

Twitter's 140 character limit—time to ditch it?

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In this Wednesday Nov. 6, 2013, file photo, the Twitter logo appears on an updated phone post on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Is it time to ditch Twitter's somewhat archaic 140-character post limit? Twitter users already employ creative ways to get around it, and CEO Jack Dorsey has called it a "beautiful constraint" that inspires creativity. But the technical reasons for having the limit in the first place no longer applies. (AP Photo/Richard Drew, File)

Many Twitter users—and more importantly, the billions more who don't

use Twitter—feel constrained by the company's somewhat archaic 140-

Whoops! That's what happens when you hit the character limit imposed by Twitter. Is it time to ditch it as Twitter searches for ways to grow its stagnant user base?

The limit was created so tweets would fit in a single text message, back when people used Twitter that way. But most people now use Twitter through its mobile app, where there isn't the same technical constraint.

And Twitter users already employ creative ways to get around it. They send out multi-part tweets, or take screenshots of text typed elsewhere.

CEO Jack Dorsey, in such a screenshot that he tweeted in January, appeared amused by the fact that people—not to be constrained—are finding creative workarounds such as the text block photos. Maybe it's something Twitter could build on.

"(What) if that text...was actually text?" he mused. "Text that could be searched. Text that could be highlighted. That's more utility and power."

This suggests that the company is at least thinking about creative ways to keep the spirit of the 140-character limit while giving people more freedom to share their thoughts and rants. But there's history, nostalgia, and the Twitter brand being inexorably tied to quick, short bursts of text. Twitter is still often described as a "short messaging service," after all.

Dorsey called the limit a "beautiful constraint" that inspires creativity, brevity and a "sense of speed." Twitter, he wrote, will never lose the feeling.

A few months later, Dorsey insisted to "Today" show host Matt Lauer that the 140-character limit was here to stay, even as Twitter itself

evolves.

But a news report this week, citing unnamed people, said the company was planning to stop counting Web links and photos in the 140 characters, a move that would further erode that limit. Twitter declined to comment on the Bloomberg report.

Gartner analyst Brian Blau called the idea "a good compromise." Twitter already shortens long links to give users more room to write. This might be a logical next step.

Easing the character limit, though, might not be enough to reverse Twitter's stagnation. The San Francisco company, which recently celebrated its 10th birthday, has long lagged behind Facebook as a place for everyone. It has 310 million users, less even than the professional networking service LinkedIn.

Facebook, meanwhile, has 1.65 billion users. Even though many people are familiar with Twitter, at least in name, the company has not been able to persuade them to use the service. Twitter remains hard to understand for many people, with its own lingo of hashtags and "at" symbols.

Although it makes sense that Twitter doesn't want to alienate existing users with too many changes, Blau said, Twitter has to "fundamentally revamp the service and make it more appealing to more people."

Getting rid of that limit might be a start.

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