Chat like never before

This week I ventured on to the underbelly of social media, Chatroulette, to see what the online world is coming to. Chatroulette, invented in the bedroom of Russian teenager Andrey Ternovskiy late last year with a bit of funding from his parents, has grown to tens of thousands of online users at any time.

The concept is simple, turn your webcam on and the site randomly links you to chat via video link with random strangers around the world. Don’t like what you see? hit “next” to change and is not transferable or redeemable for cash. All images used are for illustration purposes only. See crazyjohns.com.au or email for full terms and conditions. ©2010 Mobileworld Operating Pty Ltd ABN 49 090 451 433 (trading as Crazy John’s).
apparently normal, people to talk to. In fact, the ordinariness of some of the conversations I had in my week of trialling the site came as a surprise. It seems it’s not just West Australians who are fascinated by the weather. A New Yorker who worked in a lead recycling plant told me about the last show he saw on Broadway, and the dangers of his work environment. A marketing student, also from the US, talked about his new puppy, a black Labrador, and held her up to his webcam for me to admire. I drew pictures of Australia and a hopping kangaroo to show a Romanian man where I was from, while he attempted to translate with an online dictionary. A teenager strummed his guitar and sung something unintelligible until I got bored of humming along and clicked next. The sleazier users were more predictable, always starting with variations on “hi sexy”, “show me yours and I’ll show you mine” or holding up signs requesting nudity.

Dr Leaver said some high-publicity incidents of children getting access to the site (despite its explicit 16+ warning) and being exposed to confronting sexual images had not helped its reputation. A proliferation of clone sites have attempted to use different methods to create more family friendly versions. There is also potential for using algorithms to measure skin exposure in order to block content. “Anything where there’s potential for something risky or pornographic to be displayed, you have a lot of people saying this is terrible and this is wrong, and it is one of the hard things to balance,” Dr Leaver said. “If you go to that ideal of being as free as possible, free often means you have the good and the bad in equal measure.”

“But that said, some of the connections people make are incredibly valuable.” People were often very wary of interacting with strangers in the real world but at the same time craved that interaction, he said. “That chance of a random connection is a very valuable thing socially if people are looking to explore and engage with other people they wouldn’t otherwise engage with,” Dr Leaver said. A big part of the site’s appeal, as well as its downfall, is the perceived lack of consequences creating a “carnival” environment where virtually anything goes. “You get the very good, the very random, the very bizarre, the very exciting and of course the fairly substantial chunk of very disturbing,” Dr Leaver said. I saw some good things, definitely some random things and plenty of the “very disturbing”. But none of it felt as threatening as being yelled at on the streets of my own neighbourhood. I eagerly await the day the real world catches up with the net, and instead of waiting for the lights to change to escape unsavoury people, I can simply hit “next”.

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DR TAMA LEAVER, CURTIN UNIVERSITY LECTURER

thousands times more risque, but it reaps much bigger rewards if you find someone interesting to talk to.” Dr Leaver had heard of instances where people had found themselves talking to soldiers serving in Afghanistan or Iraq. “You do hear about some people having amazing conversations, people connecting who would never have otherwise found a way to interact.”

With a bit of persistence, I found it was possible to find interesting,