

New way of communicating,  
140 characters at a time

## Twitter puts broadcasting into everyone's hands, shifting media, networking and personal experience

By DORIAN BENKOIL | For a community in Tanzania, Twitter was a way to raise \$10,000 to build a well. People in Mumbai used it to spread news of attacks there before more formal channels did so. An American arrested in Egypt used the platform to mobilize friends and get him out of jail. Dell Computer has sold more than \$1 million in equipment through its Twitter feed. Atlantans found gasoline for each other during a shortage. And for many many more people, Twitter is a way to get, and stay, in touch with groups of friends and associates, sharing both the mundane ("Going to the supermarket") and the profound ("Food Bank Fill Up was GR8!!! Over \$75k & 44,000 lbs of food raised").

Twitter co-founder Biz Stone calls Twitter "a real-time, one-to-many network that is changing the way people communicate around the world." That may sound like over-reaching marketing-speak, but in Twitter's case it seems to be true. There's not one Twitter community but rather thousands, perhaps millions. Fashion models, TV personalities, non-governmental organizations and Fortune 500 companies all use it. Barack Obama announced his running mate on Twitter. Best-selling author Timothy Ferris and basketball star Shaquille O'Neal respond directly to fans on their feeds. The Israeli consulate in New York uses it to spread its point of view. (One example: @gerrykirk "The solution is dialogue but we must not ignore attacks on our civilians #AskIsrael".)

Twitter has created a new grammar, of "@" signs and "#" tags and other notations to allow sifting and targeting of messages in multiple directions, publicly to groups or privately to individuals. Words like "Tweet" (a Twitter message) and "Tweetup" (a meeting of people convened over Twitter) have entered the lexicon. "If we get it right,



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#### **Twitter**

for changing the real-time communication game. A cultural phenomenon that's almost like ESP; nothing comes close to this digital mind-meld for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: What are you doing?

then Twitter isn't about the triumph of technology. It's about the triumph of humanity," Stone says. " You know, getting out of the way and letting people do what they're best at."

Becoming one of the Twitterati is easy. Log on to the website, create a logon name, and start sending messages of up to 140 characters about anything you want. Click to "follow" any user and whether you want to get their updates on your handheld mobile device. Or you can use one of the many complementary applications, such as Twirhl, TweetDeck or Tweety, instead, also molding and melding the updates on your computer or mobile phone. You can have your Twitter feed pushed onto blogs, and have or have headlines feed into Twitter along with links. Because of its platform's API, which allows programmers to see behind the code and write their own complementary software, Twitter sits at a hub of innovation, inspiring thousands feed readers, assemblers, aggregators and searchers of its messages that do everything from help monitor and pick stocks to indicate what trends are rising in importance around the globe.

Stone says he and the other early users had no idea how important Twitter could be when they built the prototype in two weeks in 2006; they just knew it was an easier way to stay in touch. The epiphany came when they all used it to contact and comfort each other during an earthquake in the San Francisco Bay Area. "It's probably because we knew, subconsciously or whatever, that that was our network, and those people would get the message immediately, and it was a great way to check in," Stone says.

He and his partners want to see Twitter, which is backed by venture capital, become a viable business. They plan to start creating revenues this year, moving up from their original plan of 2010, asking business like Whole Foods, Jet Blue and Comcast - - who use Twitter feeds to stay in touch with customers -- what new features and services they might pay for. He doesn't, he says, expect you'll see traditional Web advertising. He does want the company to be a leader in the business community, noting that a lot of other companies are looking to Twitter as an example. "What are the obligations not just in creating a great product, but also a great work environment for employees? What other role do you play as a company in the world?" he asks. "What does it mean to start a company now? There's some level of obligation with local issues and global issues."

Great questions, and ones that will be exciting to work on, 140 characters at a time.

**Twitter**  
www.twitter.com

Launched in 2006, Twitter lets you broadcast short text messages from your phone to anyone who wants to follow you. It's simple, it doesn't always work, and while some digerati love it, others detest it. None of which matters. Twitter changed the game for mobile media and personal expression. It's not for everyone - but it puts SMS broadcasting into everyone's hands, and that changed the game for eye-witness journalism, networking and personal expression.



*The Twitter opening screen; dozens of other apps are also out there to help users navigate the Twitterverse.*