



More characters, better Twitter?

The first evidences about the impact of the 2016 limit change suggest a positive but limited effect, even though results are stronger among light users and on specific markets

by Luca Molteni

In 2016, Twitter social platform entered the eight year of its life; as underlined by some experts of digital economy ⁽¹⁾, there is a sort of «Eight-Year Rule» for the Internet companies, because in the digital world the equivalent of every organization doing business anywhere in the world dies every 8.5 years (considering the 2013 rate of failure). Unfortunately, for Twitter's stakeholders, the rule seems con-

firmed considering the company's stock value. Truth be told, Twitter was born in 2006 with Jack Dorsey as CEO, but user counts started really growing in 2008. In 2013, new CEO Dick Costolo took Twitter public with an initial public offering (IPO) of \$26 per share. Share value quickly doubled and in one day, a new public company was born valued at \$31 billion. In early 2015, Twitter shares dropped by 18% upon the announcement of weak

revenue growth, reduced profitability, and stalled new user adoption. Costolo stepped down and Dorsey returned. In 2016, the eight year of real existence for Twitter, the stock hit an all-time low under \$14. Even if recently (April 2017) there was a surprising user growth pushing the stock again above \$18 (Presi-

⁽¹⁾ See D. Giannetto, «The Future of Twitter? Statistics Show 2016 Death», *Huffingtonpost.com*, 15.2.2016.

dent Trump effect?), after such a long period of stagnant performance the biggest question is: Can Twitter survive in the medium-long run?

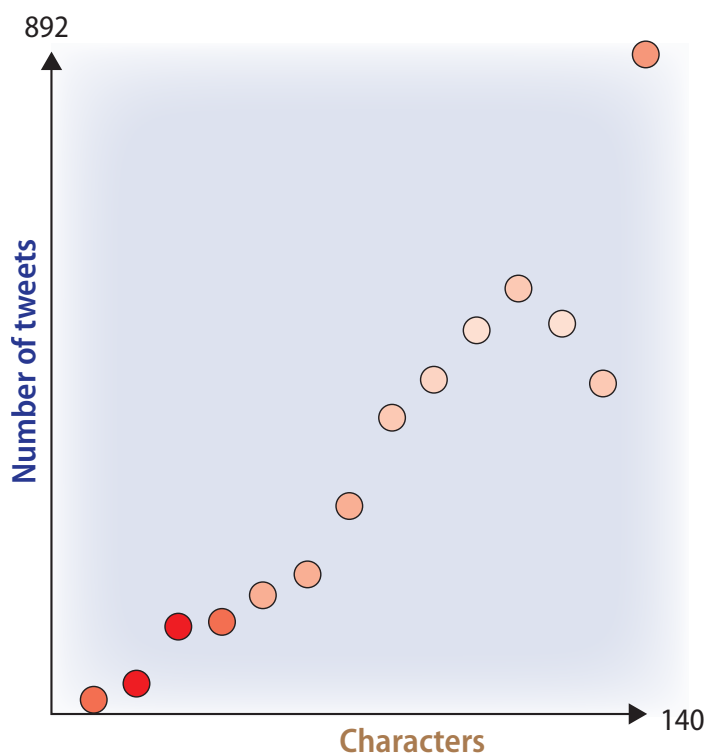
One of Jack Dorsey's ideas to revitalize Twitter is the partial relaxation of the 140-character limit; probably, the main reason relates to the revision of the business model, more focused on medium and large companies marketing activity.

On the other side, some social media experts and users think that the move to relax the 140-characters limit could give a hit to user experience. The need to be quick and concise stimulates common and professional users to be more brilliant and funny in their tweets, and opinions like «I'm going to unfollow everyone whose tweets look like a novella. That's where I draw the line...» have been not so rare in the debate about this topic.

Early reports (2), probably based on a sample of users empowered to use more characters inside the platform, underline that expanded character limit will not affect users much, and Twitter's timeline will remain the same. Contrary to widespread concern, people will not be bombarded with paragraph-long tweets that they will have to navigate through and ignore. Instead, those reports claim that they will still just see the usual 140 characters and will have the option of expanding a longer tweet to reveal the additional commentary.

