

Narration:

We have now reached a stage in the online world where Myspace is dwindling. Facebook has become an unruly and complicated mess. It's no longer cool, even parents are joining. But and a platform called twitter is emerging like a phoenix from the flames.

So what exactly is twitter? Twitter is a micro-blogging platform where a user can post, or as they say in the lingo 'tweet' whatever comes to mind, in your limited number of 140 characters. You can 'follow' other people on twitter, so you will be able to read whatever they 'tweet'. If they follow you, they in turn can read whatever you tweet.

Dr Chris Scanlon, from the Media Studies Program at La Trobe University, explains its popularity this way.

Dr Chris Scanlon:

I think it's the ease with which you can use it and set it up. It's not as daunting as setting up a blog. It's not as daunting as setting up a Facebook page even, and maintaining that. It is much quicker. It doesn't have the form. It's disposable.

There's a guy from Stanford in an iPhone programming lecture who actually referred to it as reverse stalking. It's kind of like rather than stalking people you kind of put out there what you are doing and kind of like almost ask to be stalked and sort of stalk people and tell them about what you're doing.

Narration:

This, as a result, is a form of communication, and it is up to the limitations of the human imagination as to what you post – providing you limit it to about 20 words. Since you can communicate through a mobile phone or the internet, you can effectively tweet from anywhere. For example, I will tweet right now. I am currently recording an audio documentary about twitter. It's under 140 characters, but will anyone read it? Does anyone care? Depending on your perspective, this is either the wonder of Twitter, or proves how utterly pointless the entire process is.

Let's hear about some first impressions, from Dr Lawrie Zion of the Media Studies program at La Trobe University.

Dr Lawrie Zion:

My first impressions of Twitter was simply that this is just Facebook-lite and it was full of people saying, "I'm going to have a shower or bath or the daily ablutions," not even very interesting ones. And I guess I just got a little bit panicked because I could suddenly see a lot of journalism academics and a few journalists starting to talk about this and I felt, "God, here's a conversation I'm not part of it yet, I better jump on."

So I signed up and I found it quite chaotic and quite disappointing for the first few weeks because I think, when you go on Facebook, which was I suppose my other social media induction in the last few years. When you go onto Facebook

you can look up, you can find people there, and you can become their friends easily and see quite a lot of stuff posted on their walls. The way that Twitter works, where there's that maximum of 140 characters, and things just flow off in tweets. If you're not being followed and if you're not following a lot of other people, there's really kind of nothing going on. The beautiful room is empty. It's kind of a fairly empty experience.

And so, after a month or two I started to realize that I was actually able to start following the media presences of a lot of media companies that I liked. So I started to realize that I could actually find out quite a lot about what was happening in these terms, just by turning on Twitter. So I became really fascinated despite the fact that there was still all these trivial things mixed up in there, it actually could end up being quite useful for journalism practice.

Narration:

A study last year found that 40% of the messages sent on twitter was comprised of pointless babble. When you think that that's the entire point of twitter, then the number is maybe disappointingly low. So what purpose are people finding in twitter? Chris has this to say.

Dr Chris Scanlon:

For a not so serious web platform, it's actually being used in quite interesting ways that what happened after the Iranian elections. It's a good example of that where people started using this in some ways low tech or very easy publishing platform to actually getting news out. And if you watch CNN at the time of the election, there were actually running tweets live. And there was a lot of debate about whether those tweets were actually coming out of Iran or whether they were being used manipulated by their Iranian government and all those sort of things.

But it was kind of interesting and it was always twitter is coming of age suddenly people started to take notice - people have never heard of Twitter or written it off as kind of a pointless thing sort of saying. OK, this is kind of actually a way of getting news out of a trouble spot.

Narration:

Professions are changing as well, adapting to make the most out of this networking tool. Lawrie has this to say about his experience as an educator.

Dr Lawrie Zion:

I guess what really got me interested in a big way was when we started Upstart and saw it from emerging journalists and realized that by posting links to stories that we'd written. And if enough people were actually following what Upstart were doing, what I was doing, then it would be possible to actually in a sense build a community out of the people that I follow and who follow me on Twitter.

