More room for greater depth and detail: implications for academic research of Twitter's expanded character limit

*Twitter makes its data available in real-time and at no cost, making it a popular data source for many academic researchers. **Wasim Ahmed** discusses some of the implications of the decision to expand the character limit from 140 to 280. Greater space makes for greater depth and detail, addressing the difficulties of interpretation that 140-character tweets would sometimes present. However, some data retrieval tools have been slow to catch up, and the change may also make historical comparisons problematic. Overall, the character increase is of value to researchers and should inspire further innovative and exciting research.*

Last year Twitter increased its text character limit from 140 to 280 characters. Explaining this decision, Twitter cited its own research showing how users tweeting in English had become frustrated with the 140-character limit. There are a number of implications of this new feature deployment and as a researcher my mind was immediately cast to academic research. Here, I discuss some of the benefits and potential limitations of the character upgrade.

Before exploring the pros and cons it is important to reflect on the benefits of social media research in academia as well as in industry. One of the key benefits of research on social media is that the data is available almost in real-time. Emerging events can be studied immediately in a way that simply was not possible before the advent of social media platforms. Think of all of the resources required to rapidly study an emerging event. Social media has streamlined this process.

Furthermore, the platforms themselves allow human thoughts to flow through them without a structured research question. This means that certain discussions might emerge that would not in an interview and/or a survey, for instance.

Platforms such as Twitter are now just as influential as traditional media. They have an undeniable influence on society and content on social media has the potential to influence users as well as those who may not use the platform.

Image credit: Tangled up in Twitter by Quinn Dombrowski. This work is licensed under a CC BY-SA 2.0 license.

An obvious benefit of the character increase from 140 to 280 is the greater room for people to express themselves. One of the limitations of tweets written with the 140-character limit, from a research perspective, was that sometimes they lacked detail and were difficult to interpret. However, there is now more room to gain greater depth, and it will be interesting to see the rate at which Twitter users will utilise the greater space afforded to them. My own early impression is that it does indeed appear that the extra characters are being utilised by users.

Related to this, the character extension may position Twitter as a more attractive platform for market research due to the increase in tweet content. Brands will benefit from longer tweets from customers as this information is utilised as market intelligence.

In terms of analysis, one potential limitation of the change is the time required to code data from a qualitative perspective will likely increase. For quantitative research it may mean that certain machine learning algorithms need refining.

An early concern was that the academic tools built to retrieve data would not return 280-character tweets. The developers of certain tools were quick to catch up by releasing fixes, however, it appears some remain limited to the retrieval of 140-character tweets.

Another issue, as with any other major feature implementations, is that current research may differ from previous research conducted using Twitter, making historical comparisons difficult.

A benefit is that the increase in characters may lead to more interesting research from a number of disciplines. There are many and varied fields that utilise Twitter data for research; including history, linguistics, computer science, and sociology, to name only a handful. Having more characters to work with may open up further avenues for researching Twitter.

Twitter, unlike any other platform, provides access to its data free of cost. Anyone with an internet connection can begin to retrieve data from Twitter (with an updated overview of the tools available to do so featuring on the Impact Blog last year). For these reasons it has thrived as a platform for academic research. Overall, I would argue that the character increase is of value to researchers studying Twitter and will likely inspire further innovative and exciting research.

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About the author

Wasim Ahmed has recently submitted a PhD on social media research at the Information School, the University of Sheffield. Wasim has a very successful research blog, which includes posts about key trends and issues within social media but also covers more practical posts on using tools to capture and analyse social media data. Wasim is a keen Twitter user (@was3210), and will be happy to answer any technical (or non-technical!) questions you may have. He is always open to collaborate and/or speak at academic and industry events.