

How Tweet It Is: Social Tweeters

Contributed by Karen Zgoda, MSW, LCSW

Twitter had me at Mumbai. For Thanksgiving last year, I was driving from Boston, MA to visit my family in my hometown of Buffalo, NY. It was very easy to be unaware of the Mumbai, India attacks going on halfway around the globe, save for the occasional glimpse of CNN headlines at a rest stop. Although I had a Twitter account at the time, I didn't quite know what the big deal was. About the most I had done with Twitter up to that point was to link my Twitter updates to my Facebook updates (using this handy Facebook application with more than 120,000 fans and more than 275,000 monthly active users: <http://tr.im/oHnj>) so I wouldn't have to constantly update both services. It seems as though there is always another new, hot technology tool just begging for you to use it, click on advertisements, and finally get your friends on board until the next new thing sprouts up. I wasn't about to spend precious time learning yet another new technology tool only to discover it was "over the hill"; once I had mastered it. {mosgoogle right}

The Mumbai attacks served as both an unfortunate and yet a hopeful example of how people can use Twitter, especially in a crisis. Mumbai tweeters, or folks using Twitter, were sending tweets, or Twitter messages, at an alarming rate. According to The New York Times, "At the peak of the violence, more than one message per second with the word 'Mumbai' in it was being posted onto Twitter" (<http://tr.im/oHwc>). People were using Twitter to describe where gunshots were heard, communicate with loved ones, learn the fate of hostages, unwittingly spread rumors and unconfirmed information, and post photos and videos of events as they unfolded in front of their eyes.

To learn even more about how Twitter and other online social media were used to cover the Mumbai attacks, check out the articles, "How the Internet is covering the Mumbai Terror Attacks" (<http://tr.im/oHzN>) or "India's Mainstream and New Media Tell Story of Mumbai Terror Attacks" (<http://tr.im/oI2Q>). Suffice it to say, I was officially sold on Twitter after watching how it could morph into a lifeline of news, information, a platform for organizing, a space to share concern or get updates on loved ones, and resources. And coincidentally, aren't these all tasks social workers excel at when helping their clients?

What is Twitter? How Do I Use Twitter?

Twitter is essentially a free micro-blogging service that allows you to post 140-character messages called tweets. If you are interested in setting up your own Twitter account, here's a great video guide: <http://tr.im/oIDM>. Folks who are "following" you can see your tweets. Likewise, once you log in to your Twitter account, you can view continuously updated tweets from those you are following.

You can respond to someone's tweets using a reply, which is public, or a direct message, which is private. To create a reply to another user, use the format "@username message." This message will then show up in your Twitter feed. To create a direct message, use the format "d username message." You can pass along someone else's tweet via a "retweet" with the format "RT @username message." Additionally, folks are increasingly using what are called "hashtags" to collect Twitter conversations on similar topics and make them more easily searchable. To create a hashtag for your tweet, simply put the "#" symbol in front of a word, like this: "#socialwork hey social workers I need tips on choosing an MSW program!" You can search hashtags on Twitter search (<http://search.twitter.com/>) or view a list of popular hashtags at Twemes (<http://twemes.com/>). To learn more about Twitter language, BusinessWeek magazine has a fun article on How to Speak Twitter (<http://tr.im/oIVh>).

Once you have started to follow friends, colleagues, celebrities, reporters, organizations, museums, government agencies, weather updates, police departments, nonprofits, and others (yes, all these groups and more use Twitter), reading tweets on Twitter starts to feel like being at a very large cocktail party where you can jump from one conversation to another just by reading your Twitter feed. Think of it as a flock of birds twittering on and on to each other. Or as NPR senior news analyst Daniel Schorr (<http://tr.im/oIJg>) describes upon learning how to use Twitter, "I'm agape as I learn about how people can communicate with the outside world. It somehow reminds me...of something in ancient Greece, the agora, the marketplace. You come out and you say things at the marketplace and everyone can hear. And every person now seems to be a network" (<http://tr.im/olk5>).

Who is Using Twitter?

