

CHAT: Four of One Hundred and Forty Characters

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In this article, O’Ryan explores the effects of CHAT on organizational Twitter accounts. Alpha Gamma Delta, *The Vidette*, and City Dance are organizations in O’Ryan’s social, university, and community life. Here, O’Ryan relates CHAT to the communication choices made by these organizations through each of their Twitter accounts. Her article describes how the characteristics and trajectories of each account build an understanding of its goals and its effects.

Today while I was waiting for Chemistry to start, I grabbed a newspaper in the hallway, sat down, and flipped through the pages. The largest headline on the page exclaimed that *The Vidette* had gone mobile! My first thought was, “Well, that doesn’t affect me. I don’t have a smart phone.” But as I looked up and down the hallway, I reminded myself again that I was in the minority. There were about twelve other students sitting around in that hallway, and ten of them were using smart phones. Cell phones are not just about calling or even texting anymore. The variety of forms of communication ranges from an email to a Facebook status update and from a Pinterest board to an Instagram picture. In mainstream America, just one form of communication is no longer acceptable. Communicators today need to be stimulated in more ways than one. We need to send and receive messages on multiple platforms to best send and receive ideas. We are constantly interacting with people and organizations. So whether it is a newspaper headline, a lengthy blog post, or a one hundred and forty character tweet, how does a communicator get his or her message across successfully?

I asked myself this question, and instantly, a research project was underway. I chose one of the newest communication genres, Twitter, and

began to dig deeper. Who uses Twitter? How is it used? Does everyone use it in the same way or do different users take varied approaches?

I found that three organizations in my life use Twitter. I chose these organizations because each one affects a different part of my life. Each organization also has a different purpose. I wanted to find out if the differing purposes would be reflected in each organization's Twitter account. Though these three organizations all use the same social media platform—Twitter—to communicate, the purposes, content, and results are different. I wanted to find out what these differences mean and how they produce different effects.

The three organizations in my life that I know use Twitter are Alpha Gamma Delta (social), *The Vidette* (university), and City Dance (community). The “social,” “university,” and “community” labels on these organizations represent where each of these organizations fits into my life as a college student. Alpha Gamma Delta is very close to me. I know all of the members; I am very involved, and I hold a position. *The Vidette* is my university's newspaper. I pick the paper up from time to time to find out about what is going on around campus and throughout the world. City Dance is a non-profit community organization. I had the chance to work on the public relations team for this organization and therefore got to experience how the organization runs from an internal as well as an external standpoint. In my research, I searched for what kinds of Twitter communication occur in each of these organizations.

Twitter has become a crucial communication practice in both large and small organizations all over the world. A short, to-the-point message, like a tweet, keeps audience members involved and in-the-know. This knowledge was the basis of my research question: why and how have these organizations chosen to use Twitter, whether as a primary or a supplementary form of their communicative practices? In order to answer this question, I first had to understand the communication practices of each organization. The following data is what I found.

Alpha Gamma Delta: Social

Alpha Gamma Delta (AGD) is an International Women's Fraternity. The Beta Omicron chapter of Alpha Gamma Delta includes just over one hundred women on the Illinois State University campus. AGD primarily communicates internally. Chapter meetings are held each Sunday to update members on new and important information for upcoming events. Minutes from the chapter meeting are sent out to members via Facebook and email, and they are also sent to the International Headquarters. Other official communications of the fraternity, both locally and internationally, often occur through email. Members also communicate face-to-face in the chapter

home and throughout the campus. This personal communication also happens through phone calls and text messaging. Finally, the Beta Omicron chapter stays connected with international sisters, including chapters all over the United States and Canada, through social media like Twitter.

The Vidette: University

Though there is a great amount of internal communication that goes on at *The Vidette*, this organization's primary goal is to get information out to the public. *The Vidette* is Illinois State University's student-run newspaper. It is published four days a week. The newspaper itself is probably *The Vidette's* most important form of communication to the Illinois State campus and the surrounding community of Bloomington-Normal, but it is by no means the only one. At *The Vidette*, reporters, editors, designers, and photographers communicate with each other to make sure news stories are correctly put together. Reporters communicate with officials, experts, and the public to find information to write news stories. The news department communicates with the advertising department to decide how the paper itself will be divided up. And finally, editors communicate with printers to finalize the finished product. *The Vidette* posts headlines via Twitter to keep up with the changing technological world that is slowly moving away from print news. The Twitter posts then link to *The Vidette's* website where more information can be found, including full articles, videos, and blogs.