Narration:

And then there's journalists, who not only use it as a source of news, but as a platform to promote themselves.

Dr Chris Scanlon:

Journalists in particular, are using it to kind of sprout their work. I publish at the Australian website or the Punch or Crikey or whatever.

And then they go and tweet their latest post and sort of tell people where they can access it so they can tell their followers where they can find their latest article or next. All the journalist that use this are quite interesting in terms of people now tweeting things like Question Time. People comment on it and they use a hash tag to kind of pull all of those and aggregate all those responses into one more or less coherent flow off commentary.

And it's kind of live and it's cheap, it's punchy, it's kind of a tabloid feel, but I think people find it entertaining. The other interesting one is Q&A, the ABC program. If you go in and put hash tag Q&A into Twitter and do a search on that while Q&A is on. People who are taking part in the discussion, they're commenting on everything from the clothes or the ties that contributors are wearing to more substantive points about the topics and they're having debates about that.

And now that has become part of the news cycle. It would be very interesting and very brave and possibly be crazy brave for a show like Q&A to actually have the Twitter feed running sort of along the bottom of the screen or in the background in some way and they'd have to moderate it to a degree. But it would be very interesting exercise in television to actually have that kind of immediate kind of commentary happening in real time.

And I think that's the real possibility is something like Twitter where you have that immediacy that you don't get.

Dr Lawrie Zion:

70% of journalists use social media to help them with their work and are engaged with it. The story breaks you'll find out about it on Twitter before you'll find out about it anywhere else because Twitter is where you get the first report whether it's an emergency or disaster. Unless it's a very tightly controlled story that comes out through a media briefing, any news that's really news and it's really surprising is going to actually find its way on the first.

Andrew Crook is a reporter for Crikey, an online independent magazine, well known in political, media and business circles. He puts the way he uses twitter like this.

Andrew Crook:

You say stories that emerge through sort of hash tags that are on the same hash tags, but down through a blizzard and you can say, "OK, that's a new story." Last week we had the Eddie McGuire controversy at the winter Olympics and he was accused of making homophobic comments in relation to a US skater and Twitter kind of lit up and that was a new story for us because it happened not before using the cycle.

So I mean I write the story and it was a massive story and then it spread to the London Sun and just went all over the place. So sometime you can get stories from Twitter assuming that people using Twitter are reliable, but it's kind of a consensus mechanism in a way rather than I think something that you can monitor to peak out as a sort of fact like something that you didn't already know and then turn out into a story. So if you're talking to a source generally, that might tell you something that he had the story right. But it happened on Twitter just surfing around trying to find things that general public doesn't know probably not as likely to happen. But in terms of the media using it, the other great thing that people will use it for journalist especially in the media or just sort of gossip access type sort of arrangement where people who tweet at each other consider themselves to be in a club of insiders almost especially around the Canberra Press Gallery you say that the journalist tweeting at each other.

And if you get retweeted or even reply to you by someone saying people within sort of issue that they are popular. So in that respect, it's sort of like a schoolyard and talk instead of in crowd which is kind of interesting but not necessarily newsworthy.

Narration:

So while it does make for a convenient source for news, it's a tool to be used with caution: take for instance the reported death of Jeff Goldblum in late 2009, which had a number of news services fooled and reaching for their video montages.

Andrew Crook:

We get so many tips that kind of could be like the Jeff Goldblum, people who have an agenda or this kind of thing. And I think as a journalist, you need to be able to sort the wheat from the chaff. When you get a tip and you have a sense when a tweet is generally right or wrong. Yeah, it only takes sometimes a couple minutes of Googling or even less to find out whether something is true or not.

Dr Lawrie Zion:

You've always got to evaluate the information that's coming out and of course you can't just believe everything in any format. The controversy I think about the death of Michael Jackson and how the reports on Twitter. And then of course we have very soon afterwards the reported deaths Jeff Goblin which caused embarrassment and that kind of thing. I think what's happening now is being able to post something like that gives the potential to enrich the range of news materials. You're doing this to curate and evaluate it.

