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CHAPTER 7

News to me: Twitter and the personal networking of news

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What does Twitter mean for news? Or, to put it another way, if we are to take Twitter seriously as a platform where news and information circulate, what role does it play in the wider news ecology? The company behind Twitter does not see itself as a news channel, but as something far more dispersed and organic. As revealed after a security breach in mid-2009, when over 300 sensitive documents were hacked and released to the public, Twitter Inc. is well aware of how its network is used to send updates, news and alerts. But the founders see a larger potential. 'Twitter is not an alert system', noted CEO Evan Williams in a strategic planning document. 'Maybe more of a nervous system', added Twitter's co-founder Biz Stone. Another note reads: 'if we had a billion users, that will be the pulse of the planet' (Schonfeld, 2009a).

This is a revealing insight into the ambitions of Twitter, which reached 44.5 million unique visitors to its site in June 2009 (Schonfeld, 2009b). There are millions more who access the service and post their own 140-character messages via desktop clients and mobile phones. It does not constitute a truly global 'pulse' yet, but neurological metaphors remain compelling, evoking McLuhan's claim that 'electric technologies' act as extensions of the human nervous system (1964, p. 3). Social media systems have many tendrils around the world, densely clustered in some regions, only delicately threaded through others, constantly receiving and transmitting thousands of electrical signals per second. Akin to a neuron, each user can receive and transmit information, and – when a network is functioning well – can be highly efficient at rapidly relaying information throughout the system.

The kinds of information shared through Twitter vary markedly. Some messages are personal and quotidian: about a meal, a train ride, a queue or a software problem. Others share links to news stories, sporting results, a trailer

for a film or a report about a celebrity death. Media organisations themselves are also participating: sending breaking news updates, teasers for feature stories and commentary on the events of the day. The rate at which any signal is then relayed – or in Twitter parlance, retweeted – by other users depends on a range of factors, including what is seen as its interest or entertainment value, or the newsworthiness of the message (boyd, 2010).

As James Carey (1989, p. 15) describes, communication is commonly understood as a transmission of messages in space, but it can also be a ritual: a ceremonial process that draws people together through shared beliefs. Twitter is a network where rituals and transmissions are imbricated: communities of interest form clusters, and messages pass between them, with the occasional message being circulated to a much wider group. The death of Michael Jackson, for example, travelled rapidly throughout the network, becoming a top trending topic and at high volume: accounting for over 30 per cent of all messages, according to the tracking service Twist (Cashmore, 2009a). As the *New York Times* noted, for many people their first contact with the news of Jackson's death was on Twitter, before any coverage by newspapers, television or radio (Wortham, 2009).

But such large pulses through the entire system are rare. Many posts will never be relayed beyond their immediate network, and the majority of users on Twitter are not even regularly updating, preferring instead to listen in to the updates of others (Cheng et al., 2009). The experience of the social network is entirely determined by the selection of people that users elects to 'follow', or whose updates they will receive. Thus, what would be considered traditional news is often filtered through a nominated set of friends, associates and strangers: designed by each user to predetermine the kinds of updates they will receive. The almost infinitely customisable nature of Twitter means that communities will determine what is important to them and retweet topics of interest, in what Manuel Castells (2007, p. 248) has described as a 'mass self-communication'. The selection of people one follows on Twitter function collectively as a highly subjective filter that prioritises and re-orders the news agenda as it is understood by a newspaper or a TV network, influencing what is heard, and when.

At another level, the kinds of Twitter updates that are most often pilloried for being irrelevant to a wider audience (for example, when a person's cat dies) may constitute significant news to an inner circle of friends. The concept of what counts as news differs between individuals, and varies according to a multitude of factors, including geographical location, nationality, age, interests and profession. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon. The definition of what is news, as opposed to trivia, or rumour, or everyday chatter has always been hazy and mutable. As the journalist A. J. Leibling wrote in 1965, 'People everywhere confuse what they read in newspapers with news' (cited in Brighton and Foy, 2007, p. 2). Newspapers once held the dominant position of determining what, in the main, would be considered the news of the day. But within social media services, the ability to tailor exactly what is heard by selecting individuals and organisations results in individually specific experiences of a news landscape. This has implications for the creation, consumption and very definition of news as it is shared and recycled through Twitter.

