

First blogging, then social networks and now micro-blogging! The web 2.0 innovation rollercoaster is moving faster and faster. The latest hype is around **Twitter**: A short, message exchange platform connecting people worldwide in real-time in an unprecedented way. Is it just another frenzy information stream to cope with, or can development organizations benefit from it?

What is micro-blogging?

Short messages, often reduced to 140 characters, are the basis of this online publishing tool and social networking channel. Twitter asks you: "What are you doing?" Answers to this question, may be in the form of a short statement, another question, a recommended link or a little conversation. Each user follows selected people and their postings. That way multiple networks between micro-bloggers are created. Some messages evoke replies and small conversations, other are republished and find their way through the Twitter cosmos in real-time.

{youtube}ddO9idmax0o{/youtube}

Twitter can be accessed even through mobile phones via SMS. It is a good example on how Internet-based content becomes increasingly accessible from everywhere. It is almost like a ticker system with up to a few messages every minute, depending on how many people one follows. This endless stream of information, from intimate to professional, poses a challenge: How to digest another and even faster information channel? Can these 140 characters be vehicles for valuable information?

[Gerrit Visser](#) from [ICCO](#) : "In itself Twitter may not seem all that valuable. With Nonaka's old paradigm that knowledge management is essentially 'connecting people to people' I do think that Twitter in itself has an enormous potential. Yes it's value may depend very much on the people you are connected to. I even dare to say to the 'quality of your network'. The content that people share on Twitter differs as much as the people one is connected to.



The screenshot shows a vertical list of five tweets. Each tweet includes a small circular profile picture on the left, followed by the user's name and a short text message. The tweets are: 1. gaurisalokhe: e-Learning Conference exploring impact of Web 2.0 on Technology-Enhanced Learning. 2. josien: Ondanks z'n vakantie loop ik hier net @RBD45 tegen het lijf. Gaat hij me ook nog eens lekker maken met z'n nieuwe Storm. :-). 3. Mjamme: RT@Richard_White Here is a useful blog on social media by @directassist a VPA specialising in social media support. 4. saturngirl: I really like these people and RT @CCgroup's growing & hiring! B2B mobile & con tech PR AE, AM & AD, Reading London. 5. wdboer: Conference Development & Information Technologies: Mobile Phones & Internet in Latin America & Africa.

Without any doubt micro-blogging can easily increase ones information overload, but also offers a new channel for exchange, which creates synergies, supports networks of like-minded people and may offer valuable information. What is so far the experience? Micro-blogging is unlike blogging, much faster, less deep, but more social as each user has his/her own network. But whereas in Blogs an article is commented and linked, a Twitter message (tweet) can be republished in seconds and potentially reach thousands of people in minutes. It has been used for many, by the inventors unforeseen, ways such as [protest coordination](#) , or in cases of emergency it

[a student in Egypt from prison](#)

[saved](#)

The most famous example of a micro-blogging tool is Twitter, but there are other services such as [Identi.ca](#) , an open source alternative based on [Laconica](#) . But the choice of the tool depends on how micro-blogging will be used.

How can an organization benefit from micro-blogging?

Public relation or stakeholder dialogue

So far micro-blogging has been used either externally to promote the own organization, or to engage within a community of practice or with stakeholders. Some development organizations are using twitter to promote their mission and operations . These include [UNHCR](#) with over 150 thousand twitting followers, the [World Food Programme](#)

, [OECD](#)

or the

[World Bank](#)

. Some organisations use micro-blogging as a channel for interacting with people interested in their work. The system offers the opportunity for sharing information about the organization, networking with potential partners, and discussing issues with a broader audience. In the first case micro-blogging is confined to disseminating press releases. In the second case the organization interacts with its tweeting subscribers in the form of a rolling conversation. Needed time and invested resources are obviously much higher in the latter case. Smaller organizations, which are less known and have a small community of followers, use micro-blogging creatively to raise awareness about their work or funds. Examples are

[Farmradio](#)

or

[Camfed](#)

Internal information sharing

Another way to use micro-blogging is internal to an organization. As an example one can share information within a team working out of different locations. It can be like a daily ticker of work exchange. In terms of knowledge sharing the system offers the following:

- a central place where to share information
- the opportunity for “pulling” information instead of receiving many “pushed” emails
- synergies and access to valuable information, otherwise not known and
- a chronology of team efforts.

[Meena Arivananthan](#) of the [ICT-KM Program](#) writes that "Micro-blogging on Twitter or Yammer reduces the need for email exchanges, which help de-clutter your inbox. The versatility in sharing your messages through a variety of ways reduces the dependency on email access." Yammer offers such an environment for organizations, where exchange happens only between users of the same organization. Yammer is offered outside of the organization firewall and has a great service, but hosts some part of organizational information.

The World Food Programme [gives some insights in a blog post about its experiment](#) with micro-blogging, particular to connect colleagues stationed in different locations. Another interesting example is offered by

[Instedd, which developed an application called GeoChat](#)

. The application has been designed to address crisis situations and makes use of Twitter in combination with mobile phones telephony and geo-referencing. "GeoChat allows you and your team to stay in touch in a variety of ways."



Time to experiment

Micro-blogging is still fairly new in the fast developing Internet, but has shown many unexpected benefits. Organizations can use it for many different purposes. If intelligently adapted, it can replace other tools for information sharing and can help dealing with the communication constraints inherent to a decentralized organization. Experimenting is the first step necessary for assessing the benefits one could derive from such a tool, the price tag being an added stream of information.

To get started you may want to subscribe to the Web2forDev tweets at <http://twitter.com/web2fordev>

Author: *Christian Kreutz*