What Happens to Tweets? Descriptions of Temporality in Twitter’s Organizational Rhetoric

Nicholas Proferes

1 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Abstract

This paper presents the results of a content analysis of Twitter’s organizational rhetoric. Focusing on the language generated by Twitter’s founders in interviews and on the language that Twitter uses to describe its service on the Twitter.com website, this analysis establishes how these messages describe and depict the temporality of tweets and the Twitter platform. This study finds that nearly all of the organizational rhetoric sampled depicts a real-time nature of the medium while descriptions regarding what happens to tweets in the long-term are almost entirely absent. This finding is presented in juxtaposition with the Library of Congress’s announcement of the acquisition of Twitter’s full archive of tweets in 2010. Following this announcement, many Twitter users professed not realizing tweets were being saved. In light of the results of analysis of Twitter’s organizational rhetoric and the Library of Congress comments, this paper discusses how Twitter’s organizational rhetoric may provide users with an incomplete picture of the temporality of the service and of the long-term storage of tweets. This paper concludes by discussing the potential implications for users’ abilities to self-direct and make informed choices about the use of the platform if this organizational rhetoric is taken uncritically.

Keywords: Twitter, Library of Congress, organizational rhetoric, content analysis, temporality


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Contact: proferes@uwm.edu

1 Introduction

In 2010, the Library of Congress announced that it had struck a deal with Twitter. In a blog post entitled, “How Tweet It Is!,” the Library declared that, “Every public tweet, ever, since Twitter’s inception in March 2006, will be archived digitally at the Library of Congress” (Raymond, 2010, para. 2). Following the Library of Congress announcement, Dylan Casey, a Google product manager commented that, “Tweets and other short-form updates create a history of commentary that can provide valuable insights into what’s happened and how people have reacted” (Singel, 2010, para. 10). With more than 100 million users tweeting 55 million times a day (Huffington Post, 2010), Twitter’s archive had become of important cultural and historical value.

However, despite the potential value of a Library of Congress archive, some Twitter users were not pleased with the announcement. Comments on the Library of Congress’ blog indicate surprise and frustration regarding the seemingly newfound permanence of tweets. Here are three examples:

So with no warning, every public tweet we’ve ever published is saved for all time? What the hell. That’s awful. (Commenter-in Raymond, 2010)

I can see a lot of political aspirations dashed by people pulling out old Tweets. I’ve always thought of the service as quite banal and narcissistic, but I’ve had a Twitter account to provide feedback to a college and a couple of vendors. I think I’ll close my account now. I don’t need to risk Tweeting
something hurtful or stupid that will be around for all recorded time. (Commenter-in Raymond, 2010)

Now future generations can bear witness to how utterly stupid and vain we were – 1. for creating this steaming mountain of pointless gibberings, and 2. for preserving it for posterity. LOC, you nimrods. (Commenter-in Raymond, 2011)

Even news reports on the announcement underscored the apparent transition from a fleeting existence for tweets to a newly instilled sense of permanence. For example, Wired Magazine noted that “While the short form musings of a generation chronicled by Twitter might seem ephemeral, the Library of Congress wants to save them for posterity” (Singel, 2010, para. 1).

As careful observers may know however, tweets have never been fleeting. Twitter has always maintained a database of the messages sent through its system that extends back to when the service was founded in 2006. The company is now simply sharing its archive with the Library of Congress. What the comments on the Library of Congress blog announcement highlight (at least anecdotally), is a disconnect between some users’ expectations for the life-span of tweets and how Twitter actually manages older tweets. But where could have this incorrect expectation come from?

There are a number of different ways that we come to understand how a technology functions. Rogers (1995) suggests that we may understand technology through our sensory experiences with it, by watching others use it, and by consuming messages about the technology. Messages about technology serve as an important guide for our understanding of what a technology does, how that technology functions, and what that technology’s potential place in our lives might be. To say this more simply, “linguistic forms can have dramatic effects upon how an event or phenomenon is understood” (Gill, 2000, p. 174). How something is described can change or dramatically impact the way we understand it. Therefore, in order to trace how users’ understandings of the temporality of tweets and of Twitter are potentially being influenced, this paper examines the ways in which Twitter’s business representatives have described the temporality of the service, exploring how these descriptions depict the Twitter platform and what happens to tweets. By examining these specific forms of discourse about Twitter, this paper traces content that may impact users’ understandings of the platform and expectations of the lifespan of tweets.

