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Putting Twitter's World to Use

By [CLAIRE CAIN MILLER](#)

SAN FRANCISCO — The first reaction many people have to [Twitter](#) is befuddlement. Why would they want to read short messages about what someone ate for breakfast?

It's a reasonable question. Twitter unleashes the diarist in its 14 million users, who visited its site 99 million times last month to read posts tapped out with cellphones and computers.

Individually, many of those 140-character "tweets" seem inane.

But taken collectively, the stream of messages can turn Twitter into a surprisingly useful tool for solving problems and providing insights into the digital mood. By tapping into the world's collective brain, researchers of all kinds have found that if they make the effort to dig through the mundane comments, the live conversations offer an early glimpse into public sentiment — and even help them shape it.

Companies like [Starbucks](#), [Whole Foods](#) and [Dell](#) can see what their customers are thinking as they use a product, and the companies can adapt their marketing accordingly. Last week in Moldova, protesters used Twitter as a rallying tool while outsiders peered at their tweets to help them understand what was happening in that little-known country.

And over the weekend, [Amazon.com](#) learned how important it was to respond to the Twitter audience. After one author noticed that [Amazon](#) had reclassified books with gay and lesbian themes as "adult" and removed them from the main search and sales rankings, [a protest broke out](#) on blogs and Twitter. The company felt compelled to respond despite the Easter holiday, initially saying the problem was due to a "glitch in our system" but later blaming a "ham-fisted cataloging error" that affected more than 57,000 books dealing with health and sex.

Soon, machines could twitter as much as people. Corey Menscher, a graduate student at [New York University](#), developed the Kickbee, an elastic band with vibration sensors that his pregnant wife wore to alert Twitter each time the baby kicked: "I kicked Mommy at 08:52 PM on Fri, Jan 2!" Mr. Menscher is now considering selling the product.

Pairing sensors with Twitter leads some to think Twitter could be used to send home security alerts or tell doctors when a patient's blood sugar or heart rate climbs too high. In the aggregate, such real-time data streams could aid medical researchers.

Already doctors use Twitter to ask for help and share information about procedures. At Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, surgeons and residents [twittered throughout a recent operation](#) to remove a brain tumor from a 47-year-old man who has seizures.

"A portion of the skull is being removed to allow access to the dura, the lining of the brain," an early tweet said. Medical residents and curious laymen following online asked the doctors what music they were listening to (Loreena McKennitt, a Celtic singer), whether the patient felt pain in the brain (no, just pressure) and how big the tumor was (the size of a golf ball). As is convention on Twitter, they tagged all their tweets with a keyword so anyone could search for the keyword and read the stream of posts.

"Twitter lets people know what's going on about things they care about instantly, as it happens," said Evan Williams, Twitter's chief executive and co-founder. "In the best cases, Twitter makes people smarter and faster and more efficient."

Mr. Williams, along with the other founders, Biz Stone and Jack Dorsey, first envisioned Twitter as an easy way to stay in touch with people you already know.

In 2006, when Twitter was just starting, the three men felt a small earthquake in San Francisco. They each reached for their phones to twitter about it and discovered tweets from others in the city. At that moment, it dawned on them that Twitter might be most useful for something else — a frontline news report, not just for friends, but for anyone reading.

Indeed, the news-gathering promise of Twitter was most evident during the terrorist attacks in Mumbai last November and when a jetliner landed in the Hudson River in January. People were twittering from the scenes before reporters arrived.

The attention the service received helped it nearly double the number of new users in the last month, making Twitter the third-largest online social network, behind [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#), according to Compete, a Web analytics company.

"Twitter reverses the notion of the group," said Paul Saffo, the Silicon Valley futurist. "Instead of creating the group you want, you send it and the group self-assembles."

Martin Stoll first discovered this on a visit to New York, where he was searching for a comedy show. Minutes after posting a query on Twitter, five people he did not know had recommended

shows. People who had signed up to follow Mr. Stoll's tweets had his question delivered to their Twitter page or cellphone, and others reading the live Twitter stream could also see it.

Mr. Stoll, the founder of GoSeeTell Network, an online travel company, realized Twitter could be an on-the-go, living guidebook for tourists. He created the [Portland Twisitor Center](#), where thousands of people ask where to find the best brunch spot or coffee house and receive instant responses from the center's officials and anyone else who wants to answer them.

Corporations often use Twitter for sales pitches. Intuit, the maker of QuickBooks and TurboTax, monitors Twitter for people writing about Mint, a personal finance Web site that competes with its Quicken Online. Intuit then writes to them and offers its service.

Even small businesses find Twitter useful. For example, Mary F. Jenn, of True Massage and Wellness in San Francisco, twitters when masseuses have same-day openings in their schedules and offers discounts. The spa is often fully booked within several hours.

But Twitter's most productive use has been for businesses that want to peer into the minds of their customers, reading their immediate reactions to a product. Dell noticed customers complaining on Twitter that the apostrophe and return keys were too close together on the Dell Mini 9 laptop. So Dell fixed the problem on the Dell Mini 10.

At Starbucks, customers used to complain by leaving notes in suggestion boxes. Now they can also post their complaints or suggestions on Twitter, where Brad Nelson, who writes the [company's Twitter updates](#), tracks what people are saying about Starbucks online.

Last month, rumors surfaced that Starbucks would not send coffee to troops in Iraq in protest of the war. Mr. Nelson shot them down, twittering, "This is not true. Get the facts here," with a link to Starbucks's [refutation of the rumor](#).

Some developers are creating tools to help companies keep an eye on the buzz. Akshay Java, a scientist at [Microsoft](#), is trying to figure out a way to identify which experts are most influential on given topics by automatically analyzing the content of their tweets and who is in their Twitter network. Companies like Microsoft could use that information to figure out which twitterers they should contact to create buzz about a new product.

However, for Twitter to be truly useful as a research tool, more people will have to start using it. If it collected a more representative slice of what the world is thinking, Twitter could enable academics and scientists to track epidemics, for instance.

To make that easier, Twitter will soon add a search box to the home page so users can search for

terms like “earthquake” or “flu” and get any tweets about those topics in their Twitter feeds.

To continue growing, Twitter will also need to earn meaningful revenue, which the two-year-old company has yet to do. Twitter hopes to charge companies like Starbucks for features that help them communicate with and learn more about their customers, the founders said.

As the company taps into the \$35 million it recently raised from two venture capital firms in Silicon Valley — on top of the \$20 million it previously raised — Mr. Williams sees evidence that his service has started to find a more utility-minded, mainstream audience.

He points to people using it to find gasoline in Atlanta during a gas shortage last fall. “It was so far from sharing what you had for breakfast — yet it only works because it’s the same place where people talk about breakfast,” he said.

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