Just saying that Twitter in that sort of rather romanticized form of the season seeing a story unexpectedly unfold before their eyes and twitting it and that being the first to hear of it is just one part of it really. You've really got I think now with Twitter if I turn it on now, we'd see some of the things happening in the world which I wouldn't have heard on the news forecast an hour ago. I think for that it's sort of now become part of what you're going to keep your eye on when you're actually trying to work through stories of the day.

Narration:

With all these people and professions making use of it, it's interesting that Twitter has developed and become popular with no aim to make money out of it. In fact, many people are at a loss to come up with a way to apply money making principles to twitter. Let's discuss it with Dr David Prentice, from La Trobe University's school of economics and finance. Could maybe advertising on twitter be the solution?

Dr David Prentice:

Well, the interesting things that came out in the recent review in the Journal of Economic Perspectives with social networking sites extremely haven't been very successful as a place for advertising. When we're going to Facebook, you're not going to look at stuff down the side. You're going there to see what the feed is or look at your friend's photograph and things like that. So the right per view, per thousand views on social networking sites are much, much smaller compared with just regular banner ads. So that actually doesn't go well for Twitter in the sense.

The other form of pricing for services on the internet which has been used very successfully by the Wall Street Journal and the Financial View then charging for years but you can only charge as much as people willing to pay for it to the extent that the technology is easily adapted by other people. If Twitter did try and charge something for it, It could well just attract someone else who's willing to come in and do something very similar for free. And then their ability to charge is going to be very limited.

Narration:

We now know that the solution is to let google search twitter messages for quite a lot of money – so advertising, for the moment, isn't needed. One form of advertising that is unfortunately thriving on twitter, however, is spam. And as The Monty Python Flying Circus have kindly pointed out, spam is everywhere.

Dr David Prentice:

That will be a really issue for it because it's already going to be a big issue just for email to give more on the ongoing issues. One of the things about the technology is lower the cost of both gaining information and transmitting information for me the big thing in social the internet in general. And transmitting information, you can now just automate things so much ... that we get the spam problem. The one suggestion that's come up that hasn't been adapted that is the use of a very tiny prospect weight because what that does is you want to low enough that it doesn't discourage people from doing all the useful stuff. But you want it high enough that you can say that send me those today's messages. The cost to the spammer then outweighs potential benefit. Given it hasn't had an email. The odds that are happening in Twitter are pretty low at the moment.

Dr Lawrie Zion:

I wondered for quite a while what some of these scantily dressed people were doing following me around actually and I pretty soon realized that we just spam going crazy again. So spam is a problem there and I have to change my password

a few times because apparently I started sending out white laws advice to people which I have didn't actually. Yes, it's probably not as secure as people would want to be and the fact that someone could get inside your account and stop sending messages on your behalf is pretty scary. I mean that's just part of one of the dangers of online in general.

Narrator:

With Twitter gaining popularity, inevitable concerns are raised. Primarily, with the rise of internet use, leet speak, and twitter, are the younger people amongst us likely to forget how to communicate properly? Dr Nenagh Kemp from the School of Psychology at the University of Tasmania has applied this thinking to the use of mobile phones, which had similar concerns raised. I talked to her on another useful internet platform, Skype. Is this degrading of the english language going to happen?

Dr Nenagh Kemp:

Not as much the media seems to be worried about there's many examples of panic or concern that this is a different spelling system is affecting especially young people spelling and reading and even moral fibre but and a lot of different things. A recent study of newspaper headlines by someone who Kristen Furlough looked at all the newspaper headline about text messaging, instant messaging computer chat over the last couple of years nearly all of those newspaper headlines were negative. So I think that there is a big concern that it's seeping into the general population's spelling but you don't see it as much.

And I've just done some studies and two honour students have just done studies with grade eight and nine students and grade four and five students. And got them to write some text messages just in normal English and some as you would to a friend and they were very able to distinguish between the two. When you say write it in proper English, they're able to keep the textisms that are abbreviations out of the messages.

