

Cut #31: What is microblogging?

George Faulkner with Todd “Turbo” Watson

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FAULKNER: Welcome to [ShortCuts](#), an online broadcast brought to you by IBM. We’re here to help you get the most of everyday Internet and e mail tools. I’m George Faulkner.

This week’s question is from Grace in New York City. It says, I’ve heard the term microblogging; what does that mean, and how is it different from normal blogging?

On the phone with us today from Austin, Texas, is Todd “Turbo” Watson, an interactive marketing expert at IBM who helps drive IBM’s blogging strategy. Thanks for joining me today, Todd. What can you tell Grace about microblogging?

WATSON: Hey, George. Well, first, Grace, I think Robert Scobel put it best about microblogging when he said that it’s hard to say anything useful in 140 characters but it sure is fun.

You know, I think microblogging mostly equals Twitter at this point, although the concept could certainly be perceived as having a wider aperture with other players like Dodgeball recently bought by Google and Jaiku. Staking a legitimate claim in the microblogging frontier.

First, let’s talk about what Twitter does. It basically allows you to post one line messages about what you’re currently doing and then sharing it with a public or private group of people.

Second, the micro blog message can be posted via many different mechanisms and many different media. For Twitter, it’s generally done via Web interface, instant messaging or SMS.

Third? Microblogging blends a number of social computing features: blogging, immediacy, presence, instant messaging. I think presence and immediacy are two of the most key characteristics of micro blogging because not only blogging to me but you're telling me what's going on right now.

Now, this becomes especially interesting and particularly relevant, you know, in the 60 second 7 by 24 by 365 news sphere, you think a story broke particularly fast via the Web? Just watch what happens when a major story gets caught up in what I now lovingly call a Twitter Twister.

Now, what's really interesting to me, though, is the full cycledom here at work. There have been plenty of other tools that have enabled immediate Web based communications: think Internet Relay Chat early on, or even our early uses of instant messaging.

But now? It's as though IRC has been brought out of the deep dark tech geek back channel underground and out into the wide open spaces. And, extended to the mobile handset for anyone to use virtually anywhere. That adds a really interesting new dynamic to the equation.

Now, all this said, although most Twittering has been very mundane and sometimes downright silly, some have observed the opportunity that this technology could bring into life threatening situations particularly natural disasters, for example, where the need for on the spot organizing and communications to multiple large concentric circles of like minded individuals could actually serve as the difference between life and death.

I'm of the mind that can accommodate both the trivial and the life saving ends of the spectrum and a lot of points in between. But now of course the marketers have discovered Twitter, which means it could be the beginning of the end or just the end of the beginning. Only time and a few million Twitter SMSs will tell. George?

FAULKNER: Hey, Todd, so I've been playing with Twitter the last couple of weeks and I've been terrified to type in my mobile number, right?

I've only been doing it on the screen. Is what you're saying that if I do in fact enter my mobile number, I will just start receiving everything from my friends list? And can you do it in reverse, do you know? I mean, are people Twittering with their mobile phones? Are they sending in text?

WATSON: Oh, absolutely. They're using all of these devices: instant messaging, a Web page, SMS. And that's really why the mobility factor becomes very, very intriguing. That's the beauty of the system. You can decide if you're going to go public or private.

So you can say I just want to extend my own network using my cell phone number or whatever, how I decide to be reached via Twitter, to a private circle. You're obviously limiting the outreach that you can relay there.

But you know, not everybody necessarily wants to hear that you just had sushi at Oochie down the street in Austin, so that's probably okay. You might want to limit it just to give it a try and see if you're Twittering in the SMS style or if you'd rather prefer it via IM or the Web client.

FAULKNER: That's incredible. Well, thanks so much for joining us today, Todd.

For a transcript of today's show, visit us on the Web at ibm.com/shortcuts. There you'll find more information on this week's topic. And again, if you've got a question for our experts, write us at cuts@us.ibm.com.

From all of us at ShortCuts, thank you for listening.

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