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Bonus content at www.backchannelbook.com:

Web Appendix C: Negotiating a Backchannel Agreement

Web Appendix D: How Open Space Transforms Meetings

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About the Author

Cliff Atkinson is an acclaimed writer, popular keynote speaker, and an independent consultant to leading attorneys and Fortune 500 companies. He designed the presentations that helped persuade a jury to award a $253 million verdict to the plaintiff in the nation's first Vioxx trial in 2005, presentations which *Fortune* magazine called "frighteningly powerful."

Cliff's best-selling book *Beyond Bullet Points* (Microsoft Press, 2007) was named a Best Book of 2007 by the editors of Amazon.com, and it expands on a communications approach he has taught at many of the country's top law firms, government agencies, business schools, and corporations, including Sony, Toyota, Nestlé, Nokia, Nationwide, Deloitte, Amgen, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Intel, Microsoft, and the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal.

Introduction

Back in the good old days of presentations, a speaker could count on audience members to sit quietly in their chairs until they were given permission to ask questions.

Those days are rapidly drawing to a close.

More and more audience members are now bringing their laptops and smartphones into meeting rooms and using them to connect with one another and start their own conversations—while the presenter is speaking.

Sometimes these conversations are confined only to the audience members attending the presentation. But when audiences use a microblogging tool called Twitter, everything they say is published instantly and available for the world to see.

This new conversation that audiences create during a presentation is called a *backchannel*—and like any change, the backchannel can be a double-edged sword.

On one side, when audiences find a presentation interesting and useful, they use the backchannel to enhance the information they are hearing and to broadcast good ideas to people both inside and outside the room. When presenters learn about the backchannel and tap into its potential, they find it a valuable way to know their audiences better, and to find out what's really on their minds.

On the other side, when audiences find a presentation boring, not relevant, or out of date, they don't hesitate to speak their minds and publish their comments to the world. When presenters aren't aware of the backchannel or read critical comments from audience members, it can lead to public conflict that disrupts or even derails presentations.

Whichever way the sword swings, there's no doubt the backchannel is here to stay, and that it will change presentations forever. The only question is the degree of change and how meeting organizers, audience members, and presenters will address it.

The backchannel is such a new phenomenon that this book can only be a first glimpse of the new forces it introduces, and a preview of practical steps you can take to engage the new world of presentations it is creating.

Chapter 1 tells the story of the impact the backchannel can have on a presentation, and the new dynamics it introduces.

Chapter 2 explains how you can join a Twitter backchannel, and Chapters 3 and 4 describe the rewards and risks of doing so.

Chapter 5 explains what you can do to start getting ready for a backchannel, Chapter 6 helps you make your ideas more Twitter-friendly, and Chapter 7 offers specific things you can do to engage the backchannel in conversation.

Chapter 8 takes you through some scenarios so you can practice getting real-time feedback from the backchannel, and Chapter 9 describes how you can learn from the example of people who handle the backchannel well.

Appendixes A and B show a couple of helpful worksheets—the Four Tweets worksheet and the Ten Tweets worksheet—that help you condense and organize your presentation tweets.

As bonus content, go to www.backchannelbook.com to download Web Appendixes C and D. Web Appendix C presents the draft of a backchannel agreement that offers a way for presenters and audiences to negotiate the major changes at work today. And Web Appendix D covers the Open Space movement, which is changing the larger context for presentations and the backchannel today.

Together the chapters provide a first look into something very big on the horizon that is rapidly heading your way.

Nobody has the answers to the questions the backchannel presents, nor are there any ground rules to guide us.

Together we get to make the rules as we go along, in a spirit of creating effective communication experiences for anyone who gathers for a presentation.

You already live in the world of the backchannel.

What this world becomes is in your hands.

[1]

Why Are You Calling Me a #@*% on Twitter?

A speaker confronts an audience member over a Twitter post, demonstrating the new dynamics at work when a backchannel exists in a room

P am Slim was nervous. Sure, everybody gets anxious when they're going to speak in public, as she was scheduled to do that afternoon. But this feeling was different. She had heard that audiences at her event did not always sit quietly and passively in their seats, and that anything could happen. It would soon turn out that Pam was right to be worried.

Pam crossed Congress Avenue and headed to the Austin Convention Center, a sprawling complex covering six downtown city blocks in this thriving city of 750,000. For five days in the spring, the South by Southwest Interactive Festival here draws technologists, entrepreneurs, artists, businesspeople, and experts shaping web technology trends and culture.

(Photo and sketch courtesy of Mike Rohde)

Someone especially excited to attend Pam's session rushed to Room 18 at the far end of the convention center. Whitney Hess had flown to Austin from New York, where she is a *user experience designer*—someone who specializes in making websites and products easier to use. Whitney has her own weblog, or blog, where she publishes articles and interviews related to her profession and her life.

As one of the first to arrive, Whitney was glad to find a seat at the center of the action—first row, next to the center aisle. She sat down in her chair, pulled out her MacBook, and made sure her wireless connection was working properly. Whitney wasn't the only one using a laptop—as more people filtered into the room as she waited the 10 minutes for the panel to start, many of them started setting up their own equipment.

What made Whitney different from attendees at most other events was that she planned to use a service called Twitter that gives her the ability to instantly publish brief posts to the web. While Whitney uses her regular blog to publish posts of any size including text, images, and video, she uses Twitter to publish posts limited to 140 characters of text—around the size of a text message on a mobile phone. A post on Twitter is also called a *tweet*; the act of posting is often called *tweeting* or *Twittering*.

Whitney typed her first post on her computer and clicked to publish it (**Figure 1-1**).

> **twitter**   Login Join Twitter!
>
> I'm live-Twittering "From Blog to Book Deal" with @gapingvoid @guykawasaki
> @stephanieklein @katelaurielee @pamslim http://is.gd/nM4E #sxswi
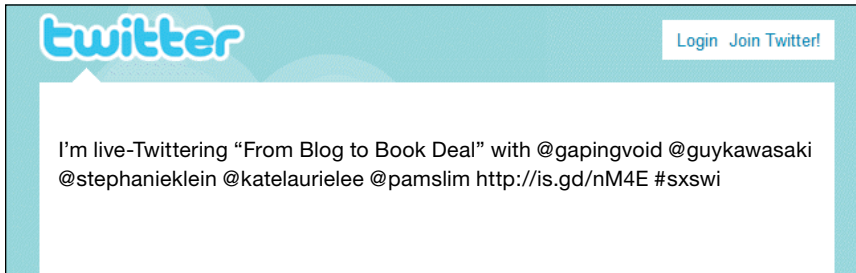
FIGURE 1-1:
Whitney's first post
was packed with
meaning.

Twitter text posts are so constrained in size they demand a certain writing style that gets to the point quickly in as few characters as possible. Though Whitney's post was brief, it revealed a great deal of information—not only about her intended message, but also about the sea change that many audiences and presenters are on the verge of experiencing today.

> **tip ❯** If you don't have a Twitter account, setting one up is fast and easy—you'll learn how in Chapter 2.

It is only by breaking down Whitney's tweet into its parts that you can begin to translate the shorthand she was using.

