

Making the most of microblogging tools (X and others)

1. Introduction

Microblogging is a type of blogging that involves sharing short posts or status updates. These posts usually have a set character limit and can include text, images, links, and videos.

X (formerly Twitter) is probably the most well-known microblogging platform, although many others exist.

This activity focuses on the benefits and potential drawbacks of microblogs. It also explores some of the ways they can help you in your studies or work.

Learning outcome

This activity will help you decide if you would like to make use of microblogging tools.

2. What is in it for me?

Look at the statements below and select any that appear relevant to you.

I would like to know when new information is released

Many organisations use microblogging sites to promote their work and research. Try finding the websites of the main organisations in your area of interest and check to see if they are using any social media sites for promotion. You will often find this information in the footer of the web page. Follow a selection of accounts to keep up with new information and ideas in your profession.

I would like to keep up with current events

From angry exchanges during Prime Minister's Questions to fund raising events, to announcements by the Bank of England, news stories can often appear on microblogging sites before they are reported through other media channels.

I would like to know what people are saying about topical issues

Many public figures use microblogging sites. If you are looking for a quotation to illustrate an idea or point of view, microblogging sites are a ready source of opinion and social commentary.

I would like to share information with others

If you would like to promote a campaign, research project, pursuit, or pastime microblogging sites can help you to find, or follow, a community of like-minded people.

I would like to keep up with developments in my subject

Academic authors as well as journals and publishers use microblogging sites to promote their work. Use your chosen microblogging platform to follow specialists, debate and news in a variety of disciplines.

3. Who uses microblogging sites?

From posting pictures of pets, to following the Cloud Appreciation Society, to campaigning and petitioning politicians, people use microblogging sites for many reasons.

An article published by ReadWrite explored what was then Twitter (now X), and identified three types of user. Whilst the article refers throughout to Twitter, many of the observations could equally well apply to users on other microblogging sites.

Whilst reality might not be quite as neat and tidy as this, the different types of user are explored below.

Listeners

Characterised more as consumers than communicators, 'Listeners' use microblogging sites as a source of information - gathering news, announcements, comment and updates from a network of carefully selected accounts.

The nature of microblogs is such that a lot of posts can be and are produced very quickly, and it's easy to become overwhelmed. Make some time to unfollow any accounts that you no longer have an interest in.

Talkers

'Talkers' use microblogging sites as a platform to promote a particular interest, topic, issue or activity. As well as being active communicators, 'Talkers' can be very creative, devising compelling content for a network of followers.

Whilst microblogs can be excellent tools for sharing information, they can equally well be responsible for the rapid spread of disinformation. Always be vigilant in reflecting on who is posting and why, especially when reading controversial posts.

Hubs

'Hubs' use X to share and create content. Like a news service, 'Hubs' follow a network of sources to find ideas and themes to inform and inspire output to their own followers.

6. Summary

Be selective. You do not need to devote lots and lots of time to a specific microblogging site to get something from it. Decide when you're going to use it and make it work for you.

Be focused. It is easy to be distracted by noise and chatter. Choose the topics that interest you the most.

You can learn a lot just by being a 'Listener' and following a selection of accounts. You do not need to contribute content of your own to get something from a microblog.

Next steps

- Think about how a microblog might work best for you.
- Find out who is an authority in your field of interest and identify which social media accounts they are using.
- Follow any that you have an interest in.

Reference

Iskold, A. (2008) '5 things to do with Twitter when you're bored', *ReadWrite*, March. Available at: https://readwrite.com/2008/03/18/5_ways_to_have_fun_with_twitter/ (Accessed: 26 August 2020).