Examining the way Twitter is described by its founders in juxtaposition with the Library of Congress commenters’ professed understandings of the permanence of tweets provides an initial inroad for exploring how users’ understandings of this platform are constructed and influenced, and for identifying the potential problems for users that may result from this influence. By exploring the institutions and spaces from which meaning and understanding of technology may be drawn, we can better understand the potential influence of rhetorics and discourses of technology in the Web 2.0 milieu. We can begin to grasp how this particular slice of discourse can potentially impact users’ abilities to understand and subsequently control information flows in the digital environment and how this discourse, if taken uncritically, could impact users’ abilities to self-direction with regards to their use of the technology.

2 Review of the Relevant Literature

Previous research has identified how Twitter was described by the popular press during its first few years of existence (Arceneaux & Weiss, 2010) and there has been some analysis of user’s opinions on the long-term storage of tweets (Marshall & Shipman, 2011). However, absent thus far in the academic literature are analyses of the ways Twitter talks about itself and how this language, if adopted and internalized uncritically, could impact users’ understanding of the temporality of tweets. There is, however, a body of relevant literature that informs this line of inquiry and provides a justificatory basis for exploring this particular arrangement of users, discourse, and perceptions of technology.
When a technology is relatively new and open to a period of “interpretive flexibility” (Pinch & Bijker, 1984), the shaping of discourse regarding a technology becomes a means for guiding its future uses and facilitating closure (Wyatt, 2004). As Pfaffenberger (1992) notes, any new artifact “must be discursively regulated by surrounding it with symbolic media that mystify and therefore constitute the political aims of the technology” (p. 294). The discourse produced by the technology’s creators therefore serves as an important tool that can help guide individual understandings and uses, as well as helping to structure the technology’s initial interpretive flexibility.

As Twitter diffused throughout society — and as the public (and potential user pool) became familiar with the service — individual understandings of technology took shape. The owners of Twitter helped guide this process (and still do to this day) by generating their own descriptions of what the technology does and how users can use it. This language and this discourse then took on the form of organizational rhetoric.

Cheney and McMillan (1990) describe organizational rhetoric as a system of communication with a common purpose that involves the coordinated activities of two or more persons. The organization then, “emerges and functions rhetorically through the communicative practices of its members and stakeholders” (Cheney & McMillan, 1990, p. 101). Businesses, such as Twitter, can have specific arguments that manifest in part through messages made publicly by organizational leaders (such as CEOs, founders, and public relations representatives). In Twitter’s case, its founders, Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, and Biz Stone have each produced messages in various media outlets that describe the technology of Twitter, what the technology does, and how one might use it. These messages function as organizational rhetoric as the founders represent Twitter and are an important object of study as the messages represent symbolic media meant to help guide interpretation of the technology.

Gallant and Boone (2008) argue, “Internet sites are inherently rhetorical” (p. 185). As such, the messaging present on the Twitter website and structure of the Twitter website itself additionally function in a way meant to help guide individual interpretation of the technology. Of particular importance is the instructional language on Twitter.com that orients first-time users and visitors to the operation of the site, as this similarly serves as an argument regarding the temporal properties of Twitter and the permanence of tweets. Analyzing Twitter’s website, in addition to the content of messages about Twitter created by Twitter’s founders in popular media outlets, allows for reflection on how social understanding and knowledge of Twitter is partially shaped through discourse, and how this language may serve its speakers interests.

3 Method

3.1 Research Question

The research question that this paper addresses is: How does Twitter’s organizational rhetoric address the temporality of the Twitter platform?

3.2 Content Analysis

This study relies on a content analysis as its mode of discovery. Content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make inferences from text about the message itself (Weber, 1990). This content analysis relies on the assumption that, within Twitter’s organizational rhetoric, there is an inherent argument about how Twitter should be conceptualized by a broader public just learning about the technology. The comments on the Library of Congress announcement point anecdotally to confusion over the permanence and temporality of the service. This analysis seeks out descriptive language within Twitter’s own organizational rhetoric that explains the temporal properties of Twitter and tweets in order to understand the how the technology was being described through this discourse. This analysis focuses on descriptions of what Twitter is, how Twitter operates, metaphors that compare Twitter to other
technologies, and any language that accounts for the temporality of the service of Twitter and tweets within Twitter’s organizational rhetoric. Comparisons to other older technologies within these messages are particularly important, as Liparitito (2003) writes, “[w]hen confronted with a truly new technology that had not been an option before, consumers must find some way to match the unexpected with previous experience,” (p. 56). Similarly, and perhaps more bluntly, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) remind us, “[m]etaphors create realities for us” (p. 156).

