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(i): Social Media

IS TWITTER A SUCCESSFUL CHANNEL TO USERS? A CASE STUDY

Submitted by CSO Ireland

I. INTRODUCTION

Dictionary Definition

Verb: twitter twi-tu(r)

Make high-pitched sounds, as of birds

1. At the start of 2010 the Central Statistics Office (CSO) considered new methods of disseminating statistics. A number of options were investigated including the use of an application for smart phones. At the time the resources and skills were not available to produce such an application. As an alternative the Office started announcing new statistical releases via Twitter. This allowed users to receive messages about releases on their phones via SMS or to use a standard Twitter phone app to access the information.

2. This paper examines the policy applied to the use of Twitter and assesses the public reaction to this new facility. Also examined are the cost benefits and the risks involved in using Social Media for dissemination purposes.

II. THE SET UP AND POLICIES

3. When one examines Twitter feeds from commercial and government organisations, different styles of activity become apparent. With some of them, there is a very informal style; with others there is a more formal wording to the tweets. The frequency of tweeting can vary from every hour to one a month. Before a user becomes a follower they usually check the feed to decide whether they like the content and style. In that context, it is very important to define and maintain a consistent style and frequency.

4. @CSOIreland adopted the following policy –

¹ Prepared by Brian Costello, Dissemination Division (Brian.Costello@cso.ie).

- Whenever the CSO publishes a release (which is always at 11am), a tweet is issued containing the headline and a link to that release.
- A very limited number of other ad-hoc announcements are issued as tweets.
- @CSOIreland follows a limited number of state or international organisations.
- The Office does not engage with or respond to any tweets even if they refer to @CSOIreland or the CSO in general.

5. Google FeedBurner passes the RSS feed for Latest Releases and Publications into Twitter. The headline for the release is used as the text for the tweet and a short URL to the release is provided. No intervention is required once the RSS feed has been updated. @CSOIreland generally tweets just over 20 tweets per month, 90% of which are via the RSS feed with 10% as ad hoc manual tweets. The Dissemination Division takes ultimate responsibility for what is tweeted. Requests often come from other CSO divisions to issue Twitter announcements, but these are rationed to what would be considered "newsworthy" tweets for a significant number of followers. The view is that "over-tweeting" may cause followers to cancel off (unfollow) @CSOIreland. Ideally the number of tweets should range from 5 to at most 10 a week. It was also considered to split releases across multiple Twitter accounts, one for the Economy, one for Agriculture, etc, but in the end the Office opted for a single feed. Followers have reacted positively to the variety of topics covered by the single feed.