The most referenced analysis on tweets typical length is quite dated; in 2012, a Twitter employee, Isaac Hepworth, published a study on a

figure 1 | number of retweets vs. tweets length



note: the color of each dot corresponds with the average number of retweets that tweets sent at that length received (the darker the dot, the more retweets received)

source: T. Peterson, «Are Longer Tweets Better Tweets? We Analyzed 4,700 Tweets to Find Out», *Marketing Land*, 5.4.2016

sample of 1 million tweets posted on the network, excluding retweets (3). The graph is plotted out by number of characters and allows to draw a couple of interesting conclusions (4).

Among those is the fact that most tweets are around 30 characters long, with an average length of 67.9 and a median equal to 60. In addition to the average length, there is also a rather large spike at 140 characters; the reason is either tweets that are edited down to the max character limit in order to fit, or that are split into multiple tweets when they cannot be made to fit. It also seems that once people get around the 100-character range, they are in it for the long haul, as

the curve slopes back upwards at 120+ characters. This may be attributable to link-shortened URL's that are tweeted out with post titles from blogs and websites. Most titles from publications attempt to deliver the maximum amount of information, while still leaving room for URLs and for re-tweeted opinions.

Nonetheless, looking at the big picture, it seems that people tend to be synthetic using this social network to communicate.

Considering previous studies on the quality of tweets, measured using the number of retweets, Peterson proposed a study analyzing 4700 tweets sent by 300 of the most popular brands, celebrities,

(2) E. Clor, «How Will a 10,000-Character Limit Change Twitter Marketing?», *AdWeek*, 12.1.2016.

(3) M. Panzarino, «Interesting Fact: More Tweets Posted Are 28 Characters Than Any Other Length [Updated]», *TheNextWeb.com*, 7.1.2012.

and media Twitter accounts, as listed by social analytics firm Socialbakers (4). Those accounts were already running up against Twitter's 140-character limit, most commonly sending tweets between 130 and 140 characters. Conceivably, they would fill up any extra character space Twitter would have given them. But, as clearly shown by Peterson, even though longer tweets are more popular among these accounts, they do not appear to be any more popular among their audiences than shorter tweets. The data show that shorter tweets often average just as many retweets as longer ones, and they sometimes average more, especially celebrities' tweets (Figure 1).

With the experiment presented in this paper, we try to provide some evidence on what really happened after the slight change introduced by Twitter Inc. from September 19th, 2016. They decided to cut down some types of content count toward the platform's 140-character limit, namely:

1. *Media attachments.* A URL at the end of tweets generated from attaching photos, video, GIF, poll, quote tweet, or Direct Message deep link no longer count towards the character limit;
2. *Retweet and quote tweet yourself.* They enabled the retweet button on a user's own tweets, so users can easily retweet or quote tweet themselves when they want to share a new reflection or feel like a very good one went unnoticed;
3. *No more @.* These changes simplified the rules around tweets starting with a username. Tweets that begin with a username now

reach all followers. (That means users no longer have to use the «@» convention, which were used in the past to broadcast tweets broadly.) If a user wants a reply to be seen by all their followers, they will be able to retweet it to signal that they intend for it to be viewed more broadly.

Obviously, this is not the 10,000 character limit mentioned by some Twitter team at the end of

bilities given by the platform, so the analyses were carried out on a sample of 1,300,304 and 185,934 tweets respectively for the USA and Italy.

The information drawn from each tweet is related to the *total length* of the tweet and the *number of web references and attachments*. To have a measure of «popularity» of the person posting the update and its potential influence on tweet length, we used the *listed count* measure: in short, Twitter users can make any

type of list they want (funny, smart, brands etc.), and identify accounts they find interesting under each header; this is obviously another indicator of popularity with respect to followers – the more lists you are on, the more popu-

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Twitter Hashtag Characters Conversation Length Tweet Politics Visuals 2016 SEO Limit

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Dataset collection and setup

