

INTRODUCTION

James Buck Gets Out of Jail and Inspires This Book

James Buck's tweet was but a single word: "Arrested." That tweet would get him out of jail, and inspire me to write *Twitterville*. But neither of us knew that at 9:33 AM on April 10, 2008, when Buck was in the backseat of a police car and being taken to a holding cell in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla, Egypt.

Buck was a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, majoring in photojournalism. He had come to Mahalla to photograph the food strikes in this manufacturing-agricultural city of four hundred thousand.

Days earlier, the streets had turned violent. Fires were started, and people got hurt. Police clubbed and arrested several protesters.

On April 10, Buck took a cautious approach. He stayed back from the crowds, using a telephoto lens to capture his story.

He got busted anyway.

I knew something about Egyptian police. In 2007 I had interviewed Wael Abbas (@WaelAbbas), as part of my Social Media Global Reports blog post series. Abbas is an Egyptian citizen journalist who kept posting videos on YouTube of uncharged "suspects" being tortured in Egyptian police stations similar to the one where Buck was heading.*

* On April 10, 2009, precisely one year after the James Buck incident, a police officer broke down the door to Abbas's home and beat up both Abbas and his

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It was when I saw the word “arrested” on Twitter that I realized how much bigger this new social media communications tool had become—more than I had previously thought possible.

I didn’t know James Buck. I didn’t follow him on Twitter until that one-word post. I didn’t even know that I connected with him.

When a “tweeter,” as someone who posts on Twitter is called, reads something posted by another tweeter and thinks that it’s worth repeating, he or she adds the letters RT and posts it again. Someone else may then read it, and repeat the process. This is called retweeting and it is the essential process that makes word often travel so far and fast on Twitter.

Retweeting is an important part of Twitter’s magic: you may follow—or be followed by—just a small handful of people. Yet even if only one person follows you, through just a few degrees of separation you are connected to the growing millions of people who tweet all over the world.

James Buck was a new tweeter. He only had a few followers; as I already mentioned, I wasn’t one of them. But a friend of his retweeted the “arrested” post and added a brief explanation. A friend of mine saw that and retweeted it. I was four steps removed from Buck. I saw the post about thirty minutes after he had posted from the police car.

A few weeks earlier, while saying good-byes to friends in Berkeley, one had turned Buck on to Twitter. The friend thought it might be good to have on his BlackBerry in case some emergency popped up.

While Buck sat in the cell, the one-word message he sent to

mother. Abbas went to a police station and insisted that they arrest the attacking policeman. Instead they arrested Abbas. They put him into a holding cell, where he tweeted about what had happened, and word quickly spread around the world. He too got out in a day, but I do fear for my friend’s safety.

Berkeley friends via Twitter kept moving. For some reason, the Egyptian police let him keep his BlackBerry and he kept tweeting. His small personal network kept retweeting. Word spread on Twitter. Someone contacted the U.S. State Department, which swung into uncharacteristically quick action.

Within twenty-four hours, Buck's government had intervened. He was released from jail and was about to be driven to the airport where he would receive a free trip home.

Before he stepped into the car, he stopped to type in another single-word message, or tweet as they are universally called.

The message said "Free."

This changed my personal view of Twitter. Until then it was something fun to use, occasionally useful for business purposes. Tweeting had landed me some paid speaking engagements. I had friends who lived in other countries and it was a faster, easier way to keep in touch.

But the James Buck incident took my breath away. I realized that this Twitter phenomenon had bigger implications than I had understood. I started paying closer attention and taking notes.

Dramatic Moments

I began to notice that now and then Twitter has very dramatic moments. In the coming months, this would include a Dutch student in a bookstore in South China who would report the first deadly rumble of the Szechuan earthquake. A team of surgeons in Detroit tweeting real-time progress to medical professionals at a Las Vegas conference as a robotic device removed a tumor from a patient. A young entrepreneur on a ferry on the Hudson River, witnessing a passenger jet skid to a halt nearby, then start to sink.

And it would be easy to have written a book just about those mo-

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ments of life and death. There are enough of them that unfolded, and there will undoubtedly be many more.

But drama is not the entire story.

Much of the time, Twitter is just about everyday people discussing everyday things. Increasingly, it has become a highly effective tool of business communication. This book chiefly focuses on telling you how people use Twitter to get closer to customers and constituents.

Twitter is also about stumbling into old acquaintances. On the day that Buck typed in “arrested,” I was sitting comfortably at home, having crossed paths with an old friend on Twitter. We were sending little spoonfuls of conversation to each other, details of jobs and travel, pets and grandchildren, catching up on the past thirty years since we’d lost each other.

