

# Let us “Entertwain” you



## Twitter Unleashes a

## World of Potential for the Entertainment Industry

by Jarrod Walpert, APR

On October 11, 2009, Miley Cyrus declared she was quitting **Twitter**, shocking more than two million fans that were following the teen celebrity on the micro-blogging service (Twitter Counter). Within moments of her announcement, a flurry of “**tweets**” - updates in 140-characters or less - began surfacing worldwide, and throngs of disappointed fans took to the Internet and their PDAs to spread the news, many pleading with Miley to reconsider. By the time the mainstream media got wind of the story, thousands of updates had posted across the “**Twitterverse**,” scooping leading news outlets that make millions off of generating first run headlines.

Stories like these – from the US Airways flight that crashed into the Hudson to the plotted terrorist attacks on Mumbai - illustrate **Twitter’s powerful, real-time updating features** that are ushering the web-based service, being called the fastest growing Internet communications tool of today (nielsenwire, June 2009), past mainstream media to be first at the gate when it comes to disseminating news and pop culture gossip.

### Redefining Social Networking

Twitter began in March 2006 as a side project of co-founder Jack Dorsey, who was fascinated with the impact the Internet could have on the fundamental question, “What are you doing?” Twitter describes itself as, “a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question through a 140-character post known as a “tweet.” Twitter’s first prototype was built within two weeks, launching publicly in August 2006. Over the next nine months, thousands of users began utilizing Twitter, and in May 2007 Twitter Incorporated was formed (Twitter.com).

Twitter can be used by anyone with an Internet connection. Users can post updates, build and follow a network

of other users, and view updates via Twitter's interface or by subscribing to a user's feed using RSS technology (similar to signing up to follow a blog's posts). In addition, users are able to send a public reply or private direct message to connect with another Twitterer. Though users can answer the prompt, "What are you doing?," tweets have evolved into more than everyday experiences, and appear as shared links to interesting content on the web, conversations around hot topics (using the # symbol known as a hashtag), photos, videos, music, and, most importantly, real-time accounts from people who are in the midst of a newsworthy event, crisis, or natural disaster. (<http://mashable.com/guidebook/twitter/>)

According to the latest numbers from comScore, Twitter traffic is up 700 percent over last year, and the service is utilized by an estimated 70 million users\* (Swartz, November 2009 & NeXTt Up Research). Users of the service comprise one-fifth of Internet users overall (Hoffman October 2009). While initial reports show that the majority of users range from 25-54 years of age, recent reports reveal that younger users are embracing Twitter, with the 18- to 24-year old population doubling since last year (Fox, Smith and Zickuhr 2009, 4-12).

Because Twitter is a new communications technology, global brands across many industries are searching for the "right" way to integrate Twitter into the communications mix, none more so than the entertainment industry. While the industry is still evaluating and inventing the best ways to leverage the medium, many celebrities and entertainment executives have embraced Twitter to pitch themselves and their projects to fans worldwide. The social media blog "Mashable," with more than 12.5 million monthly page views, keeps an ongoing list of today's most engaging celebrity Twitter users (Mashable.com).

### Eliminating the Gatekeepers

The power of celebrity precedent on Twitter was set in April 2009 when actor Ashton Kutcher, today's foremost celebrity Twitter user with more than 4 million followers, publicly raced media conglomerate CNN to see who could surpass one million followers. At 2:13 a.m. on the morning of April 17, 2009, Ashton won. That same day, Oprah Winfrey, the force behind making the book club an American phenomenon, announced she was joining the Twitter Fray and devoted that day's show to the micro-blogging service. (Slattery April 2009). As a result, traffic to Twitter.com was up 43 percent compared to the previous Friday, and 24 percent from the day before the segment aired (Ostrow, April 2009). With the endorsement of two mega-celebrities, Twitter began to be looked at more closely and adopted by users as part of everyday pop culture.

Where the infiltration of celebrities on a platform such as Twitter gets interesting is what happens when celebrities sidestep their publicists and begin communicating directly with fans. It's a whole new level of engagement (Wortham, February 2009). According to the *New York Times* blog, "Bits",

celebrities are now taking candid photos and putting them on the Web. "While watching the Academy Awards on TV Sunday night, Hollywood couple Ashton Kutcher and Demi Moore sent text updates to fans via Twitter. At a post-Oscars party afterward, they also uploaded several grainy photographs using TwitPic, an application that allows users to post pictures taken with their mobile phones to their Twitter accounts, garnering thousands of hits in less than a minute." (Wortham, February 2009).