A Whole New Audience

Millions of people use Twitter in an astonishing variety of ways, well beyond what its inventors envisioned for it when it first entered the scene in 2006. Some people use Twitter to post updates on what they are doing or thinking at the moment—similar to the status update feature on the popular social networking site Facebook. Others use it to publish posts that offer useful information or commentary on particular topics.

Some do their Twitter posting with a desktop or laptop computer; others use their smartphones. Using these tools, people might publish to Twitter from home, an office, a coffee shop, a sidewalk, or even from a ferry, as one passenger did when he photographed US Airways Flight 1549 soon after it landed in the Hudson River in January 2009, posting a link to the photo on Twitter as the first photographic report from the scene.

Your audience, reporting live from the scene

When Whitney wrote in her first post that she was *live-Twittering*, she was referring to one of these many uses of the tool—to report live from a meeting, presentation, conference, or event (**Figure 1.2**).

I'm live-Twittering "From Blog to Book Deal" with @gapingvoid @guykawasaki @stephanieklein @katelaurielee @pamslim http://is.gd/nM4E #sxswi
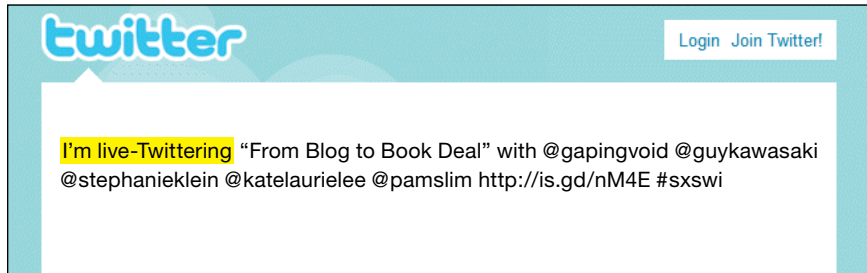
With her short text dispatches she would describe what happened at the event like a journalist reporting live from the scene, but without the need for a satellite television truck.

Next, Whitney described her location: Pam's session that was titled *From Blog to Book Deal: How to* (**Figure 1.3**).

I'm live-Twittering "From Blog to Book Deal" with @gapingvoid @guykawasaki @stephanieklein @katelaurielee @pamslim http://is.gd/nM4E #sxswi
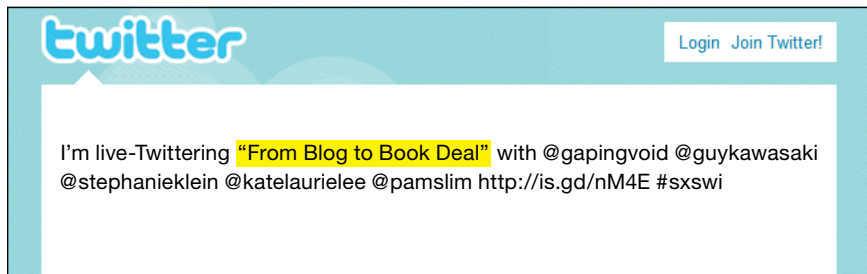
Many talented writers grow a substantial readership through the quality of their work on their blogs, and some of them have been able to extend their online readership into offline readership by getting a book deal with a mainstream publisher. Pam had personal experience in accomplishing the feat—she started her own blog, *Escape from Cubicle Nation*, to help people quit their corporate jobs and start their own ventures; and she recently managed to get a book of the same name published by Portfolio in 2009. Today's session was intended to help other aspiring writers learn how they might accomplish something similar.

But why would Whitney live-tweet in the first place, and who would find it useful?

An audience with an audience

It's not always easy to see the value of a Twitter post in isolation; rather, the value of a tweet lay in the eye of the beholder, and the meaning the tweet has to its author and reader. One of the ways people find value in using Twitter is when they *follow*, or subscribe to someone else's posts. This is a crucial concept that makes the difference between new users finding value in Twitter or abandoning it altogether.

When you first set up a Twitter account, you're not connected to anyone—you're like someone just arriving in a new city and you don't know a single person. But when you click the *Follow* button on someone else's Twitter home page, you establish a connection to them and agree to subscribe to the posts they publish. You might begin by following your friends' Twitter posts, and then you may expand your circle to follow people in your profession whom you respect, and then maybe you'll follow a celebrity or two.

As you grow the list of people you follow, you are creating a network that delivers to you only the posts you want to read from the people you trust. And just as you can follow other people, they can also follow you to receive information that you yourself publish.

For her readers who found the *Blog to Book* topic interesting, Whitney was providing a valuable service by passing on information about the event to those who could not be there in person. When she published her post, it was instantly viewable by her readers, and by anyone else searching the Twitter service. Twitter posts are usually public and viewable unless you take steps to make them private.

An audience looking you up online

The next part of Whitney's first Twitter post introduced to her readers today's presenters, who were all participants in a panel discussion (**Figure 1.4**).
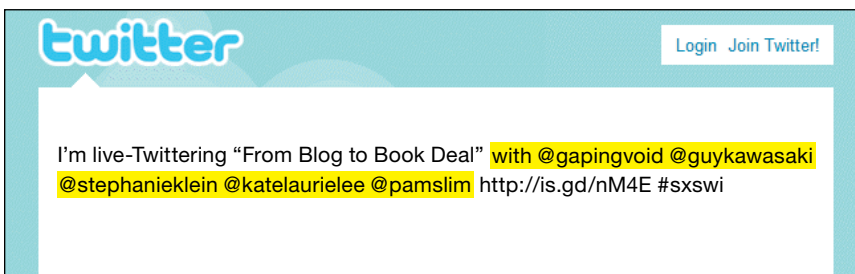
FIGURE 1-4: Whitney listed the members of the panel discussion.

When you sign up for a Twitter account, you choose a username or handle for your account. In some ways it is similar to an email address, except your Twitter address is your username preceded by an @ sign, and can only be used within the Twitter service. Some people use their full names as their Twitter usernames, like *@whitneyhess* herself. Others, like Hugh MacLeod, cartoonist and author of *Ignore Everybody* (Portfolio, 2009), use an alternate name—in his case, *@gapingvoid*.

Guy Kawasaki, founding partner of Garage Technology Ventures and author most recently of *Reality Check* (Portfolio, 2008), is *@guykawasaki*; and Stephanie Klein, the author of the blog *Greek Tragedy* as well as *Moose: A Memoir of Fat Camp* (William Morrow, 2008), is *@stephanieklein*. Kate Lee, a literary agent from ICM, is *@katelaurielee*; and Pam, who had invited the panelists to appear today, is *@pamslim*.

Listing all of the panelists' Twitter handles enabled anyone reading the post to quickly visit the panelists' Twitter home pages, read their biographies, or scan their recent posts and conduct other research on them.

Whitney extended her coverage of the event to the visual when she reached into her bag and took a picture of the panel and posted it on the popular photo-sharing website Flickr (**Figure 1-5**).

