Twitter API: Up and Running

This groundbreaking book provides you with the skills and resources necessary to build web applications for Twitter. Perfect for new and casual programmers intrigued by the world of microblogging, *Twitter API: Up and Running* carefully explains how each part of Twitter’s API works, with detailed examples that show you how to assemble those building blocks into practical and fun web applications. You’ll also get a complete look at Twitter culture and learn how it has inspired programmers to build hundreds of tools and applications.

With this book, you will:

- Explore every component of a Twitter application and learn how the API responds
- Get the PHP and MySQL code necessary to build your own applications, with explanations of how these ingredients work
- Learn from real-world Twitter applications created just for this book
- Discover the most interesting and useful Twitter programs—and get ideas for creating your own—with the book’s Twitter application directory

Twitter offers a new way to connect with people on the Internet, and *Twitter API: Up and Running* takes you right to the heart of this technology.

Kevin Makice, a Ph.D. student at the Indiana University School of Informatics, researches the local use of technology and the application of relational psychology to complexity and design. Currently, he’s developing a critical framework for phatic design by exploring Twitter as a means of strengthening community.

“Twitter API: Up and Running is a friendly, accessible introduction to the Twitter API. Even beginning web developers can have a working Twitter project before they know it. Sit down with this book for a weekend and you’re on your way to Twitter API mastery.”

—Alex Payne (@al3x), Twitter API Lead

“This book rocks! I would have loved to have this kind of support when I initially created TwitDir.”

—Laurent Pantanacce, creator of TwitDir

“Twitter API: Up and Running is a very comprehensive and useful resource—any developer will feel the urge to code a Twitter-related application right after finishing the book!”

—The Lollicode team, creators of Twitscoop
Praise for *Twitter API: Up and Running*

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— The Lollicode team, creators of Twitscoop

“A truly comprehensive resource for anyone who wants to get started with developing applications around the Twitter platform.”

— David Troy, developer of Twittervision

“An exceptionally detailed look at Twitter from the developer’s perspective, including useful and functional sample code!”

— Damon Cortesi, creator of TweetStats, TweepSearch, and TweetSum

“This book is more than just a great technical resource for the Twitter API. It also provides a ton of insight into the Twitter culture and the current landscape of apps. It’s perfect for anyone looking to start building web applications that integrate with Twitter.”

— Matt Gillooly, lead developer of Twalala

“A wonderful account of the rich ecosystem surrounding Twitter’s API. This book gives you the insight and techniques needed to craft your applications in this rapidly expanding social network.”

— Craig Hockenberry, creator of Twitterrific
Twitter API: Up and Running
Twitter API: Up and Running

Kevin Makice
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One reason Twitter resonates with me is its simplicity. I’ve blogged in some form or another since 2000, when my first son was born. It takes a lot of time and thought to compose even a few paragraphs of meaningful text for a blog. You can add pictures and video, fiddle with the formatting, and reference many other sites with hyperlinks. It is an incredibly useful practice, but rarely does blogging fit into one of those natural moments between tasks. Twitter, on the other hand, won’t let you contribute more than a few thoughts or a link or two with each post, and only then if it fits into the 140-character limit. There is no formatting or multimedia embedding; it is just a simple act of thinking, sharing, responding, or emoting.

Since Twitter’s award-winning appearance at the South By Southwest (SXSW) conference in 2007, many have called for it to improve on the simple things it does. Why aren’t there groups? Can we make our posts longer? Will pictures show up in the timeline? How can I manage my private messages to other users? Although Twitter has on occasion responded to collective behavior or demand by implementing a new wrinkle (as with @username replies), the service has largely remained as it began: simple.

It is a credit to Twitter that it has resisted such changes. Making the service less simple would also make it less versatile. The void of unanswered user requests for functionality is filled by an ecosystem of third-party developers. The incentive for the innovation and resources these developers bring to the Twitter community would be critically lowered if the main service tried to do too much. A simple Twitter is better not only for the users trying to post their status updates, but also for the third-party applications trying to find their niches.

