

## CUTTING EDGE COMMUNICATION: MICROBLOGGING AT THE FORTUNE 200, TWITTER IMPLEMENTATION AND USAGE

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### ABSTRACT

*Web 2.0 electronic social networking technologies are providing organizations with new platforms for communication. One of the fastest growing aspects of this communication has been Twitter microblogging. This study was therefore undertaken to help organizations to better understand social network technology implications and to assist in identifying potential usage opportunities. As a result, this paper examines web pages of the Fortune 200 firms as listed on the CNN Money website to determine the implementation and usage of electronic social networking, and in particular, Twitter. Results indicate that the Fortune 200 firms are embracing the new technologies. Nearly three-quarter of the firms have implemented electronic social networking and 64.5% of firms have a Twitter account. In addition, 44% of the Fortune 200 make use of at least two social networking technologies. Although participation varies by industry sector, 79% of the companies utilizing Twitter use the technology for news distribution. Twitter is used to a much lesser extent for marketing/promotions, customer service, and human resources.*

**Keywords:** Twitter, microblogging, empirical study, Facebook, blog, Web 2.0, Fortune 200

### INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 skills have been rated as one of the 10 hottest information technology skills [14]. Web 2.0 capabilities have been integrated into product life-cycle management platforms by vendors such as Dassault Systems and Siemens to foster internal teamwork and access wider communities of knowledge [30]. The Web 2.0 is commonly associated with applications and technologies that allow users to create, edit, and distribute content [13]. This includes web-based communities, social networking sites, video-sharing sites, blogs, wikis, and so on [33].

Web 2.0 usage and expenditures have been steadily rising. For example, an *InformationWeek* 500 survey found that 82% of banking and financial service

institutions are using wikis, blogs, and other social networking tools for internal collaboration and knowledge sharing [16]. Thirty-seven percent have deployed them for external collaboration and 27% encourage workers to use Web 2.0 technologies to increase productivity. Moreover, 78% of *InformationWeek* 500 companies use wikis and blogs to communicate with colleagues [19]. Only 42% use these technologies to collaborate with customers or suppliers, but that is an increase from 27% in 2007. In addition, according to Rosetta, a Princeton, NJ market research firm, 59 of 100 major retailers had Facebook accounts in September of 2008 [6]. This was almost double the number four months earlier. In terms of expenditures, Forrester estimated that global internal enterprise Web 2.0 spending was \$384 million in 2008 and projected to more than double to \$912 million in 2010 [11]. Gartner estimated annual spending on enterprise social software to be \$280 million in 2007, increasing to \$1.06 billion in 2012.

One aspect of the Web 2.0 that has been enormously popular is that of blogging. During 2007 alone, there were 175,000 new blogs each day [18]. Moreover, Technorati, a blog search engine, indexed 133 million blog records from 2002 to 2008 [31].

Interestingly, the introduction of microblogging has transformed the Web 2.0 into an instantaneous medium. Microblogging is a new form of blogging that allows users to send brief text updates [17]. Bloggers can use several services for the updates including instant messaging, e-mail, or Twitter [2]. The posts are called microposts, while the act of using these services to update the blog is called microblogging. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, also use a microblogging feature in profiles. On Facebook this is called "Status Updates."

Twitter, launched in July 2006 and named by eWeek as one of the top 20 technologies that changed the decade, is the dominant microblogging social network service [9]. Southwest Airlines, for example, claims to have nearly one-half million followers on Twitter [34]. Twitter is a free hosted microblogging service in which

the person who creates the message is called the “author.” The people who receive messages are called “followers” or subscribers. Twitter utilizes tweets, or status updates, that are a maximum of 140 characters. The user can include a profile picture, but only one on the user’s page, and can restrict delivery to his/her circle of friends or, by default, allow anyone to access them. Between February 2008 and February 2009, there was a 1,841% increase in accounts, or approximately 8 million users [22]. Between May 2008 and March 2009, twitter.com experienced a growth from 1.2 to 9.3 million unique U.S. visitors per month [3,25]. According to marketing research firm comScore, Twitter had 75 million unique visitors in the U.S. in January 2010, 126 times the 593,000 visitor number a year and one-half earlier [21,26]. Although time spent on social networks increased 277% in the US in 2009, media research firm Nielsen notes that Twitter grew more than 500% [29]. Comcastcares.com, for example, has more than 36,000 followers and has generated 39,000 tweets as of January 2010 [29].