City Dance: Community

As *The Vidette* has recently made a large push towards using the internet and social media, so has City Dance. City Dance is a non-profit organization in Peoria, IL. Its mission is to "change lives through dance and arts mentorship." City Dance teaches kids how to dance in order to give them something to do, to give them something to believe in, and to keep them out of trouble. Thus, City Dance communicates with children, families, the surrounding community, potential donors, and members of the professional break dancing community. To do this, they have a website, email updates, a blog, and social media accounts, including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.

As you may have noticed, Alpha Gamma Delta, *The Vidette*, and City Dance use some similar and some different communication practices. In my research, Twitter is the one commonality between those practices, and thus my research focus.

After I had a grasp on the details of each organization, the second step of my research was to understand the medium of communication itself: Twitter.

Twitter

Twitter is one of the newest social media websites in comparison to others, such as Facebook and MySpace. A Twitter post, commonly known as a “tweet,” can only be made up of 140 characters. Therefore, a writer must strategically choose how to compose a message to come across effectively in a small amount of words. Choices like these are made in all forms of writing. A news story must be written in the inverted pyramid style. A film must have a character going through complications, climax, and resolution. These genre conventions make each piece effective. An effective tweet gives the audience a blurb of information or an update so they can know what is going on. An effective tweet should be informative and to the point. It should only contain one main idea or piece of information. The information in a tweet should give the reader a basic understanding of the subject. If the reader chooses, he or she may look for more detailed information elsewhere. On the other hand, an ineffective tweet leaves the reader confused and always looking for more regardless of personal interest. The ineffective tweet lacks a definitive subject and action.

So once I had ascertained the dynamics of three different organizations working with one medium, next I wanted to find out the causes of the differences in each organization’s Twitter accounts. How and why are the uses of 140 character tweets and the layout of Twitter profiles so different across organizations? I found the explanation to this question in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory.

CHAT and Twitter

There are many different factors that will influence an organization’s communication, including a tweet. What is the goal of the piece? What are the common conventions of the genre? Who is creating it? Who is editing it? What is the organizational environment like? Who is the intended audience? Where do all those people come from? What is their worldview? What kind of mood are they in today? All of these factors, and more, can be explored with CHAT. This theory, according to Joyce Walker, covers “how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices.” Put a little more simply by my English 101 instructor Sarah Hercula, CHAT explains the effect “of a text on society and of society on a text.” Everything from the production of a piece of writing to dinner table discussions after interacting with that piece of writing is part of CHAT, which includes the input from, or lack thereof, and the effects on, or lack thereof, the author and the audience and everyone in between. With that said, CHAT includes consideration of not only the factors that affect the making of the text, but also how it is received. From the perspective of a writer, understanding the implications of CHAT allows a person to communicate

more effectively. If you consider all of the circumstances that may be affecting you (the sender) and the audience (the receiver), you can make choices to help you communicate in the most efficient way possible. What is more, this also goes for the reverse when you are the receiver.

When applying CHAT to Twitter, we must think about what components make up a Twitter page. It is not just the tweets themselves that are the communication, but the entire Twitter account. The tweets, layout, followers, and pictures of the account are all communicating something. The audience, consciously or not, interprets a message from all of these components. What message is communicated from the color, word choice, and content of a Twitter account? A communicator who uses or thinks about CHAT makes active decisions to account for the effect that he or she has on these components and the effect that the components have on the audience and everything in between.

For example, *The Vidette* conducts its Twitter communication in a very professional manner. Complete sentences, informal language, and article links are all included in *The Vidette’s* tweets. The content includes news, self-promotion, and organizational accomplishments. The Twitter profile layout includes professional photography and graphic designs to provide legitimacy.



Figure 1: *The Vidette’s* Twitter Layout

All of these choices speak directly to *The Vidette’s* audience, which is made up primarily of Illinois State University students and Bloomington-Normal community members. The layout and sentence structure used ensure that *The Vidette* is taken seriously. The conventions of the Twitter profile follow proper newspaper conventions as much as possible. This includes using short and to-the-

point headlines, or in this case, tweets, displaying a simple yet visually appealing layout, and employing an interesting tidbit of information to convince the reader to read on. At the same time, there is enough informal language and message content to ensure that the attention of a college-aged audience isn't lost.