The purpose of Twitter API: Up and Running is to provide an introduction to using the Twitter API—the means to get at the rich Twitter data—to build web applications. This book has three main parts: an overview of the Twitter ecosystem and culture; background information on the languages and environment you need to create your applications; and working code for a suite of sample applications meant to get you started on your programming adventure. Novice readers should be able to gather working knowledge from the PHP scripts used to create the sample applications and see how the syntax works in context. Experienced readers will likely benefit from the references for the API methods as well as discussions about the context into which your applications will be placed.
As Twitter lowers barriers to publication through its simplicity, so this book will provide easy access to the skills and resources you’ll need to build web applications for its API.

**Who This Book Is For**

The cultivation of open API development represents another level of evolution in Internet participation. We aren’t just reading and writing content; we’re also cocreating the interactions surrounding that content. Twitter, in particular, has a low barrier for both. The most important property of the Twitter API is not found in the nuances of its syntax, but rather in the imaginative and prolific cocreation it inspires.

This groundbreaking book is for Twitter fans who want to do more than just answer the question, “What are you doing?” In this first book about working with the Twitter API, new and casual programmers are provided with explanations of how each part of the API functions and examples of how those parts can be assembled into web applications. We’ll also look closely at the culture of Twitter and how it has inspired programmers to build their own tools and games.

A prerequisite for this book is a basic understanding of how applications are built and hosted on the Web. However, you don’t need to be a professional coder to launch a Twitter web application successfully. The XHTML, CSS, PHP, and MySQL code necessary to the construction of the example applications will be provided and explained, as will some suggested criteria for securing a website. You should be able to pick up this book, follow the sample code, and have at your disposal a working application to use and modify.

The sample code can be downloaded from this book’s website ([http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/9780596154615/](http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/9780596154615/)). It is open and available for anyone to use.

Among the wide range of readers of this book will be IT professionals in small organizations and Twitter members looking for a programming project. In the former scenario, an IT professional may be looking at Twitter as a potential platform to integrate existing services or products provided by his employer. He can use this book to survey some web tools that might serve as a foundation for a larger web application. In this context, it becomes a project companion with additional long-term value as a reference and directory of sample applications.

In the latter scenario, an active member of the Twitter community may have grown tired of waiting for someone else to provide missing functionality and be thinking about adding it herself. She might read this book first to see what is out there, in case someone has already built the desired tool, and then try to code the web application herself. She may not consider herself a programmer, but she can build off of the sample code and
learn details by referencing the chapters on PHP and MySQL functions, selecting the sample application closest to what she has in mind and then making changes to add the desired behavior.

Twitter is a hot topic, but not much has been written about it yet. Therefore, the information this book contains on the history of the Twitter culture will also make it attractive to nonprogrammers who want to understand the phenomenon, such as decision makers for company development teams or active Internet users new to Twitter.

### How This Book Is Organized

This book introduces the Twitter API in the context of a greater community culture, offering a suite of sample applications to help illustrate some key programming concepts. Here’s a synopsis of what you’ll find:

**Chapter 1, Hello Twitter**
- Gives you a comprehensive overview of the Twitter culture, including the history of microblogging, the Fail Whale, the company business model, the API developer community, and creative uses of Twitter.

**Chapter 2, Twitter Applications**
- Reviews more than two dozen existing third-party Twitter web applications you can use as inspiration for your own creations. The applications are grouped into seven tools categories—Publishing, Information Stream, Appropriation, Search, Aggregation, Statistics, and Follow Network tools—and each app is profiled with a screenshot and a description of what it does.

**Chapter 3, Web Programming Basics**
- Provides a comprehensive starter kit for XHTML, CSS, PHP, and MySQL. This chapter is meant to be a primer for new programmers and a convenient reference for more experienced programmers. It also offers some advice on what to look for when searching for a web host to care for your new application.