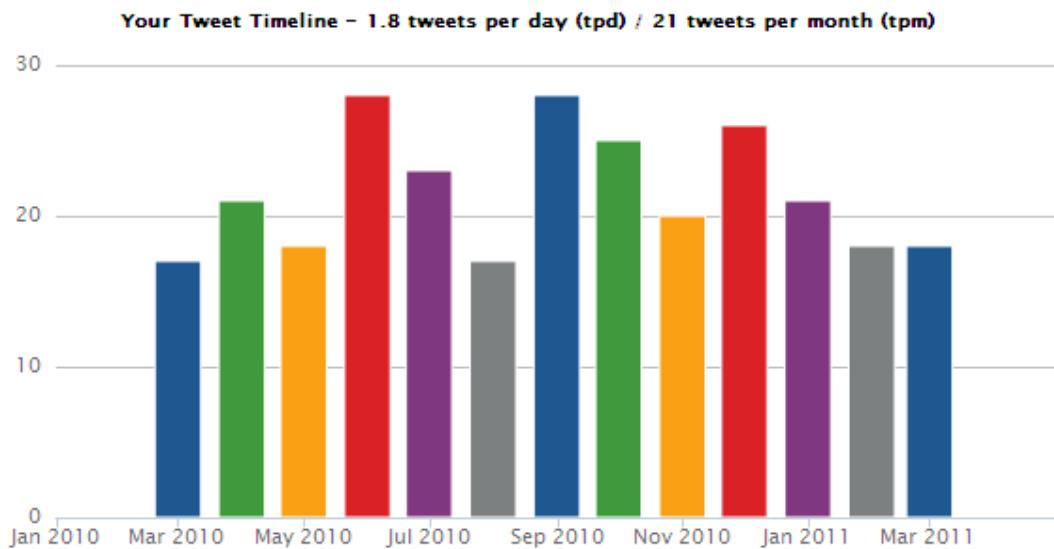


Figure 1. The number of tweets per month from @CSOIreland

6. The policy is to use Twitter as a one-way channel for information. The Office does not engage in any conversational communication either to specific followers or to all followers. There are a very limited number of tweets from the public posing questions to the CSO and no response is given to them. It is assumed that if they require the information they will go through the established channels (information@cso.ie or via telephone) to get the information. @CSOIreland does not as a matter of course follow its followers, and this prevents them from sending Direct Messages which require actioning. This policy may be revised at a future point.

III. OUR FOLLOWERS

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7. When the CSOIreland Twitter feed started in March 2010 it was hoped to achieve in the region of 250 followers. This has been well exceeded with the number in April 2011 having reached over 1,800 and continuing to rise on a daily basis. Followers range from politicians to students, from state organisation to small businesses. When compared to other similar twitter feeds, relative to populations in other countries, it rates well. The other methods of notifications to users are mailing lists (which Twitter has now well exceeded) and RSS feeds. The Releases and Publications RSS feed has in the region of 1000 visits per day so with Twitter at over 1,800 followers it has now become the main notification channel for users of CSO statistics.



Figure 2. Followers, politicians; students; state organisation and small businesses

8. Another aspect of Twitter which affects the coverage is the number of re-tweets a feed will get. This provides a multiplier factor to the coverage of announcements particularly if the re-tweeting is carried out by Influential or Highly Influential followers. The CSO regularly measures this activity using Topsy.com. It gives the Office feedback on what releases are creating interest. In the case below one tweet about small business R&D was re-tweeted six times so it went out to our followers and a further 5000 followers.

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RT @TheDigitalHub: RT @CSOIreland: Almost €1.9bn spent on research and development activities
http://goo.gl/fb/PvNNQ
athenamediae 12/15/2010 [retweet]

RT @newmorningip: Small business R&D spend in 2010 up by 42% yoy http://bit.ly/fJ47Lv Make sure you
are claiming your tax credits! http: ...
fplogue 12/15/2010 [retweet]

Small business R&D spend in 2010 up by 42% yoy http://bit.ly/fJ47Lv Make sure you are claiming your
tax credits! http://bit.ly/faNPFa
newmorningip 12/15/2010 [retweet]

RT @CSOIreland: Almost €1.9bn spent on research and development activities http://goo.gl/fb/PvNNQ
eunan 12/15/2010 [retweet]

RT @CSOIreland: Almost €1.9bn spent on research and development activities http://goo.gl/fb/PvNNQ
thedigitalhub Highly Influential 12/15/2010 [retweet]

RT @CSOIreland: Almost €1.9bn spent on research and development activities http://goo.gl/fb/PvNNQ
sonofthesavage 12/15/2010 [retweet]

Almost €1.9bn spent on research and development activities http://goo.gl/fb/PvNNQ
csoireland 12/15/2010 [retweet]
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Figure 3 A sample of re-tweeting activity for @CSOIreland

II. THE HIGHS AND THE LOWS

9. The major benefit of Twitter as a feed over RSS is the information organisations can get from the activity around their tweets. The Twitter Bio can help to identify the type of

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people and organisations following a feed. Retweets and comments give an indication of interest in particular statistical releases. The Twitter search box along with “Tweets near you” is used to regularly monitor @CSOIreland for comments. Statistical divisions are encouraged to review Twitter activity around their own releases. The following are a number of the positive comments seen.