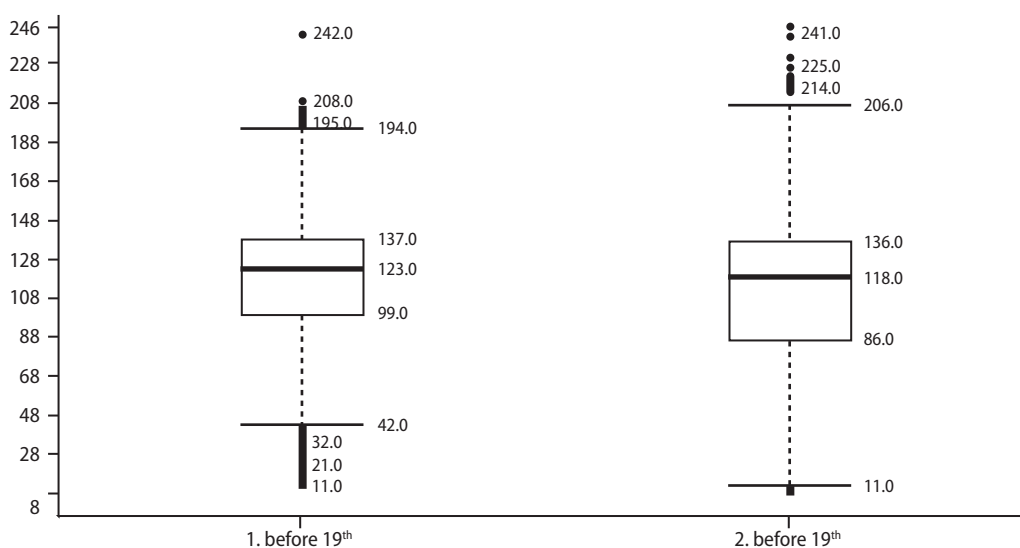
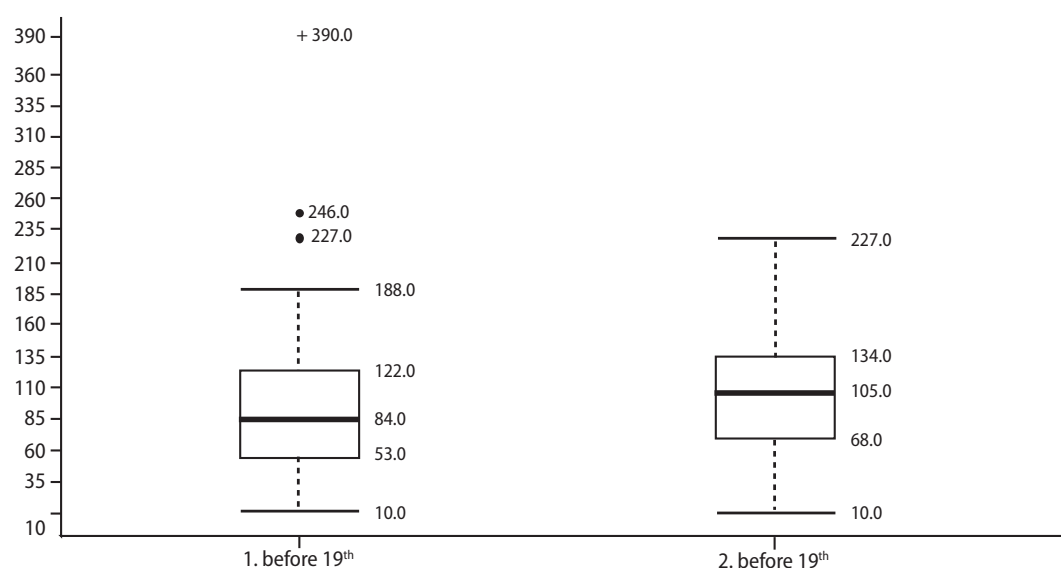
To obtain the first evidence on the subject, we decided to collect a sample of tweets in the USA and in Italy, in the time window September 14th-September 29th 2016. The chosen topics were the presidential election in the USA, while in Italy we considered various hashtags, inside which we will put in evidence those related to the December 4th referendum and politics in general, to some TV shows, talent shows, series, and to the launch of the Apple iPhone 7. Overall, we collected 8,241,338 tweets in USA and 1,113,159 tweets in Italy using different servers (5); cleaning the retweets and the duplicates, we ended up respectively with a sample size of 1,782,285 and 206,488 in the two areas. Finally, we decided to filter out the time window September 19th-21st, to allow users some time to understand the new possi-

Analysis results

The main focus of the analysis was on the evaluation of the differences in tweet mean length *before* and *after* 19th September 2016. In Figure 2 and 3, the two conditional box plots for the USA and Italy are reported, showing a clear difference in the two areas.

