

# What is Twitter? - Get to know about it



From the Winneba gas explosion to the Mumbai attacks to the Amsterdam plane crash, people have found a new way to inform and be informed through a technology that has had its share of media hype: Twitter.

Twitter is simply a free social networking and, micro-blogging service that allows its users to send short text messages to anyone who cares to tune in online or on their mobile phone. In other words, the technology is a communication tool that gives the chance to stay in real time contact with family and friends no matter where you are or what you are doing by just sending and reading their updates known as Tweets. It has often been described as filling the gap between email and instant messaging.

And that is part of the reason why Twitter is now on everyone's lips, just as myspace.com was about a decade ago and Facebook last year. It has grown quickly to play a major part in the way people interact with fellow colleagues and professionals from around the world.

The first impression one gets on signing up to Twitter is good. The designs are attractive and simple, and the fact that there isn't much else to do other than 'twitter' on about things makes it seductive. After all, you only get 160 characters, so no long monologues.

On opening the site, Twitter asks the question "What are you doing?" and allows you to send a small update to your followers. The concept is amazingly simple and that is perhaps one of the main reasons why it has caught on like wildfire. The restriction to 160 characters has resulted in Twitter being labeled "micro-blogging".

I first encountered Twitter about a year ago. I loaded it up and watched the activity on the main Twitter page. All I saw was a seemingly pointless stream of tweets that literally documented every movement of people's daily lives, down to the unnecessary detail of what they were eating for dinner. I tried sending a few updates but nobody was following

me, so I was just talking to myself. I played with it for a couple of hours and then ignored it for a while.

But when I later got back to it, I realised that you don't have to listen to the incoming noise! You can ignore it if you choose to. Unlike email, Twitter is just 'fly on the wall' communication. On the other hand, if you have people following you, you hope they are tuning in so you can get your message across.

Ideally, you keep the people you are following to a minimum, and have more people following you.

Twitter was created by Jack Dorsey while working for San Francisco-based pod-cast company Odeo, and it launched in August 2006, growing by word of mouth until last year when it emerged from nowhere as a way for devotees to keep track of what is going on and share their thoughts with friends.

A couple of months ago, I was out of the country for an international course on financial and economic reporting in Germany and so I lost track of events happening here in Ghana. This was in spite of the fact that most Internet news websites offered me the chance to zoom in on events in the country.

However, a couple of friends I have from the Ghana-India Kofi Annan Centre of Excellence in ICT were kind enough to send to me tweets on the happenings in Ghana, which I replied to instantly and that made me think as if I was in the centre of events, especially when the President delivered his State of the economy address to Parliament and the gas explosion accident that happened in Winneba.

Of course, following short messages on a screen is not the same as being physically there; just as watching a nature show on TV doesn't mean you can claim to have visited the Kakum National Park.

But the sense of presence that can be achieved is remarkable, especially when sitting at a computer, working, connected to the Internet and with a Twitter client running so that tweets appear as they are posted. It's rather like reading a novel, when you stop seeing the words on paper and find yourself immersed in a world created for you by the author.

After a certain point, Twitter becomes part of the background to life.

Let me cut to the base - Twitter is many things to many people, but what often goes unnoticed is that it can be an incredibly powerful marketing and community building tool with the ability to develop your brand, build relationships with your audience, and provide a promotional medium that has the ability to go epidemic!

The technology is also used by politicians, sportsmen and the news media to catch up on what's new in the lives of many newsmakers who have signed up to Twitter. For

instance, the news of ace rider Lance Armstrong's return to cycling was broken by people who followed his tweets.

Twitter has also become a platform for companies to advertise their products and service as many companies have found Twitter an effective means of announcing links to products, reviews on other sites, etc. So the technology has become an exciting tool to utilise and support business. However, it is only one of many tools we have at our disposal. I do not see it replacing any of the others we use, nor do I see the positive impact on business being exclusive to Twitter.

So Twitter is nice, it's hyped, it's growing, and it's downright dangerous as a news channel.

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<http://ghanabusinessnews.com/2009/05/06/what-is-twitter-get-to-know-about-it/>