As Twitter has risen in popularity, a weakness was exposed on August 6, 2009 when a hacker was able to shut down Twitter at 9 a.m. EST for a few hours [21]. The outage was a result of a denial-of-service attack.

Users include government agencies, celebrities, corporations, and charities. For example, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have been using Twitter to provide updates regarding the H1N1 situation [5]. The U.S. Army utilizes Twitter to recruit soldiers [24]. Celebrity Twitters such as Britney Spears, Kanye West, and Barack Obama have even reportedly hired ghostwriters to supply their tweets because they are so busy.

Dell posts discount codes for online purchases on Twitter. Shoe retailer Zappos.com periodically gives passes for free overnight shipping through Twitter. Kmart, Sears, and Dell use Twitter to answer customer service questions. In addition, Dell made \$1 million in revenue through sales alerts in 2008 [8]. NCM Fathom Events, a Colorado-based entertainment company, raised \$5,000 for the anti-poverty group CARE by using Twitter tweet pledges during a four-day fundraising event in March 2009 [10]. Wyclef Jean's Yele Foundation raised \$1 million in one day for the Haiti relief fund through the donation of \$5 per tweet [27].

JetBlue uses Twitter as part of its corporate communications function in which microbloggers are considered citizen journalists [32]. Their primary use is to watch and listen to blogs for market research purposes. Zaphos uses Twitter to make personal connections among employees and between the company and its customers. Employees use it to organize meet-ups outside of work and customers can use Twitter to get a feel for corporate culture.

At IBM, 53,000 employees use a homegrown social networking tool named Beehive [11]. It is being tied to additional Web 2.0 tools including blogs, wikis, and its Twitter-like application BlueTwit, which has over 2,000 users.

Twitter can be used to reduce company email, improve work and project tracking, and keep employees connected [23]. Because Twitter is a public forum and an organization may not want the competition to know about research ideas, salesperson travels, and so on, several products have been developed for internal access-controlled business use. Socialcast, available at [www.socialcast.com](http://www.socialcast.com), is a tool in which employees can choose to follow other employees, send ideas, and ask questions. Socialtext, available at [www.socialtext.com](http://www.socialtext.com), includes wiki capabilities and blogs. The Twitter-like aspect is called Signals. TransUnion, for example, has an estimated saving \$2.5 million in less than five months after spending \$50,000 on Socialtext [20]. Yammer is also like Twitter for business [32]. The security scheme is simple in which users confirm accounts by using a corporate email address and can only view messages (called yams) from other users registered from the same email domain. Yams, however, can be any length and can include images and other multimedia content. The basic service is free but there are premium add-ons starting at \$1 per user per month. Alcatel-Lucent has 1,000 users on Yammer and has 200 posts each day.

### **THE CHALLENGES OF MICROBLOGGING**

A Deloitte survey of over 400 companies found that the top business objectives for social media were to generate more word of mouth (38% of respondents), increase customer loyalty (34%), increase product or brand awareness (30%), bring outside ideas into the organization (29%), and improve customer support quality (23%) [29]. The primary obstacles to making online communities work included getting people to

engage and participate (30% of respondents), attracting people to the community (24%), getting people to keep coming back (21%), and finding enough time to manage the community (19%).

Another challenge with regard to social networking is the lack of hard return on investment (ROI) metrics [7]. There are soft benefits such as bridging geographical and organizational information divisions by creating communities of interest around subject matter rather than organizational hierarchies. A 2008 AIIM worldwide survey of 441 business technology professionals found that 46% of respondents indicated that their organizations had an “ad hoc”, rather than strategic, approach to their Web 2.0 applications [12]. A 2008 CIMI Group survey of 277 companies found that none cited the Web 2.0 as a significant factor in current planning, although 90% of the respondents were using at least one social networking application.

At least two large corporations, GE and IBM have implemented employee use policies. GE employees are required to sign a business code of conduct when hired while some employees are required to annually sign specific guidelines on electronic security and data usage. IBM also requires employees to annually sign business conduct guidelines.