In particular, in the USA case there is no evidence of an impact of the new tweet length rule, with the median length equal to 123 characters before September 19th and to 118 characters after (with the interval Q_1-Q_3 between 99 and 137 before and between 86 and 136 after); in the Italian case on the contrary the impact seems relevant, with the median length increasing from 84 to 105 and the interval Q_1-Q_3 shifting from 53-122 to 68-134. Consequently (5), the Anova *F*-tests on mean length difference

(4) T. Peterson, «Are Longer Tweets Better Tweets? We Analyzed 4,700 Tweets to Find Out», *Marketing Land*, 5.4.2016.

figure 2 | distribution of tweet length before and after 19th September 2016 (USA)

figure 3 | distribution of tweet length before and after 19th September 2016 (Italy)

table 1 | ANOVA F-tests on tweet mean length (Italy, specific topics)

Tweet hashtags	# tweets	Mean length before 19 th September 2016	Mean length after 19 th September 2016	Anova sig.
Politics (2016 Italian referendum)	50,061	110.52	110.28	0.4161
iPhone 7 (smartphones)	7614	85.68	104.92	0.0000
Tv talent	6131	76.86	79.9	0.0003

are significant in the USA case, but in the opposite direction compared with what we expected before the analysis; on the contrary for the overall Italian case the tests were more than 99.9% significant in the «right» direction.

If we go deeper in analysing Italian data, we could find that the impact of the rule change is different for different topics (Table 1).

As happened with the USA data, for politics hashtags we are not able to find a significant impact, while limiting the analysis to consumer electronics and TV talent we can observe a clear increase in tweets length (in particular for the iPhone 7 topic).

We get consistent overall results comparing the number of external «http» links used inside a tweet: there is no sample mean increase in USA (on the contrary, a significant decrease) and a clear growth in Italy . Note anyway that as the attached online figures show the starting point is very different in the two countries and much lower for the Italian case (0.897 link per tweet in USA vs 0.292 in Italy).

Finally, no deviation from the overall result was obtained considering only more popular users («listed count» above 50). Their tweet average length in the USA and in Italy is larger compared to the overall Twitter users population (around 119 characters in USA and 103 characters in Italy), but again only in Italy there was a significant growth before and after 19th September (105.34 vs 101.45), although less relevant compared to the total tweet sample.

Managerial implications and future research

Managerial implications

The main results we obtained in this empirical study is that the nature of Twitter as the domain of concise and brilliant users seems

not to be threatened by the relaxation of the character limit. The effect of this relaxation, at least in the terms proposed in September 2016, is not so strong, in particular taking into account specific topics, such as politics, and heavy users. On the contrary, considering topics like consumer electronics and TV shows, within a less mature environment in terms of user experience and intensity such as the Italian case, the increased possibility to insert media links leads to an apparent growth of tweet length.

Considering potential managerial implications for the affected topics and areas, we can say that more characters could have a positive impact on the ability of brands to improve customer experience as well as widen the audience and the corporate users of the social platform. Ash Read highlighted some ways to make full use of 140 characters **(5)**:
4. provide more context in replies. As a result of the update, user @names no longer count against the 140 characters. This allows more space to provide additional details that previously may have taken a couple of tweets. For example, if a user is responding to a customer service question, they could not only share their reply in 140 characters, but also add a GIF saying «Thanks for reaching out» or a screencast video to further explain how to fix the issue;
5. utilize visuals more often. Studies have shown that visual and media attachments are a big factor in boosting engagement and retweets; as already mentioned, Twitter users are now able to utilize the full 140 characters to share their copy and still include media, without exceeding that limit. For marketers, this means more opportunities to include visuals, videos, prod-



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uct demos, and more within their tweets; for customer support teams, it also provides the chance to share screenshots, screencasts, and other support materials to help customers with their tickets;
6. opportunity for better conversation. The very essence of Twitter is conversation and connecting with others. One of the most important factors in the update is that it allows better conversation on the platform: with usernames not counting against character counts, users can fully embrace the 140 characters to express themselves. Previously, having a conversation with two or more participants could be hampered by the fact as usernames could take up anywhere from 5-20+ characters, leaving little room for discussion.