This chapter considers the news practices that are emerging through Twitter, starting with a brief account of the various ways it is used to create, distribute and consume news. Are terms like 'citizen journalism' usefully applicable to Twitter practices to date? How do the immediacy and the subjectivity of networks like Twitter change the way news is understood? In particular, the critical reception of CNN's coverage of Iranian election protests in 2009 offers a case study of how Twitter users are able to access rapid and directly personal experiences of news, and how this changes expectations of media organisations and their capacity to listen. These events are examined as part of a broader question: does Twitter contribute to a reconsideration of news and its audiences, and how do emotions shape the social space of news?

When is Twitter journalism?

There are several archetypal moments of news breaking on Twitter. They are retold as dramatic narratives, and often become stories in their own right. 'There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy.' Those fifty-seven characters, written by eyewitness Janis Krums, became the first news that US Airways Flight 1549 had ditched into the Hudson River. They were accompanied by an image of a floating plane, photographed from a ferry, with passengers clustered along the wings. As the news of the plane incident spread, Twitter itself became a news story, and Krums was held up briefly as a kind of 'citizen journalist' star (Mackey, 2009). Similarly, when bombs exploded in Jakarta in July 2009, the first reports came via Twitter (ABC News, 2009) and then continued as a major source of images and updates, as occurred during the Mumbai terror attacks and the bushfires across southern Australia in 2008. The social media site Mashable observed, 'it's remarkable to think that this form of instant news distribution, unheard of 3 years ago, is now commonplace' (Cashmore, 2009b).

Certainly, Twitter is becoming established as a short-form news platform. In terms of news distribution, a wide range of media outlets already have a presence, including the BBC, CNN, ABC, the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The major networks attract substantial audiences around the world, with CNN's breaking news service (twitter.com/cnnbrk) approaching three million followers. The most common style adapted by news agencies is to treat Twitter like another broadcast outlet: delivering dozens of updates per day, but not receiving updates from others in turn, or tracking how the news is received, or responding to any feedback. Despite CNN's large follower count, fewer than twenty people are followed in return.

This asymmetry is in itself interesting, as it reveals how closely the engagement with social media has been modelled on traditional broadcast models. In practice, CNN is merely using Twitter as another pipe to push down news feeds. As Mark Deuze has observed, the news industry has treated online spaces as just an advertisement for the offline product, while 'journalism still depends on its established mode of production, through which it largely (and unreflexively) reproduces the institutional contours of high ... modernity (Deuze, 2008, p. 856). The belief was maintained that the primary role of the online population was to behave just as people were expected to behave offline: as an audience (p. 856). Thus, while Twitter may be a new space, this does not mean that news companies have as yet developed particularly novel ways to engage with it.

Further, it remains unclear that terms such as 'citizen journalism' or 'participatory journalism' can map comfortably against the kinds of activities that occur on Twitter. Even in the case of Janis Krums, he had no intention to adopt the codes and processes that are associated with journalism: his message was not an attempt to tell an objective story, nor to conduct an investigation at arm's length by following leads or making enquiries (Herzog, 2009). The Twitter message Krums sent was immediate, subjective and emotional: he was on the ferry that would soon be collecting the stranded passengers. He was in the middle of a rescue mission and was sharing a dramatic experience with his set of followers. His message, however, was immediately retweeted and dispersed widely through the Twitter system. If a piece of information is widely circulated by a large international network, it may be considered to have reached the status of major news. But does that make the process that generated it 'journalism'?