FIGURE 1-5:
In addition to live-Twittering the panel, Whitney took a photo of participants Hugh MacLeod, Guy Kawasaki, and Stephanie Klein and posted it on Flickr.
(Photo courtesy of Whitney Hess)

An audience creating a flow of information you're not creating or managing

If people find Twitter posts they like, it's fast and easy to follow their authors on the Twitter service; and it's just as easy to *un-follow* someone if the posts are not useful. As with traditional journalists, over time writers like Whitney develop a reputation for the topics and events they choose to report and the quality of their writing. Popular writers tend to act as trusted editors, selecting relevant information, insight, commentary, and additional resources that readers find interesting and useful. As Whitney cultivates her trusted reputation it helps her grow her base of followers—currently at 4,500—who remain followers because they want to hear more from her.

Sometimes Twitter writers include a link to a website—as in this example (**Figure 1.6**).
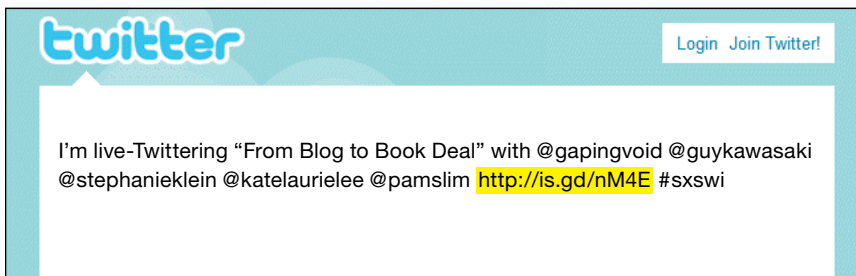
FIGURE 1-6: Whitney provided a link to more resources.

Whitney wanted to share with her readers the direct web address of a page on the SXSW website that contained more detailed information about the panel. But a common problem that writers on Twitter run into is the excessive length of website addresses, such as the original one Whitney intended to share:

http://sxsw.com/interactive/talks/schedule?action=show&id=IAP0900156

With only 140 characters available for any post, the original URL would have used up 68 characters—almost half of her available space. So here Whitney used a *URL shortener* service called *is.gd*, which compressed the address to only 17 characters—*http://is.gd/nM4E*—a savings of 51 characters that she could use to include other useful information. Many third-party services that publish Twitter posts have URL shorteners built in, so you don't have to go to another website to accomplish the task.

Your audience is making their reporting easy to find

And finally, the last bit of text at the end of Whitney's post may look extraneous, but it packs a great deal of Twitter power (**Figure 1.7**).

> **twitter**   Login Join Twitter!
>
> I'm live-Twittering "From Blog to Book Deal" with @gapingvoid @guykawasaki @stephanieklein @katelaurielee @pamslim http://is.gd/nM4E #sxswi
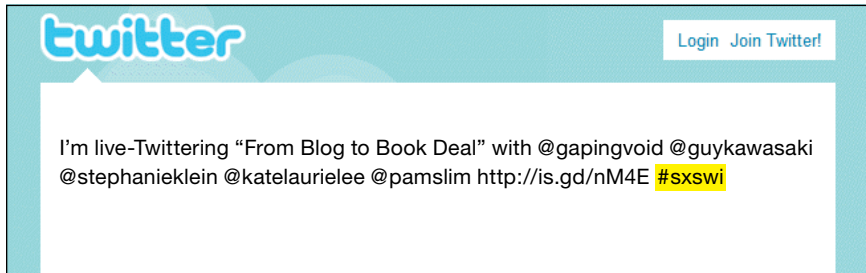
The letters *#sxswi* are a *hashtag*—a special code that Twitter writers place in their posts to indicate they are attending or referring to a specific event or topic. In this case, people Twittering from the SXSW Interactive Festival would include *#sxswi* in their posts. When someone searches for that hashtag on Twitter, the results include the tweets with that term. In addition to event-wide hashtags like *#sxswi*, presenters like Pam sometimes provide audiences with a meeting-specific hashtag like *#blogtobook*, making posts for that meeting even easier to find on Twitter.

Whitney managed to pack quite a bit of meaning in the 138 characters of her Twitter post; and this was only the first of dozens more posts Whitney would write in the next hour as she live-Twittered the panel's presentation, all of which would reach her 4,500 followers.

Although Whitney was quite experienced at live-tweeting, she could not have predicted that the way she used Twitter that day would play a role in putting her on a dramatic collision course with one of the speakers on the panel.

The Seeds of Conflict

Having published her first Twitter post, Whitney looked up from her computer and was surprised there weren't more people in the room, so she posted her impressions (**Figure 1-8**).

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

Beyond shocked at how empty this room is given the star power of the panel. Perhaps it's the time slot: 5pm on the last day of #sxswi
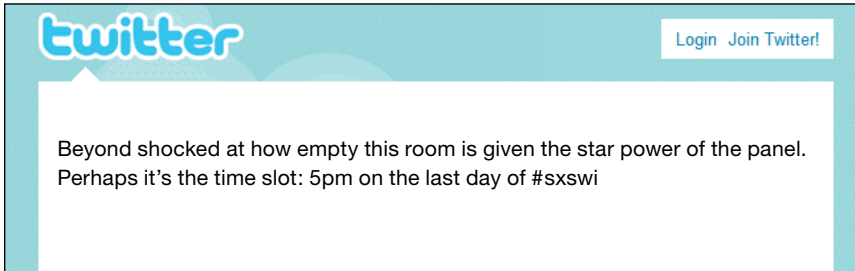
FIGURE 1-8: Whitney expressed her surprise that there weren't more people there to see the well-known participants of the panel discussion.

The *Blog to Book* panel was slotted for the last hour of the last day of SXSW Interactive Festival. Eventually about 100 people would find their way to Room 18 by the time the session started.

Pam started off the panel by introducing herself and her fellow panelists, along with some of the members of the audience whom she knew. Pam asked the group how many people were bloggers, and most of the people in the room raised their hands. She then asked how many had written a book from their blog, and only a few raised their hands. From her poll, she knew she had a good match between the information she had planned for the session, and the audience who was there.

As moderator, Pam viewed her own role as the advocate for the audience, holding herself responsible for making sure their needs were being met by her and the panelists. Trained as a facilitator before she became a writer, Pam had a friendly, evenhanded demeanor as she guided the panel through a spirited discussion about how to write a book proposal, get the attention of a literary agent, and develop a strategy for getting published. Sometimes she asked a question to prompt a conversation, interjected a point, or guided the discussion to a new topic if the current one had run its course.

Mining for nuggets

Whitney had been especially interested in attending the *Blog to Book* panel because she had been following panelist Stephanie Klein's work for years, and now Whitney was keen to hear her in person tell her story about getting published.

When Stephanie described her excitement at hearing interest in her work from a publisher, Whitney quoted her in a Twitter post and used Stephanie's Twitter username for attribution (**Figure 1-9**).

