

More people flock to Twitter as a conduit for information

April 20 2009, By Laura Bauer

Maybe you know about Ashton Kutcher's obsession with Twitter. Last week the actor became the first tweeter to reach 1 million followers, and on Friday he got Oprah to join in.

You might have even heard about Corey Menscher, the new dad who made a tweeting habit of documenting every time his wife felt their baby kick before the boy was born in January.

But did you know this? The FBI twitters. So does the Johnson County, Kan., sheriff's office. Don't forget the University of Missouri and the University of Kansas. Or physicians in Wisconsin who on Thursday took followers through a knee surgery, tweet by tweet.

It seems this land of [Twitter](#) -- where life is documented on the Internet in 140 characters or less -- isn't just about celebrities or the silly anymore. It's about real information, in real time.

Sometimes that can be tweeters telling people about a shooting in their town, or about who was arrested overnight and is now in the county jail. Or letting residents know about severe weather headed their way.

"Twitter is a scanner. It's a scanner of life, scanner of the country," said Jen Reeves, an expert in new media and a professor at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

And so many organizations are jumping in.

The sheriff's office in Cass County, Mich. -- population roughly 50,000 -- posted its first tweet March 26. "Just started tweeting today! Hopefully found a way to get out our info to more of our citizens in a unique way."

The next day: "Have more complaints of scams in Cass. People need to remember to NEVER give out personal info to unsolicited email, mail or phone calls."

The FBI set up its Twitter page last fall, making it one of about 20 law enforcement agencies at the time with one. Today, at least 150 police agencies twitter, and the FBI has more than 2,600 followers.

During President Barack Obama's inauguration, the bureau told its followers on Twitter which entrances to downtown Washington were closed and which were open. On a daily basis, tweets can be about new criminal charges across the country or wanted fugitives, even cold cases in need of information and where to call with it.

"The 'Wanted' posters of the past, while there's a purpose for those, this is the new version of that," said Special Agent Jason Pack, a spokesman in the bureau's national press office. "Twitter is another tool we can use to put the faces and cases out there. ... We want to keep up with the times and reach people we ordinarily wouldn't be able to reach."

Created three years ago as a way for employees of a San Francisco podcasting company to communicate with one another, Twitter.com isn't just for the young. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center, the average Twitter user is 31.

And the number of those twittering grows every day. The same Pew study said that in May 2008, 6 percent of adult Internet users said they used Twitter or a similar microblogging service. Seven months later, the number had grown to 11 percent.

KU's Natural History Museum is a Twitter "newbie" with just 13 followers, but the museum is looking at ways to expand its Twitter use to educate more people about the museum or make visiting it more interactive.

In February when the museum celebrated the 200th anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, it set up a computer so visitors could talk about Darwin or their experiences at the museum. The idea is to do more twittering.

"People still ask, 'Why would you want to do that?'" said Jen Humphrey, the spokeswoman for KU's Biodiversity Institute, which includes the museum. "Microblogging is a phenomenon that has a great deal of power and allure for a community conversation."

And the conversation is instant. Quicker than mass e-mails or phone calls, tweets can be sent to and from cell phones or BlackBerries, too.

That is one reason Twitter would be a good way to alert students of an emergency on a college campus, such as a shooting or major incident, said Jeffrey Beeson, a University of Missouri spokesman.

"It's the fastest way to notify people that we have," Beeson said. "Hopefully we don't have to use it for that."

When Milwaukee police recently wanted to inform the public of a shooting, they turned to a tweet of less than 115 characters.

"Latest homicide in the city is NOT a random act. Male, 33, shot in 1500 block N. 39. More details as we have them."

Earlier this month, the Johnson County sheriff's office told its followers on Twitter about a crime -- "JOCO Sheriff looking for two burglary

suspects who stole over \$8000 from ATM's."

Some tweets can be more intriguing, like the ones Robert Hendrick of Tennessee posted last fall when he had outpatient varicose vein surgery. He was awake for the surgery and kept his followers -- including his wife -- updated on what was going on.

"Got some great paper shorts. Then they french cut them up the side. Gr8!," he tweeted early on.

Hendrick is a co-founder of Change:Healthcare, a business that helps clients save money on health care. Hendrick said that twittering his surgery was a way to show people the process and educate them.

"2 veins down. 2 to go. 1 lower left leg. 1 lower right leg. Top left leg done," he tweeted from what he described to his followers as a cold operating room.

Twittering, Hendrick said, "gave me a sense of connection to people during the surgery."

At one point, he typed: "Dr. Bonau rocks! Gr8 sense of humor about all of this. He's not sure what twitter is but he's indulging me."

Doctors now are getting involved with tweets during surgeries, and experts say that probably will only increase as more people are drawn to the microblogging service. Aurora Health Care in Wisconsin plans to regularly use Twitter during surgeries.

On Thursday, during a live "Twittercast," the hospital saw its number of followers rise to 2,240. That was up from just 930 the previous week. During the surgery, medical staff posted 250 [tweets](#) and received 180 replies with questions or comments. The idea is to educate people.

"Twittering is a very personalized way to learn, to grow and understand what's going on out there," said Reeves, the MU professor. "It may not be the end-all, be-all, but the way it functions, the way people communicate, I think it's going to stay around."

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Citation: More people flock to Twitter as a conduit for information (2009, April 20) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-04-people-flock-twitter-conduit.html>

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