### **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Several studies have been conducted to examine the Web 2.0. One study empirically investigated factors influencing user adoption of Internet social networks [28]. The Social Network Site Adoption model was introduced to examine the effects of perceptions of normative pressure, playfulness, critical mass, trust, usefulness, and ease of use on usage intention and actual usage of sites. Results indicated that all of the determinants had a significant direct effect on intent to use, with perceived playfulness and perceived critical mass the strongest indicators. Intent to use and perceived playfulness had a significant effect on actual usage.

Another study utilized social network analysis as a technique to measure and evaluate social networking. Network analysis was employed to better understand child welfare organizations in Baltimore [15]. Social network analysis is a technique that can assist in identifying structural holes in organizations, community building, relationships between junior and senior

employees, diffusion of innovation, and knowledge flows within and between individuals and departments.

The US military has also launched a study on the use of social networking web sites in an effort to design new policies on how the military should use them [1]. Social networking sites have always been banned from government computers but the Marines are allowed access to sites from their own computers or recreational computers provided on military bases. Rules are needed to balance the advantages of using speedy communications such as Twitter with the risks associated with protecting sensitive data. The use of social networking sites could expose defense computer networks to malicious software and create possible cyber-security problems.

And, a 2009 study examined social network website usage by university students in China, Egypt, France, Israel, India, Korea, Macao, Sweden, Thailand, Turkey, and the U.S. [4]. Results indicated no differences in the number of offline friends between individualist and collectivist nations. In addition, there was no difference in the number of online social ties between individualist and collectivist nations.

Given the recent publicity with regard to microblogging, this study was undertaken to better understand the state of microblogging in the 200 largest firms. Twitter was selected and studied because it is the dominant microblogging product in the market. This research, therefore, examines several questions. Do the largest firms use Twitter and if yes, how? Is there a relationship between microblogging and the use of other social networking technologies? Are there industry sectors that are more likely to employ microblogging. Results are important in helping organizations to better understand social network technology implications and to assist in identifying potential usage opportunities.

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study utilized the CNN Money website [35] list of the Fortune 1000 firms to obtain the 2009 Fortune 200 companies and identify the company’s industry sector. Each company website was then examined to determine Twitter, Facebook, and blog utilization. If no Twitter capability was found on the company website, Twitter.com was used to search for any accounts associated with the company. Company website

Twitter descriptions were used to determine usage type(s) such as news, customer service, and so on. Relative to uses, data was examined to determine if Twitter was used for more than one purpose. Social networking utilization was also examined to determine if there were correlations between the use of any two technologies.

**RESULTS**

A review of the Fortune 200 firms found that 64.5%, or the majority, of companies utilize Twitter (Table 1). In terms of other social networking technologies, 41.5% of companies utilize Facebook and 20.5% utilize a blog.

**Table 1.** Overall Social Network Usage

	Twitter	Facebook	Blog
Firms That Utilize	64.5%	41.5%	20.5%
Firms That Do Not Utilize	35.5%	58.5%	79.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Relative to social networking technology utilization, 27% of the Fortune 200 use only one technology, whether it be Twitter, Facebook, or a blog (Table 2). Twenty-nine percent use two technologies and 15% utilize all three technologies. Overall, 71% of the Fortune 200 use at least one form of electronic social networking. Few firms employed only one technology. For instance, 1.5% just used a blog and 4% solely used Facebook.

**Table 2.** Usage of Multiple Social Networking Technologies

Type	Percentage	Number of Firms
Only 1 Technology	27%	54
Uses 2 Technologies	29%	58
Uses 3 Technologies	15%	30
Total	71%	142

Social networking utilization was next examined to determine if there were correlations between the use of

two technologies. Table 3 illustrates that there are correlations significant at the .01 level (2-tailed test) for all three technologies. In other words, for example, the use of Facebook was significantly positively correlated with the use of Twitter.

**Table 3.** Social Networking Pearson Correlations

Technology	Twitter	Facebook	Blog
Twitter	1	.424**	.313**
Facebook	.424**	1	.269**
Blog	.313**	.269**	1

\*\* Correlation significant at the .001 level (2-tailed)

Table 4 examines Twitter participation by industry sector. Eleven of the sectors account for 80% of the Fortune 200 firms. These sectors include petroleum refining (29 firms), healthcare (22 firms), computer/IT (19 firms), general merchandiser/retailer (16 firms), insurance (14 firms), commercial bank (12 firms), food product (11 firms), food & drug (11 firms), motor vehicles & parts (9 firms), aerospace and defense (9 firms), and telecommunications (8 firms). The sectors with the highest level to lowest level of participation are computer/IT (95%), telecommunications (88%), general merchandiser/retailer (88%), food product (82%), aerospace and defense (78%), healthcare (64%), insurance (64%), motor vehicles and parts (44%), commercial bank (42%), petroleum refining (41%), and food and drug store (36%).