FIGURE 1-9:
Whitney tweeted a quote from panelist Stephanie Klein.
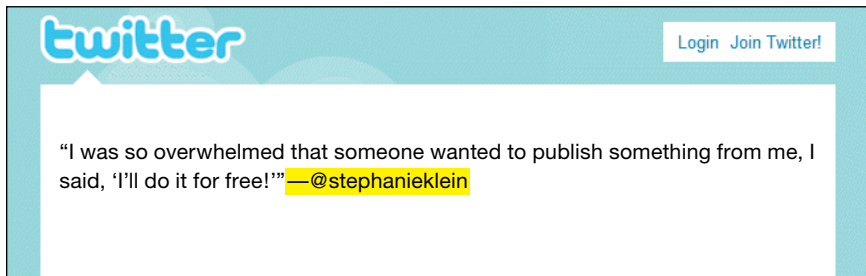
As the discussion continued forward, the panelists shared their stories, advice, and sometimes conflicting strategies. Whitney mined the conversation for nuggets of advice about why bloggers should consider publishing books. For example, panelist Guy Kawasaki described the permanency of books compared to blogs, and Whitney reported it on Twitter (**Figure 1-10**).

FIGURE 1-10:
Whitney tweeted a quote from panelist Guy Kawasaki.

Whitney finds she gets much more from live-Twittering an event than she does from just sitting and listening—the act of processing, condensing, and publishing her tweets within a 140-character limit takes her through a process of engaging with the information at a deeper level than she otherwise would.

Next on the panel, Hugh described how his blog had facilitated a relationship with one of his readers, the popular marketing author Seth Godin, which was instrumental in getting Hugh's book published, as Whitney reported (**Figure 1-11**).

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

Blog helped build up relationships. @sethgodin, other connections wouldn't have known him otherwise. That paved the way @gapingvoid
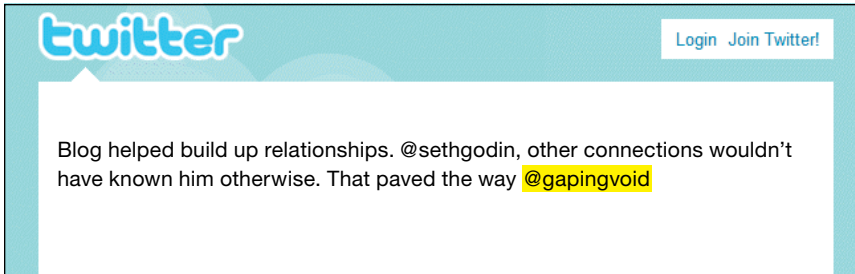
FIGURE 1-11:
Whitney para-phrased advice from panelist Hugh MacLeod.

Throughout the session Whitney was looking for the practical marketing tips she could use herself and pass on to her readers. Stephanie, for example, worked hard to find innovative ways to market her blog, placing her blog web address everywhere she could, as Whitney reported (**Figure 1-12**).

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

@stephanieklein is genius. Went to lots of parties, took photos, handed out cards w/ her blog URL, emailed all Evite invitees w/ URL

FIGURE 1-12:
Whitney praised Stephanie Klein's marketing tactics.

Over the course of the hour-long panel, Whitney would collect an impressive body of information via the 48 tweets she posted. Later, Whitney would copy and paste all of the Twitter posts on her regular long-form blog so her 10,000 blog readers could quickly scan the information to learn what happened. She would also add extended commentary and additional context to the entire stream of posts that would not be possible to include in single posts in isolation.

But a few of those posts Whitney would later regret.

Two different approaches

About 25 minutes into the session, Pam guided the discussion to the topic of whether a writer would get better results by investing time in cultivating relationships to get introductions to a publisher, or by investing time in writing a book proposal first. Guy and Hugh were advocates of working trusted connections to get to an agent. Taking a different view as a literary agent, Kate said she encourages book proposals, and is open to reading any that a writer sends her, as Whitney reported (**Figure 1-13**).

FIGURE 1-13:
Whitney para-phrased advice from panelist Kate Lee.

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

Obviously knowing someone will help you get in the door, but I'll consider any inquiry.—@katelaurielee
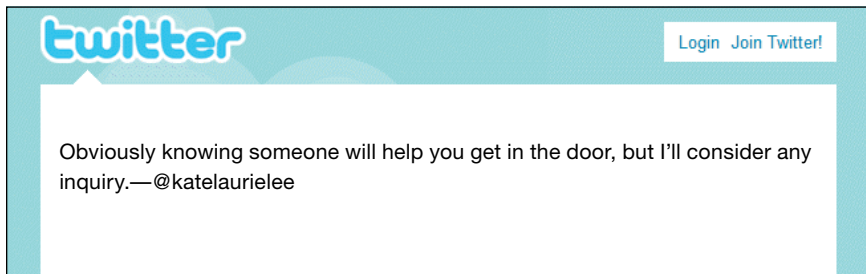
Kate described two routes she had seen by which writers turn their blogs into books:

- One route is when bloggers have a "fantastic idea"—some concept that is easy to see how it will turn into a book.
- The other route is when a blog reveals a "great voice"—the blogger is indeed a talented writer, but it is harder to identify exactly what the book will be.

Stephanie affirmed that the latter route applied in her case, and it had been extremely hard for her to prepare her own proposal, as Whitney reported (**Figure 1-14**).

FIGURE 1-14:
Whitney quoted Stephanie about her work on her book proposal.

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

"I worked harder on my book proposal than I did on writing the actual book."—@stephanieklein
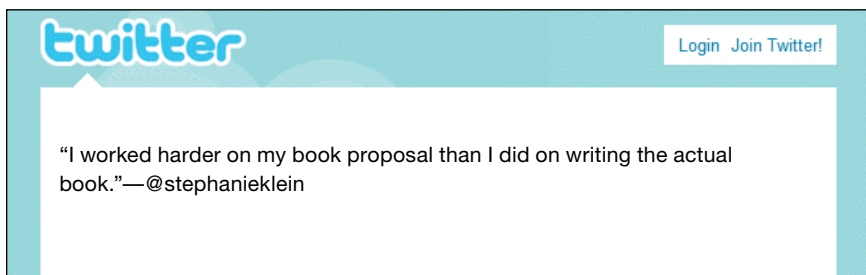
Kate said that she thought Guy and Hugh's experience of getting published through connections was uncommon, and that for someone like Stephanie the route was harder because she didn't already have an obvious book idea coming from her blog.

Guy disagreed with Kate, and Whitney expressed what she thought about the difference of opinion (**Figure 1-15**).
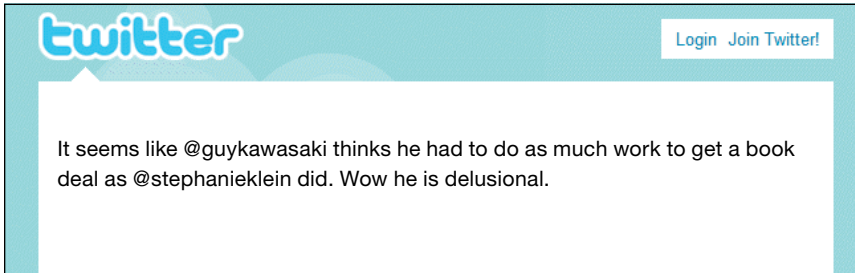
Guy went on to explain his position in more detail as he talked on the panel.

