

# Life & times

## Just don't tweet back in anger

**Craig Gamble**  
FAST LIVING



I have a problem with Twitter. It's not that I'm opposed to endless tweets about what sort of coffee someone is drinking, or what shoes they've just bought, or what he said about she said about this girl – well, OK, I do have a problem with that. My major issue though is every time I think or hear about Twitter, and the verb tweet, immediately there pops into my head that little yellow Tweety Bird with a lisp. I'm more of a *Tom and Jerry* kind of guy, but Tweety and Sylvester did make it into my formative TV-viewing years, and it seems I never completely escaped.

So now, mention Twitter and a little movie plays in my head of Tweety and his famous line – “I thought I taw a puddytat . . . I did! I did see a puddytat!” Drives me mad. Putting Tweety Bird's problems with cats aside, Twitter and its social networking site compadres have been in the news again, but this time they've been making it, not reported in it.

The first story concerns the unexpected death of Michael Jackson two weeks ago, a story that was broken first not by any traditional media, but by the celebrity gossip site TMZ (tmz.com). At about 1.30pm Los Angeles time, the site posted news that Jackson had suffered a heart attack. Then a little over an hour later, at 2.44pm, it reported his death. Jackson officially died at 2.26pm; the speed at which they had the news up is remarkable. Unfortunately for TMZ, a lot of traditional media outlets didn't credit it with the story, preferring to wait until *The Los Angeles Times* posted news of Jackson's death on its web page at 2.51pm. The Twitter monitoring site Twitscoop recorded how tweets about Jackson's death suddenly dominated everything else. The site monitors tweets and

presents them in a dynamic graphical box, with key words growing in size according to the number of tweets that use them. A video of the live Twitscoop feed shows the words “Jackson”, “TMZ” and “Cardiac Arrest” looming suddenly very large (you can find it on YouTube, search for Michael Jackson and the twitter effect). Indeed there were so many tweets about Jackson at the time that the site slowed to a halt, and TMZ itself also crashed for a period. Even sites as big as Google reported a slow-down because of the sheer number of people trying to find information about Jackson. Old favourite Wikipedia was affected,

when a short editorial war starting up on Jackson's wiki pages, with various contributors arguing for and against whether Jackson was actually dead or it was all some big hoax.

Huge numbers of people all over the world turned to the web and social-networking sites when the story broke rather than switch on the radio or the TV. This is how we now access our news. But there are some obvious pitfalls in allowing the internet, and social-networking sites, in particular, to replace your news at six.

Very quickly after Jackson's death, a host of Hollywood celebrities suddenly shuffled off the celebrity coil.



Illustration: ANDREW JOYNER (2007)

Poor old Jeff Goldblum fell off a cliff in New Zealand first, then George Clooney was a lost in a plane crash over the Rockies and Harrison Ford went down with his yacht. These reports, of course, were hoaxes, but all three suddenly established lives of their own. Channel 9 here fell for the Goldblum story, and it took a statement from the New Zealand police and a rather funny eulogy on his own death by Goldblum himself to convince some the actor was alive and well. Clooney's publicist, too, was forced to issue a statement that the actor was still with us, after a deluge of calls from friends and fans. It seems Twitter accounts are particularly susceptible to hackers and hoaxing. The site shut down in the last weeks to fix a hole in security that allowed fake messages to be posted in the accounts of Britney Spears, rapper P. Diddy, and talk-show host Ellen de Generes; it was the second time that Spears's account had been hacked. The very speed of the spread of news through Twitter and other sites is the core of the problem. Unlike traditional news agencies, who would, one hopes, spend time checking facts and validating a story, on sites such as Twitter there is little or no gate-keeping. It's like Chinese whispers on speed.

Mind you, one recent Twitter story was all too true, with its bona fide Tweeter wishing now, one suspects, that the sudden notoriety would please, please, just go away. Author Alice Hoffman received a critical review of her latest novel *The Story Sisters* in *The Boston Globe*, and the lady was far from pleased. In a series of increasingly offensive tweets, Hoffman called the reviewer an “idiot” and a “moron”, and then published the reviewer's email address and phone number so that others could tell her “what they think of snarky reviewers”. Hoffman's account, and the offending tweets, have since been deleted.

How times have changed. Only a few years ago, it was good advice to never drink and dial, now the wisdom is to never tweet in anger.

## When nature and large machines are brought together

SLOW LIVING



There is a quality of slowness which is at once a terrifying and beautiful assault on the senses. People who've seen whales and elephants up close speak of it, but it can also be appreciated in the “unnatural” environment where man-made machinery and nature come together. I speak of largeness.

Mining machinery can be huge, steady and crunching. The driver of a super-truck, like a toy figurine, is displaced by the sheer size of bright “Tonka” metal panelling and tyres

made from rubber six feet deep. Mines are not especially accessible places, and there are not many opportunities to come face to face with the aesthetics of earth-eating supersized structures: they are rarely glimpsed outside of the pit.

On occasions when one leaves a landlocked habitat for a port city, one may drift towards the quayside if for no particular reason other than to meander, but the results can be surprisingly slow and awesome. There are large vessels – freighters, aircraft carriers and cruise liners – the dimensions of which we can never be familiar with unless we work on or about them. The mass of a hull that seems to rise with the imperceptibility of a minute hand to block the

horizon is, more often than not, hauntingly beautiful. I saw the cruise ship *Sun Princess* by mistake – happened to be watching the ocean swallow up (with taken-for-granted consistency) that warped, red disc that attracts the gaze of so many wistful, nature-loving types. Being placed just metres before a gargantuan, steep-sided ship, moving with the grace of a real setting sun, raises a consciousness about the simultaneity of pulling nature and architecture together. The ship's horn blasted three times before the *Princess* glided into view; chests were already a-tremble from the vibration at this deep, slow frequency. In the port she was dangerously large and could not stop or turn suddenly. This was the



The ship's horn blasted three times before the *Princess* glided into view...

very earliest stage in a momentum-gathering exercise that would last across oceans. The difference between this departure and that of the setting sun was the human emotion that the *Princess* carried as cargo. Mixed with the emotion-laden tradition of “leaving”, the sheer size of such a slow-moving vessel is literally too big to ignore. One notices one's own smallness; one's own part in the scheme of how large creatures and things, in their spatial and temporal dimensions, have a special, slow force.

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