In its most broad definition, the concept of participatory or citizen journalism is one where the role of reporting is taken on by those who are not professional journalists. Bowman and Willis define it as:

the act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires. (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 9)

For a non-journalist using Twitter, the intentions can be quite different. Addressing a few dozen, or even a few thousand, followers, a Twitter user may occasionally seek to share relevant information, but they may also wish to amuse, to vent, to capture a personal moment or to converse. The concepts of reliability, accuracy and providing objective commentary do not provide the common motivation for a Twitter message. The first tagline for the service was quite intimate – 'What are you doing now?' – suggesting that users contribute in an impressionistic, subjective style.

But in November 2009, more than three years after launching, Twitter's founders changed this introductory question to 'What's happening?' This was a clear and acknowledged shift towards a different mode. As Biz Stone explained, the service has 'long outgrown the concept of personal status updates', as people are also 'witnessing accidents, organizing events, sharing links, breaking news, reporting stuff their dad says, and so much more' (Stone, 2009). News, links and the witnessing of events are now characterised as a critical part of what people do on Twitter.

Certainly, Twitter is a platform that can lend itself to the speedy delivery of breaking news headlines, a capacity that is already being harnessed by services such as BNO News, the BBC, ABC and CNN. As the managing director of ABC, Mark Scott, has argued:

I think Twitter may emerge as the outstanding way of disseminating surprising breaking news. In my experience in newsrooms, the biggest stories always arrived in 140 characters or less: 'Princess of Wales dead', 'Plane hits World Trade Center'. (Scott, 2009)

But does the penning of a headline-like update, drawn from an eyewitness experience, constitute an act of journalism? Journalism has been defined as an occupational ideology, one that is defined and patrolled by those who self-identify as journalists (Deuze, 2005). This description would immediately delimit the description of non-journalist Twitter users as contributing to any conscious form of journalism – it may not be their intent or even desire. Janis Krums, for example, had been using Twitter for business reasons, to post links that related to his nutrition company. As he explained in an interview, 'the

posts before and after the US Air photo were mainly random things that I think are interesting' (Herzog, 2009).

This raises the question of how a plane on the Hudson river is different: it was something interesting to Krums, and certainly something that became of interest to large numbers of other people. But his use of Twitter did not fundamentally change in that moment: he was sharing an experience, expressing a feeling about what he saw, not necessarily aspiring to be a journalist or to provide 'accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information'. Describing these moments as journalism is retrofitting an established mode of practice onto something that is materially different.

How are we to characterise these contributions, if not necessarily as journalism, citizen or otherwise? On networks such as Facebook and Twitter, millions of messages circulate every day, a series of tiny, experiential observations. Occasionally, one will be considered significant, and will rapidly move through the system, from one cluster of associates to the next. It moves from being personal news to something larger, in a shared recognition of interest and relevance. But while there are moments of eyewitness reporting occasionally shared en masse on Twitter, they can also fall outside the usual spectrum of citizen journalist activity or definitions of news. 'Journalism' may be an unnecessarily restrictive framework to apply to these experiential accounts, which often relate an affective, impressionistic moment of what was seen and felt, designed to be shared with a distributed social group. A more granular understanding is needed of the emergent habits and practices within social media spaces.

As Carey has noted, the concept of news is grounded in a historical period and represents the interests of a specific class:

> [News] is a form of culture invented by a particular class at a particular point of history – in this case by the middle class largely in the eighteenth century . . . [it] does not represent a universal taste or necessarily legitimate form of knowledge . . . but an invention in historical time, that like most other human inventions, will dissolve when the class that sponsors it and its possibility of having significance for us evaporates. (Carey, 1989, p. 17)

Twitter was produced by a class that differs from the middle class of the eighteenth century in key ways. It began as a network for information elites and early adopters, 'no collar' desk workers with an interest in scanning a wide range of sources and staying in touch with friends and family, regardless of the physical realities of long working hours. It has been adopted by a wider demographic, yet its emergence in the early twenty-first century needs to be under-

stood in connection with particular labour practices and desires for information that also skew the way news is defined and received.