> *...just like in the venture capital business there's one theory that you craft this great cover letter, this great business plan, this great pitch, you send it in and Trixie or Biff who is sitting at the front desk of Kleiner Perkins is going to open the envelope and be freaking blown away that you're going to be selling dog food online, that they're going to rush it in and show it to Michael Moritz or John Doerr. The other theory is...Seth knows him, and Seth calls up his editor and says, 'Listen, you know, Adrian, you gotta publish this book.' I would recommend that path. It's much higher probability.*

Guy looked over at Hugh and said, "You probably didn't write a book proposal, did you?"

Hugh answered, "Nope."

Then Kate started making a point, "Yeah, but who, how many people have that..."

But Guy continued, "Let me finish. Let me finish. I know how you have to tell your story—how you're open, and you want to hear all these great things, I understand..."

Kate said, "No, the average person..."

But Guy went on, "I understand, I understand, because every venture capitalist says, 'Yeah, send me your plan; I always read my plans.' Bullshit. So the way it works, you can come away from this session thinking, it's who you know... More accurately it's not that...It's who knows about *you*."

Pam knew that Guy has strong opinions and a forceful personality, but from her judgment as moderator, carefully listening to his tone and watching the body language of the panelists, she didn't feel like Guy was being rude toward Kate or overstepping bounds to the point where Pam would need to say something.

Two different perceptions

Sitting in the front row as an audience member, Whitney perceived the situation completely differently. She felt that Guy was being chummy with the other male panelist, and now he was aggressively talking over a female panelist who was not challenging him on it. Obviously feeling strongly about the situation, Whitney posted on Twitter her take on what had happened (**Figure 1-16**).

FIGURE 1-16:
Whitney posted
that she thought
Guy was talking
over other panel
members.

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

@guykawasaki now taking over the panel, telling @katelaurielee to "let him finish!" He's insisting that you shouldn't submit proposals #sxswi
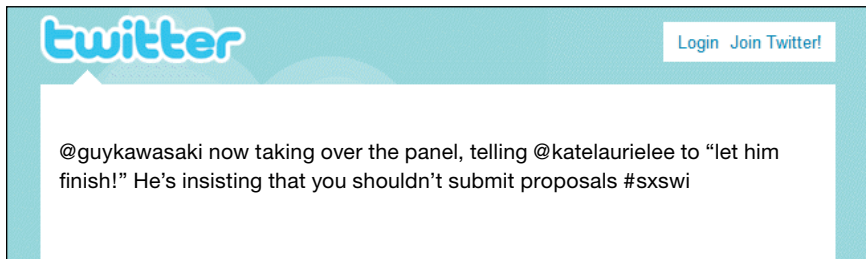
Because Twitter allows you to post easily and instantly, posts sometimes can be emotional. What someone writes in the heat of the moment in a short Twitter post may not be the same thing she would write if she had time to think about things in a longer, more considered piece of writing. And at the moment, Whitney was unhappy with Guy and had a tool at hand to express how she felt.

When Guy is on stage giving a keynote he doesn't monitor what is being posted on Twitter because he considers it rude to do so. But because he was a panelist today he had the time to scan posts while other panelists were talking.

Still with her emotions rising, Whitney wrote a new post expressing her feelings about how she thought Guy was acting and clicked to publish it. She used a word she rarely says verbally, let alone in print.

Guy looked down at his computer and read the post from someone on Twitter he didn't know named @whitneyhess (**Figure 1-17**).

FIGURE 1-17:
Angry about what
was happening,
Whitney posted
what she thought
about Guy's
behavior.

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

Wow @guykawasaki is being a total dick. Is he always like this? #sxswi
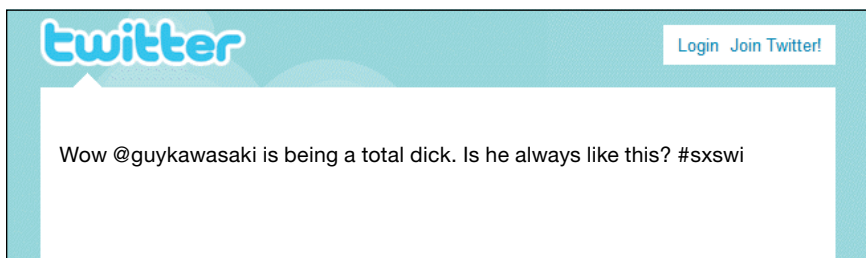
In an ordinary presentation, a presenter would only know if someone called him a crude name if she interrupted the session to say it. But because Guy was monitoring Twitter to see how the audience was reacting to the panel, he saw Whitney's comment.

> ### What Would You Do?
>
> If you were speaking to a group, and during the talk you saw a Twitter post from someone in the room that was critical of you, what would you do? Most Twitter posts are publicly published to the world, and they are archived and searchable at search.twitter.com. Would you ignore the post? Or would you say something? You'll find more scenarios like this one in Chapter 8 that you can rehearse in order to prepare for a range of backchannel comments.

When he read the post, Guy knew that anyone in the room—and the world, for that matter—could see it too because it had been published on Twitter. He strongly disagreed with Whitney's comment and felt like he was being wrongly portrayed.

In this critical moment on the stage, Guy faced a choice. He could ignore the post, which is often the best approach when facing a potentially volatile emotional situation. Or he could say something.

A number of forces had aligned in Room 18 that would make Guy decide what to do. It was the last panel of the last day of the event, Pam was a personal friend, he was feeling punchy, and he felt he didn't have anything to lose.

The audience talks back

Although he would never recommend anybody else do this, Guy looked out into the crowd in the room and in a loud voice he said, "I want to know who Whitney Hess is, because she just said I'm being a total dick. What is this?"

Surprised by Guy's statement, some people in the audience laughed.

A voice rang out from front row, center aisle, "I'm right here!"

As Guy started to speak, Whitney quickly added, "If I would've had a (microphone), I would've yelled it out!"

Pam's heart jumped in her throat for a second.

And everyone else sat on the edges of their seats waiting to hear what would happen next.
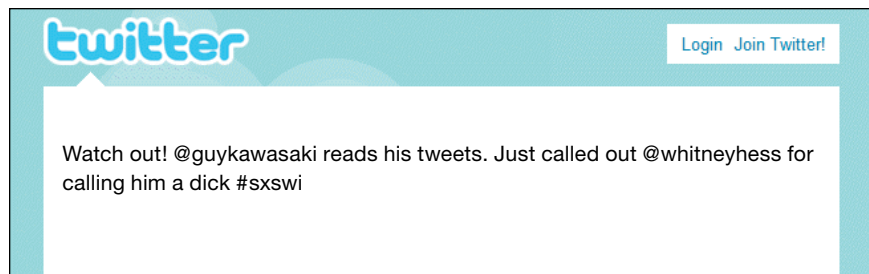
Introducing the Backchannel

The dramatic interaction unfolding in Room 18 of the Austin Convention Center is not the norm at most meetings and conferences today. Generally, people who present their ideas to a group can count on audience members to sit quietly in their chairs until they are dismissed or given permission to ask questions after viewing the Power-Point slides. But newly equipped with Twitter and tools like it, audiences are turning accepted social conventions upside down in an instant.