This concept of engaging with fans by leveraging a mass communications tool like Twitter against the principles of interpersonal or one-to-one communications is what makes Twitter's potential for sending, receiving and processing messages so commanding.

"As a medium, Twitter allows people to talk about themselves; it's this 'story of me' that resonates today," said Sarah Evans, a public relations and new media consultant at Sevans Strategy. "We're experiencing a game changer in the dynamics of how publicity and PR works. When it comes to pop culture, Ashton Kutcher is certainly a leader and other celebrities like Jermaine Dupree are really engaging their fans to build quite a following."

### Redefining Social Networking

As celebrities watched what Ashton was doing with Twitter, more followed suit. The "Twitter Celebrity Report," published in October 2009, illustrates the power behind celebrities on Twitter. The report examines the status of celebrities proportionate to their followers – second to Kutcher is Britney Spears, with more than 3.7 million followers, followed by Ellen DeGeneres, who has attracted 3.76 million. (Tweetrace.com, November 2009). The top three spots cumulatively represent over 10 million followers, each with more than 3 million followers. To put these numbers into perspective, each of the top three celebrities on Twitter respectively have more eyeballs looking at their "tweets" than almost double what the nation's largest daily newspaper – *USA Today* – offers in daily print circulation at 1,891,604 (ABC FAS-FAX; MRI, Spring 2009).



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Analysts, social media experts and early adopters of Twitter – those like the team behind Apple - attribute Twitter’s rapid growth to two things: its real-time attributes and the simplistic nature of the medium (Apple.com). As a macro community, Twitter is founded on the formation of “small worlds”, or micro communities, that link people who hold similar interests, regardless of geographic boundary. In the case of the entertainment industry, micro communities are being created within the “Twitterverse” where fans can engage directly with their favorite actors, producers, writers, musicians, and entertainers who now have the opportunity to build their celebrity brand – or create buzz around their latest project – with each and every “tweet.”

“Twitter offers a real-time glimpse into what people are thinking or saying about you in ways no other communications tool can offer,” said Greg Cangialosi, president of Blue Sky Factory, and author of the “The Business Podcasting Book.” “This type of engagement, especially when a celebrity gets directly involved in a dialogue with his/her fans, offers a unique opportunity to build followers and remain in constant contact with them. There is no other customer or fan acquisition tool like it today.”

“Twitter’s advantage is instant access to someone I’d never have personal access to otherwise,” said Rosalyn Marhatta, an active “Bones” fans who was interviewed this past October in an article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. “If I want to see something on the show, if I love something or don’t love it, Hart Hanson (the show’s writer) listens. And many times he responds.” (Collins October 2009).

Similarly, fans of the show “Modern Family” learned its fate when executive producer Steve Levitan posted the following tweet: “A great day. “Modern Family” just got picked up for the back 9!” Likewise, when Paul McCartney was a guest on David Letterman recently, fans began tweeting as his band set up for a rooftop performance. The flurry of reports built buzz for that night’s show and helped ratings according to CBS. (Pennington October 2009).

## The Twitter Effect

With the rise of Twitter comes new buzzwords; terms like “tweets” are becoming a part of everyday lingo. Within the social media world, a new term, coined by Hollywood as “The Twitter Effect,” is linking box office sales and ratings to Twitter. Audiences are voicing snap judgments on movies faster and to more people than ever before on Twitter, and their ability to create a box office hit or flop is forcing major

studios to revamp marketing campaigns. “These days, if people don’t like a movie on a Friday, it can die by Saturday.” (Dobuzinskis July 2009).

The recent Sascha Baron Cohen film “Bruno” offers a great example of suffering from “The Twitter Effect” as audiences reacted and tweeted about the film’s raunchy nature, potentially scaring viewers in the other direction (Sragow, August 2009). According to “360iBlog,” a loose correlation did exist between such early reviews on Twitter and the following day’s box office receipts. “Bruno” saw opening day sales drop 39% the next day, during which time 21% of tweets posted about the movie were analyzed as negative in a Twitter search (Lein September 2009).