The case of CNNfail

It is important from the outset to understand emerging social media technologies in their historical context, as growing from and drawing upon the energies of major media companies as well as the tropes of broadcast media forms such as radio, TV and newspapers. If we are to return to the idea of Twitter as a nervous system, then traditional news companies act as a cortex, while the majority of users are dispersed like dendrites, connected to the cortex, reacting and responding to it and to each other, but also sending new signals of their own.

However, these signals are not necessarily received by media organisations. Many journalists and news agencies continue to see Twitter simply as a dissemination tool to deliver news to an audience. Certainly, by examining the updates of CNN, the BBC, ABC and the like, we can see that the major broadcast networks are being followed by millions, but few are following people back in return. This failure to be receptive to incoming signals, be it commentary or tips or criticism, has already generated public embarrassment for news networks.

A notable example occurred in June 2009, on the weekend of the Iranian election. After the announcement that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been returned to office, Tehran erupted into mass protests, with claims of fraud and voting irregularities. The election occurred on a Friday, and by Saturday there were images of street clashes and demonstrations appearing on the photo sharing site Flickr, as well as 140-character descriptions appearing on Twitter. These eyewitness account were circulated widely, to the point where Twitter users were receiving regular updates about the crackdown on protesters, while some mainstream news networks were only lightly covering the events (Morozov, 2009).

CNN, as a 24-hour cable news broadcaster, came under particular criticism for its slow response to the Iranian protests over the weekend. As described by the *New York Times*, the network seemed to have taken the weekend off, offering only occasional reports rather than the kind of rolling live coverage that made its name during the first Iraq war and the political crackdown in Tiananmen Square (Stelter, 2009). This laxity of coverage generated thousands of critical responses from Twitter users, who were receiving dramatic accounts online, but only sporadic coverage from CNN, MSNBC and Fox

News. The result was the emergence and widespread use of the tag *#CNNFail*, which then became a trending topic on Twitter. At points during the weekend, new criticisms were appearing on Twitter at least once per second (Stelter, 2009). Soon after, a website was created called CNNfail.com, with a live stream of all tweets relating to CNN's coverage. In the words of Andrew Sullivan, a blogger for *The Atlantic*, 'There's a reason the MSM [mainstream media] is in trouble' (Sullivan, 2009).

While CNN sought to defend its reporting, the damage had already been done to its reputation as the best source of around-the-clock news during a political crisis. A host of newspaper and television reports focused on Twitter taking its place as the service for immediate and diverse first-hand accounts (see Cohen, 2009; Morozov, 2009; Taylor, 2009). This perspective, however, overlooks the fact that Twitter and cable news channels are complementary forms, responding to each other as they cover different kinds of responses to an event, similar to the interaction between many blogs and the mainstream media. In the case of the Iranian election, one provided live television and web-based coverage within the genres of traditional news journalism, while the other offered instantaneous, emotional accounts of the lived experience of Iranians in the streets.

What was striking was how easily networks such as CNN could have avoided the situation. For example, by Sunday morning, Twitter users had already commenced tracking CNN's oversights in detail. One user, called Alierakieron, wrote: 'Tehran is burning, and CNN's headline is about a theme park.' Indeed, on that morning of the second day of protests, CNN's Twitter update read: 'Theme park chain Six-Flags files for bankruptcy.' Alierakieron responded with a comment directed straight to CNN: 'You're a disgrace to journalism.' However, as CNN does not follow her, or many of the millions of others who tune into CNN's Twitter channels, her comment received no response. Many thousands of similar comments were being written on the same day. Yet with no established process to 'listen in' to the feedback, CNN appeared slow and thoroughly disconnected from the news ecology on Twitter that it sought to influence as a news provider.

