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## *Don't Believe the Hype!*

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# DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE!

Despite the hype of social media and services like Twitter, they fall short of their promises in professional contexts argues **Anders Larsson**.

**S**ince its introduction into mainstream society in the mid-1990s, the Internet has carried with it a number of ideas and preconceptions regarding its potential for a number of different areas of professional activity. Many of us still remember the dotcom bubble just before the burst – enthusiastic consultants, casually dressed, promising easy access to successful online business ventures of various types. Many of us can perhaps also recall what happened as a result of much of this hype surrounding the new medium. Don't get me wrong – the Internet has indeed played, and continues to play a vital part for many professions and walks of life. But it is also important to bear in mind the inflated hyperbole often surrounding these technologies.



We might have expected much of this high-strung attention to have diminished a little bit in the post-dotcom era. However, what we are seeing today is something very much akin to what took place just before the last millennium. With the publication of the whitepaper “What is Web 2.0? Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software” online activist and consultant *Tim O’Reilly* is often believed to have ushered what could be described as a second version of the World Wide Web; a “Web 2.0”, if you will. Much can be discussed about this dictum for web publishing; suffice to say that it provides a set of guidelines for online activity, essentially boiling down to increasing audience activity. The notion of the Internet as providing means for interaction between sender and receiver is recognizable from the aforementioned early days. This notion has now been put forth yet again – with the same or even more enthusiasm than the last time.

Indeed, services like Twitter and Facebook are “all the buzz” in a variety of professions. While there are plenty of ideas about the necessity to use these types (as well as other) of social media, little is known as to how to use them for best results. In academia, publications are emerging that employ empirical data from professional applications of social media. In the following, I discuss some of the tendencies that I have found in my own research regarding Twitter use in three different areas: Politics, journalism and customer relations.

A quick fact-check might prove me wrong about this, but it seems to me that every political election for the last twenty-odd years have been proclaimed as “Internet elections” – suggesting that as citizens took to the web to interact with politicians, we would see an increase of voting, engagement and democratic values. These preconceptions are no different in the 2.0 era. Sweden can serve as an example; during the last parliamentary elections (held in 2010), social media services like Twitter were thought of as a necessity for politicians to use in order to maintain contact with their constituencies. The analyses carried out by myself, recently published in a co-authored article with Hallvard Moe in *New Media and Society*, would suggest otherwise. We analyzed just over 100,000 tweets tagged as relevant for the election sent during a one month period before the election date on September 19th. By focusing on the high-end users of the Twitter service, we were able to say something about how different user groups took to the micro blog. The results indicated that while some low-profile politicians were indeed present in our high-end user sample, most of the more well-known political actors were largely missing. Instead, we could clearly see how other actors took to Twitter. Journalists were one group, obviously used to taking up place in public space, media professionals were rather frequent in our sample. Conversely, we

could also discern another group making its mark in our data – members of the Pirate Party were represented in the social network graphs we used to assess the use patterns that emerged from our data sets. More importantly, we could see that the majority of messages sent were undirected ones: just over sixty per cent of the messages were so-called *singletons*, undirected tweets not intended for any specific receiver. About twenty per cent were *re-tweets* – these are messages that were originally sent by one user, and then redistributed by another. Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, just under ten percent of the tweets sent during the specified period were directed messages. By using the @-sign in conjunction with a specific Twitter handle, communication between users of the service can be facilitated. However, as the results suggested, such communicative practice took place at a rather limited extent. Curiously, we have found similar distributions of singletons, re-tweets and @-messages in our studies of Twitter use during elections in the other two Scandinavian countries. As interaction, for example through the use of @-messages, can be said to be a key part of the 2.0 maxim, we must conclude that the values expressed through the practices studied, do not easily match up with these ideas of how to carry on an online professional presence. Moreover, as rather few Swedes make use of Twitter on a daily basis (figures vary between 2 and 10 per cent of the population), the significance of Twitter must be placed under careful scrutiny – even in the IT-savvy nation of Sweden.

As for the profession of journalism, hopes (as well as fears) regarding the impact of the Internet, have been felt also there. Moving beyond the uncertainties for print news that the online publishing format carries with it, one particularly salient area of inquiry from academia as well as from professionals has been that of audience involvement. While research on audience generated content has regularly found that most news organizations approach this topic rather cautiously, Twitter has been lifted to the fore as a possible channel for increased contact between journalists and audience members. In my study on the uses of Twitter by staffers and viewers of the talk show *HübINETTE*, which premiered on Swedish television during the fall of 2011, I employed a similar approach to the one described previously. While the Twitter account used by the host of the show, Karin HübINETTE, appeared more active than some of the aforementioned politicians’, it is important to note that no matter what use patterns emerge, most of the key users identified through the analyses presented in the paper were journalists. Thus, these findings further corroborate the dominant role of journalists – also in the online realm. As such, the potential for journalist-audience interaction will probably remain latent if the audience is not further involved – that is, if they want to be involved.

