

# The Ubiquitous and Increasingly Significant Status Message

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Who would have thought that the status message would be one of the hottest features on the Web? This situation may be hard to conceive of, given the status message's humble beginnings as a simple, practical away notice in email applications and instant-messaging services.

The status message has evolved from its lowly beginnings into a multidimensional feature and service addressing numerous social needs. It is a near ubiquitous feature in email applications, instant-messaging services, and social-networking sites upon which billion-dollar companies are built. Even the powerhouses of the Web, the search engines, have gotten onboard, with status-message boxes available on personalized search home pages and status messages reflecting near instantaneous temporal happenings now integrated with traditional search results.

Nowhere has the status message made more of an impact than on the social-networking sites—MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, myYearbook, and Orkut, as well as micro-communication sites such as Twitter.

The status message has achieved such importance in terms of, well, status, that there are even services that provide witty messages for you (e.g., <http://www.awaymessages.com/> and <http://tjshome.com/statusmessages.php>) in case you are too busy to compose them yourself. Controlling the content of status messages is now a facet of professional online reputation management (<http://www.prospectmx.com/social-network-online-reputation-management-protection>). Numerous companies provide status-message account-management services for other companies, organizations, and individuals. The major search engines have entered into agreements to access the stream of updated status messages from the major platforms, and there are several startup companies focused on providing status messages as search results. In sum, the status message is now big business with significant impact along multiple fronts.

What is a status message? How are they used, and what has made the status popular as a Web service?

A status message is usually a short note that automatically appears as a feature of some client applications on the Web and is available to a large audience. A rough analogy would be a message on a telephone answering machine or a note stuck on a bulletin board. However, one can update a status message with relative ease. Therefore, status messages are updated frequently, serving as an instantaneous communication medium. Status messages are typically written in the third person, making them similar to announcements on news tickers, such as those seen on major television news channels. Although conceptually linked to blogging via terms such as micro-blogging, the status message is really a form of micro-communication, given its frequent updating and short length.

By short, we mean really diminutive. A status message is typically in the range of about 140 characters or less, which is about 20 standard English words. This word length is similar to that of a newspaper headline or sentence. Whether by design or default, the sta-

CLASSIFICATION	PERCENTAGE
Comments	49%
Information providing	18%
Information seeking	11%
Opinion	22%
Total	100%

► Table 1: Status messages by classification

SENTIMENT BY WEEK FOR ALL COMPANIES	PERCENTAGE
Great	31%
Swell	32%
So-so	12%
Bad	16%
Wretched	7%
No Tweets	2%
	100%

► Table 2: Brand sentiment for all brands by week

ABBREVIATED QUESTION	YES	NO
Solicited opinions in status message concerning purchase?	74%	26%
Received advice after posting status message?	80%	20%
Did this advice influence your decision?	75%	25%

► Table 3: Results of status-message survey from myyearbook.com

tus message appears to be of a familiar length for information processing, which may have facilitated its general acceptance by the population in a variety of information technology platforms and domains.

Given their shortness, status messages can be sent via several Internet technologies. For example, tweets (the Twitter jargon for the status message) are displayed on a user's profile page, but they can be delivered directly to followers via instant messaging, Short

Message Service (SMS), Really Simple Syndication (RSS), email, or other social-networking platforms, including Twitterrific, Facebook, or LinkedIn. The Twitter application-program interface also allows the integration of Twitter with other Web services and applications. Additionally, many real-time media platforms have entered into agreements with major Web search engines to provide status messages as part of integrated search-engine result listings.

How are status messages used? Offering interesting insights into personalities by reflecting individuality traits, status messages serve as personal bulletin boards for many individuals and organizations. Some commonly reported uses of status messages are:

- Disseminating news and information, either about self or others
- Inquiring by posting of questions to others
- Promoting one's self or organization
- Replying to status messages of others
- Sharing of knowledge or expertise, including links, multimedia, and live events

In an analysis of 2,700 Twitter posts that mentioned companies, we manually coded the status messages into four categories developed a posteriori, which are:

- *Opinion*—the expression of opinion or sentiment concerning a company, product, or service.
- *Information seeking*—the expression of a desire to address some gap in data, information, or knowledge concerning some company, product, or service.
- *Information providing*—providing data, information, or knowl-

edge concerning some company, product, or service.

- *Comment*—the use of a company, product, or service term in a status message where the brand was not the primary focus.

