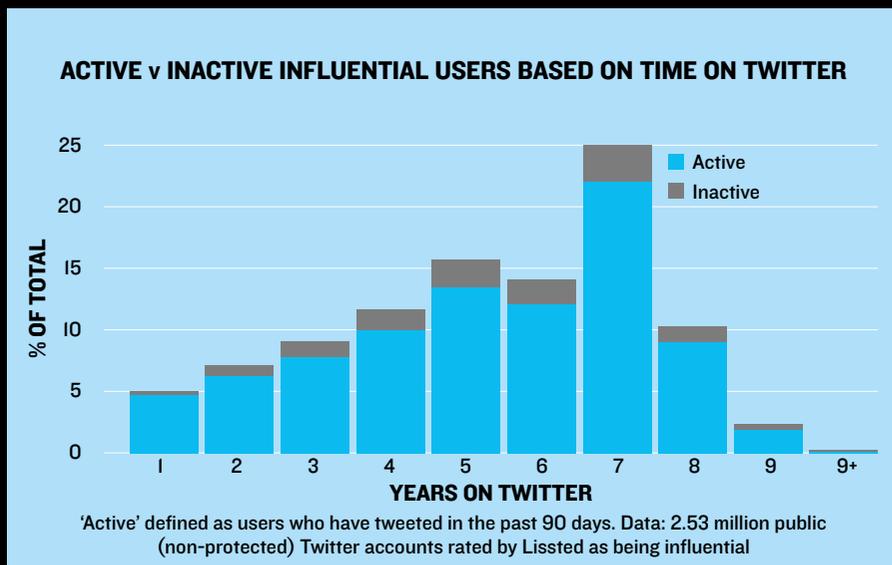
LinkedIn, sits better – even if this privacy is only a perception. This makes the public nature of Twitter both its greatest strength and its most significant weakness.”

NEW TWITTER

On 5 January, after the 10,000-character story broke, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey tweeted a ten commandment-style message pronouncing Twitter’s core values. He’s got even more feisty since. Dorsey even set himself five tasks: refine the service; cater to influencers; curb abuses; play more video; build an app army.

But what do comms experts think Twitter needs to do? Here, in full, are Parker’s three big recommendations:

- 1 More effective policing of the community. Frequent stories about people attacked by trolls, spammers and bullies can’t help user growth. Some investment has been made in this area, such as Twitter’s creation of a Trust and Safety Council and its updated harassment reporting tool.
- 2 Cut down on follow spam. Have you ever been followed by the same account multiple times? You know the ones; they follow you, and then if you don’t reciprocate, they unfollow you. A week later they follow you again and the whole sorry story repeats itself. It’s a tiny minority of users who implement these tactics to try to build their follower





number. Lissted's data suggests only 100,000 users (0.03 per cent) account for potentially 15–20% of the platform's following relationships. Twitter should have more stringent limits on the number of accounts you can follow. After all nobody can truly follow the tweets of 100,000 others.

③ Improve access to communities. A key strength of Twitter is the groups of experts you can find related to pretty much every industry, profession and topic you can think of. In my opinion Twitter focuses too much on promoting celebrities and not enough on these niche communities. It needs to provide new and existing users with simple and effective ways to 'plug into' them, both within the platform and outside.

Parker has enjoyed success by building community-based Twitter feeds (such as @politicsUKTD and @EducationUKTD) that distil into one account what's being talked about by around 1,000 influential voices in a community. He's now even doing daily email digests summarising the content shared by community influencers. This kind of data-driven innovation could unlock Twitter's commercial potential – for itself and for agencies who specialise in Twitter.

SO @PRPEOPLE #WHATDOYOU DONOW?

Some PR professionals may have assumed that, as long as they'd mastered Twitter and Facebook, they'd ticked the social media box.

The uproar around Twitter has shattered such complacency. "The days of your social media strategy being limited to Facebook and Twitter are over," says Daniel Tyte, executive director at Working Word. "That was probably unhealthy and limiting anyway. Find your audience online, whether that's on LinkedIn or Instagram, and experiment with reaching them in new ways. It's only through play that you'll perfect it."

Andrew Smith, managing director at social media trainer Escherman, says Twitter's travails should make PR professionals think about how Twitter operates as a means of directly reaching relevant audiences, and how it works as a communications medium with journalists.

"On the former, Twitter will be allocated as much attention as is appropriate given audience usage. On the latter, it could argue that it is business as usual. Journalists and media outlets still constitute the largest group of verified accounts.

"So long as Twitter continues to have a role influencing real things in the real world, it will continue to play a very important role in the world of PR."

Twitter is still with us (phew), @Jack's in charge and has a vision, and many of world's most influential people still inhabit the network. For now, Twitter's storm may have blown itself out, but the calm may only last until the next big set of numbers.



The days of your social media strategy being limited to Facebook and Twitter are over. Find your audience online, whether on LinkedIn or Instagram, and experiment with reaching them

THANKS TO THE PANEL AT INFLUENCE HQ

PR adviser Stuart Bruce sits on the organising committee for the World Communication Forum in Davos



Adam Parker is head data chef and founder of Lissted and CEO of media intelligence company RealWire



Andrew Smith is a social media, analytics, SEO and PR trainer who runs Escherman, a digital comms consultancy



Daniel Tyte is executive director at Working Word and co-chair of CIPR's Social Media Panel