Finally, when looking at Twitter use in customer relations, many of the same notions mentioned above can be found also here. While Twitter use for marketing efforts might be frowned upon by some parts of the online community (a rather broad statement, admittedly – but take a look here for an example - <http://www.howtousetwitterformarketingandpr.com/>), its potential for creating contact between customers and companies cannot be denied. In a co-authored paper we assess this notion empirically. We chose to study Twitter use by the Swedish state-owned train operator, SJ. Employing a similar approach to the one described in the two previous cases, tweets were collected during the Christmas season of 2011 – a period marred by extreme weather conditions (even for Sweden, apparently) with train delays and even cancellations as results. While SJ does indeed have a presence on Twitter, employing the service to communicate with their customers, the resulting communicative patterns can be interpreted as traces of what has been labeled as a ‘Web 1.5’ style of social media use – purportedly offering a comfortable segue between the two supposed 1.0 and 2.0 paradigms of web publication. SJ have jumped on the bandwagon, so to speak – but they are only starting to find their way as to how to maneuver it. As an example of this, while their customer service department has ample opening hours, their Twitter account is only administered during office hours. As the trains run (or in some of the cases discussed in the paper, are cancelled) at all hours of the day, tweets directed at SJ from passengers during late hours of the day are left unanswered – until the following morning. This “office hour” approach to social media is indeed a challenge to information practitioners – as their respective stakeholders are online, so should they be. Or so it would seem, following the “always on” motto of the 2.0 dictum.

As all three case studies show, social media services like Twitter are starting to spread in a number of different professions. However, the results presented here would suggest that the ramifications of such employment must be seen as rather limited. To be sure, we have not yet seen any of the revolutionizing aspects often associated with these and other similar technologies come to fruition. Instead, professional uses of Twitter tend to take on traditional forms, augmenting rather than transforming already established patterns of work performance. Be that as it may, we are only seeing the beginning of the uses of Twitter and the likes in professional contexts. Human behavior changes slowly, even if it takes place in an online channel. ■

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## Jaan Grünberg *The Leadership Perspective* Clubbing your way to technological leadership

A trip to the vibrant “Silicon Allée” in Berlin is a must for anyone interested in the frontiers of information technology. If you go, then you join a band wagon of young talents and investors from all over the world. In an increasingly digitalized world it would seem like a paradox to emphasize place as a driver of technological leadership. However, it is an essential insight from studies in geography that place has an essential role in explaining the surges in creativity that characterizes certain places at some times. The case of Berlin shows unexpected coupling between techno clubs and high tech companies.

The Berlin setting for creative industries represents an extreme case of how political, cultural, technological, and economic forces interact to shape a creative and economic field. During the period 1990 to 2010 the setting moved from a position as a subversive underground of illegal clubs in the post-unification ruins of the city, to being integrated in the symbolic projections of the Cities authorities. At the center of this development we find the techno clubs which popped up in the abandoned and ownerless properties. The clubs’ character as are “here and now” collective creative experiences brought the youngsters from a formerly divided city together, generated excitement and provided arenas for musical, artistic and organizational experiments. Gradually the scene in Berlin gained force as magnet for companies in the music industry. The move of Universal Music and MTV Europe to Berlin around the millennium were landmarks in this development. Today the Berlin story is one of economic dynamics and a breeding-ground for starts-ups in the creative industries.

It is in connection with the music industry where we find some of the most fascinating high technology companies. Take the example of Ableton. The company has been around for more than a decade and develops software that has changed the production and performance of electronic music. Today their flagship product Ableton Live is globally distributed and an industry

standard. The roots of Ableton trace back to the Berlin electro music scene and the clubs and parties that defined a new musical era in the 1990-ies. One of the founders, Robert Henke, stands out as a visionary leader who has been able to blend the roles as musician and engineer into something entirely new. It was from the needs of the founders to create new sounds that the company’s software first grew. Thus involvement in the scene led to the development of technology. Ableton is not the only company.

Another, more recently founded firm with ties to the techno scene, is Soundcloud. The last couple of years their logo with the little cloud is increasingly found on the internet. The company provides, in their own terms “the world’s leading social sound platform where anyone can create sounds and share them everywhere.” Soundcloud emphasizes the role of their product in the creation of music, rather than being a mere listening device. This reflects the collaborative atmosphere of the Berlin setting. The company was founded by the young Swedes Eric Wahlfors and Alexander Ljung in 2007 who set up in Berlin due to the emotional attraction that the city provided. Just as in the case of Ableton one of the Sound Cloud founders had a background as a producer on the electro music scene in Berlin.

The example of Berlin should be of interest to policy makers and others who try to stimulate technological development. Research funding and programs for collaborations between business and academia are well known policy options for such ends. The case of Berlin provides an alternative lesson. It might be so that it is through supporting social settings that are exciting and fun and which allow for experimentation with both technologies and identities that the way to technological leadership is found. The challenge is that such a path to technological leadership does not go through plans and policies, it is driven by creativity in its truest sense; the ability to make something out of nothing.