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, "As of December 2008, 11% of online American adults said they used a service like Twitter or another service that allowed them to share updates of themselves or to see the updates of others" up from 9% in November 2008 (<http://tr.im/oIXh>). This report also states that "the median age of a Twitter user is 31. In comparison, the median age of a MySpace user is 27, Facebook user is 26, and LinkedIn user is 40." However, despite an estimated 6 million Twitter accounts, it seems that "10% of Twitter users generated more than 90% of the content" (<http://tr.im/oJ1X>). In comparison, it is estimated that Facebook has more than 200 million users (<http://mashable.com/2009/04/28/twitter-active-users/>).

Are Social Workers Using Twitter?

As Twitter has become more popular, social workers are starting to tweet. Not all social workers, however, are sold on the concept.

"Well, I can tell you, I personally don't use Twitter," says part-time University of South Carolina MSW student Amy Anderson. "I'm having enough problems keeping up with my Facebook account, my work e-mail, my personal e-mail, my school e-mail.... I just don't need the distractions. My Blackberry buzzes enough as it is!"

A social worker in private practice told me, "Text messages cost me 35 cents each. I realize I could change my service, but I'm content using my phone as a phone and my computer for e-mail and Facebook.... I don't really see much utility to tweeting for a clinician."

Still, some social workers are learning how to harness Twitter, including Linda Grobman, ACSW, LSW, publisher/editor of *The New Social Worker*. She says, "When I first heard about Twitter, I didn't really understand it, and I was a bit skeptical. *The New Social Worker* started using it on January 30, 2009, so I'm still relatively new at it. I have found that it is a really great way to get a quick message out about something." She uses Twitter to communicate a thought that she wants to get out to social workers—or information about a new resource or a social work-related show that is going to be on TV, or something new on *The New Social Worker's* Web site. "It's not enough to warrant a mailing to my e-mail subscriber list, or even a blog post, but I want to let people know about it. That's when Twitter comes in really handy," she adds. "I think as more social workers join Twitter, it will become more useful for these kinds of quick announcements."

Karen Carnabucci, LCSW, TEP, a social worker in private practice, is experimenting with Twitter. She posts an affirmation of the day, which she says "is a good chance for me to decide what are my focus words for each day."

Social (Net)working—Finding and Following

How do social workers find other social workers on Twitter? How do they decide who to follow, and who is following them? Karen Carnabucci says, "I don't have lots of followers at this time, but that's all right with me. One of my beliefs in networking is that biggest isn't always better. I'm more interested in reaching the people who want what I have, whether it is information, services, or other kinds of help. Through Twitter, I have connected with a coach in Racine who lives just blocks from my office. I've also learned about some interesting sites that I am recommending to clients or reading for myself."

The *New Social Worker* publisher/editor Linda Grobman has some useful tips for finding social workers and other interesting people on Twitter:

I have found social workers by using the Twitter search tool, by searching for the #socialwork tag, or by searching WeFollow. Also, I look at the "follow" lists of other social workers or social work organizations to see who they are following or who is following them. I tend to follow people or organizations that are tweeting about social work topics, rather than people who are tweeting more personal things (e.g., "I just finished watching House and am now going to study for my final"), unless I know the person personally and really want to know their every move. But because I am on Twitter as *The New Social Worker* (my Twitter URL is <http://twitter.com/newsocialworker>), I really use it for professional networking.... I've discovered some interesting organizations through Twitter, and I think some organizations have learned about *The New Social Worker* who wouldn't have otherwise.

The National Association of Social Workers has joined the Twitterverse (see <http://twitter.com/nasw>), and adds that "most of our followers have found us organically or through links to the NASW Twitter Feed posted on <http://www.socialworkers.org>. We're also able to find social workers on Twitter by using Twitter Search (<http://search.twitter.com/>) by searching for terms like, "MSW," "LCSW," and "social worker."

How Social Workers Tweet

Some very active social tweeters have found innovative social work uses for Twitter.

NASW began using Twitter in January 2009. Says NASW Web services staffer Ebony Jackson, "NASW is using Twitter to engage social workers through social media. We post daily on a wide range of topics, including advocacy efforts, NASW News articles, releases from the NASW Press, social workers in the news, and new products and services. We also post a "Friday Question" on Twitter and our Facebook fan page to create dialogue with social workers online." She adds that NASW began its Twitter feed with tweets sent from the White House by NASW Executive Director Betsy Clark, while she attended the signing of the Lily Ledbetter fair pay act on January 29, 2009.