Swant put in evidence at least six areas of expansion related in particular, but not only, to advertising activity **(6)**:

(5) A. Read, «Longer Tweets Are Here: All You Need to Know About Twitter's 140 Character Update», *Buffer Social*, 19.9.2016.

(6) M. Swant, «6 Ways Longer Tweets Could Give Branded Messages More Character», *AdWeek*, 6.1.2016.

1. pharmaceutical, alcohol, health-care, financial and in general all highly regulated industries could easier meet disclosure requirements on the platform;

2. possibility to «pontificate», or in other words, to post lengthy memos; this could be useful for opinion or industry leaders who want to write more at once or to give lengthy replies to other people's tweets to better illustrate their side of an argument;

3. better capabilities for Twitter search and SEO, because more characters will create more search opportunities within the platform, as well as provide new opportunities for marketers to harness the power of Google;



In sintesi

- Il 2016 ha rappresentato l'ottavo anno di effettiva operatività per Twitter, uno snodo spesso cruciale nella vita delle Internet companies. **Nel corso dell'anno, il valore azionario dell'azienda ha toccato il minimo storico**, sollevando numerosi interrogativi sul futuro di medio-lungo periodo della piattaforma social.
- Per far fronte alla dinamica sfavorevole, il CEO Jack Dorsey ha proposto di introdurre **una modifica al limite di 140 caratteri per tweet** che ha storicamente contraddistinto Twitter, probabilmente nell'intento di coinvolgere maggiormente i dipartimenti marketing delle medie e grandi aziende. Secondo alcuni, tuttavia, una decisione simile avrebbe potuto compromettere l'incisività dei messaggi, uno dei punti di forza della piattaforma.
- Alcuni studi precedenti hanno evidenziato come la lunghezza media dei tweet fosse di 67,9 caratteri, e che **non si riscontrava una correlazione diretta tra la lunghezza degli stessi e la loro popolarità** (in termini di tasso di retweet).
- A partire dal 19 settembre 2016, la policy di Twitter riguardo al limite di lunghezza è stata modificata, **escludendo dal computo dei 140 caratteri i link relativi ad allegati multimediali** e i riferimenti @usernames.
- Per verificare l'impatto delle modifiche sul comportamento degli utenti della piattaforma social, in questo studio sono stati analizzati oltre 1,3 milioni di tweet negli USA e 185.000 tweet in Italia pubblicati subito prima e subito dopo il 19 settembre 2016. L'analisi ha mostrato che **negli USA l'impatto delle nuove regole è stato assai ridotto** e si è manifestato in modo controintuitivo nei termini di una leggera diminuzione della lunghezza media dei tweet; **in Italia si è invece registrato un aumento della lunghezza media dei tweet**, ma circoscritto a post relativi a specifici argomenti (elettronica e media) e non ad altri (politica).
- In generale, la nuova policy relativa alla lunghezza massima dei tweet sembra avere avuto un impatto modesto, aprendo però **nuove opportunità a livello di marketing e customer care**. In particolare, il maggior spazio a disposizione potrà facilitare conversazioni più efficaci e renderà più semplice allegare media e visual ai tweet, facilitando le campagne di marketing e garantendo un miglior servizio di customer support da parte delle aziende.

4. engagement increase; allowing brands to reach audiences with more content on Twitter will result in longer time spent with brands and more opportunity to build connections with their audiences;

5. fewer motivations to link off-channel, because having more characters means more options for content creation and the ability to offer richer experience on-platform, again increasing customer engagement;

6. TL;DR (Internet slang for «too long; didn't read»); the move could provide a way for brands to have a combination of short- and long-form content; we could imagine a button for TL;DR that gives consumers options for what kind of branded content they want to look at.

In general, the first evidence of a light and not generalized effect seems to be confirmed, playing down the relevance of the debate on the opportunity to further relax the character limit.

Limits and future research

The limits of the present study are evident, in particular for the specificity of the analyzed topics and the consideration of only two countries. To assess the effect of possible future new changes in Twitter rules, we suggest to broaden the number of involved areas and topics. Another important aspect is to assess the potential effect of other variables, considering the extension of the time window we need to consider to get an adequate sample of tweets before and after the change. ■

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