As shown in Table 1, a significant number of status messages were used to provide information about a company or product (18 percent), to seek information about a company (11 percent), or to offer an opinion about a company (22 percent).

Percentages such as these have captured the attention of companies, universities, other organizations, and individuals interested in monitoring the pulse of their brand awareness or image.

Why are status messages so popular? It may relate to the attention economy, which is based on the idea that the abundance of information available creates a shortage of attention in people. Therefore, any technology or service that reduces the consumption of attention when locating, processing, or sharing information will have utility in the marketplace. Status messages permit people to quickly know what others are doing and what is happening at some given moment. They also permit the sharing of targeted information or the location of information.

What also makes status messages so valuable is that they are usually publically available. The de facto standard of the emerging status-message ecosystem is public by default, private when necessary, which makes access to status messages on many platforms easy and—given their growing number and widespread use among an increasingly var-

ied demographic—valuable for research, political inquiry, and commercial investigations. In fact, the integration of real-time search results may be one of the most innovative search-technology advances in years.

As an example of the value of status messages in the e-commerce domain, we conducted an analysis of nearly 150,000 status messages from Twitter, collected over 13 one-week periods for the brand names of 50 major companies. For each one-week period and each brand, we calculated an overall sentiment of the status messages using a five-point Likert-scale by means of a Naïve Bayes classifier. As shown in Table 2, there was significant commenting on these brands, making them a rich source of brand-image data for corporations in the area of customer relationship and market analysis.

This type of information, once expensive to obtain, is now freely available via status-message platforms on the Web. As such, the status message is important for many sectors, not just e-commerce.

Just as importantly, it appears that these status messages have an impact on people's interactions and behaviors. In a survey of 34,514 myYearbook users in the important 13- to 24-year-old demographic, we asked participants questions concerning their use and the influence of status messages on product and purchase decisions. We asked if participants had ever sought opinions in status messages prior to making a purchase, whether or not they received advice based on this status-message request, and if the advice

they received was influential in their purchase decisions.

As the results in Table 3 show, status messages are a source of information for people. Also, people use status messages to share information and opinions, and this information has a notable effect on people's behaviors.

Nearly three-quarters of the respondents reported they have posted information concerning something they wanted to purchase in order to get opinions prior to purchase. Nearly 80 percent reported they received advice, and 75 percent reported this advice influenced their eventual purchase decisions. Not only are people posting information about products and services, but people are also actively soliciting the opinions of those in their social network. Others are responding to these solicitations with information, and this information affects eventual behaviors. Although these percentages are from the business area, we would expect to see similar behaviors in other domains.

As a function that began basically as a notice announcing "I'm away," the status message has certainly come a long way. It is now a recognized and valued form of information seeking and sharing. Its short chunk of information seems ideally suited to cognitive processing, and its public "share with all" convention makes it valuable as an open information source. Although still at an incipient stage, it will be interesting to see the future development of the status message's potentially noteworthy impact on commerce, social networking, and information technology.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bernard J. (Jim) Jansen is an associate professor in the College of Information Sciences and Technology at The Pennsylvania State University. Jansen has more than 200 publications in the area of information technology and systems, with articles appearing in a multidisciplinary range of journals and conferences. His specific areas of expertise are Web searching, sponsored search, and personalization for information searching. He is co-author of *Web Search: Public Searching of the Web*, co-editor of *Handbook of Weblog Analysis*, and author of *Understanding User-Web Interactions Via Web Analytics*. He has received several awards and honors, including an ACM Research Award and six application development awards. Jansen teaches both undergraduate and graduate-level courses, as well as mentors students in a variety of research and educational efforts. He also has conducted numerous consulting projects. He resides with his family in Charlottesville, Virginia.



Abdur Chowdhury is Twitter's chief scientist and has been working the lines between academia and industry for most of his career. Hobbies include cave diving, Aikido, and teaching his daughter cool stuff.



In 2005 Geoff Cook became the CEO of myYearbook, joining forces with myYearbook's founders—Catherine and David Cook—his siblings. Cook was instrumental in raising more than \$20 million in angel financing, venture capital, and venture debt to build the young company into a leading social media destination with 10 million uniques and 2 billion pageviews per month. He previously founded EssayEdge.com and ResumeEdge.com from a Harvard University dorm room, and built them into category leaders over the course of seven years before selling them to the Thomson Corporation in 2003. Cook has an A.B. in economics from Harvard and lives in Pennington, NJ with his wife Kerri and three-year-old daughter Madeline.