**Chapter 4, Meet the Twitter API**
- Gives the details on how to make requests of the Twitter API. Included in the general explanation are format differences, HTTP methods and error codes, authentication, and rate limits. This chapter contains a directory of all of the parameters used by the API and a description of each of the 40 methods, grouped into seven categories: Publishing, Information Stream, Follow Network, Communication, Member Account, API Administration, and Search. It also includes a discussion about security issues involving Basic Auth and a brief description of how to use cURL to test the API.

**Chapter 5, Meet the Output**
- Takes a look at what comes out of the API as a response from Twitter. The various types of XML objects you will encounter—user, status, message, search, ID,
response, and hash—are detailed with example output, explanations of the included XML elements, and a list of methods that return that object.

Chapter 6, Application Setup
Discusses the things you need to do to get your web environment ready, including creating a master Twitter account, making your MySQL database tables, creating your stylesheet, and uploading custom functions to a directory outside the web path. Each of the custom functions used in the sample applications is discussed in detail, with a description of what it does and PHP code provided as examples.

Chapter 7, Sample Applications
Describes the web interfaces from the suite of sample applications. For each of the seven applications, I’ll run you through how to use it and what it does, and then we’ll look closely at the code. Included are suggestions for how to make this starter code better.

Chapter 8, Automated Tasks
Describes the code for the programs from the suite of sample applications that run in the background. It includes a brief explanation of what each of the five scripts does and how the PHP code works.

Appendix
Provides a bare-bones look at the Twitter API, listing the method path, whether it requires authentication, if it is charged against your rate limit, the HTTP method type, and any required and optional parameters.

Conventions Used in This Book
The following typographical conventions are used in this book:

*Italic*
Used for emphasis, technical terms where they are defined, URLs, email addresses, filenames, file extensions, and pathnames.

*Constant width*
Used for code samples, SQL statements, HTML and XML elements, methods, functions, variables and attributes and their values, objects, and class names.

*Constant width italic*
Used for user-replaceable items in code.

*Constant width bold*
Used for emphasis in code samples.

This icon signifies a tip, suggestion, or general note.
Using Code Examples

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Acknowledgments

It has always been a dream to write a book. While for a long time I thought it would be about time travel or dragons, I’m delighted that my dream was fulfilled under the banner of O’Reilly Media. For that, I have a number of people to thank.

This book is dedicated to my family—Amy (@amakice), Carter (@cmakice), Archie, and the TBD baby we were creating during the nine months it took to write this tome—who went out of their way to give me time and space to type, type, type. By now, with me five years into an older-student Ph.D., they are used to helping me get my 3–5 hours of sleep each night, while keeping me fed and entertained. However, writing a book on top of graduate school is like adding a couple more dissertations to the workload. It takes a village to write a tech book. As they supported me, my family received support from Amy’s and my parents—Susan Clendening (@twobigdogs); Roger (@rjisb) and Jean Isbister; Gary and Carol Clendening; Joy and Pete Kottra—and our friends. I am particularly grateful for the supplemental financial support from that group and from my long-time friend, Tim Roessler, who can now take this dedication as a direct request to sign up for Twitter.