Equally, Twitter is about meeting new people who are relevant to you, in business or whatever else interests you. You can find them easily, start a simple conversation and watch how quickly and deeply it can often develop.

Ultimately, this is a book about what Twitter can do for you. I’m going to tell you what others have done and are doing and my hope is that it will give you a few interesting or useful ideas.

Telephone Metaphor

As Chris Brogan (@ChrisBrogan), one of Twiterville’s most respected pioneer-champions, likes to say, “It’s very much like a telephone.” He’s right, and the telephone is a good starting point, but it seems to me that Twitter is more than that.

Brogan maintains that Twitter, like the phone, is a personal communications tool. And you can use it to conduct any conversation you choose to discuss.

Those conversations, however, are usually private on the phone.

You can talk privately in Twitter through a feature called direct message, or DM. Yet in most cases, Twitter works best when it is public and anyone can see what you are saying, so that anyone can respond to what you say or retweet it.

Twitter is also superior to a telephone for meeting new people. When a stranger calls you on the telephone, it is usually to try to sell you something you don't want. The practice got so out of hand on the telephone that laws have been created to constrain telephone peddlers.

But on Twitter, meeting strangers can be both enjoyable and valuable. If you meet someone you'd prefer to avoid, there are filters and functions that work relatively well at keeping that person away from you. It is almost always an easier experience than receiving a cold call.

People use Twitter for personal or business reasons. Many of us find we cannot help but mix the two together, just like many folks do on the phone or face-to-face.

I've been asked why any employer in her right mind would allow workers to tweet on company time. The answer is simple, and again it's like using a telephone at work or, for that matter, e-mail or a fax: you use Twitter to communicate. The topic is up to you.

The Blog Metaphor

Twitter is as much like a blog as it is like a telephone, except that you need to picture a very small blog post. In fact, Twitter is the leading software in a category called microblogging. You publish what you have to say, and people respond if they wish. You publish to one person or to the whole world, and people respond in the same manner.

Space is limited to just 140 characters; therefore, messages must cut to the chase. Shorthand necessarily becomes part of tweeted

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language; it's more egalitarian than full-size blogs because people respond in equal length and equal placement on Twitter pages or "tweetstreams." The constraints of size lead to speedy conversation. Twitter moves faster than any blog.

There are several books that will tell you how to use Twitter and why you should. This book does a little of both, but neither is my central focus. I share with you the stories of people using Twitter in the home office and in the global enterprise. People tweet to raise money for causes; to make government more responsive; to find and distribute news; to build personal or business networks; or to just kill a little time with people you enjoy.

I believe that many of us learn best from other people's stories. If I tell you about someone who has used Twitter to improve his personal brand or to get more customers into a coffee house or to shop in one market over another, my hope is you will read one of these stories and adapt Twitter to whatever it is you do.

Twitter is a pretty simple tool. Most people can pick up the mechanics just by fiddling with Twitter for a few minutes. Once you start talking with people, they tend to be pretty generous in helping newcomers find their way around. Before you know it, you'll be helping others who have followed you into Twitterville.

A Tool for All Seasons

I am beginning this book in the toughest economic climate since the 1930s. I hope that we will have entered better times before you start reading it.

I could argue that Twitter is ideally suited for tough times. At a time when economic constraints are causing most businesses to make painful cuts, they still must interface with customers; Twitter is the most efficient and effective way to do it this side of a face-to-face meeting.

It's not just customers, it's your entire business ecosystem—your prospects, partners, employees, investors, analysts, and media. You'll probably find many of them are already in Twitterville when you arrive, already having conversations relevant to your business. The sooner you join the conversations, the faster you may get out from under the business pressures you are facing.

But when you think about it, Twitter is not just a tool for tough times, but for all times. There is no economic situation in which businesses do not need to interact with constituents. There are very few instances when the most economic way of doing it is not the wisest course to take.

Good-bye, Broadcast. Hello, Conversation

We live in an era when what used to be considered best practices are not so good as they used to be. Methods that have been in place for years, refined and optimized over time, just aren't getting the results they used to. Among them are customer support, traditional marketing, and product research.

My previous book, *Naked Conversations*, coauthored with Robert Scoble (@scobleizer), assailed the excesses of marketing. In 2006 that seemed a revolutionary idea to some. Now it seems pretty obvious. Marketing programs are too expensive, and they produce diminishing results.

Twitterville examines the inefficiency of traditional marketing. It argues the case for using social media instead of ads. It argues that from a business perspective, Twitter is the most effective tool yet delivered into the growing arsenal of social media tools.

