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# A load of Twitter

Feel the need to tell everyone everything you're doing all of the time? Then tweeting is for you

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"Arse, poo and widdle." With this unholy trinity of coy expletives, Stephen Fry introduced us to the joys of Twitter earlier this month. Fry was stuck in a lift and posted a "tweet" about it. His naughty digital missive, together with a photo taken on a camera phone, put him at the vanguard of the latest social-networking phenomenon, which everyone from Hollywood to Wall Street is talking about.

Launched in 2006, Twitter is the inescapable, hot tech product. It boasts 6m users - teeny compared to Facebook's 150m - but its audience has surged by more than 1,000% in the past year. Twitter's most famous advocate is Barack Obama, whose Twitter account has 265,970 followers, more than anyone else. Fry is the second most followed tweeter, with 174,924; celebrities such as Jonathan Ross, Shaquille O'Neal, Lance Armstrong, Tina Fey and Lindsay Lohan trail behind. ("Jesus Christ" is listed as having 33 accounts, by the way, while "The Devil" has 189. "Richard Dawkins" has three.)

Right now, the San Francisco-based company that owns Twitter is valued at \$250m, even though, in start-up argot, it is "pre-revenue". Its inventors, Biz Stone, 34 - who describes Twitter communication as "like a flock of birds choreographed in flight" - and Evan Williams, 36, recently rejected an offer from Facebook to buy their company for \$500m. Yet despite the big money and the enthusiasm swirling around his product, Williams (who also coined the term "blogger") has admitted many are bewildered when they first encounter Twitter. "We've heard time and time again: 'I really don't get it - why would anyone use it?'"

It's a fair question. What kind of person shares information with the world the minute they get it? And just who are the "followers" willing to tune into this rolling news service of the ego?

The clinical psychologist Oliver James has his reservations. "Twittering stems from a lack of identity. It's a constant update of who you are, what you are, where you are. Nobody would Twitter if they had a strong sense of identity."

"We are the most narcissistic age ever," agrees Dr David Lewis, a cognitive neuropsychologist and director of research based at the University of Sussex. "Using Twitter suggests a level of insecurity whereby, unless people recognise you, you cease to exist. It may stave off insecurity in the short term, but it won't cure it."

For Alain de Botton, author of *Status Anxiety* and the forthcoming *The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work*, Twitter represents "a way of making sure you are permanently connected to somebody and somebody is permanently connected to you, proving that you are alive. It's like when a parent goes into a child's room to check the child is still breathing. It is a giant baby monitor."

Is that why tweets are often so breathtakingly mundane? Recently, the rock star John Mayer posted a tweet that read: "Looking for my Mosely Tribes sunglasses." Who wants to tell the world that? "The primary fantasy for most people is that we can be as connected as we were in the womb, a situation of total closeness," says de Botton. "When people who are very close are talking, they 'twitter away': 'It's a bit dusty here' or 'There's a squirrel in the garden.' They don't say, 'What do you think of Descartes's second treatise?' It doesn't matter

what people say on their tweets - it's not the point."

"Tweets are really just a series of symbols," says Lewis. "The person writing it just wants to be in the forefront of your mind, nothing more." Which makes it very appealing to marketers. Companies such as Starbucks have been quick to recognise the marketing potential of Twitter, and makers of the critically acclaimed American TV show Mad Men received a profile bump when fans, posing as characters, sent tweets to one another. Even think tanks such as the Institute for Public Policy Research have begun using twitter to publicise their activities. It's not hard to understand why people might follow these tweets. But why do 174,924 people "follow" Fry's every thought?

"Receiving a tweet is like a friend whispering something in your ear," says de Botton. "We all want people to whisper secret messages to us. Children like to play 'I have a secret to tell you'. It's great fun, but what they say is often not very important."

"To 'follow' someone is to have a fantasy of who this person you're following is, and you use it as a map reference or signpost to guide your own life because you are lost," says James. "I would guess that the typical profile of a 'follower' is someone who is young and who feels marginalised, empty and pointless. They don't have an inner life," he says.

Jonathan Ross is a fan of Twitter for different reasons. He recently asked followers to nominate a word he could use in his Bafta script. He went with "salad" and dropped it in 45 minutes into the show. For him, using new technology confers status.

"It makes us look young. And that is a high-status position in this society," says de Botton. "Perhaps closeness is not always possible, or desirable. Twitter gives us another option. It says: I want to be in contact with you, but not too much. It's the equivalent of sending a postcard."

[Click here to follow The Times fashion team micro-blogging live from the fashion week shows on Twitter](#)

## HOW TWITTER WORKS

**Is it easy to do?** Ridiculously so. Log on to [twitter.com](https://twitter.com), open an account, and seconds later you can tweet.

**What's a tweet?** A 140-character posting, resembling Facebook's status updates (where it asks: What are you doing right now?). If 140 characters aren't enough for your profound musings, just tweet again.

**Who reads it?** Whichever fellow tweeters choose to "follow" you. You can also "follow" other users. This becomes your "friend" network.

**Is it live?** Yes. Posts are loaded in real time, so you can communicate instantaneously. Hostages trapped in the Oberoi hotel during the Mumbai attacks, for example, posted Twitter messages that detailed the chaos as it happened

**How do I do it?** From a phone or a computer.

**Give me some examples:** "We just made history. All of this happened because you gave your time, talent and passion. All of this happened because of you." Barack Obama

"TODAY WAS MY FIRST DAY IN COURT, I WAS NERVUS \, TRAFFIC COURT, SLOW DOWN TWEETLE." Shaquille O'Neal, basketball star

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