3.3 Data Collection

Twitter founders Evan Williams, Biz Stone and Jack Dorsey have been active in discussing their service in the media since Twitter’s founding in 2006. Individually and collectively, they have given interviews in a variety of news outlets, talk shows, and at a variety of technology conferences. At these locations, they have discussed topics regarding Twitter, what Twitter offers users and the world at large, and the history of Twitter. The language that this group uses to describe Twitter in interviews also inherently functions as an argument for how others might conceptualize and view the service.

The interviews analyzed and considered in this study were located through searches on the founders’ names in video hosting sites such as YouTube and Google Video. In identifying salient interviews, preferential treatment was given to older interviews and interviews that occurred on major news outlets or talk shows. This method of selection should be considered as purposive sampling, but does represent a potential limit regarding generalizability of the findings. Eight interviews were considered as part of this analysis: a 2006 interview with Evan Williams, Biz Stone and Jack Dorsey on the technology interview program called “LunchMeet”, a 2009 interview with Biz Stone part of the You 2.0 Documentary Project, a 2009 with Biz Stone on Comedy Central’s Colbert Report, a 2009 interview with Biz Stone and Jack Dorsey on ABC’s The View, a 2009 interview with Jack Dorsey on Agora News, a 2010 interview with Biz Stone on CNN’s Wolf Blitzer’s Newsroom, a 2011 interview with Biz Stone on PBS’s NewsHour, and a 2011 interview with Jack Dorsey on the Charlie Rose Show. After identification, interviews were then transcribed and coded by hand.

In addition to the interviews, the Twitter website itself is home to numerous rhetorical messages that contain language meant to guide users’ sense-making process. This study approaches the rhetorical messages on Twitter’s homepage as they appeared to an individual who is using the site through a web-browser for the first time. This distinction is necessary as Twitter offers mobile versions of their site and as there are numerous applications for various mobile and cellular devices that also interface with Twitter. These other locations are areas to be explored in future work. The analysis this study undertakes includes the landing page for Twitter.com, the sign-up page, the “Home” page, the Terms of Service, and Twitter’s Privacy Policy.

3.4 Coding Schema

The types of content within the interviews and within Twitter’s website that is of interest to this study are: the descriptions of what Twitter is, how Twitter operates, metaphors that compare Twitter to other technologies, and any language that accounts for the temporality of Twitter or tweets. Once identified, this language was then coded into one of three categories that emerged during the identification of salient content: language that suggests that Twitter maintains an archive of tweets, language that suggests Twitter does not maintain an archive of tweets, and language that focuses on the real-time nature of tweets, neglecting any description of how tweets are treated in the long-term.
4 Findings

4.1 Interviews

In the interviews analyzed here, Twitter’s founders never exactly say that tweets are kept indefinitely, nor do they ever exactly say that tweets are ephemeral. The long-term storage of tweets is not explicitly discussed. Instead, the most common descriptions of Twitter itself are messages that describe Twitter as a “real-time” media while neglecting any explanation of how tweets are treated in the long-term. This type of content is present exclusively in six of the eight interviews considered for the analysis. These types of descriptions predominantly focus on the immediacy of the technology. For example, in an interview with Wolf Blitzer on CNN, Biz Stone was asked summarize the real point of Twitter. He responded:

I’d say the real point of Twitter is to help people discover and share what it is that’s happening around them in their world. It really has become an information network that’s very focused on real-time [emphasis added]. (Blitzer, 2010)

This style of response, with particular focus on the words such as “real-time” and “immediacy,” is present in other founders’ remarks as well. When asked what Twitter is best at in a 2009 interview with AgoraNews, Jack Dorsey responded:

Well I think...I think what Twitter is best at is only that the sum of the people that use it. I think as a technology it brings a lot of immediacy to the conversation. It allows people to interact in real-time and it allows a great mass of people to interact and report from wherever they are and whatever they’re doing. So I think that that really engages people in a way like never before so you can, you can be out witnessing something, you can be out helping someone, you can be at, you know, a hall of government and just talk about what you’re seeing what you’re experiencing and other people read that in real-time and that may inspire them to act on their own [emphasis added]. (AgoraNews, 2009)

However, not all of the interviews contained these consistent descriptions or metaphors for what Twitter is and what Twitter is like. Two interviews contained metaphors that constitute conflicting messages regarding the temporality of Twitter. The first appeared in a 2006 interview with “@LunchMeet”. In this interview, when describing Twitter, the founders referred to Twitter being like “a chatroom” (Slutsky & Codel, 2006), which is a technology that may or may not have centralized messages storage. Seconds later, they also state that the service is “like LiveJournal” (Slutsky & Codel, 2006). In terms of metaphors, LiveJournal.com is a blogging/diary platform substantively different than a chat-room with quite differing message retention. LiveJournal maintains an accessible database of posts made to its servers whereas a chat-room may or may not. Given that this was an interview very early in Twitter’s existence as an organization, it is possible that Twitter had not standardized its messaging quite yet. In a much later interview, when Biz Stone and Evan Williams appeared on ABC’s morning talk show The View, the two contradict the statements made in the 2006 interview. In explaining Twitter to The View host Whoopi Goldberg, Biz Stone states, “It’s really different than e-mail, chat rooms and all this stuff you might be used to” (Walters, 2009). This is also the first instance of a negative association being presented in the interviews. Here the audience is told that instead of Twitter being like other technologies, it is actually unlike these other technologies.

In the same interview on The View, Stone uses language that suggests a level of ephemerality to the medium and reemphasizes its real-time nature. He states:

If you ignore e-mail for a few days it just piles up. Social networks, the same thing, are you my friend, yes/no. That’s not what Twitter is... Twitter is an information network, you go on and you say, ‘I want to follow this source of information, I want to follow CNN, I want to follow The View, I’d like to follow Ev [Evan Williams], I’d like to follow my mom, and I want to curate this
information in real-time and receive it in real-time because its meaningful to me, and in that way it’s very different’ [emphasis added]. (Walters, 2009)

Here, we can see how the metaphor of messages piling up could conjure the image of an archive and a sense of longevity and — within this message — we are told that Twitter is not like this. This statement is then immediately followed with a renewed focus on the real-time nature of the platform. While Twitter’s founders are not explicitly claiming that Twitter is ephemeral, the content of this particular message does offer a potential misleading metaphor that may help could influence a user’s understandings of this technology. If taken uncritically, this problematic metaphor, in combination with a few conflicting messages, and in addition to the heavy focus on the “real-time” nature of the platform in Twitter’s organizational rhetoric, could play a role in the development of user expectations and understandings of the longevity of tweets that did not match what actually happens to tweets.

4.2 Twitter.com

The Twitter website itself is home to numerous messages in the form of organizational rhetoric that may guide users in the sense-making process. Almost all of these messages orient users exclusively towards the real-time nature of Twitter while neglecting any discussion of how tweets are stored in the long-term. The first page that a visitor to the Twitter website arrives at contains large text on the left hand side of the screen stating “Welcome to Twitter. Find out what’s happening, right now, with the people and organizations you care about [emphasis added]” (twitter.com, 2013a). Older versions of the website included similar language such as:

Discover what’s happening right now, anywhere in the world. Twitter is a rich source of instant information. Stay updated. [Twitter’s landing page, 2010, emphasis added] (Social Media Performance Group, 2013)

Follow your interests. Instant updates from your friends, industry experts, favorite celebrities, and what’s happening around the world [Twitter’s landing page, 2011, emphasis added]. (Social Media Performance Group, 2013)

Across these statements, we can see how visitors are, and have been, oriented towards the real-time and instantaneous nature of Twitter as soon as the landing page loads.