In all, it was a vivid study of the limitations of importing a broadcast news model from television and applying it to Twitter with little recognition of the importance of paying attention to the other users of the network. In the case of the Iranian protests of 2009, CNN would have been a stronger news network if it had tracked the comments and criticisms of the thousands of users who were interested in the developing events. As I have previously argued, the metaphor of listening is a particularly apposite one for the kinds of online activity that occur in social media spaces like Twitter (Crawford,

2009a). Had CNN been listening to the stream of small pulses of information, from Iranians, from news watchers in the West and from other news networks such as PBS (which had more detailed and sustained coverage), it could have deepened its coverage of the significant events in Tehran.

The capacity to listen in to hundreds, if not thousands, of people through their Twitter updates could be particularly powerful for news media companies. Of course, only a small percentage of updates may be directly useful to a story. But around certain issues and news events, updates can form very noticeable patterns, as with the Iranian protests. Yet there are few examples yet of media companies developing an ability to listen in order to strengthen their own news services. Some see Twitter as a kind of competitor to traditional news services (see Solis, 2009), without acknowledging its interdependence, or the way it enhances and expands the spread of traditional news services, while also contributing to the news ecology with millions of personal and subjective accounts. The case of CNNFail demonstrated the importance of listening as well as broadcasting.

Personal news network

The value of listening to Twitter users is still regularly disparaged, however. The service has been criticised as banal since its inception, without recognition that the 'conversations about nothing' are cementing forms of social connection and intimacy (Crawford, 2009b). Not only is phatic communication an important part of Twitter's utility, it also has ramifications for how we understand the concept of news.

In what became a much publicised study, US market research company Pear Analytics reported in 2009 that 40 per cent of the messages relayed on Twitter were 'pointless babble' (Kelly, 2009). Only 3.6 per cent were deemed to be news-related. There are considerable limitations to the study, which sampled 2,000 Twitter messages across a two-week period. But one of the most significant was definitional. News was defined as: 'Any sort of main stream [*sic*] news that you might find on your national news stations such as CNN, Fox, or others. This did not include tech news or social media news that you might find on TechCrunch or Mashable' (Kelly, 2009, p. 4). Babble constituted anything that 'did not appear to be useful to a large percentage of your visitors (more than 50%)' (Kelly, 2009). Ignoring technology and social media news immediately discounted an information genre that has been highly popular on Twitter ever since the service was widely adopted at the media and technology conference SXSW in 2007.

Pear Analytics received many queries about how its study had been conducted, including how pointless babble was detected: what could be important news to someone may be unrecognisable to another. The company responded on its blog: '[Babble] became very easy to spot in the public time-line – tweets like "I just saw a raccoon" or "I need to buy some shoes today" fall in this category.' But a Pear analyst later added that 'if you are a hunter or the owner of a shoe store, you would argue that those tweets are not irrelevant' (Kelly, 2009).

This study points to a wider misunderstanding of the concept of news as it is developing within social media spaces. The definition of news has been reduced to a narrow, corporate-centric information genre that is produced by major media groups. The observations of non-journalists are then consigned to babble, unless they capture a moment that is significant enough to be categorised as citizen journalism. This produces a seesawing of opinion about Twitter as news platform versus Twitter as mindless banality. As danah boyd wrote in a blog post:

> Far too many tech junkies and marketers are obsessed with Twitter becoming the next news outlet source. As a result, the press are doing what they did with blogging: hyping Twitter up as this amazing source of current events and dismissing it as pointless babble. (boyd 2009)

As I have argued, broadly defining much activity on Twitter as citizen journalism is problematic, as it over-emphasizes Twitter's role as a news source in opposition to the existing broadcast and online outlets, and fails to engage with the ways Twitter alters traditional understandings of news. Conversely, simply considering Twitter as little more than a noisy channel for meaningless streams of chatter downplays the significance of the emotional dimension of the technology. A more detailed engagement is needed with the emergent practices on Twitter to attend to the blurring between everyday personal updates and news, and to observe how they are different from pre-existing definitions of journalism. Of the many ways in which news functions differently within Twitter, three deserve mentioning here: reordering, flatness and shared feeling.

