

BOOK REVIEWS

Twitter and Mobile Communication

Dhiraj Murthy, *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 220 pp., U.S.\$22.95

Twitter, the microblogging and social networking service founded in 2006, has the following to say about itself on its blog:

we like to say that Twitter was born mobile. After all, the 140 character limit of Tweets was based on text messaging or SMS constraints. That means our platform was actually designed to allow anyone, anywhere to read, write and share Tweets. Today, mobile is often the primary way people around the globe experience Twitter. Sixty percent of our 200 million active users log in via a mobile device at least once every month. (<http://blog.twitter.com/2013/new-compete-study-primary-mobile-users-twitter>)

Taken at face value, this statement suggests that Twitter's potential is, in essence, twofold: it enables greater freedom of movement and circulation for both social networks and for human communication.

What, then, are the consequences of this newfound mediated mobility? After all, that seems like a tall order for tweets of a modest 140 characters each. Is the sociological outlook perhaps a bit less rosy than Twitter itself would have us believe? Enter Dhiraj Murthy, currently Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London and lately of Bowdoin College, and his new book on Twitter, the aptly titled *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age*. Murthy carves out a careful middle space between the optimists and the pessimists, arguing that:

Twitter has the potential to increase our awareness of others and to augment our spheres of knowledge, tapping us into a global network of individuals who are passionately giving us instant updates on topics and areas in which they are knowledgeable or participating in real-time. In doing so, however, the depth of our engagements with this global network of people and ideas can also, sometimes, become more superficial. (x)

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first three chapters provide a concise conceptual overview of Twitter, focusing upon what exactly it is, how to situate it within a long history of mobile communication beginning with the telegraph, and how to theorize it in terms of social interaction and identity formation and maintenance. The latter chapters of the book are a series of four in-depth and incisive case studies of Twitter's role in journalism, disasters, activism, and health. Murthy's accounts of both local and global participation



in natural disasters such as the Tohoku earthquake and the grassroots activism of the Arab Spring are especially notable; extensive online participation from those Twitter users quite remote from on-the-ground events underscore his two-pronged contention that, while expanding our awareness of global events, that awareness is shallow and transient.

Of particular importance for mobility studies is the thematic thread running throughout the text about how new media technologies compress and reconfigure space and time into a weakly felt “constancy of presence.” This in and of itself is not a new insight. However, Murthy’s empirical findings add nuance to the standard story. In his study of the protests and activism in Egypt in 2011, for example, he argues that while Twitter was of little relevance to organizing the movement on the ground, it did raise global awareness and therefore “directly led to increased diplomatic pressure and humanitarian aid.” Ultimately, he contends, “Twitter aids us more in tightly integrated globalized communication, McLuhan’s (1967) ‘global village,’ but may not be helping local community structures” (147). And even that potential is premised upon the construction of strong network ties – both on- and offline – which Twitter cannot accomplish by itself.

If this book has any weakness at all, it is that it does not give sufficient attention to Twitter’s linguistic diversity. Despite drawing upon case studies from around the world, Murthy does not delve into the ways in which 140 characters does not lend itself to the same density of information in English as it does in, say, Chinese. Though by no means a technological determinist, he certainly believes that new media technologies have some persuasive and structuring force, so some treatment of linguistic diversity would have been welcome in his treatment of how Twitter facilitates and constrains the mobility of users and their ideas. Nevertheless, this is an excellent and important work, and *Twitter* is highly recommended for scholars and students of digital media and mobile communication.

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Setting the Stage for Future Design Mobilities

Ole B. Jensen, *Staging Mobilities* (London: Routledge, 2013), 228 pp., 19 illustrations, £80

Like most readers, I am very quickly drawn into a book that actively involves the reader at the outset. The opening of Ole Jensen’s *Staging Mobilities* asks