The sign-up page is the next page that a user who does not already have an account would encounter. On this page, a new user is asked for “Full Name”, “E-mail”, “Password”, and “User Name”. Underneath, text appears that states:

By clicking the button [The button reads: Create my Account], you agree to the terms below: These Terms of Service ("Terms") govern your access to and use of the services, including our various websites, SMS, APIs, email notifications, applications, buttons, and widgets, (the "Services" or “Twitter”), and any information, text, graphics, photos or other materials uploaded, downloaded or appearing on the Services (collectively referred to as "Content"). (twitter.com, 2013b)

Only when a user clicks on the box containing the Terms of Service (not a necessary or required step) does the box expand to the full eight print pages of text, thereby revealing the full user agreement (but not the privacy policy, though there is a link to the privacy policy on the page). Twitter’s Terms of Service and Privacy Policy are the documents that govern user access and use of the Twitter service. While anyone who has ever setup a Twitter account has agreed to these conditions, a 2011 survey found that, “Only 18 percent of social media users surveyed said that they read the terms and conditions for posting to the sites they use” (Dugan, 2011, para. 7). By agreeing to these conditions, “you consent to the collection and use (as set forth in the Privacy Policy) of this information [any information that you provide to Twitter]” (twitter.com, 2013d, para. 6).
Despite their length, the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy never explicitly state that Twitter maintains a permanent record of tweets, nor does it state that tweets are ephemeral. Instead, the Terms of Service includes statements such as, “What you say on Twitter may be viewed all around the world instantly [emphasis added]” (twitter.com, 2013d, para. 3), and “By submitting, posting or displaying Content on or through the Services, you grant us a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free license (with the right to sublicense) to use, copy, reproduce, process, adapt, modify, publish, transmit, display and distribute such Content in any and all media or distribution methods (now known or later developed)” (twitter.com-d, 2013d, para. 12). In these quotes, there again appears language that invites users to consider the real-time nature of the medium. Absent from this is language that might present a user with messaging that describes the long-term storage of tweets. While this license may grant Twitter the legal right to archive tweets in perpetuity and share such an archive with the Library of Congress, there does not appear to be any predominance of language that would invite a reader to understand that this was happening.

Once a user has completed a brief orientation that describes the process of how to follow users, they are taken to the primary Twitter interface. The Twitter “Home” interface itself has changed significantly since its original design in 2006. The question that appeared at the top of the screen in 2006, “What are you doing right now?” was eventually replaced by the question, “What’s happening?” and, as of the time of writing in 2013, has been replaced with the much more simple and less inquisitive “Compose a new Tweet…” (twitter.com, 2013c). A text input box allows users to enter a response, with a button next to it marked, “Tweet”. Clicking this button sends the message off into the world of Twitter. A message just sent shows up in a user’s “Timeline”, the area directly underneath the input box. The Timeline displays, chronologically, both the messages of the user and the messages that have been sent by individuals that a user follows. Located on the left hand side of the screen are information about who a user is following, who is follow that user, suggestions for more people to follow, and an area marked, “Trends”. Within the realm of this interface there are several inherent rhetorical messages about the way that users should experience the site and the historicity of messages.

The historical prompts “What’s happening?” and “What are you doing right now?” invite a user to form a response tweet that is of the moment; less so “Compose new Tweet…” These are questions that Twitter seems to be asking of users (or perhaps, one’s followers are asking of the user). Regardless of attribution to a speaker however, the historical prompts orient a user towards the “real-time.”

When the user enters a tweet, it is immediately populated within the chronological timeline on the user’s page. A small bit of text to the right of each “tweet” appears in the timeline that describes how long ago that message was posted. The twenty most recent tweets appear in the timeline as a default. Only when a user scrolls down further and further on the page do older messages appear. Despite the fact that these older messages appear, there is a technical limit on the number of “tweets” that can be accessed through the timeline: 3200 (Owens, 2011). A user can only “go back” 3200 tweets into their history before the site will load no more. Twitter, beginning in January of 2013, began rolling out a new feature that does allow users access to their own historical archive, but not that of others in their timeline, and it does not populate the messages through the timeline itself. However — and importantly when considering the implications for Twitter’s overall efforts at shaping user understandings of the technology — Twitter went seven years before implementing this feature. There are multiple readings that can be made of the Twitter timeline itself.