Although the audience's chairs in the room faced forward toward the primary conversation on the raised stage in the front of the room, there was a second, silent conversation happening in parallel at the back of the room. That's because Whitney wasn't the only person in the room creating a stream of information on Twitter—dozens of others in the room were doing the same thing.

Like Whitney, some of them were taking notes on the presentation and adding additional links, resources, and commentary for their followers to read. Some monitored all of the Twitter posts that had the session hashtag so they could read what their fellow audience members—including Whitney—were saying about the session. For example, Dave Gray posted on Twitter his surprise at Guy's comment (**Figure 1-18**).

FIGURE 1-18:
Dave Gray posted his surprise at the exchange between Guy and Whitney.

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

Watch out! @guykawasaki reads his tweets. Just called out @whitneyhess for calling him a dick #sxswi

Other audience members were *re-tweeting* posts—a term for re-posting someone's tweet and giving the original author credit. And some audience members were communicating with others in the room about the topic the panelists were discussing, as well as about unrelated topics.

A parallel conversation, inside the room and out

While these multiple streams of information flowed among the audience members and outward to the rest of the world outside the room, the speakers on the stage at the front of the room carried on their discussion about book publishing as they would in any other context.

But whether or not all of the panelists were aware, their audience actually was significantly larger than the 100 people there in Room 18. Via Whitney's Twitter stream, their ideas were reaching an additional 4,500 people following her posts. And in turn, every person using Twitter in the room was reaching their own followers. If one-quarter of the people in the room used Twitter and each had 300 followers who read all of their tweets, they would be reaching 7,500 people outside the room. Added to Whitney's audience, the total audience outside the room would be 12,000, or 120 times the size of the audience physically there.

When audience members create a line of communication like this to connect with others inside or outside of the room while a speaker is talking, they create a *backchannel*.

> **definition ❯** A backchannel is a line of communication created by people in an audience to connect with others inside or outside the room, with or without the knowledge of the speaker at the front of the room. Usually facilitated by Internet technologies, it is spontaneous, self-directed, and limited in time to the duration of a live event. A backchannel can be constructive when it enhances and extends helpful information and relationships, and it can be destructive when it articulates and amplifies counterproductive emotions and sentiments.

The concept of a backchannel is not new—technically, passing a note written on a piece of paper to another audience member is a backchannel. In linguistics, backchannel refers to the verbal and nonverbal cues that a listener gives a speaker to indicate understanding or confusion. In diplomatic circles, a backchannel is a line of communication outside official channels; and in computer lingo, a backchannel may be the route by which a virus takes control of a compromised computer.

It was audiences at events in the technology industry mostly in the past decade who laid the framework for the backchannel. With the rise of the Internet, tech-savvy audience members found they could use a range of tools to create impromptu lines of communication, including Internet Relay Chat (IRC), live blogging, text messages, instant messages, email, and custom chat rooms. Instead of keeping their thoughts inside their

heads or writing them in their personal notepads or computers, these audience members found they could use these new technologies to broadcast their thoughts to other people both inside the room and out, while the presentation was still happening.

But what was once the domain of the tech-savvy few is now becoming the domain of the many as more people discover they can easily use Twitter to create their own backchannel during live presentations. Twitter does have its limits, as we'll explore later, but its popularity is ushering in a new era of backchannel possibilities.

A double-edged sword

The early adopters discovered things that still hold true about the backchannel; specifically, that it can be constructive when it

- Enhances the information coming from the speaker, as people take notes, add commentary, and provide additional resources to what is being said at the front of the room.
- Connects people within a room, building communities around ideas.
- Connects people with others outside the room, as those not attending use technology to follow the dispatches from the live events, engage in conversations, and even directly ask questions of the presenters.
- Gives a speaker a new way to reach a wider audience.
- Provides a valuable archive of information to review after the event.

But they also found that a backchannel can be a double-edged sword, because it can be destructive when it

- Creates distraction as audience members pay attention to the backchannel more than the front of the room, or when the conversation strays to topics unrelated to the presentation at the hand.
- Leaves out of the conversation presenters or other audience members who are unaware or unable to join, creating a sense of unfairness because they have no way to respond to comments and criticisms.
- Lacks the ability to convey the full context for what is happening in a room because of the brevity of posts.
- Allows a rude or snarky tone to take hold of the conversation when people say things online that they would not say directly to a presenter.

Often a backchannel created by an audience happens in silence and is completely separate from the front channel coming from the stage. But when the backchannel and front channel collide, they can spill out into the open suddenly and unexpectedly, as they did at the *Blog to Book* panel.

The back of the room collides with the front

Whitney had been finding the backchannel a helpful tool that day to reach out to her readers, but she was now surprised that her post on Twitter had suddenly entered the room. After all, it's one thing to make a comment in the heat of the moment and post it on the Internet, but it's another thing to have that comment read by the speaker in front of the room of 100 people.

And now the words that were intended only for the virtual world suddenly came crashing into the flesh-and-blood world of Room 18.

Back from the Brink

The exchange between Guy and Whitney had knocked Pam momentarily off of her game—after all, most moderators aren't faced with the challenge of handling potentially explosive situations when there is a conflict between presenters and audiences on a public stage. Because of the extraordinary dynamics of the exchange, Pam's facilitation skills kicked into high gear as she became hyperaware of the tone of voice both Guy and Whitney were using, and carefully watched their body language for any clues on how they were feeling.

Pam was at the ready to cut off the interchange at any point if she felt it was getting out of hand or would potentially disrupt the panel.

After Guy and Whitney exchanged their initial words, Pam jumped in and asked, "What's going on?"

Guy said, "What...what is my dickiness?"

Whitney went on, "...that she was trying to say something and you were cutting her off."

Guy countered, "She was interrupting *me*! How many believe she was interrupting me?"

The audience laughed. Pam could see by Whitney's body language that she was surprised to be put on the spot and was uncomfortable in the situation.

Pam was conscious that she didn't want the audience to turn against Whitney and was not going to let that happen.

Whitney said, "I believe what was happening is… that we're trying to discuss how all of us as unknowns with blogs can find a way to get to a place where our blogs can become credible enough to turn into book proposals…."

Guy said, "Yeah…"

Whitney continued, "I understand that you have notoriety from prior work that you've done, right, so let's just get back to that, (instead of) 'Well, I know people'…"

Guy countered, "No. But wait. Hold on here. You've got me completely wrong. My colleague here from ICM was saying no matter who you are, send in a proposal, she reads it, blah blah blah…I'm telling you another way, if you're unknown, is to write good stuff and get known…"

Whitney responded, "That's actually not what you said. You told her, 'Yeah, yeah, yeah…VC's say that too, but that's not what they do…'"

Guy said, "We're in a parallel universe here!"

The audience laughed. Guy continued, "So what I'm suggesting is you write good stuff, you get known, and then people who are known will be happy to introduce you. That's what I'm suggesting."