Says one social work Tweeter (<http://twitter.com/monstertalk>), "I use Twitter, often to relate articles of interest that I come across quickly, but I've definitely made links with other social workers, because I identify myself as a social work blogger. I have also made good use of <http://www.wefollow.com> to find other social workers. In fact, it has been the best source. I find Twitter useful as well to build up relationships and news with nonprofit organizations that are relevant to my work." This tweeter continues, "I can't tweet from work, though, so am restricted to home time! I would recommend other social workers get involved in blogging, social networking, and building conversational dialogues, with other social workers internationally, but also with users of services in other capacities. I've also created virtual links with nurses and doctors and hopefully helped to spread the important work that is done by social workers in mental health services in general. The blogging and the tweeting have informed my practice, and, I believe,

improved it.”

An MSSW candidate at the University of Texas who goes by the Twitter name “BooBoo3000,” uses Twitter during her lunch breaks. “I especially like doing Twitter trend searches to see what others are talking about. My favorite people to follow are people that tweet about things that are informative, challenge us to take action, and balance those tweets with occasional humor and offbeat stuff. ”

Finally, a social worker named Ignacio (<http://twitter.com/iggyp>) is trying to get his agency on board with Twitter:

So being the only person under 30 that works at my program, I am hip to technology and think that it is a wonderful tool to improve practice. I presented Twitter to my coworkers.... I explained it in the most simplistic of language, stating that it is pretty much a broadcasting tool.... I mentioned how much easier and simplistic it is than having to log on to our slow computers, especially if we need to get information to everyone at once, instantly, and without having to log onto e-mail. We are about seven people in our program, most of [whom] know how to use text messaging. The only other 60+ person was a little reserved about it and was not at all thrilled about it. “It’s just one more thing we have to check.”

Ignacio works at a private nonprofit child welfare agency that assists relative caregivers raising relative children when the parents are out of the homes (and/or lives) of the children. The agency provides support in obtaining resources for legal guardianship, stability (food, clothes), recreation, and links them to other agencies for things like welfare and mental health services. There is an equal balance of home visits and office work. “I have been trying over the last month to implement Twitter at my work in order to link all three social workers together, because we are separated by geography,” he explains. “Twitter would be useful to let everyone know what they’re up to and make any important announcements that need to be made (example: Ignacio is at a home visit in [location]; per Supervisor, we have a staff meeting tomorrow; Hey! I have this new resource).”

However, Ignacio does see a hindrance to using Twitter at work:

The only hindrance I see to Twitter is its slow and crash-tastic behavior during normal business hours. With signing up for text messaging, I have noticed...that sometimes the tweets I have sent to my phone get there two hours later. That is not effective, and with no Twitter/Internet applications existing for our simple phones, there is no way to log on to the Web site to update our statuses.

Social or Networking...or Both?

So, is social networking—such as tweeting—a social activity, a professional networking tool, or perhaps both?

The New Social Worker’s Linda Grobman, who uses Twitter primarily for making professional contacts, cautions new social workers to consider the image that they are projecting to potential employers and future colleagues. But she concedes that “some occasional personal notes, even in professional networking, allow people to get to know each other as real human beings in a way that wasn’t possible before.”

Keeping It In Perspective

As Mark Morford states in his article, “How to Stay Relevant” (<http://tr.im/pLgc>), flexibility and being open to the development of new ideas and tools are key. “I have found ‘flexibility’ to be the most frequent reply I give to those who ask me about how the hell they’re supposed to keep up with the onslaught of tech whizbangery coming at them, where to begin, and why they should care and just what to make of it all.... Flexibility. On the crudest level, it just means you allow the possibility that some of these seemingly inane developments might be beneficial and you should not dismiss them out of hand because, well, that’s where the action is.”

As with any social networking site, Twitter has a way of grabbing hold of people and not letting go, if they let it. Private practice social worker Karen Carnabucci relates, “Although I like the Internet and all of its features, I have to keep all of this in perspective. I want to live a life, not just exist in front of the computer screen.”

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