

# User burnout could threaten Twitter's prosperity

November 6 2013, by Ryan Nakashima

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The Twitter bird logo is on an updated phone post on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, Wednesday Nov. 6, 2013. Twitter is expected to price its initial public offering some time Wednesday night. The company recently raised its price range to \$23-\$25 per share, following strong investor demand, and is expected to start trading on the New York Stock Exchange on Thursday. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

They loved it. Now they hate it. A growing number of celebrities, athletes and self-promoters are burnt out and signing off of Twitter.

Many have gotten overwhelmed.

Some people built big audiences on the short messaging service only to have their followers turn against them. Others complain that tweets that once drew lots of attention now get lost in the noise.

As Twitter Inc. begins trading publicly Thursday, the company is selling potential investors on the idea that its user base of 232 million will continue to grow along with the 500 million tweets that are sent each day. The company's revenue depends on ads it inserts into the stream of messages.

But Wall Street could lose its big bet on social media if prolific tweeters lose their voice.

Evidence of Twitter burnout isn't hard to find. Just look at the celebrities who—at one time or another—have taken a break from the service. The long list includes everyone from Alec Baldwin to Miley Cyrus to "Lost" co-creator Damon Lindelof.

Actress Jennifer Love Hewitt lamented "all the negativity" she saw on the service when she quit, temporarily, in July. Actress Megan Fox left nearly a million followers dangling when she checked out in January, explaining that "Facebook is as much as I can handle." Pop star John Mayer deleted his account in 2011, saying Twitter absorbed so much of his thinking, he couldn't write a song.

"I was a tweetaholic," he told students during a talk at the Berklee College of Music.

If Twitter turns off celebrities who have a financial incentive to stay in close contact with fans, how can the company prevent average users from becoming disenchanting?

For some users, Twitter tiredness sets in slowly. At first, they enjoy seeing their tweets of 140 characters or less bounce around the Web with retweets and favorites. But new connections soon get overwhelming. Obligation sets in—not only to post more, but to reply to followers and read their tweets.

Many users conclude that Twitter is a time-sucking seduction and turn away. One who calls herself *patrilla\$\$\$thrilla* excitedly tweeted "first tweet, wocka wocka" just after she joined in July.

On Wednesday, 161 tweets and 27 followers later, the romance was over. She quit to "fully enjoy the little details in life I miss because I'm too busy here," she tweeted.

The cacophony creeps into everyday life. Twitter fanatics tweet from the dinner table, during a movie, in the bathroom, in bed. Vacations can seem like time wasted not tweeting.

The over-doers suffer from a "fear of missing out" (or FOMO), says Tom Edwards, vice president at *themarketingarm*, a Dallas-based advertising agency. "Managing our virtual personas, including all of the etiquette that comes with, can be tiresome, especially for those with large followings."



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It happens—even to people who ought to know better. Just ask Gary Schirr, an assistant professor who teaches a course on social media at Radford University.

In August, while vacationing on a beach, Schirr felt a pang of withdrawal because he had stopped tweeting to his 70,000-plus followers. Then he saw an old condemned house about to be washed away and posted a photo to Facebook and Twitter. He felt relieved when the likes and retweets rolled in.

"You feel forgotten if you're not out there," he says. "It's another sign of addiction. You feel bad if you don't tweet."

Prolific tweeters stay engaged partly because there are real benefits to a big following, which usually requires tweeting a lot.

Journalists who have large Twitter followings have used them to land better-paying jobs because every click on stories can make more money for their new employer. Actors can land roles on TV or the movies if their digital audience is expected to tag along.

Matt Lewis, a columnist with The Week magazine, says his Twitter following is like "portable equity" that gave him an edge over more established writers earlier in his career. He's now got nearly 33,000 followers.

Even so, one of Lewis' more popular stories is titled "Why I hate Twitter." It goes into why the social network became, for him, "a dark place" overrun by "angry cynics and partisan cranks." He became demoralized by the criticism, but he couldn't pull himself away.

"It's also like a prison. You can't check out," he says.

Today, Lewis rarely interacts with his followers and hopes the service will come up with new ways to filter out the hate tweets. "Why should I be harassed if I look at my @ button?" he says.

But he remains amazed at how Twitter has helped him reach new readers, and after some 67,000 tweets, he isn't giving it up.

Others find that as more people join the service, the deluge of tweets can drown out individual voices.

So says Bob Lefsetz, a music industry analyst who writes an email column titled the Lefsetz Letter.

Twitter, he wrote in July, is "toast." "Over. Done. History." His follower count isn't rising as quickly as before, although it's still a respectable 57,000-plus. And his tweets don't see as much action as in the past, which he attributes to too many people tweeting "too much irrelevant information."

"In the old days, I'd get 20 retweets. Now I'll get none," Lefsetz says. "It makes me not want to play."

Along with the potential for burnout, there's also the risk that Twitter becomes uncool to the younger generation, especially when services such as Pinterest and Instagram are a tap away.

Devon Powers, an assistant professor of communications at Drexel University, says many of her students have moved on to Snapchat. But there can still be pressure to keep up with the other services.

"There's all these new obligations to update and report and check in," she says. It can make dropping offline feel like a relief.

"If I get really busy, the first thing I stop doing is checking Twitter," she says. "I'm living my life. I'm not having a commentary about it."

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