#Legal Research:
Using Twitter for Legal Research

by Stephanie A. Noble

There are hundreds of social media networks, but only a few are well suited for legal research. Of those few, Twitter is likely to deliver the best results. Originally launched in 2006 as a microblogging tool that allowed users to create 140-character status updates called "tweets," Twitter has become the go-to social media platform for disseminating breaking news, marketing through blog posts, and sharing updates to digital collections. Twitter users not only gather and forward stories from traditional news outlets, but also report events as they happen. In the past three years, Twitter has been used to organize such headline-generating events as Arab Spring (#arabspring); the recent protests in Hong Kong (#umbrellamovement); and, closer to home, the protests in Ferguson, Missouri (#fergusonprotest).

Establishing a strong following list and tracking trending topics using hashtags are keys to successfully using Twitter to enhance your traditional legal research. This article will present a brief history of Twitter, suggest tools for tracking news and trends with hashtags, and offer tips for networking with other hashtag hunters.

An Octothorp by Any Other Name

For Generation X and older, the "#" was originally used as either the pound sign or as a number sign. It was called the pound sign because of an abbreviation scribes used for weight—"lb." It later morphed into a number sign because of confusion surrounding the British pound sterling.[1] The pound sign was first used on August 23, 2007 in a tweet by Chris Messina, a social technology expert. Messina proposed the # as a way to gather online discussions about Barcamp, a technology "unconference."

Chris Messina™ @chrismessina   ☑ Follow

how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?

1:25 PM - 23 Aug 2007

438 RETWEETS **759** FAVORITES

At this time, #s were used as a programming tool to highlight a special meaning in code. In countries other than the United States, some computer programmers referred to # as a hashtag. Ironically, Evan Williams, a Twitter founder, reportedly responded to Messina's idea that he didn't think #s were going to be popular because they would be too technical.[2] On August 26, 2007, however, Stowe Boyd wrote a blog post titled "Hash Tags = Twitter Groupings" in which he supported Messina's proposal for the use of hash tags.[3] Boyd agreed that individual users labeling their tweets with hashtag topics would help define the shared Twitter experience.

Two events in October 2007 helped hashtags transition from the technology-jargon-specific geekosphere and into mainstream use. The first was Nate Ritter's use of #sandiegofire in his tweets to keep people informed about the wildfires raging through San Diego. Around the same time, Republicans seeking to keep Congress in session to vote on an energy bill started tweeting with the hashtag #dontgo.[4]

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By July 2009, hashtags had been formally adopted by Twitter and anything with a # in front of it became hyperlinked. Hashtags were further accentuated when Twitter introduced "Trending Topics," placing the most popular hashtags on its homepage.

Rather than fading into obscurity, hashtags filled a niche for organizing information into searchable topics. Hashtags serve the same organizational purpose in Twitter and other social networks that a call number does in a library cataloging system. A # followed by a tweeter-assigned topic makes that tweet searchable by topic and also groups the tweet with similar ones. With more than 500 million tweets per day,[5] individual tweets fade into a virtual junk drawer unless they have a hashtag attached to them. Instead of random tweets getting lost among the millions, the hashtag brings users together and creates topical threads.

It only took seven years for the term "hashtag" to make it into the Oxford English Dictionary. Added in June 2014, the term is now a permanent part of our 21st-century vocabulary, and not a passing Internet fad.

Using Hashtags to Define and Navigate Your Research

As an example, let's look at how pairing a hashtag with the acronym SCOTUS can be used to learn what is going on at the U.S. Supreme Court and how people are responding to the Court's decisions. The first step is to enter #SCOTUS in the search box at the top of the page.

As you type, Twitter will provide suggestions for additional topics, types of content, and people to follow.

You can either scroll down the list and click on one of the suggestions, or simply continue with #SCOTUS. A long list of results will appear in your news feed that will look something like this:

At this point, a Twitter neophyte might frantically scroll through the list and look for an applicable tweet as more and more tweets appear in the news feed. A better method is to narrow your results by choosing from the list of options in the top-left box in the left column.

The Advanced Search option is particularly helpful because you can create a more traditional research string with key words, dates, exact phrases, and additional hashtags. Advanced Search also allows you to search within results for tweets from specific people and locations.