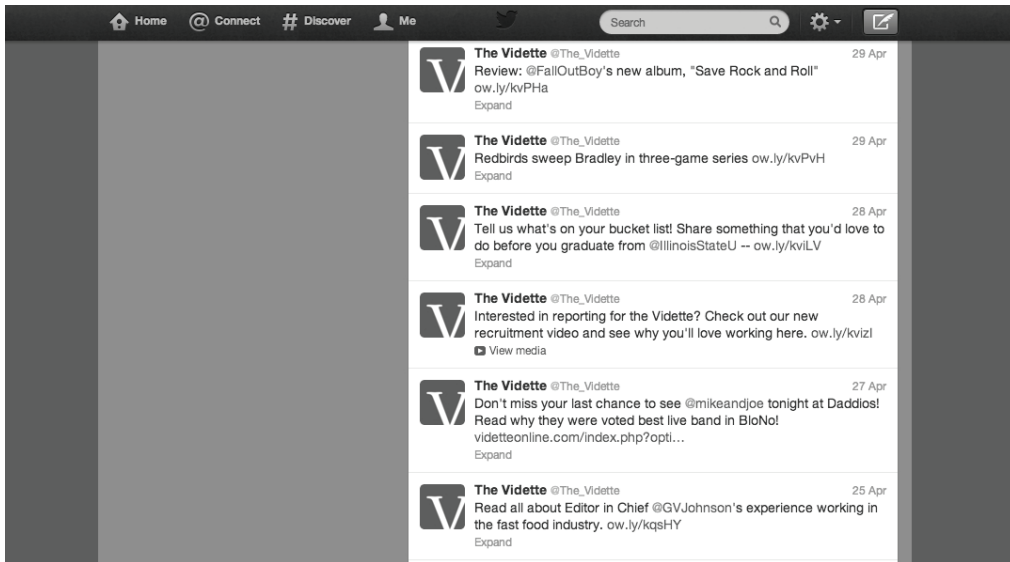


Figure 2: *The Vidette's* Sample Tweets

Unlike *The Vidette*, Alpha Gamma Delta primarily uses Twitter to connect with active members and alumni. Much of their content includes updates, accomplishments, reminders, and retweets. Retweets repeat what another Twitter user has already tweeted. This is commonly done to share and to raise awareness of the tweet with a broader audience. All of this is done to inform followers and to connect members across international borders. Members of Alpha Gamma Delta have common goals and values and build camaraderie through celebrating accomplishments together via Twitter.

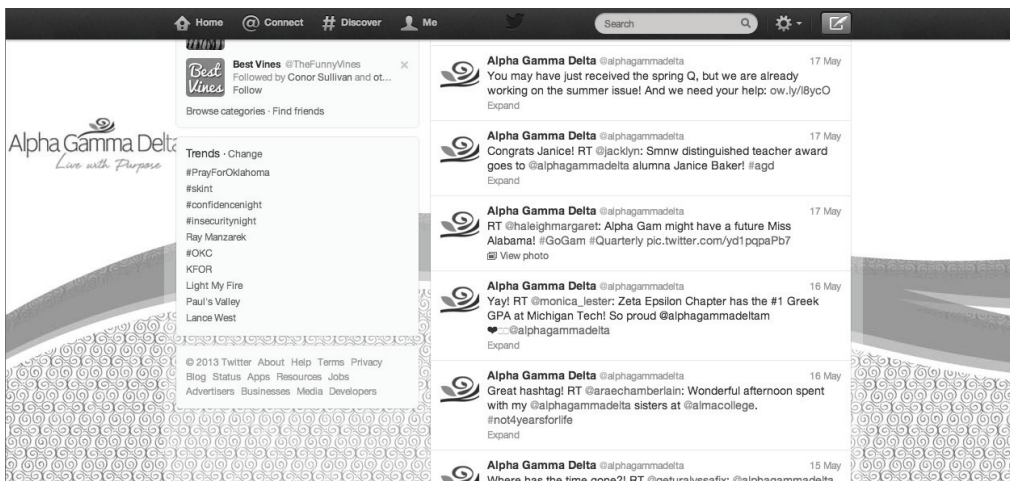


Figure 3: Alpha Gamma Delta Sample Tweets

This type of information, released by AGD, is not intended to grab an exterior audience, but to manage and enhance the experience of women who are already members of the organization. The layout is professional, and the inclusion of the organization's logo reflects Alpha Gamma Delta's status as an international organization, but the language and sentence structure is often informal because the audience primarily consists of collegians interacting outside of an academic setting.



Figure 4: Alpha Gamma Delta Twitter Layout

The Twitter account associated with City Dance is much more informal than that of *The Vidette* or Alpha Gamma Delta. The main profile picture is the organization's logo, but the rest of the layout is supplied by Twitter's settings options.



Figure 5: City Dance Twitter Layout

The content of this account includes informal language, fragments, “txt speak,” retweets, responses, updates, and promotions. City Dance takes a personal approach to reach out to the community.



Figure 6: City Dance Sample Tweets

City Dance directly interacts with audience members through personal conversations and retweeting. City Dance makes these decisions in relation to using Twitter to gain credibility in the community, the trust of parents, the respect of professional dancers, and so on.