The most recent tweets appear at top, and are therefore the first thing that a visitor sees. This seems to orient users towards the “real-time” nature of the medium by providing the most recent communications first. While some have compared Twitter to a diary, a paper diary confronts a viewer with the oldest messages first. A diary confronts a viewer with a history — a diachronic display of messages — by making all of the messages it contains visible. Twitter does not make the entire body of messages that a user has posted on the site immediately visible. Instead, they are hidden from sight, only viewable once a
user begins to scroll down through their timeline. In this way, users are oriented towards the “real-time.” However, if they chose to — and they must have chosen to in order to see it — users could access older messages by scrolling down. This created the possibility that users may draw the conclusion that their entire history of messages is in fact being archived. It creates the possibility that, despite the orientation towards the real-time, users may realize the longevity of their tweets. The fact that this particular section is even called, “Timeline” seems to favor this interpretation. Calling it a “Timeline” invites a user to imagine a sense of history. However, a user can only access 3200 messages within the Timeline. It would seem difficult to imagine that a user would ever scroll back through 3200 messages, as this would require over 160 “next 20 messages” loading pages and would certainly necessitate a lot of patience. However, for those that did go that far back and then found they could load no more messages, what conclusion could they reasonably come to? It seems plausible that if a user could not access older messages beyond the 3200 tweet limit, that they might draw the conclusion that these tweets no longer existed. Here, the rhetoric of the technology itself is ambiguous, and an interpretation of ephemerality is possible if one concluded: once a certain number of tweets are populated, the old ones disappear. Of course, this is not the technical reality. Twitter itself maintains all tweets in any Timeline beyond the 3200 cut-off point.

In summary, the messaging present on Twitter.com primarily orients users towards considering the real-time nature of the medium, instead of an understanding of tweets as ephemeral or permanent. It does not seem like much of a stretch to say that Twitter’s organizational rhetoric is focused on the here and now. Users are given an interface and tools on that interface that orient users towards the most recent, the current, and the trendy. Until the introduction of the individual archive retrieval function in early 2013, users were not given an interface, or tools, or a predominance of messaging that would orient them towards considering their entire history of tweets. Even today, the individual archive retrieval tool is buried at the bottom of the user’s settings page, and Twitter does not make mention of the Library of Congress archive in the text someone new to the service would encounter in the process of signing up.

5 Discussion

Twitter is not real-time. It is simulacra; an archive of messages that have been posted to a database some time ago. When we go to Twitter, we are not seeing the present, we are seeing the (sometimes not very distant) past. However, there is a critical reason that Twitter, as an organization, may have chosen to use this language of real-time and to focus on the immediacy of the medium: It is imperative for their business model. Twitter must create a self-fulfilling prophecy, discursively regulating the platform by surrounding it with symbiotic media that constitute it as a place to go to gain access to real-time information (to borrow from Pfaffenberger).

John Perry Barlow (1994) wrote, “Most information is like farm produce. Its quality degrades rapidly”. Yesterday’s news or gossip is not as valuable as today’s. Twitter’s value is highly dependent on the freshness of the content on its site. But in order for Twitter to offer “real-time,” they require a massive user-base that is constantly producing the real-time. To recruit this user-base, Twitter must offer a view of the world in 140-characters whose refresh rate is as up to date as possible, thereby offering a tantalizing source of information with a particular kind of value. Therefore, the success of Twitter as a business is partially dependent on their ability to position their platform through organizational rhetoric and discourse and to begin to shape the future uses of this technology through these tools. Through this messaging, Twitter’s founders speak of capturing the “real-time” and argue that they offer an exquisite and unique tap into what’s happening right now. Unfortunately, while simultaneously remaining silent about what happens to tweets in the long-term, users who overly rely on this discourse as an input into their understandings of the technology may be put at a disadvantage.

The Library of Congress was not alone in announcing its 2010 partnership with Twitter. One of Twitter’s founders also made an announcement on Twitter’s official blog. In this announcement, Biz Stone
explained that tweets have “become part of significant global events around the world” (Stone, 2010, para. 2), and that, “A tiny percentage of accounts are protected, but most of these tweets are created with the intent that they will be publicly available” (Stone, 2010, para. 2). Despite the assertion that Twitter users understood that what they were creating was “public,” Stone’s blog entry contains no discussion of whether or not users realized that tweets might ever become part of a nation’s permanent historical collection. The results of the content analysis suggests that — based purely on the sampled organizational rhetoric — it would be quite unusual to develop this expectation. While users are oriented towards the “real-time,” there is a dearth of language and messaging that suggests the longevity of tweets. Users are given an interface, tools, and text that directs them towards the most recent and generally away from considering what happens to tweets in the long term. Combined with the inability to view Timeline histories beyond a 3200 message threshold until the 2013 addition of the personal archive feature, perhaps the anecdotal confusion that some users had over the permanence of tweets makes sense. Perhaps it should not be surprising that some users would have expected that older tweets remained inaccessible, and perhaps while all of those messages were possibly created with the intent that they will be available publicly, does this mean that users understood how long that public life-span would be?