I think it's just another way of writing it. It's certainly not new to write abbreviations. I mean anyone who's ever had to take notes in a lecture or written a shopping list or had to jot down a note from a telephone. No one writes everything out completely in full and they're in a hurry or when the some constraints on what you can write. So I think it's another way of writing that's just become a bit more dense with these abbreviations. Or people just use them more but it seems like most people can still distinguish when it is appropriate and when it's not appropriate to use those abbreviations.

Narration:

So there is clearly a time and a place to tweet.

Dr Nenagh Kemp:

Yes, language does always evolve. No I think in more informal writing perhaps it's going to be more appropriate for you to abbreviations but I think it takes a really long time for formal language to change. So perhaps that might change but I think it would take a really long time before books, or newspaper writing or

anything official is going to accept any kind of change. So it's probably better to stick with the conventional spelling if you want to remain acceptable of that certain level. Well, if you're worried that telephones were going to damage people's ability to talk to each other, I think everyone worries about new technology.

But all its doing is making more people to communicate and in fact it's making people communicate by regional language more than ever before. I think a lot of science fiction seem to worry in the future no one would be able to write, that would be the only what the educator delete could do and people be able to read and write language. But I think always different ways of communicating now actually meeting that written language is more important and people are able to use it more.

Narrator:

So twitter is harmless, and it's interactive. It's bridge building, social, and fun. But does it have the staying power, or is it merely the next in a long line of MySpaces, Facebooks, Bebos, LinkedIns, or Slashdots? Does it have the potential to revolutionise the world, or is it just the knitting circle of the noughties?

Dr Chris Scanlon:

Whether it should be dismissed entirely, I don't think so particularly in a situation where one of the only sources that people can get messages out on a particular situation such as Iran, it is valuable. Now, of course you have to read that critically and to take the example of CNN when we're reporting people's twit, they become the butt of jokes. But that shouldn't been say well, everything on Twitter is going to be rubbish, or it's all going to be sort of low grade stuff. I don't think that's the case at all.

I think in particular, in instances it can be quite powerful. It's going to span everything from celebrity gossip to manipulation by dates and represent these states to being used as tool for activists. And in the addition of photography with TwitPic and other services like that, where you can post images. That's potentially very powerful and completely in repressive regimes and with the flow of information of stifled actually getting images out is incredibly powerful.

So if you think about so if you think about something like the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989, if you have Twitter there you possibly would have heaps more perspectives coming out of that.

Andrew Crook:

Look I think once the novelty sort of wears off of that clubbishness that people do just to sort of say what other as a journalists are tweeting about which is a irrelevant to a 99.9% of the population. Once that wears off, assuming sort of mass take up then it could be a source. I mean I think it is underdeveloped too and I think and not everyone is tweeting in sort of a differential between countries in the US tend to be further ahead in this kind of technologies. But still I think journalism if you want to get people on the record and Twitter is sort of notorious for pseudo names and sometimes it's hard to know who these people

are and maybe this guy maybe you know is the editor of the Courier Mail it do need to be object technically starts as far as the theory goes convince people objectively that your story stands out. It's hard to stand up a story solely with Twitter unless one of those outrageous type stories which is good in the reactions instant as well that's good for us because if something happens in the morning the newspapers are not on it then we can just pounce.

Dr Lawrie Zion:

It really wasn't that long ago that we just could have ask the same question about something like email which I think now is really the most significant application that there is on the internet. The short answer to the question as to whether Twitter is going to be around for what was known really knows. What Twitter has introduced into the social media landscape will live on other applications. And I think that what it's done to speed up if you like the knowledge cycle of journalism will only intensify over time.

So I'd like to thank my guests, Andrew Crook who you can tweet @andrewjcrook as well as the rag he works for, @crikey_news, Chris Scanlon, who goes under the handle of @cscanlon and Lawrie Zion, who can be found @lzion, @upstartmagazine, and be sure to look up his canine companion, @labradormoose. Many thanks to David Prentice and Nenagh Kemp, who are welcome to join us on twitter at any time. And while you're busy with all this tweeting, why not send one to @latrobe? In fact, send a link out about this. OMG, @latrobe made a podcast about twitter, LOL, and a link. And remember, you only have 140 characters, so tweet wisely.