Kate added, "Unless they're insecure…"

Guy said, "I can't help that. So that's a recommended path. You can go with her path. That path works. This is another path. Write good stuff and people like us who are published will know and we'll be glad to help you, for the reason that I would like to score karmic points and to have some favor that I can call back on my editor or agent some day. So in fact I'm giving you another path, which is quite the contrary to what you're saying I'm doing. So I don't believe I'm being a *dick*."

Guy pronounced the last word in a drawn-out, funny tone, prompting more laughter.

Then Pam decided it was time to cut off the exchange and continue on with the rest of the panel, so she said, "But I appreciate making sure that we keep that focus. I appreciate that, I really do. I love Twitter for that reason."

A crisis averted

Without missing a beat, Pam continued guiding the panel discussion on its course for another 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, Whitney continued posting on Twitter, including her thoughts about what had just happened (**Figure 1-19**).
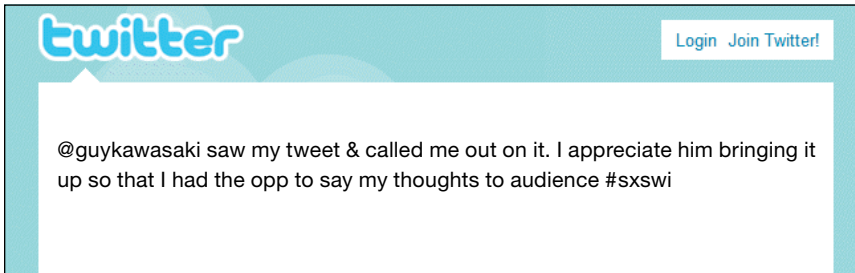

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

@guykawasaki saw my tweet & called me out on it. I appreciate him bringing it up so that I had the opp to say my thoughts to audience #sxswi

FIGURE 1-19:
Whitney posted that there were no hard feelings after her exchange with Guy.

Pam's moderating skills, Guy's public speaking experience and positive tone, and Whitney's ability to have a frank discussion about something and move on were all contributors to keeping the panel on track.

The interaction may just come down to two people interpreting the same experience in two completely different ways. After the session, Whitney posted her thoughts on Twitter (**Figure 1-20**).

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

Phenomenal comments from folks who came up to me after the panel to say, "Thank you for calling him out!" Mostly women, interestingly
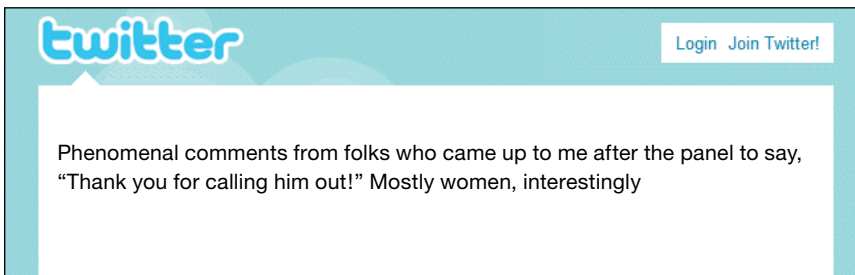
FIGURE 1-20:
Whitney tweeted that she received positive comments from audience members.

And Guy said later in an email:

I chose to take on something that I thought was inaccurate. I did not interrupt the other speaker—she interrupted me. If someone wants to call me a dick, it should be true—at least at that instance in time.

Ultimately there were no hard feelings between Guy and Whitney, and Pam handled the situation effectively. No one raised their voice, and no one threw tomatoes.

But still, for the standards of presentations in the U.S. and many countries, the exchange was surprising and was a moment the audience would not soon forget.

Lesson(s) learned

Reflecting on the $2\frac{1}{2}$-minute exchange, Pam thought it had not detracted from the session, but instead it had added an emotional lift to the panel at the point where energy was starting to drag.

And it offered a chance for everyone to learn something about how to engage the backchannel.

Lessons from *Blog to Book*

When Pam arrived in the room, she used her laptop to display her PowerPoint slides, so she was not able to use the computer to get online and monitor the backchannel on Twitter. Her lesson learned—a moderator should have a laptop or other device available to monitor what people are saying in the backchannel during

a presentation. Whitney never expected Guy to read her comment, let alone read it to the audience. She is now very conscious of what she posts when she live-Twitters from an event, only writing comments in a way that she would be comfortable having the presenter read to the group.

Whitney's final post on Twitter wrapped up her impressions of what had happened that day (**Figure 1-21**).

FIGURE 1-21:
Whitney tweeted that the panel was useful.

twitter   Login Join Twitter!

That was a great panel. Makes me think about ways I could turn my blog into a book. Would love to hear my blog readers' thoughts

But that wouldn't be the last thought on the topic.

Although the backchannel primarily takes place during a live presentation, it will often prompt a conversation that continues after the session has ended. A few days after the *Blog to Book* panel, blogger Eileen Corrigan wrote an extended post

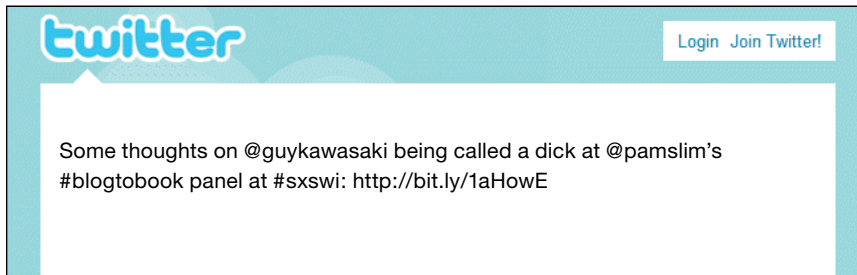about her impressions of the session and sent a link to it to her followers on Twitter (**Figure 1-22**).

FIGURE 1-22:
Eileen Corrigan wrote a blog post about the *Blog to Book* panel.

Guy commented on Eileen's blog post, as did Pam, and the lively conversation continued there over a few days; prompting several readers to note that the quality of the discussion there was impressive.

Another attendee, Austin Kleon, had taken sketch notes during the *Blog to Book* session, then afterward scanned the graphic in his sketchbook and used Twitter to send his followers a link to the image on Flickr (**Figure 1-23**).
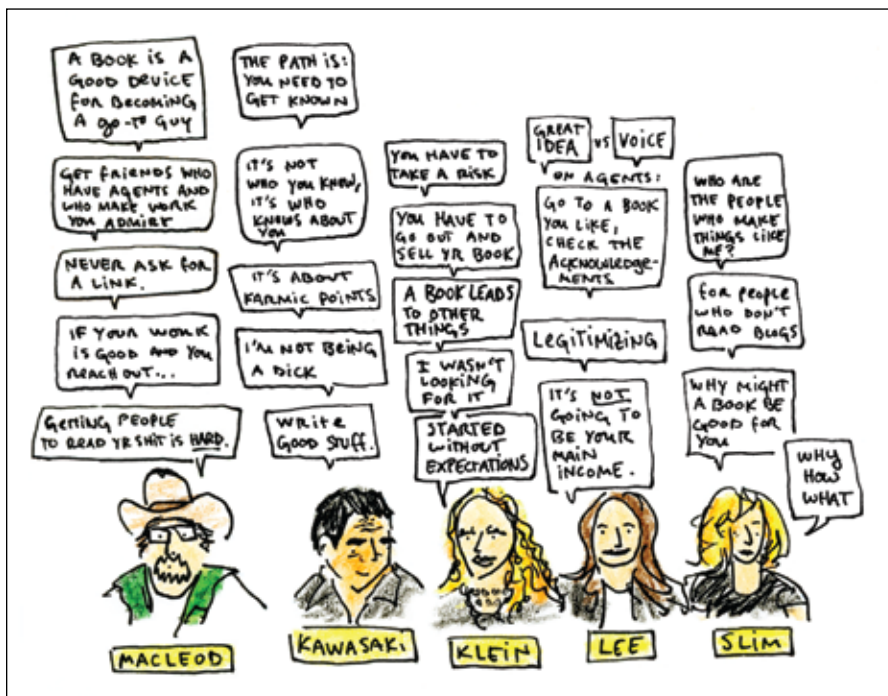