In an interview discussing how journalists approach using Twitter, Andy Carvin, National Public Radio’s senior product manager for online communities, manages to capture the complex relationship between the real-time nature of Twitter and the long-term implications of an archive of individual tweets, stating:

When I’m tweeting, I generally don’t think about whether I’m contributing to a historical record. There are definitely times when I feel the information I’m retweeting certainly is, but not really for my own tweets... Generally, when something big is going on, I’m in the zone and not thinking of much else except capturing what’s happening and figuring out what’s true. I definitely try to add context when it seems appropriate, but it’s really directed at real-time consumption. (Tenore, 2011, para. 4).

Carvin’s sentiment — that he does not think about whether he’s contributing to a historical record in the moment — seems quite reasonable. Having every user contemplate the historical record every time they tweet would add a major speed bump of reflexivity. At 500 million tweets a day, perhaps it is much easier to simply not think about the digital trail that is left behind over time as we engage in communication in this medium. When the messaging present about Twitter focuses users on the real-time and is simultaneously silent, ambiguous, or even occasionally uses problematic metaphors that may influence understandings about the indefinite storage of tweets, users are dissuaded from engaging in temporal reflexivity. They are discouraged from considering both the historical record and the future of this data.

This raises a number of potential concerns and questions about user agency and self-direction. First, as Yochai Benkler (2007) suggests, “A fundamental requirement of self-direction is the capacity to perceive the state of the world, to conceive of available options for action, to connect actions to consequences, to evaluate alternative outcomes, and to decide upon and pursue an action accordingly” (p.147). If self-direction is predicated upon an individual’s perception of the world, and the organizational rhetoric and messaging about Twitter helps shape this perception, and this language was misleading, ambiguous, or created any illusion of ephemerality, individuals could be impeded in their ability to set appropriate ends in their use of the technology.

Second, as the Library of Congress intends on making this archive of Twitter available to researchers, it is important to ask questions about the secondary use of this data set. Just because a user may have sent a tweet, does this now indicate that they understood that tweets would be around for (virtually) forever, archived in the Library of Congress? Further research is needed to establish what Twitter
users’ understandings of the temporality of the platform actually are outside of the anecdotal comments on the Library of Congress archive announcement.

Lastly, there are a number of interesting political economic issues at stake here that warrant further investigation. As Scholz (2008) points out, much of the labor on Web 2.0 sites is unpaid user labor on which the businesses that run these sites are reliant on in order to turn a profit. In the case of Twitter, language that describes the platform as anything other than “real-time” could prompt user reflexivity regarding the service. User reflexivity in turn could impede the timely production of tweets, and when Twitter’s business and profits depend on having users populate information into a system as quickly as possible in order to produce a simulacra of real-time, maybe, it is a lot easier not to give users a reason to slow-down and contemplate both the historical record and the future of this information.

6 Conclusion

Through a content-analysis of Twitter’s organizational rhetoric present in interviews and of the Twitter website itself, this paper has demonstrated that nearly all of the messaging about Twitter created by Twitter, particularly early in Twitter’s existence, focused on establishing the real-time nature of the medium while neglecting descriptions about what happens to tweets in the long-term. In light of this messaging, this paper has also highlighted a number of unsolved questions about assumptions about user’s intent for tweets, about user’s abilities to self-direct, and about the use of the Library of Congress archive. There is, however, more work that needs to be done to more thoroughly investigate Twitter users’ understandings of the medium and the longevity of tweets, to see how user understandings do or do not conflict with descriptions of medium, and to trace the influence that Twitter’s organizational rhetoric has had. This paper, however, is an important first-step that establishes how Twitter has been described through the rhetoric of its founders.

7 References


### 7.1 Interviews