**Table 4.** Twitter Participation By Industry Sector (With At Least 7 Firms in Sector)

Industry Sector	Number of Firms in Fortune 200	Percentage that Use Twitter
Petroleum Refining	29	41%
Healthcare	22	64%
Computer/IT	19	95%
General Merchandiser/Retailer	16	88%
Insurance	14	64%
Commercial Bank	12	42%
Food Product	11	82%
Food & Drug Store	11	36%
Motor Vehicles & Parts	9	44%

Industry Sector	Number of Firms in Fortune 200	Percentage that Use Twitter
Aerospace & Defense	9	78%
Telecommunications	8	88%
Total (80% of Firms)	160	

In reviewing the firms' web page descriptions of Twitter, it became apparent that there were 4 primary types of uses. These uses include news, marketing/promotions, customer service, and human resources. Results indicate that 79% of the firms use Twitter to distribute news (Table 5). Moreover, 33% use Twitter for marketing/promotions. The least used applications are customer service (26% of firms) and human resources (12% of firms).

**Table 5.** Twitter Usage By Type

Type	Percentage	Number of Firms
News	79%	102
Marketing/Promotions	33%	42
Customer Service	26%	33
Human Resources	12%	15

Relative to uses, data was examined to determine if Twitter was used for more than one purpose. Table 6 illustrates that 50% of the firms that used Twitter specified only one purpose. Thirty-three percent had two uses, 9% had three uses, and 2% had all 4 use types.

**Table 6.** Multiple Twitter Uses Per Firm

Number of Types	Percentage	Number of Firms
Only 1 Usage Type	50%	65
2 Usage Types	33%	43
3 Usage Types	9%	11
4 Usage Types	2%	2

Twenty-nine, or 14.5%, of the Fortune 200 firms utilizing Twitter have multiple Twitter accounts. A sample of these firms is listed in Table 7. Wal-Mart has accounts for associates while AT&T, Hewlett-Packard, and International Business Machines have a corporate

focus. Dell, Microsoft, and Verizon appear to be product-oriented and United Parcel Service has accounts for employee communications.

**Table 7.** Sample of Companies With Multiple Twitter Accounts

Company	Examples
AT&T	Consumer, Community, Small Business, Corporate, Yellow Pages, Enterprise and AT&T News
Citigroup	Citigroupjobs, CitiandDallas
Dell	Special offers, products, community
Hewlett-Packard	Official News, HP Store, Imaging and Printing Group
International Business Machines	Partner World, Partner Community, Virtual Innovation Center, Virtual Loaner Program, Websphere, Developer Works, Smarter Planet
Microsoft	Corporate communications, products such as Windows
United Health Group	UNH Innovates, newsroom, health, health group
United Parcel Service	UPS news, employee communications, jobs
Verizon Communications	Residential, Wireless, Business, Corporate, and Breaking News
Wal-Mart	Accounts for associates

Table 8 provides a sample of Twitter descriptions found on four of the company websites. Wal-Mart uses Twitter to provide news about their corporate culture. Bank of America focuses on service issues, while reassuring privacy. State Farm promotes their community service and Dell is building a community and selling products.

**Table 8.** Sample of Company Twitter Descriptions

Company	Twitter Description
Bank of America Corp.	We'll be listening, responding and sending updates to help customers with unresolved service issues. And while we Twitter, you don't have to worry about your privacy. David

Company	Twitter Description
	Knapp, Bank of America's Senior Vice President of National Customer Experience, will be monitoring the Twitter conversation, and no account information will be shared in the Tweets. To protect your privacy, never share account information in unsecured locations. It's another way we're working to improve our service and availability to customers.
Dell	Now you can also get great deals from Dell, stay current with what's happening at Dell, and connect with other Dell fans and employees through Twitter!
State Farm Insurance	Connect with and see what State Farm is doing in your community
Wal-Mart	All around the world, we help our customers save money so they can live better. It's engrained in our culture and is our focus for building relationships. And that includes online, too. Our twitterers will tweet their unedited perspectives of what they're working on, the unique and fun aspects of our culture, the responsibility that comes with working here, and more.

**CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

Results indicate that electronic social networking has been implemented at nearly three-quarter, or 71%, of the Fortune 200. Twitter microblogging is the most common technology, utilized by 64.5% of the firms. Interestingly, 14.5% have more than one Twitter account. Facebook (41.5% of firms) and blogs (20.5% of firms) lag far behind. Although 27% use only one technology, 29% of firms use two technologies and 15% use all three technologies. Pearson statistics suggest a high degree (.01 significance level) of correlation between the implementation of each of the technologies.

Findings also demonstrate that implementation varies by industry sector for the sectors that account for 80% of the Fortune 200 firms. The sectors with the highest level of participation include computer/IT (95%), telecommunications (88%), general merchandiser/retailer (88%), food product (82%), and aerospace and defense (78%). The sectors with the lowest participation include food and drug store (36%), petroleum refining (41%), commercial bank (42%), and motor vehicles and parts (44%).

In terms of usage, the most common use type, by 79% of the firms, was to distribute news. Marketing/promotions (33% of firms), customer service (26% of firms) and human resources (12% of firms) were far less common. One-half of firms Twittering had only one use type. Thirty-three percent had 2 use types, 9% had 3 use types, and 2% had all 4 use types identified in the Twitter description.

When examining company descriptions for their Twitter activity, no uniformity was found. For example, Wal-Mart uses Twitter to provide news about their corporate culture while Bank of America focuses on service issues and State Farm notifies users about its community service.

There are several important implications from the study. One finding is that the largest firms apparently find value in electronic social networking, and in particular, microblogging. Nearly three-quarter of the firms use at least one social networking technology, with Twitter being utilized by nearly two-thirds of all firms. More than 14% have multiple Twitter accounts. In addition, 44% of the Fortune 200 employ at least two social networking technologies. For firms such as Bank of America and International Business Machines, the benefits relate to customer service. Dell, on the other hand, leveraged Twitter sales alerts to generate one million dollars in revenue in one year.

A second implication is that industry sector may be a determinant with regard to microblogging participation. The computer/IT (95%) and telecommunications (88%) had high participation levels while food and drug store (36%) and petroleum refining (41%) had much lower participation. It could be hypothesized that given the computer firms' specialization in and knowledge of information technology, it would be easier for each to implement, monitor, and understand the benefits of

microblogging. International Business Machines has even begun utilizing BlueTwit, a second microblogging tool. Conversely, given that petroleum refining may have minimal consumer contact, Twitter may be less useful.

A third implication is that several, roughly one-third of, Fortune 200 firms are either skeptical regarding microblogging and/or have not found a reason to implement. It is possible that these firms may believe that microblogging is a distraction and reduces employee productivity. Moreover, these firms may not feel the bandwidth drain is worth potential benefits. In addition, the firm may find it challenging to police communications and may fear litigation in the event of negative or inaccurate information being released.

A final implication is that while news is the most common usage type and 50% of firms use Twitter for only one usage type, other uses such as service and marketing/promotions have the greatest potential for growth. The nature of Twitter's real-time communication could be used, for example, to quickly resolve customer problems, thus increase customer retention, and to spur impulse purchases. Twitter provides the organization with ubiquitous and low cost access to its current and potential customers.

The limitations of this study are primarily a function of each firm's website and the nature of the research methodology. If a firm utilizes Twitter but does not indicate this usage on their home page (or search box), then it was not counted. As a result, the participation may be higher than the 64.5% found in this study. This weakness was partially mitigated in that Twitter.com was also used to determine if the firm had a Twitter account. Moreover, if a site did not use Twitter, Facebook, or a blog but used another social network technology, it was not counted in the social networking participation total. As a result, the overall participation may be higher than the 71% as reported in this study. The second weakness is that due to the nature of the research methodology, the research does not measure communication volume, user volume, or technology effectiveness. Future research needs to examine the usage volume by account and to explore if microblogging is a fad or will become a more important facet of corporate communications.

The study does, however, begin to clarify that extent of Twitter microblogging at the largest firms. Overall

findings suggest that the large majority of the Fortune 200 firms have implemented electronic social networking and in particular, Twitter accounts that are used primarily for news distribution.

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