FIGURE 1-23:
Beyond using Twitter, people in the backchannel use a range of tools to report on an event—in this example, Austin Kleon sketched his notes and sent a link to his followers via Twitter.

(Sketch courtesy of Austin Kleon)

This is just one more example of the creative and interesting ways the backchannel uses a range of technology and tools to report on live presentations, in addition to Twitter, photographs, audio and video podcasts, and live-streaming video.

A New View from the Podium

The history of the technology-aided backchannel is brief, but the rapidly growing phenomenon indicates that something fundamental is changing—the relationship among event organizers, presenters, and audiences. Just as the interaction in Room 18 demonstrated, differing points of view can bring presentations to the brink of dramatic and public breakdowns of communication.

But the potential for positive outcomes is equally attention-worthy, as we all find our way across the front lines of this rapidly shifting landscape known as the backchannel. There have been occasional disruptive technologies that have transformed the field of presentations—the introduction of blackboards, microphones, overhead projectors, video, and PowerPoint presentation software. Only the next few years will tell whether audiences use Twitter to make simple adjustments to the way we do presentations, or radically reshape them altogether.

One thing is sure already: the backchannel is rewriting the job description of everyone involved with presentations, including hosts, audiences, and presenters. Hosts have to rethink the way they create to bring presenters and audiences together. Audiences have to carefully consider the new power in their hands, and how to use it wisely and effectively. But it is presenters whose jobs will change the most, because they are looking at a rapidly changing world from the view of the podium.

Presenters, meet your new audiences

How much change are you looking at if you're a presenter today? If your audience members have created a backchannel, it's likely they are

- Typing into laptops and texting on smartphones instead of sitting quietly looking at you or taking notes on paper.
- Recording everything you say in writing, photographs, audio, and video.
- Talking about you to other people inside and outside the room before, during, and after your presentation—possibly praising or criticizing you.
- Asking questions during a talk instead of waiting until the end.

- Checking your facts in real time, and calling you out if they question your credibility.

- Gauging your demeanor and attitude, and challenging you if they feel you lecture, pontificate, use corporate speak, or are otherwise inauthentic, condescending, patronizing, rambling, or verbose.

- Sometimes walking out of your presentation if they don't think it's a good fit for them; and sometimes walking into the room during your presentation if they've heard good things about it in the backchannel.

- Perhaps getting mad about something you said, and thinking about interrupting your presentation or confronting you, and on rare occasions even trying to take control and derail your presentation.

The backchannel is the future

You may not yet have had a backchannel in your presentation, but you will soon enough. And when it arrives, it will be here to stay.

Communications expert Jen McClure says she would have been surprised two years ago if someone said speakers would be looking at screens instead of at her, but now she expects it. "As speakers, there are just different expectations," Jen said. "There's no going back to where we were at." Jen explained that audiences simply aren't going to close their laptops and that "anyone who rejects it outright may lose audiences."

Author Dan Gillmor agrees that although speakers may not like it, the backchannel is here to stay. "Welcome to real life," said Dan. "Anyone who is teaching is painfully aware that students are IM'ing like crazy and talking about things relevant or not, behind the back of the speaker. This is common. The fact (is) that people can do it, so live with it. Be compelling as a speaker and I'll pay attention to you."

Seeing an opportunity to join something bigger

The seminal book *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (Basic Books, 2000) described 10 years ago that as the Internet has given people the ability to express themselves, a global conversation has begun. In this highly connected age, people are already talking about you, so you might as well be part of the conversation.

Entrepreneur Loïc Le Meur says, "If no one Twitters about it, it's a disaster. Even if it's negative, it's good, because it means it matters."

Of course conversations have always been around, it's just that now they take place everywhere on the planet there is a computer with an Internet connection.

When you look at the backchannel as part of a conversation that's already been happening, but now it's in a new form, it's not as daunting. You can simply use new tools and actually create a bigger conversation than ever before possible. Besides, if you don't engage the backchannel, you potentially have something to lose. You won't know what's happening in the room or what your audience is thinking and saying. You may lose opportunities offered by people who search speakers' reputations on Twitter before they hire speakers, or who expect them to be savvy about how to use technologies to engage their audiences. And you stand to lose your credibility or hard-earned reputation if people you have yet to meet search Twitter and define who you are based on negative backchannel comments they find.

A genie not going back in the bottle

You may think you can wait a while to engage the backchannel, because you haven't yet seen any of your audiences set one up during a presentation. But the situation could change at the click of the mouse. Whitney, Guy, and Pam were at an event where a wireless Internet connection, laptops, mobile phones, and Twitter are the norm. But that technology toolkit is rapidly becoming standard for audience members everywhere, whatever profession they are in and wherever they may be. Ready or not, you may have a backchannel waiting for you at your next presentation.

You may be concerned about whether engaging the backchannel is something you can even do. After all, you may already be overwhelmed by the fear of public speaking and the daunting task of creating a presentation with a good story, solid material, and quality graphics. And now, on top of that tall order, you have to quickly learn new tools, new skills, and new approaches to presentations, likely adding stress to an already difficult experience.

It's true that the backchannel can make your job harder. But it can also make your job much easier. If you engage the changes and learn how to use the new tools at your fingertips, you can pave the way to a new, more conversational form of communicating. Not only will you gain a live, searchable database of your audience's thoughts, but you also get immediate feedback and build a platform that will extend your ideas far outside the room, with far greater impact.

Presenting some fundamental questions

As we all move forward into the new era of the backchannel, we're entering new and uncharted waters. As the *Blog to Book* panel demonstrated, the backchannel is sometimes a surprising and even shocking place, and in the wake of the change it is creating, it is raising fundamental questions that we don't have the answers to yet, including

- What do audiences expect today?
- What are the ground rules?
- Who is accountable?
- What is the best structure for a presentation?
- What is the best way to integrate an audience's feedback?
- How do you prevent distraction, rudeness, and loss of control?
- When is a backchannel appropriate, and when is it not?

In this book, we'll address all of these questions and explore possible answers together.

But be assured, as you engage the tectonic shifts afoot, you'll be able to surf the coming backchannel wave safely to shore and get back up and jump right in again.