

To Tweet or Not to Tweet

A tweeter tweets to his or her followers on Twitter. (Say that five times fast.)

If you're just starting to get a grasp of the blogosphere, you've been left in the dust on the technology superhighway. Microblogging, part blog and part instant messaging, is the current rage. Twitter, a free microblogging service, exploded onto the social media scene in 2007. It is attracting an ever-growing following of staff at cultural institutions who see its value as another way to build relationships and attract new audiences. It has been listed among the six social media tools that every business and professional should use.

To view a short, satirical introduction to Twitter, watch the video "Twouble with Twitters" at www.youtube.com. Wikipedia offers a basic definition: "Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters, displayed on the author's profile page and delivered to other users—known as followers—who have subscribed to them. Senders can restrict delivery to those in their circle of friends or, by default, allow open access. Users can send and receive tweets via the Twitter website, Short Message Service (SMS) or external applications."¹

Amy Fox, a graduate student at the University of Washington, is writing her thesis about museums and their use of Twitter. She has tracked museums on Twitter since early 2008 and found that most give two main reasons for joining Twitter: to foster good public relations and to make connections with people. Michelle Moon, Assistant Director of Education for Adult Programs at The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, is a tweeter who initially found Twitter useless, but became a convert when museums she likes began to tweet. She finds Twitter useful for two main reasons: it allows easy communication among museum colleagues in "brief thoughts that keep you actively engaged," and it allows simple filtering of content most likely to interest the follower. She also thinks that Twitter forces you to be efficient and provides a broader perspective beyond listservs. One's

experience with Twitter, she says, is based on the quality of the tweets—that is, the short messages from Twitter friends that periodically appear on the user's Twitter homepage.

In some ways, Twitter is like sitting at the feet of a teacher and waiting for him or her to spout words of wisdom or witty observations and then hearing the reaction of the gathered crowd. It's simply another way to receive communication, albeit in short bursts of text. Blogs tend to be one-way communication—almost no

It's important to keep in mind that your Twitter audience will extend beyond your geographic area and will likely be unable to attend your organization's events.

readers make use of the option to comment on blog posts. Tweeting encourages more group communication due in part to the ease of responding. In other words, if you write a blog, you promote it and hope an audience will find you. Your audience expects you will update your blog with new information on a regular basis. But if you send a tweet, your message goes instantly to your network and your chances of getting a quick response are high.

Who's using Twitter and other microblogging services? According to a recent Pew Internet and American Life study, 11 percent of online adults said they use a service like Twitter to share updates about themselves and see updates of others. About one-fifth of online adults ages 18-34 use it, with the percentage dropping off the older the age, which is no surprise. In the 35-44 year-old demographic, 10 percent use Twitter, and by the time we reach the 45-54 age range, the percentage

drops by one-half. The median age of a Twitter user is 31. They are slightly more racially and ethnically diverse than the full United States population and slightly more likely to live in urban areas.²

Nina Simon, who writes the Museum 2.0 blog, thinks that microblogging is more participatory than other social media because there is a smaller distinction between the content producer and consumer—few people sign up as a follower and sit back and do not send a tweet. And with only 140 characters per message, there is a level playing field—the verbose folks have no room to make a lengthy argument. Short and concise is what this game is about. Other benefits, according to Simon, are that the tweeter gets instant feedback, and tweeting does not require a maintenance strategy. If you stop tweeting, nothing happens. You can choose how often to send messages. In the blogosphere, readers expect fresh updates on a regular basis.

While there are no standard guidelines for museum tweeters, Simon offers the following sound advice in her blog titled "An open letter to museums on Twitter:"

1. Don't use Twitter to spam me about visiting.
2. Tell me something I can't find on your homepage.
3. Give me content worthy of your institution.
4. Remember the radio station analogy. If your museum was hosting a radio show, would you only talk about the open hours and try to entice people to show up? Of course not. You would do something engaging, educational, entertaining, provocative...all the elements that you try to design into every program or exhibit. So now imagine you have a text-based, short-format radio show. What would fit there?³

One reason why a history organization might actively use Twitter is because it wants to establish a relationship with an audience that it cannot successfully reach with more traditional forms of communication. It may be an audience that is enthusiastic about your work and wants to have an ongoing conversation with others

who share this enthusiasm. These followers want information beyond what's going on at your institution—beyond what they can find on your website. They may want to feel that they have special access to your organization—information that fuels their enthusiasm. Fox advises that being “real,” writing casually and conversationally, creates a friendly tone that is more entertaining and approachable. It's important to keep in mind that your Twitter audience will extend beyond your geographic area and will likely be unable to attend your organization's events. So a combination of types of tweets is the best strategy: invitations to events, fun facts, blog links, insider information, and insights.

Fox stresses that the other part of

tweeting that many organizations forget is listening and observing. It's important, though time consuming, for a tweeter to follow his or her followers. This offers insight into their daily lives, a different approach to audience research. Twitter also allows an organization to follow tweets from movers and shakers in their target audiences to find out what those audiences are talking about. If you are considering whether or not to set up an institution Twitter account, Moon and Fox recommend that you create your own account and follow what other history organizations are doing.