Reordering

Newspapers order stories in a hierarchical sequence that accords more weight to some – such as the lead story at the top of a broadsheet page. News broadcasts on radio and television similarly rank stories in a taxonomy that begins with what is deemed most important and runs on to the least, played in order through the course of the programme. But Twitter radically unsettles a pre-ordered experience of mainstream news. Users might read their friends commenting on what they think is the interesting news of the day, which could include links to stories, YouTube videos, blogs and photographs. If news organisations are followed on Twitter, they will offer updates in the order in which they are reported. The organising principle is temporal and linear, sent when it is received, not ranked in order of significance.

For example, BNO News (twitter.com/breakingnews) delivers news updates to its Twitter stream regularly throughout a day, but will signal a major news story with a prefatory 'urgent', or by capitalising the entire message. It does not have the ability to package together news, or reorder throughout the day – it aims to reach users as quickly as possible. When a news story is deemed to be of particular interest, it may be expanded upon with several messages. For example, after an earthquake off the coast of New Zealand, BNO first reported the earthquake, then forwarded an alert from the Pacific Tsunami Warning Centre, and followed with a warning to Australian residents on the coast of New South Wales. The threat dissipated a few hours later. But BNO was one of the earliest organisations to release the information about the quake and tsunami warning, which it proudly noted on its blog. 'This particular event, even though no destructive tsunami was generated and no one died from the earthquake, just shows the lack of coverage from the mainstream media at times' (BNO, 2009). Meanwhile, television news programmes reported the risk of tsunami later in the day, and were unable to update as regularly as Twitter news services.

Furthermore, many users will get their first access to a news story indirectly, when it is retweeted by someone they follow. The tsunami warning was immediately and widely retweeted, particularly by New Zealand and Australian users, radiating outwards from those who receive BNO updates to their followers, and beyond. This intense social reordering of news operates through communities of interest: groups with a particular focus (be it related to their profession, leisure activities, location or age) will prioritise the sharing and retweeting of news that will be of direct relevance to them and their followers (boyd 2010).

Flatness

The distinctly unhierarchical nature of Twitter generates other effects. Messages are not ranked in order of importance, and unless a software client

such as Tweetdeck is used, there is little to prioritise or even distinguish one over another. This generates a kind of 'flatness', particularly in the web-based interface of Twitter. A message from a friend about lunch will arrive with the same format as an update about a bombing: neither will be highlighted or marked out as more important.

Further, if news headlines are particularly well suited to the 140-character limit, personal Twitter updates can easily assume the general form of news headlines. This is a kind of newsification of the everyday, where users are voluntarily contributing headline-style reports of their daily activities. This is to suggest not that there is no distinction between news headlines and personal updates from friends, but that the shared form of Twitter messages has the effect of blurring and flattening each: personalising the news and headlining the personal. Miller (2008, p. 388) has argued that social media tend to flatten communication 'towards the non-dialogic and non-informational', creating a phatic culture. But this is not a unidirectional tendency: affective and phatic exchanges can enhance and add dynamics to information streams.

For example, personal commentary can overlay and intensify mainstream news events, heightening the emotional experience. Writing about broadcasting live events on television, Dayan and Katz (1994, p. 97) draw together the relationship between rumour and flatness:

> Rumours reinject depth into a televised event, differentiating those who know from those who do not know yet. They suggest the existence of physical volume in the event: they counterbalance its pedagogic cool, its ironed out flatness.

If rumour can be understood as the general circulating wash of discussion and story telling, then the discussions on Twitter about a news event add to its depth in a similar way to watercooler discussions of television events. A story can be seen immediately having an impact on people, whether they are directly affected, or just sharing the news, or critically engaging with it.

Shared feeling

Twitter is well suited to augmenting live events, through 'live tweeting' and discussions occurring in real time during sporting events, elections or television shows. These exchanges can be full of suspense, joy, horror and disappointment. These everyday exchanges have their own complex emotional currents.