From the O’Reilly camp, Laurel Ruma (@laurelatoreilly) ran point on this project. Despite my being intimidated by both the brand and the endeavor, she held my virtual hand throughout the process and gently kept me on task. That this book arrived on bookshelves near you is a credit to her stewardship that made this project such a wonderful experience for me. I wouldn’t have met her at all if it weren’t for Jeffrey Bardzell (@jeffreybardzell), my professor and friend, who referred me to his agent Carole Jelen McClendon at Waterside Productions. Carole, now my agent, helped me pitch an idea for a Twitter book to John Osborn (@johnatlarge) and Laurel. Nine months later I was holding my first published book. From top to bottom, the O’Reilly Media organization was amazing. Rachel Head, Sarah Schneider, Marlowe Shaeffer, and Rachel Monaghan were also key to completing this project, and I thank them all for their professionalism and patience.
I’d also like to thank the great early tech reviewers that O’Reilly assembled to help improve the content in the book: Alex Payne (@al3x), Ed Finkler (@funkatron), Eric Stern (@Firehed), Cameron Kaiser (@doctorlinguist), Bill Ryan (@wgryan), Lisa Hoover (@lisah), Abraham Williams (@poseurtech), Dave Troy (@davetroy), Jeff Clark (@jeffclark), Matt Gillooly (@mattgillooly), Damon Cortesi (@dacort), and the Lollicode team. Ed was particularly helpful in answering follow-up questions after his initial review, improving security in the sample code, and taking a second peek at additional sections written into later drafts. I am also appreciative of the fact that Alex was willing to spend so much time looking at my words when he was writing his own O’Reilly book on Scala. This book is all the better for their participation.

My local Twitter community deserves props as well. I am in awe that a small university city could muster over 650 early adopters of the service, many of whom were among my peers at the Indiana University School of Informatics. Their use of Twitter is what makes my timeline so valuable. In the process of testing the code for this book, I had to rely on a number of people in my follow net to make sure I wasn’t inadvertently blowing up oil rigs in the Gulf. Thanks to my early reality checkers: Michelle (@MzHartz), Allison (@allisoncooke), Joel (@rhythmofself), Jonathan (@JonathanBranam), Noah (@noahwesley), Steve (@SoundSystemSDC), Daniel (@b00ger), Chintan (@tankchintan), Mike (@dmikeallen), Jenny (@jbhertel), and several others.

The Twitter version of this would be: “@everyone thanks!”
About the Author

Kevin Makice is currently a Ph.D. student at the Indiana University School of Informatics, the first such doctoral program in the nation. His research interests center around the local use of technology and Phatic Design, the application of relational psychology to complexity and design. Prior to completing his Masters of Science in Human-Computer Interaction in 2006, Kevin was the primary Internet programmer for TicketsNow, a clearinghouse for sports, theatre, and entertainment tickets available in the secondary market. Along with three others, he won the CHI 2005 student competition by designing a concept for an ad-hoc volunteering system for elderly residents in assisted-living centers. His past research includes political wikis, tangible interfaces for children’s games, machinima, and network analysis of ball movement in basketball. Much of his blogging and academic efforts over the past year have focused on exploring Twitter as a means of community building.

Colophon

The animal on the cover of Twitter API: Up and Running is a white-breasted nuthatch (Sitta carolinensis). This small songbird is 5 to 6 inches in length with a wingspan of 8 to 11 inches. It has a large head, short tail, and a white face and dark crown. The name nuthatch refers to its habit of gathering nuts and seeds, jamming them into tree bark, and then hammering or “hatching” them open with their strong beaks.

A common species, the white-breasted nuthatch has an estimated total population of 10 million. It lives in woodland areas across North America, from southern Canada to southern Mexico. At least nine subspecies exist, although the differences between them are small (mainly plumage color) and change gradually across the range. Like other nuthatches, the white-breasted nuthatch is able to walk headfirst down tree trunks and can hang upside down from branches. This behavior is the reason for its several nicknames, including topsy-turvey bird, devil-down-head, and tree mouse.

The nuthatch is omnivorous, feeding on acorns and hickory nuts in the winter and insects in the summer. It builds nests 10 to 50 feet up in trees, usually in a hole lined with fur, grass, or bark. In spring the female nuthatch lays 3 to 10 eggs, which are white with reddish brown spots. Its main predators are hawks, owls, and snakes.

The cover image is from the Dover Pictorial Archive. The cover font is Adobe ITC Garamond. The text font is Linotype Birka; the heading font is Adobe Myriad Condensed; and the code font is LucasFont’s TheSansMonoCondensed.