

Twitter overload

By Deanna Zandt

Originally published on deannazandt.com

"There is no such thing as information overload, there's only filter failure." -Clay Shirky, via @jayrosen_nyu

One of the questions I get asked most about [Twitter](#) and other social media — whether from friends or from people I'm training— is, "Okay, I understand how it technically works now, but how do you handle that flood of information coming your way? It would drive me crazy to try and keep track of x number of people!"

Yes! I agree!

If I actually tried to stay on top of the several hundred people and conversations I'm following on Twitter, I would: (a) never get any work done, (b) go slightly bonkers, and thus (c) be rendered homeless quite fast. The trick is that I'm not actually paying that much attention to all those people. (Sorry, people I follow.) The paradigm of email being our main form of digital communication for the past 10+ years (at least in the mainstream) has created this sense that every message appearing in front of our faces is significantly important enough to demand our attention. As social media expands, nothing could be further from the truth. We are presented with the opportunity to reach numbers of people that previously was technologically impossible. That doesn't mean we have to pay attention to them all.

In the case of Twitter, I like to think of it as my personal water cooler in the break room— when I'm bored or otherwise off on an ADD jaunt, I stop by here and listen to what other people are talking about at the moment. If something interesting or funny just happened, I pop my head into the group and tell them. ("A guy wearing boxers on the outside of his pants carrying a 1984 boombox blaring Michael Jackson just danced with me on Houston St.")



There are some decisions I've made about my Twitter use that have helped me to keep enjoying it as a helpful tool:

- **I don't try to figure out all the conversations that were happening before I stopped by.** Unless there's some heated, heavy-duty discussion happening, I don't go back in time and try to find out what everyone's said since I last checked.
- **I've accepted that there *will* be some things that I miss.** I generally rely on "[retweets](#)" — denoted by *RT* or *rtwt* — to keep me abreast of really important news or funnies.
- **I [search](#) for my username to look for people replying or referring to me.** I want to be polite and respond to people talking to me as much as possible. You can save an [RSS feed](#) of the [search results](#) so you don't have to keep checking the webpage.
- **I'm selective about who I follow and unfollow.** I don't follow everyone that follows me, and I unfollow people who overwhelm my stream. This comes across to some as rude or unkind in the new paradigm, but I don't subscribe to that belief. I don't expect everyone that follows me to stay interested in my tweets about just how hilarious and weird my friends and dog are. I don't expect them to be interested in every meeting or conference that I decide to live-tweet. Like most relationships, we need to work on our expectation management and boundaries in the social media sphere. [I wrote a post about this last year.](#)

The biggest thing I like to stress to people who ask me these things is that Twitter (and other tools like it) are tools for enhancing your communication and relationships — not destroying your sanity trying to keep up with everything. You should use them how you see fit, and not be afraid to make your own rules for your relationships— just as you would offline, so can you online.

