

LIFE IN A FLASH

Everyone seems to be hooked on Twitter. But the social networking tool is doing a lot more than discussing hobbies and stars.

STORY: DOMINIC RUSHE AND SHERYL-LEE KERR



WHAT ARE YOU DOING? SERIOUSLY. RIGHT now I'm typing. I had a shower earlier. Later I may go to the cinema or watch TV. I need to do laundry. I ate Thai food last night. Green prawn curry. I liked it. Do you care? Apparently so.

Just three years old, San Francisco-based Twitter has become the hottest internet firm on the planet simply by enabling us to instantly update our comings, goings and views to the world in short, sharp, free messages no longer than 140 characters.

Industry analysts reckon 37 million people a month (and growing fast) are visiting the Twitter site to share what they are doing. Users are up 1000 per cent on last year and there are more than 680,000 in Australia.

Big events and social upheaval are now all-

atwitter. During the Mumbai attacks in November, people sent messages (tweets) to Twitter from their hotel rooms, people tweeted from the bloody streets of Iran, and during the record-ratings finale of *MasterChef* the instant opinions were flying thick and fast from armchair food critics.

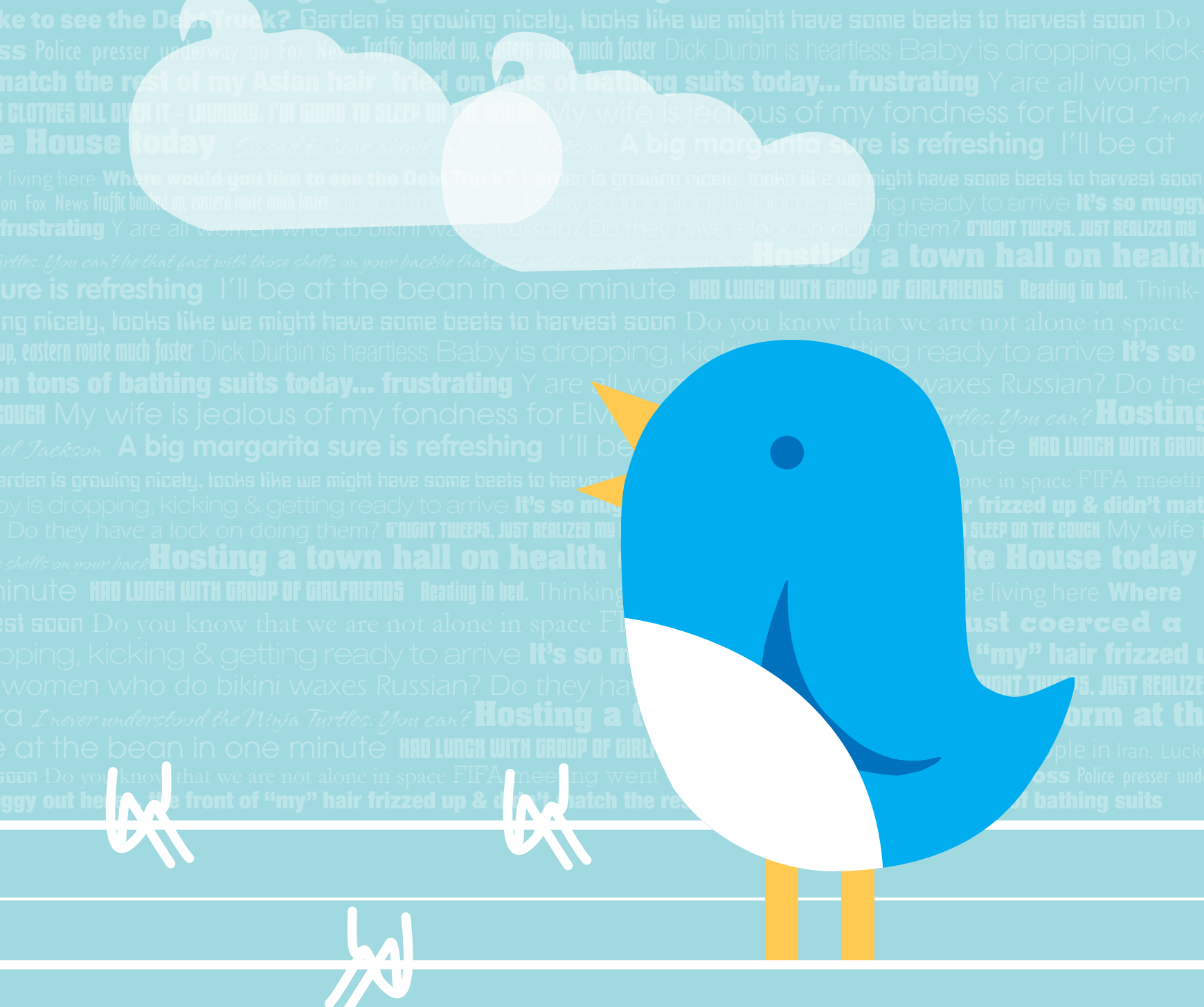
Not that everyone is impressed by the phenomenon. Twitter has been called the "poor man's email" – by Google's billionaire boss Eric Schmidt, no less – and "the purest manifestation of narcissism and stupidity" by outraged author Andrew Keen (who nonetheless tweets as well).