But Twitter alone is limited. It is too shallow in its constrained space. It is not visual. It is limited in its ability to conduct safe transactions or hear someone's voice.

A carpenter building a home would have to use a hammer—but

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not *just* a hammer. This book shares numerous stories of how Twitter works best with other social media tools, particularly blogs. When considering Twitter, this book advises you to consider an entire toolset, which in fact can lead to an entirely new way to conduct your business.

In *Naked Conversations*, Scoble and I predicted the death of a so-called Broadcast Era, and the birth of a new Conversational Era. *Twiterville* looks upon the three years between books as a transformational time. This transformation has accelerated during this recession because businesses now understand that they need to explore new avenues. Those avenues seem to converge on Twiterville's Main Street.

The Generosity of Crowds

I have often written about social media being built on a “cult of generosity.” Tweeters have been more than a little generous with me in the process of writing this book.

As I started each chapter, I posted on Twitter what I was covering, and requested people tell me good stories on the various topics explored in each chapter. My cup overflowed with results.

I received several hundred suggestions. Tweeters generated about three-fourths of the stories reported in *Twiterville*. The process I used is called crowd sourcing, which I find to be better for research than anything else, including Google.

In Google you enter a keyword, and a “spider” crawls all over the Internet's data to give you results. That's a pretty remarkable process. But by crowd sourcing in Twiterville, I got people I know and trust to give me information, insights, and specific examples, which this book shares with you.

The way in which I wrote this book confirmed to me my very best thoughts about Twitter. Twiterville has its darker streets, as I will discuss, but it is dominated and culturally shaped by a cult of

generosity. The people who are most generous in Twitterville are among its most influential members.

Why Call It “Twitterville”?

I am not sure whether or not I was the first to coin the term “Twitterville.” I came up with it after Laura Fitton (@Pistachio) described her “Twitter Village” in a very thoughtful blog post in January 2008. I had not previously heard the term, and I’ve been using it ever since.

Twitterville connotes a certain homey, small-town feel, a place where you meet people you know as you stroll down familiar streets. These are people with whom you share common friends, interests, and ethics. When you meet a stranger here, chances are you have mutual friends or interests.

While Twitterville has millions of people in it, and is growing faster than the world’s largest megalopolises, it still feels cozy to most of its residents and visitors. It still feels safe for the most part.

This is due, in my opinion, to Twitterville’s most important characteristic, something I have named global neighborhoods. The concept came to me several years ago, while I was having coffee with Charlene Li, who wrote the foreword to this book.

She told me geography is becoming irrelevant because of social media.

For Charlene it seemed to be a throwaway thought. But for me, it was a very large idea. It gave me the sense of global neighborhoods, which became the name of my blog and has been my central focus since completing *Naked Conversations*.

Through social media, society is being rearranged very fundamentally and at a faster rate than many people realize. Until the Conversational Era came along, people were constrained by geography. We really could not get to know people we did not encounter face-to-face.

When you think about that, you realize that each of us has been denied access to billions of people, many of whom share similar passions and interests, some of whom can help us, some of whom we can help.

By no means have the barriers disappeared. Everybody simply cannot know everybody else on the planet. But the barriers between people have been lowered through social media. Doors have been opened. Restrictions are being reduced as people start discovering there are others like themselves all over the world. It has the potential to reverse the combination of suspicion and ignorance that people of one culture feel about people of another.

We no longer need airplanes to meet new people who are physically far away from us. We can now go online and visit a virtual place to do this. That place may not be tangible or even real. But the people you meet there are real, and so are the relationships you form there—and *Twiterville* will hopefully show you their value.

In her foreword, Charlene Li writes that Twitter is “a conversation,” a reference to *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, the fountainhead book of the social media revolution. She is right, of course. Markets are conversations, *Cluetrain* taught us. Twiterville is a marketplace, and the conversations are meaningful to a growing number of businesses.

So I fully agree, but I see something even more promising.

Twitter lets us behave online more closely to how we do in the tangible world than anything that has ever preceded it. And we find neighborhoods that suit us. If we love to talk about politics, we can find many neighborhoods where everyone cares about just that. The same with hummingbirds, cooking, sports, or needlepoint. You can find a neighborhood where you can hang out to learn and share and chat about the topic.

You can join as many or as few as you like. These are global

neighborhoods, yet they are small and personal and cozy at the same time that they make your world far bigger.

I hope you enjoy reading *Twiterville* as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

—Shel Israel
January 21, 2009