

Expanding tweets from 140 characters to 10,000? Not nearly radical enough

January 8 2016, by Christian Fuchs, University Of Westminster



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There are as yet unconfirmed reports that [Twitter plans to extend its 140 character limit to 10,000](#). But why would Twitter consider radically changing its most unique characteristic?

Today's media culture is one of extreme speed and ephemerality – facts

and factoids, comment, claims and counter-claims flash past in an instant – a process accelerated by the emergence of 24-hour news. Inevitably it tends to offer only a superficial analysis of events: televised election debates often require candidates to give only very short answers, for example.

So although comment and debate is now arriving in greater quantities this move towards greater speed and brevity has undermined quality: hollowing out news, threatening the existence of investigative journalism, and leaving no time for debates that explore society's contradictions.

[Social media](#) such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are not so much communication technologies as vast advertising agencies selling data-enriched targeted advertising. Given their capitalist nature, it's no surprise that they're shaped by the logic of acceleration and accumulation. Users collect Facebook followers and likes, and emphasise the positive while excising the negative; Twitter's 140-character limit forces users to be brief in their pursuit of likes, followers and retweets; the Vine video service is limited to six seconds, Snapchat's messages exist only for ten. This culture of speed favours entertainment, not the sustained discussion of complex arguments.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

But unlike its peers, while Twitter's business also relies on advertising, it isn't profitable. It made losses of £645m in 2013, £578m in 2014, and £431m in the first three quarters of 2015. Its share value has dropped from more than US\$60 at its highest in December 2013 to [a low of US\\$22 in January 2016](#). By comparison, Facebook made a [profit of £2 billion](#) in 2014. For Twitter, its speed and ephemerality are so high that advertising logic seems contravened. The bursting of the dot-com bubble in 2000 showed the dangers of precariously-funded internet companies' floating on stock markets.

So perhaps CEO Jack Dorsey feels that changing Twitter's technological design [will fix its economic problems](#), increasing the length of users' attention span – and therefore the amount of time in front of adverts – with an increase in the length of tweets. But over the ten years since it

launched, Twitter users have become accustomed to how Twitter works and may continue using it as they always have.

Twitter finds itself in a bind: immensely popular but unprofitable, with no guarantee that what introducing 10,000 character tweets will change this as neither current nor alternative design promise large profits.

From fast news to slow news

Twitter's economic crisis reflects the crisis in our public sphere. New technologies are often accompanied by a certain fetishism, that either celebrates it as a technological fix to all society's ills, or demonises it as bringing about the end of civilisation. The arrival of [social media](#) is no different: some see it as the harbinger of digital democracy and a revitalised public sphere, while others argue that it makes us stupid and lowers the tone. In truth neither is right, because communications both shape society and are shaped by it.

We need to slow down. Just like the [slow food movement](#), we also need [slow media](#) that give us time to develop discussion. This inevitably means rolling back the capitalist logic of advertising sales so the focus can be on quality content, not monetising adverts. De-commercialisation and de-acceleration are strategies for saving the media.

I grew up in Austria, where the national public service broadcaster ORF hosted the evening television discussion programme [Club 2](#) several times a week. This format's unique feature was potentially unlimited airtime, which often resulted in hours-long, in-depth discussions of contemporary issues lasting into the morning hours. Club 2 was prototypical slow media.

Truly social media

If [social media](#)'s commercial logic is flawed, without tackling the capitalist political economy Twitter's proposed changes are not enough. A more radical approach would be to turn Twitter into a non-commercial, non-profit platform without advertising that substitutes accumulation and speed for striving to foster sustained communication and debate.

Think that's impossible? Non-commercial logic works for Wikipedia – one of the [most popular sites on the web](#) – which is a non-profit funded by grants, donations and some paid services it offers.

Why shouldn't it also work for Twitter? Radical improvements require the de-commodification of online communication – something that would require fundamental design and political-economic changes, and also the development of alternative funding models, such as a [participatory media fee](#) – a tax that advertising-based companies pay to access the audiences that generate their profits.

The internet's potential is vast; it's important not to be sidetracked by profits but to use it to foster political debate and understanding in a world of global violence, economic crisis, and environmental catastrophe. The social media age has not yet developed its Club 2: we must make the move from social media capitalism towards [a public sphere-focused social media](#) and a media that is [held in the commons](#) – only then can social media become truly social.

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