Even if this is true – and it may well be – Twitter also has become a new form of broadcasting. In just a heartbeat, no matter where you

are, everything from the banal and the ridiculous to the life-changing can be seen or sent en masse across a mobile phone or computer screen. Friends, family, stars and strangers can share their uncensored news, nonsense and gossip before it could ever reach a blog, email, paper or TV newscast.

We have entered the instant age. And that, in turn, is changing our expectations of the world. Twitter allows followers to become instant film critics, with *Bruno* a case in point. Before any mainstream review could be published, sour tweets had begun circulating rapidly, causing a totally unprecedented torpedoing of US opening weekend figures.

At the height of the election protests in Tehran, Twitter was one of the few ways for



Iranians to tell and show the world what was happening.

Then there was US student James Buck, who was arrested during a demonstration in Egypt. He managed to tweet one word: "Arrested." Friends at university in Berkeley, California, called the dean, the dean called a lawyer, the lawyer got him out, and then Buck sent another tweet: "Freed."

Fire authorities in parts of the US use Twitter, as well as traditional media, to warn when bushfires are shifting towards homes.

And Twitter provides real-time updates on disasters, such as happened during last month's New Zealand earthquake.

Curtin University's internet lecturer Dr Tama Leaver was one who knew about it instantly.

"I found out about that literally as it was happening," Dr Leaver says.

"A friend whose Twitter stream I subscribe to was saying 'Oh gosh, the building's shaking'. I know for a fact he would never bother to write an email 'Oh there might be an earthquake happening' but just the fact he could key it into his phone and hit 'send', and that it was a news story breaking as it was happening for me, rather than appearing on the news websites an hour or two later, was quite important and another of its great appeals."

But it's not the value of Twitter in times of crisis that makes it a hit – in fact, quite the opposite. The mundane is its stock in trade – hearing about everything from Kevin Rudd's grumpy cat to a Peruvian guy washing his socks.

"Some of the things we want to discuss are some of the most banal things in our lives," says Dr Leaver. "And that's the appeal of popular culture. Instead of being able to talk to three people in the lounge room with you at that particular moment, you can have a potential global discussion going on."

Some celebrities love it for other reasons entirely – a fair few are in a race to have the most Twitter followers. A random snapshot reveals Britney Spears has 2,864,040 followers. Ellen DeGeneres has 2,904,802. Barack Obama has 1,997,654. Malcolm Turnbull has 15,210. Kevin Rudd has 375,537. Pink has 332,032. Ashton Kutcher has 3,238,339.

Stars with lacklustre numbers have even been known to pay for Twitter fans. US web >>

promotions firm uSocial says it was paid to deliver 25,000 followers to Michael Jackson's Twitter page. They were filling the order when he died.

Curiously, the same celebrities who screamed blue murder about privacy – step forward, Britney Spears, Stephen Fry and Jonathan Ross – seem willing to share every private detail.

Twitter is a gig no spotlight-loving star seems able to refuse. Those too busy to type tweets themselves have taken to paying ghostwriters. Rapper 50 Cent and Spears reportedly both use writers, the latter employing a whole team.

Yet what might seem to be inane minutiae to give the fans a thrill or a laugh is actually a lot more. "It's radically reduced the gap between celebrities and their fans," says Dr Leaver. "It gives that sense of immediacy and access." And all our mundane tidbits are quite revealing.

"One post won't give you much at all," says Dr Leaver, "but looking at a stream of somebody's Twitter posts can be a very intimate thing because you do share those little banal details and, when you add it together, it actually gives you a really interesting picture of a person."

Twitter CEO Evan Williams believes people aren't becoming any more exhibitionist.

"I think that it's easier to share, and people have always wanted to share," he says. "There's an innate human desire to share, a desire to have influence and be heard."

However, there are dangers. What was once

private information is now public and searchable. Workers who tweet are being monitored by their bosses, and potential employees are having their tweets analysed. There's also the problem of people forgetting the whole world can read your posts, says Dr Leaver.