Movies like “Inglorious Basterds” (sic) on the other hand, saw positive impact at the box office attributable to Twitter. *Hollywood Reporter’s* “Risky Biz” blog declared “Inglorious Basterds” the “Twitter Ages” first true success story. As the production company leaned on social media services like Twitter to expand the film’s run, sales climbed to \$65.1 million, making the film the most profitable film in history (Frankel October 2009) yielding close to a 434,000 return on investment in proportion to a sub-\$15,000 production budget. It’s key to note here that the film is most often compared to the “Blair Witch Project” which was produced for \$60,000 and grossed \$248.6 million worldwide.

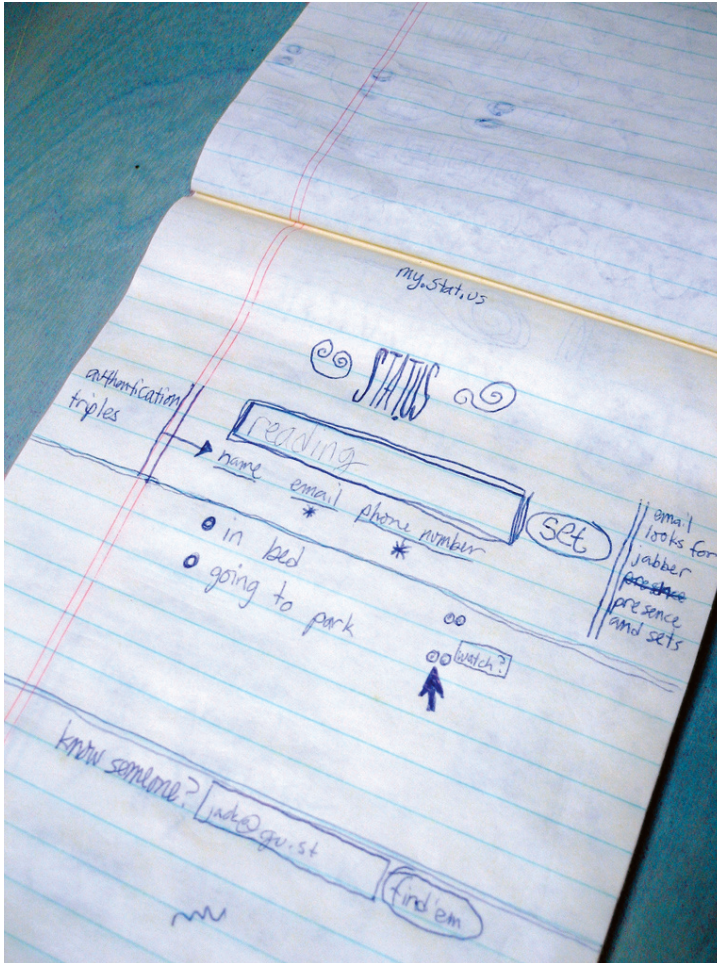
“We all spend a lot of time talking about Twitter and our ability to communicate,” said Paramount vice chairman Rob Moore, in a recent interview with the *Economic Times*. “Here’s a case where people can rally around a movie they care about and have a sense of participation - then tell other people, ‘hey, this is something you should see, too.’” (Warren Oct 2009)

## Twitter & The Silver Screen

Essentially, Twitter is TV’s new water cooler (Pennington October 2009). Twitter offers new ways for a show’s cast, writers and producers to communicate with fans between weekly installments by offering teasers, trailers and links to behind-the-scenes footage that keep the show top of mind. Even more important, a tool like Twitter allows an evergreen connection to a show year round, even when cast and crew are on hiatus.

Networks like the CW and Fox are embracing Twitter to communicate with their teen/tween viewers. The CW website offers Twitter lists, linking fans to shows like “Gossip Girl” and “The Vampire Diaries” with direct access to profiles of the cast, creators, writers and producers (ww.cw.com). Similarly,

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Twitter's prehistoric document, circa 2000. An early temporary name was "Stat.us." Credit: Jack Dorsey

the new FOX-show "GLEE" has a heavy Twitter presence. Originally aired in May 2009, following the finale of "American Idol," "GLEE" hosted a sneak preview of the pilot episode; at the time the show had less than 1,500 followers. This fall, the show partnered with Twitter to offer "tweet-peats", where viewers could follow Twitter updates scrolling across the screen revealing director's commentary, behind-the-scenes details and answers to fan questions (Hibbard August 2009). The show garnered 7.44 million viewers, placing it in 19<sup>th</sup> place in the top 20 shows aired for that week (Respers September 2009). GLEe on Fox's Twitter presence soared and today has more than 62,000 followers. (Trendrr.com). GLEE, incidentally, was the first show this fall to report a full-run pick up after only two episodes aired (Hibberd & Andreeva September 2009).

