Fortuity Research Report

This issue, Fortuity Research looks at Twitter madness.

THE OBLIGATORY TWITTER ARTICLE

"A good newspaper, I suppose, is a nation talking to itself", said the playwright Arthur Miller in 1961. Had he been around in 2009, he wouldn't have had to suppose. He could have read the transcripts of a nation talking to itself. They look like this:

> LamTang is comforting a friend who swears he will die of swine flu anytime soon lol

> mischievousone @klaraflame Def understand what you mean about being paranoid if one device has all your stuff in it. But there's find my iPhone now :D Yay!

> lesDeLois ANOTHER FINAL DESTINATION MOVIE SMH *http://www.bit.ly/PrzUo*

> matstevens Game 4 2day! Magic VS Kobe. Magic need to keep winning these next two games. Tipping Dwight to have his biggest game yet!

The source of these gems is, of course, Twitter – the newest web sensation and, for now, the lowest common denominator in social networking. Anyone with a unique username and an email address can sign up for a Twitter account, and from then on they can use the web or an SMS-equipped mobile phone to post "tweets" of up to 140 characters. These appear on the user's own Twitter homepage and are also forwarded by web and/or SMS to anyone who chooses to "follow" that user. It's a kind of institutionalised stalking, and the pack are hungry for new prey. Even a raw beginner may be gratified to see that he or she has signed up several followers immediately, although the elation vanishes with the realisation that these are porn site operators with photos to sell. Interactivity is provided by a reply option: preceding a tweet with someone's username preceded by an "@" symbol directs it to that person. A basic tagging system has also evolved: following a word with a hash symbol designates it as a keyword for that tweet. All public tweets can be searched for any word or phrase – not just keywords – from your Twitter homepage.

Twitter's as easy to use as you can get without opening up the internet to domestic pets and farm animals. Many celebrities have been able to set up accounts, and now they (or their media minders) can titillate their fans with hourly postings about their movements and thoughts. Anyone who thought most movie and TV stars have feet of clay can now see how wrong they were: the clay clearly extends all the way up to the head. Apparently even our glamorous super-celebrities lead lives that are staggeringly banal. Creative uses of Twitter – like the great books condensed into tweets at http://www.tinyurl.com/qsytcw – are few and far between.

> Ulysses: jamesjoyce: Man walks around Dublin. We follow every minute detail of his day. He's probably overtweeting.

A recent study of Twitter – which must be a goldmine of data for lazy social scientists – has been compiled by Dan Zarella at hubspot.com, and is available as a PDF for download from that site. It shows that about 55% of Twitter subscribers have never tweeted, a slightly larger proportion have no followers, and about 52% are not following anybody. All of this suggests a substantial amount of early disillusionment, so perhaps there is still hope for the human race. Nonetheless there are still over 4.5 million Twitter profiles, and roughly the same number of tweets gets posted every day. Ancillary products have sprung up around Twitter – add-on software for browsers, for instance, or www.twittermail.com, which allows you to (you guessed it) tweet by email.

Fortuity Labs, of course, has its own take on the phenomenon. Louise Chang, head of the Twitter Research section, observed something interesting when she studied new Twitter users setting up their accounts. Far more enjoyable than actually reading the tweets, she discovered, was the snarky process by which you can block tweets from celebrities, politicians and lobbyists who you dislike or disagree with – whether they have actually attempted to contact you or not. Chang discovered that Twitter users would actively seek out other subscribers whom they loathed and despised, just to have the pleasure of cutting off any possible communications from that person. This insight has formed the basis of Fortuity's new web venture, still under development, but tentatively known as "The Non-Personator".

The Fortuity Non-Personator is based on the "killfile" option found in many forums and discussion groups, which allows the user to ignore postings from a particular individual -- but takes it much further. Subscribers to the Non-Personator site will be able to route their emails, webpages, and, of course, tweets, through a hub which will do its best to filter out any reference to their own particular bête noir. Each item of loathing will be charged for separately -- although they are considering bulk discounts for religious fanatics and people who write letters to their local newspapers -- and several levels of filtering will be available. For instance, if someone has taken a dislike to hearing about Susan Boyle, then at Level One her name will be blacked out in all emails or tweets reaching the user. At Level Two the user will be warned before accidentally opening any websites or blog posts mentioning the hated name, and at Level Three, any emails or tweets from friends or acquaintances which mention or refer in any way to the singer will be returned to the sender, with a rude comment of the subscriber's choice.

Beta testers of the system have requested a Level Four, where subscribers with a common dislike can vote to hunt down and kill the person concerned, but this is causing some headaches in the legal department. However, Chang is enthusiastic about the potential for the system as it stands, especially after it hooks into digital TV and radio broadcasts: "Imagine never having to hear or see *anything* about Angelina Jolie and her kids *ever again!*"

On a less serious note, the recreational designers at Fortuity -- in what they describe as the Division of Social Not-Working -- have come up with a new web game. TweetWhack is based on the GoogleWhack game that came into being shortly after Google was first established. The rules of GoogleWhack evolved over time, but the main aim was to find a two-word phrase which, when searched for on Google, returned one site only. As the game developed other rules were established excluding dictionary sites and word lists. In the book *Dave Gorman's GoogleWhack Adventure* (Ebury Press, 2004), a British comedian and journalist describes how he became so obsessed with his own variant of the game that he travelled around the world to pursue it.

GoogleWhacking has become much more difficult over time as the number of websites has exploded, and most of the original players appear to have lost their enthusiasm, so the boffins at Fortuity have come up with TweetWhack as a replacement.

The rules are simple. First, use the Twitter search box to find two words which occur only once in a currently available Twitter message -- for instance, "sneeze greek" currently brings up:

> **sageorigin** Fabulous day at *Greek* festival. Took dogs for walk, watched Toast *sneeze* his guts out. Now watching Quigley Down Under. Near perfect day!

Now pick one of the words to keep, and find a second word to go with it that also brings up a TweetWhack -- for instance, "sneeze potato":

> **SGreenwaltMusic** Zesty jalapeño *potato* chips make me *sneeze*

Keep the second word and find a new word to match it -- for example, "potato torrent":

> **ogrebattle** @lilibel read *torrent* The Guernsey Literary and *Potato* Peel Pie Society ? am about to... after school, that is!

Keep going as long as you can or until the boss comes in. Because Twitter updates rapidly, tournament players should save copies of the webpages they find to help resolve any disputes. Award yourself extra points for completing a chain with a link back to the place you started from -- as "torrent greek" would do above if it brought up one tweet instead of three. But take off points when you have to send a tweet yourself to complete the chain! And if there's not enough challenge to the game try using three-word strings, or putting the search string in quotes.

Top marks to the staff at Fortuity for finding a way to make Twitter entertaining! If you find any others pass them on to FR: tweet fortuityres or email fortuityresearch@gmail.com.

Jon Jermey