"I know there's all sorts of examples of executives and PR folks writing things about 'Oh, I've just landed in this backward town' and going to give a lecture in said backward town and then half the people in the lecture going 'Well, actually we saw what you wrote'," he says. "People still don't fundamentally understand that something posted to Twitter is live for the world to see."

Another downside is imposters passing themselves off as stars. Rapper Kanye West and actress Whoopi Goldberg have both urged Twitter to do something about hoaxers appropriating their names. Now Twitter is rolling out a new system that displays a tick beside Twitter pages of genuine, verified celebrities.

These negatives are just the tip of the iceberg to Twitter's loudest critics. They argue the service inevitably will be outdated by the next big thing, but that in the meantime it represents yet another nail in the coffin of traditional social media.

However, Dr Leaver says Twitter tends to supplement rather than replace other media forms.

"It is amazing how many people must sit and watch TV with the laptop open or with the mobile phone in hand and want to comment on it

and want to feel like they're part of a discussion about TV," he says. "People aren't moving away from things like TV – they're combining things."

"I don't think Twitter changes the game. Twitter makes the game more accessible."

So who is behind Twitter? All this noise is being generated in San Francisco by three 30-some-things and their 40 staff. Think warehouse, bike rack, muesli stacked on a trestle table, life-size green plastic deer, vintage video-game machine – you get the idea.

Williams and co-owner Biz Stone work here. Williams, the business end of Twitter, is a veteran Silicon Valley executive, a Google alumnus credited with inventing the term "blogger".

Born on a soybean, corn and cattle farm near Clarks, Nebraska (population 379), Williams made his way to Silicon Valley in the late 1990s, starting as a freelance computer-code writer and developing a reputation for coming up with great ideas. In 1999 he set up Blogger.com, the original blogging software firm, which was eventually bought by Google just after Williams had hired Stone. The pair then left to team up with Jack Dorsey's Twitter.

Facebook has already tried to buy the firm, then integrated a Twitter-like feature into its own site instead. Even Google was recently rumoured to be looking at buying it.

Many are starting to question how the founders can afford to keep Twitter going. After all, it

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is free to use and there are no ads. Twitter raised more than \$US35 million (\$A42.6 million) earlier this year and doesn't need money right now.

Ask Stone about his biggest market and he replies, quizzically: "Market? I don't know if we really have any 'markets'."

Of course they don't – they don't make any money. Silly us.

The founders say they are looking at all the possible sources of revenue, from advertising to charging for private Twitter networks or taking a percentage of transactions conducted via Twitter. "We'll try things. Some will work; some will not," says Stone. "There are always ways to make money if you have something valuable and people like it."

As for Twitter's future, nobody really knows where it's going. But it looks like it's here to stay.

"I see Twitter staying around. I see it becoming an entrenched part of life," Tama Leaver says.

"I don't see it will displace anything else."

"People will still use email and will still write blogs and people will still read newspapers, but I think Twitter connects people in a way none of those other services could. It facilitates protest movements, it facilitates conversations about the band and, most important, it's already part of people's lives. I don't think we can expect Twitter to change people's lives fundamentally, but I do think it is a tool that's not going to go away soon. The instant age is here to stay." **STM**

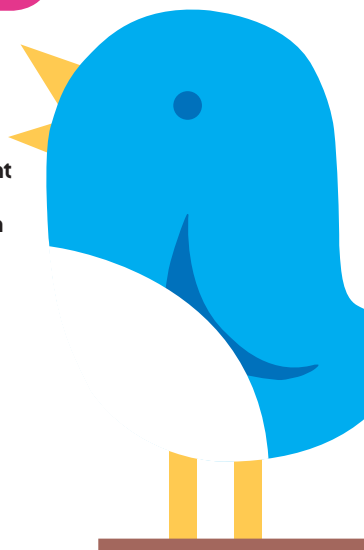
THERE'S AN INNATE HUMAN DESIRE TO SHARE, A DESIRE TO HAVE INFLUENCE

STM now has its own Twitter page, STMPerth. STM's fashion editor Claire Davies will be tweeting live from the front row of Perth Fashion Festival events with all the hot news as it happens from September 4. And we'd love to hear readers' views and gossip from the Festival – so tweet us!

To celebrate STM's new Twitter page, we're giving readers the chance to win a \$200 Olympus FE 20 Digital camera, thanks to studentedge.com.au, just for signing up to follow STMPerth.

Go to www.twitter.com/STMPerth and click the links to become a follower.

At noon on Friday, August 28, 2009, a winner will be selected at random from our list of followers and will be contacted via Twitter.



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