Twitter's detractors see it as either a passing fad or as a waste of time and resources. While there is no charge for the service, someone must be responsible for

sending tweets and for spending some time following what other history organizations are doing on Twitter. Moon estimates that a person can easily spend less than an hour per week with Twitter and be actively engaged in the medium. Like much social media, success is hard to quantify. You can track the number of people that sign up to follow your tweets, but you can't know if they are reading them. The question also arises of who in an organization would be the tweeter.

So, to tweet or not to tweet. That's for each organization to decide. Social media platforms come and go—it costs very little to give new ones a try. Experimentation can lead to worthwhile connections with new audiences. ●

“History Bytes” is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at grovet@si.edu.

¹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>, accessed 20 July 2009, Internet.

² See www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/Twitter-and-status-updating.aspx, report date 12 February 2009.

³ See <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2008/12/open-letter-to-museums-on-twitter>, accessed 20 July 2009, Internet.



SAMPLE TWEETS from the HISTORY WORLD:



- **mysticseaport** Have you been aboard the MORGAN lately? Come watch her restoration before your very eyes. <http://snipurl.com/m8bkf>
- **MuseumEd** Just posted a report on a cell phone audio tour survey, www.museum-ed.org. Link is on front page just about the picture.
- **ConnerPrairie** Vote for us! We've been nominated as one of the best museums in Indianapolis in the @RTV6 Indy A-list competition. <http://bit.ly/ikAOE>
- **ConnerPrairie** In between taking photos today of Glorious 4th, we'll be posting photos from last night's fireworks on our Flickr page! <http://is.gd/1mpZo>
- **HistoryCenter** Don't forget you can see Lincoln for a Lincoln (\$5) this Sat. through Mon. <http://tinyurl.com/nm4I44>
- **NYHistory** Incredible Naturalization Ceremony here... Everyone was so excited and happy to become US citizens... We are so proud to have held it.
- **airandspace** Star Trek fans asked for more x-ray photos & here they are! New blog post: X-Ray Analysis of Starship Enterprise. <http://bit.ly/BhsbE>
- **NYHistory** Send us your NYC photos! Received some stunning shots of flotilla in the harbor on #hudson400 river day from @CMBlackwood
- **mysticseaport** drinking a COOOL iced coffee from the Mystic Seaport bakeshop and thinking, summer is finally HERE! Whee!
- **tenementmuseum** N.Y.P.D. Uses Cricket to Reach Out to Immigrants <http://tiny.cc/cde8N>
- **whalingmuseum** Great article in The Boston Globe “When Whales Made Kings” <http://bit.ly/BnYHD>

Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE (All Periodicals Publications Except Requestor Publications)	
Publication Title	History News
Issue Frequency	Quarterly
Issue Date	October 2009
Number of Issues Published Annually	4
Annual Subscription Price	\$40.00
Postmaster: Send address changes in SASE to: History News, 1717 Church St., Nashville, TN 37203	
Address: 1717 Church St., Nashville, TN 37203 Publisher and Complete Mailing Information: Publisher, Title, and Mailing Office (Do not leave blank) Terry Davis, ASIS, 1717 Church St., Nashville, TN 37203 Editor (Name and complete mailing address) Rob Seely, ASIS, 1717 Church St., Nashville, TN 37203 Editor (Name and complete mailing address) Bethany Macklin, ASIS, 1717 Church St., Nashville, TN 37203 Owner (Do not leave blank. If the publisher is owned by a corporation, give the name and address of the corporation immediately followed by the names and addresses of all stockholders owning or holding 1 percent or more of the total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, give the names and addresses of the individual owners. If the publication is published by a partnership or other unincorporated firm, give its name and address as well as that of each individual owner. If the publication is published by a sole proprietor, give the name and address of the proprietor.) ASIS, 1717 Church St., Nashville, TN 37203 Owner (Name, for State & Local Mailing: 1717 Church St., Nashville, TN 37203)	
Known Bondholders, Mortgagees, and Other Security Holders Owning or Holding 1 Percent or More of Total Amount of Bonds, Mortgages, or Other Securities. If none, check box <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> None. Full Name: _____ Complete Mailing Address: _____	
Tax Status (For completion by nonprofit organizations authorized to mail at nonprofit rates.) (1) Has Not Changed During Preceding 12 Months <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> (2) Has Changed During Preceding 12 Months <input type="checkbox"/> If (2) check box, complete following: 1. Date of change: _____ 2. Reason for change: _____	

History News		For Year Ending December 31, 2009
a. Total number of copies (Net press run)		6,150
b. Total number of copies (Gross press run)		7,000
c. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
d. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
e. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
f. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
g. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
h. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
i. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
j. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
k. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
l. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
m. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
n. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
o. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
p. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
q. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
r. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
s. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
t. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
u. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
v. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
w. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
x. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
y. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150
z. Total number of copies (Net press run) (See instructions for completion of this section.)		6,150