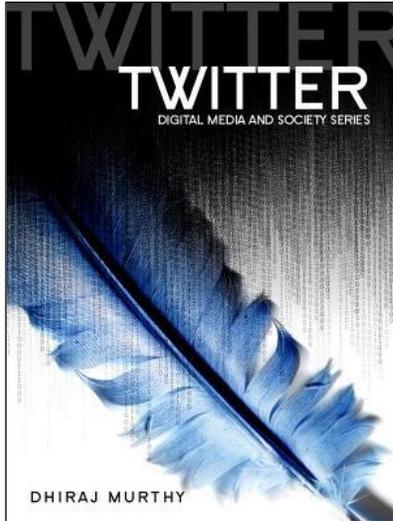


Dhiraj Murthy, **Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age**, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013, 193 pp., \$ 22.95 (paperback).

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Since the advent of social media, scholars have made broad statements about its impact on society. The optimists celebrate social media and predict that it will cause more participation and democratization. The cynics, in contrast, condemn social media as shallow and arbitrary, while equating the death of meaningful communication and intimacy with social media's mass proliferation. The problem with such polemics, however, is that both sides fail to offer a balanced treatment of social media's influence on society; instead, they revert to hyperbolic claims disguised as useful scholarship. Dhiraj Murthy, in **Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age**, attempts to fill this gap by showing both the significance and superficiality of social media in the digital age.

Murthy's central argument that Twitter "does not signal the death of meaningful communication" (p. x) is well-researched and supported by existing scholarship and empirical evidence. However, Murthy makes clear that, while Twitter "has the potential to increase our awareness of others and to augment our spheres of knowledge," the side effect of such a global network is that communication can, occasionally, become "more superficial" (ibid.). As such, Murthy grounds his thesis in the complexities of global reality, demonstrating that Twitter's reach is wide enough to encourage openness and democracy, but it is also too vast to be void of insignificance. Twitter, according to Murthy, leaves room for both.

The first chapter ("What is Twitter?") introduces the reader to the new social media by defining its characteristics. The purpose of this chapter is to establish the differences between Twitter and other social media like Facebook, and here Murthy cleverly explains why Twitter deserves its own book. Compared with Facebook, Twitter is more public. According to Murthy, Facebook functions to "keep ties between users active and vibrant," while Twitter seeks the "accumulation of more and more followers who are *aware* of a user's published content" (p. 8). In this way, Murthy defines Twitter as a microblog in which users share quick thoughts and reflections (limited to 140 characters) with other users.

The second chapter ("Contextualizing Twitter") illustrates the myriad ways that Twitter resembles the telegraph, but also explains crucial differences that give Twitter its novelty. Both technologies, according to Murthy, are used to send brief messages in a short amount of time, and both technologies are not without their controversial aspects. At one point, critics saw the telegraph as a "threat to letter

writing," but Murthy points out that the telegraph ultimately "highlighted the permanence of letter writing" (p. 15) to make it a significant medium. In effect, Murthy suggests that the immediacy of Twitter will give permanence to earlier, less efficient electronic media, and he predicts the cycle to continue when Twitter is replaced by the next communicative technology. This is not to claim that Twitter and the telegraph are identical. For Murthy, there are discernible differences between the two technologies. For instance, unlike the telegraph, Twitter costs nothing to use and is public, multicast, interactive, and networked, thus making it a product of the digital age.

Chapter Three ("Theorizing Twitter") moves toward a theoretical understanding of Twitter. Murthy is not interested in monolithic theories, however, and clarifies that by "exploring literature on media democratization, self-production, technological determinism, and interactionism, some basic theoretical frameworks have been introduced by which to understand Twitter's roles in social communication" (p. 25). Despite drawing on the work of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Manovich, Bourdieu, Herder, Descartes, Dreyfus, Turner, Therborn, and especially Goffman, Murthy constructs the chapter with accessible language, so that the general reader will not be confused by the wide array of theories that are woven into the discussion. Murthy devotes the most pages to Goffman, thereby identifying the theory in which he would prefer to situate Twitter. Murthy's references to Goffman intend to extend the noted sociologist's three key themes surrounding talk—ritualization, participation framework, and embedding—to the mediated space of Twitter. Nevertheless, this chapter highlights the various ways that Twitter can cross disciplines and inspire scholarship in numerous fields.

In the remaining four chapters—"Twitter and Journalism," "Twitter and Disasters," "Twitter and Activism," and "Twitter and Health"—Murthy merges theory with practice to make conclusions about Twitter's role as a social communication. In each of these chapters, Murthy refers to empirical evidence of historical tweets to convincingly convey Twitter's significance as a social media. However, Murthy is wise to call attention to its potential limitations as well, which makes for a careful, more nuanced discussion than one would expect.

For instance, Murthy acknowledges several ways that Twitter has altered journalistic practice. Twitter functions as a media space where news is ever present, and as a result, both "banal" and "profound" news is simultaneously produced in this space. In a given moment, a user in the United States may tweet about his breakfast, and at the same time, a user in Mumbai may tweet about a bomb blast. As a result, Twitter has produced more "citizen journalists," but Murthy ultimately argues that these Twitter-based citizen journalists "experience a short-lived fame as the public follows stories of interest through professional news media outlets" (p. 52).

In his discussion of Twitter and disasters, Murthy chronicles how Twitter is used to update the world on natural disasters. This, according to Murthy, allows a mass amount of people in a short amount of time to become informed, but the drawbacks are that only well-connected countries like Japan can update the world on their status, while less-connected countries, such as Pakistan, remain dependent upon Western users to spread the knowledge.

When addressing the relationship between Twitter and activism, Murthy maintains Twitter's role in "rattling" dictators, but insists that Twitter alone is not responsible for "toppling" dictators. He refers to the Arab Spring demonstrations in 2010 and the prominent role that Twitter played in anticipating revolutions. While Tweets did not bring Egyptians to the streets, as Murthy notes, they did "facilitate a diverse global network of individuals who participated in a wide-ranging set of mobilization efforts" (p. 114).

Murthy's final chapter on Twitter and health care is his most insightful. It is here where Murthy gets closest to the everyday use of Twitter and the ways in which private information like one's health is volunteered publicly. The result, as Murthy indicates, is that individuals can create support communities and connect to doctors more directly. Twitter shifts health practices in the same way that it alters journalistic practices, as it gives patients authority on medical advice by broadcasting their experiences to Twitter-based health communities.

Overall, *Twitter* is a well-articulated introduction to a social media that has changed our communication practices. Murthy argues that these changes are not as prodigious as the social media optimists would like us to believe, but the author's engagement with theoretical frameworks and real-life examples establish Twitter's importance and its impact on society. As a result, *Twitter* is a persuasive, balanced account of one of the most popular mediums in the world today.