Advanced Search

Words

All of these words

This exact phrase

Any of these words

None of these words

These hashtags

Written in — Any Language ▼

People

From these accounts

To these accounts

Mentioning these accounts

Places

Near this place — ⚲ Location disabled

Dates

From this date — to

Other

Select: ☐ Positive :) ☐ Negative :(☐ Question ? ☐ Include retweets

[Search]

As you search hashtags and start following people, Twitter will begin to customize its recommendations for you. This will make it easier to find people and organizations to follow.

Hashtag Chains and Networking Tips

Once specific hashtags lead you to people and organizations to follow, you can start to "chain" together resources and ideas. Think of how you mine footnotes and endnotes to find new resources to research. That is what chaining does for you. When you find a result you like, see who has commented and retweeted. Also, see what other hashtags they label their tweets with to give you additional search terms to use. Some good starting points are:

- general legal hashtags—#law, #legal, #attorney
- practice areas—#bankruptcy, #personalinjury, #divorcelaw
- government—#SCOTUS, #TenthCircuit, #DOJ, #ColoradoLaw
- vendors—#Bloomberg, #Heinonline, #WestlawNext, #LexisAdvance.

Apply the same etiquette you would use in your face-to-face networking to your social networking. Be genuine in your response, retweet ideas you find interesting, ask open-ended questions to create conversation, and become a resource for others. The more you contribute to the conversation and add value to threads, the stronger your hashtags will become.

Legal Research in 140 Characters or Less

In a forty-three-page Note for the *Michigan State Law Review*, law student Patrick M. Ellis argued that to increase open access to legal materials that help lawyers provide quality legal research at a more affordable price, social media platforms needed to be used for more than marketing and outreach to potential clients.[6] To prove his point that social media could be used to tap into a more diverse and more accessible well of information that has the capability of improving society at large, he wrote the entire piece using resources he found on Twitter through the methods described in this article: following, retweeting, and searching hashtags.

Ellis's attempt to prove that social networks could be used as a cost-effective alternative to traditional legal research was only partially successful. He did find that the social networking aided him in his research for the article, but ultimately decided that the academic rigor required for primary legal research is not currently available using Twitter. Although he was able to do all of his article research for free, he recognized that he did not research a specific legal issue.

Ready, Set, Tweet

To begin using Twitter for legal research, you'll need to create an account. Simply follow these steps:

1. Go to www.twitter.com/signup.
2. Enter your name, e-mail address, and password. Remember, this is a business tool, so choose a username that is professional and easily identifiable to others.
3. Click "Create my account." Now your account is active.

To make the most of your account, create a brief (160 characters) description that will encourage people to follow you. Don't panic. You can change your details any time.

Twitter has created a useful help page for new users at support. twitter.com/articles/215585-getting-started-with-twitter#. This page covers the technical basics of how to connect with others, use mobile apps, and discover sources. More important, it covers the subtleties of good tweeting, including how to build your voice and the reciprocal nature of this tool.

Another resource Twitter provides is the Twitter Glossary.[7] Covering everything from "@" to "Who to Follow," the glossary will help you become familiar with Twitter jargon and learn the culture of Twitter users.

Conclusion

Although Twitter and hashtags should not be relied on as authoritative sources of information, they can enhance traditional tools by using network members to guide the user to the most current updates, as well as to uncover resources that are not easily located by traditional means. Twitter should be viewed as an information vehicle—a method of connecting researchers with common interests to share information and resources.

Notes

1. Dictionary.com, "What Is the Real Name of the #?" (June 25, 2012), blog.dictionary.com/octothorpe.

2. Doctor, "Hashtag History: When and What Started It?" (May 30, 2013), www.hashtags.org/featured/hashtag-history-when-and-what-started-it.

3. Boyd, "Hash Tags = Twitter Groupings" (Aug. 26, 2007), stoweboyd.com/post/39877198249/hash-tags-twitter-groupings. Boyd, who refers to himself a "Web anthropologist," is the lead researcher for the future of work and work technologies at Gigaom Research.

4. Gannes, "The Short and Illustrious History of Twitter #Hashtags" (April 30, 2010), giagaom.com/2010/04/30/the-short-and-illustrius-history-of-twitter-hashtags.

5. Internet Live Stats, "Twitter Usage Statistics" (Nov. 14, 2014), www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics.

6. Ellis, "140 Characters or Less: An Experiement in Legal Research," Social Science Research Network (Oct. 1, 2013), papers.srn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2343874.

7. The Twitter Glossary, support.twitter.com/articles/166337-the-twitter-glossary#. ∎