### The Great "Twhite" Way

Similarly, Twitter has extended its reach across the entertainment industry to include live theatre, namely Broadway. The publicity team behind the musical "Next to Normal" deployed a viral Twitter campaign that combined communications about the show with consumer

engagement. In May 2009, "Next to Normal" became the first Broadway show to perform an adapted version of the entire play across Twitter. The performance took 35 days, ending on June 7, the morning of the Tony Awards ceremony. At the beginning of the promotion "Next to Normal" had 30,000 followers. As word spread about the Twitter-based performance, and the cast began to engage back and forth with fan followers, that number grew to more than 550,000 - more followers than Starbucks. (Newman August 2009.)

According to the Broadway League, the show sold \$226,000 in tickets with 72% theatre occupancy the week prior to the start of the Twitter "performance." The week following the Tony Awards, and the Twitter-adapted performance, the show made \$480,000 in ticket sales, selling out 95 percent of seats. (Newman August 2009.) *Author's Note: the show's win of three Tony Awards more than likely had something to do with the rise in ticket sales as well.*

### What's Next?

With any new technology comes trial and error, and Twitter is not immune to obstacles. While Twitter has solid financial backing - it recently received an additional round of \$98.2 million in funding (Hoge October 2009) - recent stats are trending flat in terms of new users, and some statistics show existing users as down by approximately three percent. (Compete.com). As Twitter's primary two competitors - Facebook and MySpace - continue to threaten market share, the service will need to rally to capitalize on its core competency, its ability to hone in on the status update and allow users to engage in one-to-one/one-to-many dialogue. While Twitter combines Facebook's status update feature with the attributes of blogging and email, it is not a "blue ocean technology." Therefore, Twitter's long-term affect will be largely based on its ability to aggregate these key features that users seek and make them mainstream and accessible enough that more and more users will adopt status updating into their daily routine.

In terms of changing the ways celebrities and publicists can build brand awareness, certain features must be tweaked to help grow the service, which has reported flat growth over the past two months. Foremost is the issue of credibility. Twitter has jumpstarted this process with its verified account service - now in beta, beginning with celebrities and

others most prone to identity hack. Second, features that help build communities of followers will ultimately help the service grow. This month, Twitter rolled out a new list feature allowing users to cluster those they follow into self-titled categories. These lists are accessible to other Twitter users, helping to expand online communities being formed.

I believe that Twitter has the potential to supersede, but not replace, the publicist. By looking at popular Twitter accounts that aggregate celebrity news and gossip, including feeds like @justjared (close to 450,000 followers), @perezhilton (1,598,686 and @EOnline (1,745,498), it's easy to cede that the way society is accessing and consuming celebrity news is on their terms and timeframe. Tweets are now the quickest way to distribute news - and gossip - en masse. For those in the world of entertainment, the question is no longer are you using Twitter, it's how are you using Twitter.

As traditional communications tools, like the press release, are evaluated in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, it will be hard to overlook Twitter as a first means to the pass. If a

brand can blast out headlines to a world of followers, most of who are linked within many social media circles, why not look at Twitter as the new "press release" or tool to gauge brand approval rating?

"Twitter is essentially replacing the press release and press kit," said Aly Semigran, lead blogger for MTV's "Twitter Nation." "We get hundreds of press releases a week, and we may open one or two. The 140-character nature of Twitter makes it so much easier to keep tabs of what's going on. Often times, I can write an entire story based on one tweet." Semigran continued to explain that she begins her day by culling the tweets of the celebrities whom she follows on Twitter, and then searches the hot trending topics that can be found right on Twitter's home page.

At the end of the day, Twitter is ultimately about communicating, and today "tweets" are often what are generating headlines. Considering 140 characters is the same length as this sentence, it's difficult to deny that a simple "tweet" might be the most efficient way to jumpstart a great story. **JW**

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*\*The numbers for Twitter are reported as estimates based on the 20% of its traffic that comes from Twitter directly; the other 80% is driven by third-party applications accessible via smartphones and computers (Guardian.co.uk "Technology Blog"). The Guardian.co.uk estimates that Twitter stats reported would need to be multiplied by a factor of five to provide a realistic glimpse of users.*

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