My Research in Practice

I had the opportunity to work on the social media team for one of City Dance’s events called Rep the Midwest. The daylong event was a breakdancing competition among professional dance crews from all over the United States. I was in charge of tweeting from the City Dance and the Rep the Midwest Twitter accounts throughout the day.

Because I do not have any background in break dancing, I knew that there would be a disconnect between myself and the competitors, the judges, and the audience. They were all a part of this world that I was not a part of, and therefore, I had to familiarize myself with this new community. They had their own jargon, their own values, and their own interests. I had to find out what was important to them to make sure that the tweets would be relevant and interesting from their point of view. I also had to use their language to sound credible and in-the-know. Questions that I asked included: Who are the important names to know here? What are the most difficult dance moves? Who is known to have



Figure 7: Rep the Midwest Twitter Layout

signature moves? What does the audience want to be updated about? To find the answers to these questions, I immersed myself in the culture of the event. I listened to conversations between dancers and audience members. My best resource, though, was one of my ISU public relations student colleagues who also happened to be a break dancer. He was my best bet for resourceful information because he understood the break dance culture as well as the communication practices of Twitter. When I found out the answers to these questions, I had to construct the information in an entertaining and interactive way.

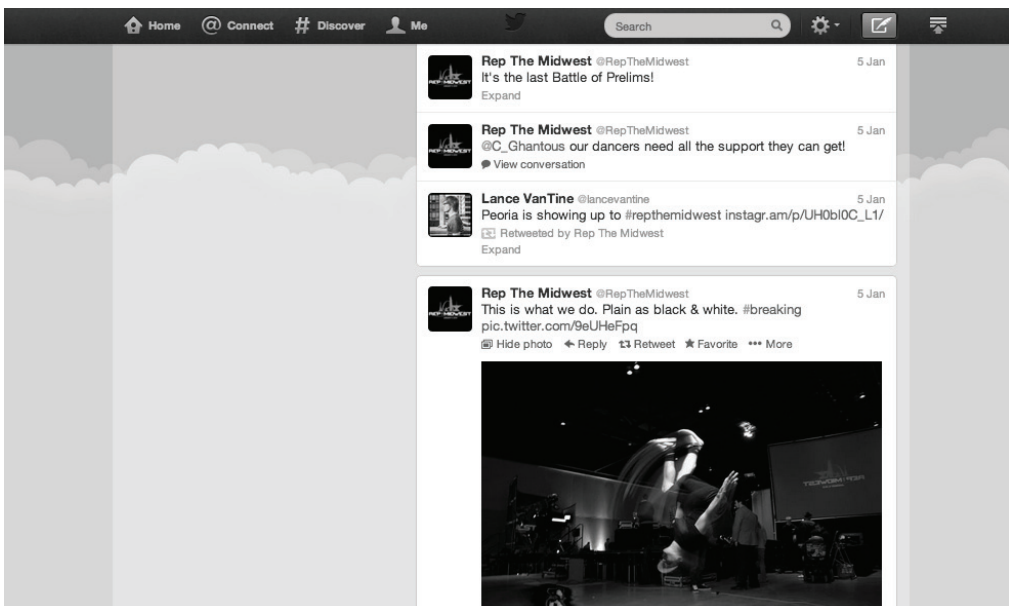


Figure 8: Rep the Midwest Sample Tweets

I worked with photographers to choose eye-catching photographs. I informed the audience on where to be within the large venue and when. I recapped winners of dance battles, and I responded to questions. This was putting my writing research into practice, for I used what I knew about this organization, Twitter as a medium, and all of the complex factors that affect writing in this context in order to tweet in the most effective way possible.

When tweeting about Rep the Midwest, reading an article linked from *The Vidette's* Twitter account, texting my friends about plans for the weekend, or walking by an advertisement on the side of a bus stop, I am a part of activity systems whether I know it or not. Communication is always affected by culture, history, and the activity system it operates within: CHAT. Every person that comes into contact with a particular communicative effort changes it from what it was before, even if just ever so slightly. The makers and writers of messages deliberately think about the trajectory of and what goes into their pieces. The audience, intended or not, is all a part of the process. To know about the processes of CHAT in writing, communication, and organizations is to be more aware of the messages happening around you and throughout the world.

Twitter may seem, from the outside, like it is one genre. In my research, I found that there are many genres within Twitter. Twitter is but one medium used by varied forces to accomplish one goal: communication. Cultural-Historical Activity Theory shows us the effects of the multiple forces that influence the purpose, content, and outcome of every layout, picture, and tweet. In order to understand the dynamics of CHAT within each Twitter account, I had to understand the depth of each organization and Twitter itself, and by doing this research, I not only learned a lot about the genre, but became a more thoughtful Tweeter.

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