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Twitter's transmitters

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The magic of 140 characters

BIZ STONE, one of Twitter's co-founders, uses the term "social alchemy" to describe the way in which short, seemingly inconsequential 140-character messages are often transformed into something of real value. Imagine, he says, that you are having a drink at an airport bar waiting to catch your flight. You send out a tweet explaining where you are and what you are drinking. Perhaps you get no response. But it is also possible that a friend who is "following" you on Twitter happens to be in the airport at the same time, sees your tweet and comes over to say hello. Thus what would otherwise have been a solitary moment is magically transformed into a pleasant encounter.

Such serendipity helped Twitter attract 58m web visitors in October last year, according to comScore. Recently its growth appears to have faltered in America, but the service is still expanding in countries such as Japan and Germany. This has led to speculation that it could eventually make a dent in Facebook's fortunes, even though size-wise it is not in the same league. Those who see a looming clash note that both companies are in the business of helping people to share information, and both have a real-time element to their services.

That is true, but the services differ in two important respects. The first is the nature of the relationships that underlie them. On Facebook, users can communicate directly only if one of them has agreed to be a "friend" of the other. On Twitter, people can sign up to follow any public tweets they like. The service, which boasts Ashton Kutcher (4.3m followers) and Oprah Winfrey (3m) among its most popular users, is in essence a broadcasting system that lets users transmit short bursts of information to lots of strangers as well as to their pals. Facebook, for its part, is more of an intimate, continuing conversation between friends.

This difference is revealed in research conducted by Mikolaj Jan Piskorski, a professor at Harvard Business School, and one of his MBA students, Bill Heil. They surveyed just over 300,000 Twitter users in May 2009 and found that more than half of them tweeted less than once every 74 days. They also discovered that the most prolific 10% of twitterers accounted for 90% of all tweets. On other online social networks the most active users typically produce just 30% of all content. Another survey published in June by Sysomos, a research firm that had analysed 11.5m Twitter accounts, found that one in five people that were signed up to the service had never posted anything.

Another big difference between Twitter and Facebook is in the kind of content that gets sent over their networks. Facebook allows people to exchange videos, photos and other material, whereas Twitter is part-blog, part e-mail. "There's a real difference here between the power of multimedia and the power of text," says Dom Sagolla, the author of a book about the art of twittering.

Even so, there are some tensions between the two services. Last year, after its takeover talks with Twitter stalled, Facebook introduced several Twitter-like changes to make it more attractive for real-time postings. It

Illustration by Ian Whadcock



also gave more visibility to its pages for athletes, celebrities and musicians and lifted the limits on the maximum number of fans that they could have on the site.

Still, Mr Stone says he sees Twitter as more akin to an outfit like Google than to Facebook. He describes the business as “an information company” whose users are keen to find out answers to what is happening in the world. The billions of tweets that Twitter is gathering up could certainly be the basis for a vast, searchable archive. The challenge facing Mr Stone and his colleagues is to find smart ways of transforming those raw data into profits.

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