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# Tweeting Globally, Acting Locally: Booming and Sustaining Disability Awareness through Twitter

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we describe on-going research that utilizes microblogging to *initiate and sustain* conversation within ad-hoc communities that have been formed around a film festival event exploring stigma, perspectives and public awareness of disability.

## **Keywords**

Microblogging, disability awareness, community, social media

## **Introduction**

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed to address major forms of discrimination faced by people with disabilities by eliminating architectural and communication barriers in existing facilities. Nevertheless, *attitudinal* barriers are still pervasive. The vast majority of the American public is neither positive nor negative toward people with disabilities, but prefers to ignore disability altogether [6]. To overcome these attitudinal barriers, people must become interested and engaged in new perspectives about difference and disability.

Social media activities such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter have contributed to the evolution of social and cultural changes, ranging from establishing political movements [5] to promoting particular social concerns e.g., the worldwide 350 rally [2], and actions for changing perceptions of disability rights [4]. McNely describes a microblogging system like Twitter as a powerful backchannel of communication that provides persistent, searchable, lightweight and conversational architecture [3]. He suggests that system attributes such as SMS functionality, simple syntax, low barriers to participation, and real-time delivery foster cognitive recursion and enable mobilization through collaborative meaning making. We believe microblogging systems can be used proactively for booming and sustaining disability awareness. Specifically, we envision *Twitter as backchannel communication to initiate and sustain conversation within ad-hoc communities around a film festival that explores multiple viewpoints on disability.*

Our central belief will be examined through qualitative studies, with a focus on the following:

- How do different user groups adopt and use Twitter to interact prior to, during, and after the event?
- What is the role of microblogging in informing participants as well as growing communities?
- How can disability awareness grow through shared Twitter interactions between local communities, participants, and a broader audience?

### **Project Background and Overview**

***Different From What? Film Festival.*** From January 29-31, 2010, a team of graduate students and members of the Equity Alliance at Arizona State University hosted the first annual *Different From What?*

(*DFW?*) Film Festival. This festival examines and questions the construction of difference and dis/ability through culture and film. Festival events were planned to help structure public discussion around images of disability in film as they relate to technology, media and society.

**Media Use.** The festival demands effective media tools in two ways: (a) Event marketing – organizers hosted a website<sup>1</sup> and publicizing through email lists and popular online advertising databases; these tactics, however, are only effective for reaching people in the lists/databases; (b) Enabling conversation – the festival provided face-to-face opportunities to network with filmmakers and invited guests through panel discussions and talkbacks after each film. Such onsite activities, however, limit the public conversation to those who were co-present at the festival.

Social media tools help make it possible for people to quickly capture and broadcast their insights to others. We were interested in transcending conversational frameworks by supporting dialogs across larger groups over longer time scales. This motivated our choice to leverage existing low-cost social networking infrastructures like Twitter.

### **Who Is Involved?**

The authors of this paper are currently conducting a study on Twitter use surrounding the festival. The target users fall into the following categories: (1) *local communities*—activists, educators, people with disability and their family members; (2) *event participants*—including filmmakers, scholars, students,

<sup>1</sup> *DFW?* Film Festival website - <http://differentfromwhatfilm.com>

local community members and other people who attend the festival; and (3) *online users*—general Twitter users (who may belong to the previous categories) who *tweet* about the festival events.

### How Twitter Is Involved?

Our study examines Twitter in three phases—before, during and after the festival, as it is used for purposes of *disseminating information* (e.g., marketing) and *supporting conversation around disability topics*. In the sequel we outline methods to foster and analyze Twitter use over the three categories of target users.

**Support Local Communities.** We believe Twitter can help form and strengthen connections among people within local communities by informing and engaging them in two particular ways. (a) Advocates and educators can instantly exchange relevant and supportive information with people with disabilities and their families. Twitter also serves as an instant talkback channel to sample responses for the sent information. (b) Twitter's "status update" structure provides an alternative communication method for people who are unable or prefer not to use their spoken voice to express concerns or opinions – those who cannot speak, have difficulty hearing, or *being heard*, such as persons who are mute, non-verbal, or profoundly deaf; or persons with autism or other intellectual disabilities that affect the clarity of their verbal communication.

Microblogging practices within local communities require a reasonably large network of people who share similar concerns. We used a festival Twitter account (DFWFilmFest) to build a social network that includes people involved or interested in the event and disability

issues. To gain users, we also publicized the account before and during the event to expand the network.

**Support Event Participants.** Twitter was a key tool for eliciting participation over the event.

Prior to the festival, Twitter served as a viral marketing tool. We used it both to send festival updates and prompt followers to reflect on popular film and disability. To address this, we posted Twitter trivia questions asking participants to answer questions like, "Name three Oscar winning movies whose main character has a disability," or "Name three memorable movie characters with disabilities and describe why they stood out."

During the festival, the primary task was mediating a space for event participants to exchange comments about event happenings. We extended spaces of face-to-face talk (i.e., panel discussions or film talkbacks) with the online conversation. To embed *online space* in the physical happening, we publicly displayed *TwitterHub*<sup>2</sup>, a billboard-like tool that dynamically re-represents a filtered network of recent Tweets. We also posted questions asking filmmakers and filmgoers to reflect on films or panels. Presently, the Twitter account remains active for participants to share reflections or continue its use in preparation for future events.

**Support Online Awareness.** With Twitter as a participatory tool, the event becomes accessible to a wider audience. It connects event participants with

<sup>2</sup> *TwitterHub*, created by Daragh Byrne, PhD student at CLARITY: Center for Sensor Web Technologies, Dublin City University. For more information about TwitterHub's use at the festival, visit: <http://differentfromwhatfilm.com/node/54>

people who may be interested in the topic but unable to attend the festival. The online conversation also works to promote general disability awareness.

### Challenges and Opportunities

As [1] recognizes, Twitter is not designed for traditional conversation. The current interface is limited to the number of refresh tweets—which may result in missed responses, and lack of interface for displaying tweets between two specific users—making it difficult to trace conversation threads. The 140-character tweet response length may also limit users’ ability to fully comment. We want to understand how the online conversation is affected or shaped by these factors. Our study may provide general recommendations on how to design an interaction structure that enables conversation in a social setting similar to the festival, and how analytical or visualization tools might be designed to enable reflection at this kind of event.

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### Author Background

**Yu-Ru Lin** is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Computer Science / Arts Media and Engineering at Arizona State University (ASU). Her research interests include analysis and visualization of interpersonal activities in online social networks. She has proposed techniques for analyzing community structures and evolutions in time-varying heterogeneous social networks, and developed visualizations to support community discovery in the context of everyday social media use. More information is available at <http://www.public.asu.edu/~ylin56/>.

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