- *Everyone, say hello to @csoireland*
- *@CSOIreland Its great to see the disability question on the Census again. Very useful information for service planners.*
- *I nominate @CSOIreland for a Shorty Award in #government because they serve their purpose well on Twitter.*
- *Lastly (these are really, really useful) @CSOIreland @ElectionsIRL @Electionlit. End of #FF for this week.*
- *Measuring Ireland's Progress. Loves it. <http://bit.ly/bXsTAc> #statporn.*
- *Very interesting from @CSOIreland - gap between public and private sectors remains. <http://bit.ly/cFVPwe> (Full analysis on blog to come).*

10. There are also negative comments about the CSO on Twitter. Generally they are unrelated to the Twitter feed and are comments about the website and the difficulty in locating information. Even before the CSO started tweeting in 2010 there was plenty of tweets related to the CSO and statistics. With the @CSOIreland presence on Twitter it allows people to reference the feed to read the useful statistical outputs the Office provides. The following are some of the negative tweets.

- *Bad, bad Windows-dependent Irish gov stats site. <http://t.co/MEW7ASS>*
- *Trying to figure out the gender split in Ireland. <http://cso.ie> not being awfully helpful :S*
- *Lies, damned lies RT @CSOIreland: Tomorrow, 20.10.2010 is World Statistics Day*

11. The policy of not responding to negative tweets may be seen as a lack of defence of the reputation of official statistics. However there are three arguments which justified this as the correct stance. Firstly, the monitoring and responding to tweets would increase the workload for the Dissemination team significantly. Secondly, any response may generate further criticism and end up spiraling into an ongoing argument. Thirdly, there are comments being made about the CSO across bulletin boards, Facebook, Wikipedia and other areas of the web. The resources required to contribute to all these public fora would escalate over time. It is an excellent practice to monitor all comments about the Office on the web and Google Alerts is use to check daily on these. This can be helpful to allow the Office to react to problem areas but no direct and public responses to individual comments take place. Another approach could be to encourage staff to respond via personal Twitter identities to tweets. However this blurs the line between their personal activity on the web and official activity. Any statement made by staff of the Office regarding statistics should be made with the full authority and backing of the Office, in which case it should be made directly by an identifiable CSO source.

IV. COSTS AND BENEFITS

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12. The @CSOIreland Twitter feed is automatically supplied via the RSS feed http://www.cso.ie/rss/releases_publications.xml. This is directed via Google Feedburner into <http://twitter.com/#!/csoIreland>.



Figure 4. The RSS to Twitter flow for @CSOIreland

As the tweet source is an existing RSS feed, minor additional resources are needed to maintain the Twitter presence. Ad hoc tweets run at around 20 a year and these require at most a half hour for checking and issuing. A further half hour per week is taken up with monitoring activity on Twitter related to the @CSOIreland and checking on new followers.

13. The major benefit for CSO customers is that with most types of mobile phone accounts they can receive free SMS notification of new releases from the CSO. It allows them to use the short URL references to our releases for further communication and discussion of statistics on Ireland. Most of the CSO management team use Twitter to keep themselves up to date on the releases issued by the office. The benefit to the Office is that customers can now get notified without having to maintain email lists, although emails are still sent to circulation lists. The other major benefit to the Office is the feedback provided by monitoring Twitter retweets and comments on @CSOIreland.

V. ADVICE ON STARTING OUT WITH TWITTER

14. First and foremost decide on a policy for issuing tweets. Ensure that management supports this policy and maintain a consistent style, content and rate for the tweets. Do not consider interacting with others on Twitter until you have established your presence. Again ensure you have a clear policy of engagement if you go that route. Understand that within social networks a more casual style may be used but balance that against what the public may expect as the style from a statistical office. Consider the rate of tweeting very carefully. Have a regular supply of tweets but you should never saturate the timeline. All tweets should be relevant and should be of importance. Do not tweet casual comments or personal chat, your followers will rarely appreciate them. Remember the dictionary definition for twitter, *Make high-pitched sounds, as of birds*. The Twitter feed from an official statistics office should be like the strong hoot of a wise owl.

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