Expressions of shared feeling are particularly evident around celebrity death. In a study by the Web Ecology Project called 'Detecting sadness in 140 characters: sentiment analysis and mourning Michael Jackson on Twitter', it was found that record numbers of people went to Twitter to express their sorrow. In the space of the first hour, 270,000 tweets were about Jackson, at a rate of approximately seventy-eight per second (Kim et al., 2009). As a popular kind of digital mourning practice, the outpouring of emotion on Twitter also serves to deepen the experience of the death as event: its physical volume increases as it passes through a social space where grief is personalised and immediate, not televised or edited after the fact.

In her description of the ordinary, Kathleen Stewart (2007, pp. 2–3) writes:

> Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life . . . they do not work through 'meanings' per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds.

Stewart's nuanced and attentive account is about broader 'structures of feeling', drawing on Raymond Williams's concept, but her work also offers a way to consider the undertow of affect in spaces such as Twitter. At once public in reach and private in effect, Twitter moves between the space of the communal and the intimate. When a significant news event is shared, and moves quickly through the nervous system, it has no singular or containable meaning. It is rendered and re-rendered through thousands of discrete, subjective viewpoints. With great velocity and on a large scale, major news events are processed in public: the textures and inflections shift between individuals and communities.

Unlike traditional journalism, with its in-principle attachment to objectivity, networked media spaces are steeped in the subjective and the social. Mainstream news is filtered through the individual's own experience and associations. In Stewart's terms, this constitutes a kind of 'contact zone' where events, technologies, and emotions move and take place (Stewart, 2007, p. 4), and no neat divisions exist between news and the personal, meaningful accounts and 'babble'.

Conclusion: molecular news

In an interview with the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Clay Shirky observed that news is a very incoherent category, with considerable overlap into the

terrain defined as 'gossip'. The dividing line between the two used to be defined in reference to news organisations. Now, he argues, it is suffering 'a kind of breakdown':

> [The model of] a group of accredited professionals deciding what becomes news and what doesn't become news has now been set aside in favor of a much more soft-focus, kind of permeable membrane-oriented way of handling or thinking about the news. (Juskalian, 2009)

In significant ways, the role of deciding what counts as news and what does not is diffusing, and moving into a more dispersed social ecosystem of news, gossip, personal headlines and shared feelings. In the gradual destabilisation of the functions of news organisations such as ranking stories, determining what is important and dividing the personal and the objective, Twitter is one space where we see the molecules passing through the membrane. Short news updates move through social filters, and personal messages can just as easily pass back through the membrane to become mainstream news. The now common use of Twitter updates in mainstream news stories as a kind of networked vox pop is the most obvious example of this counterflow, but the more interesting question may be how Twitter's communities of users are effecting a more gradual pressure that shapes how news organisations operate and determine their coverage.

One of the significant ways in which this may occur is the gradual alteration of the dominant model of news broadcasting to include a greater emphasis on listening. News stories will be circulated, but discussions they generate will also become part of the story itself, and go on to generate further stories. This increased emphasis on tuning in to the social circulation of news will also have ramifications for the work of journalists, in what I have called elsewhere the 'labour of listening' (Crawford, 2009a, p. 531). Further, it may raise new kinds of concerns and entrench inequities. Not the least of these is the question of who is being listened to: social networks are themselves skewed, with the majority of Twitter users currently under 35 years old, living in developed countries and well educated (Cheng et al., 2009).

McLuhan drew on biological analogies to depict what he saw as the 'disorganization of social networks' (Genosko, 2005, p. 86). But the metaphors of cellular osmosis and the functioning of nervous systems also evoke a kind of effortlessness within complexity. Certainly, there is an ease with which millions of people are already communicating over Twitter, sending messages and listening in to what they find of interest. Yet the wider cultural effects are complex, requiring us to stretch beyond established understandings of news,

or gossip, or sharing, or community. Bonding rituals and information transmissions in such networks are not easily demarcated, but operate coextensively: as both information and emotion. Viewed in this light, Twitter underscores the ways in which news itself is a shifting and organic category, something that both forms and reflects communities, and moves within shared structures of feeling.

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