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“Tweets, Twits and Tech: The Many Faces of Twitter in Austin”

Prior to this year, Robert Quigley considered social networking site Twitter to be a little silly. The Austin-American Statesman Internet Editor had heard talk that Twitter was poised to become the Web’s next big thing – like blogging and Facebook before it – but resisted the urge to join the site, thinking the world didn’t need yet another overhyped online communications tool.

But when Quigley finally logged into Twitter and created an account this January, he was hooked. The rapid-fire nature of communicating via short text messages (Twitter users like to call them “tweets”) that are instantly sent to friends and acquaintances was addictive, and he found himself glued to the web site, along with the more than 3 million other Twitter users worldwide. And rather than leaving it at that, Quigley soon had something of a brainstorm: what if the Statesman tweeted the news?

This past June, Quigley’s vision became the Austin-American Statesman’s official Twitter account – otherwise known as @Statesman (the “@” sign is used to identify Twitter users by their account names on the site). Each day, he sends out 15-20 carefully selected tweets of news and other local information to the account’s more than 2,000 subscribers (in Twitter parlance, subscribers are also known as “followers,” while users are sometimes referred to as the “twitterati” or, more succinctly, as “twits”). He also uses the account to communicate directly with readers, creating a virtual back-and-forth and a degree of humanization beyond what is possible in a newspaper’s print edition, he said.

In establishing an alternative outlet for the newspaper to report the news, the Statesman has joined thousands of other Austin businesses, organizations and tech-savvy individuals who use Twitter for such varied purposes as socializing, marketing, networking and information-gathering.

For his part, Quigley’s Twitter efforts quickly paid off in the form of new followers and increased visits to the Statesman web site resulting from his tweets. But it was during Hurricane Ike this September

that the paper's Twitter coverage took off. As the storm unfolded, the Statesman's field reporters in Houston and Galveston tweeted what they saw, updating those in Austin and elsewhere in real-time from the scene.

"We had support all the way through, and it was gaining momentum, but that really kicked it through the goalpost," Quigley said of the Ike coverage on Twitter. "That was the weekend where even skeptics would look at this and think, 'maybe this is for real,' maybe this can work and be a powerful journalism tool. That was probably the moment."

According to Quigley, part of the Statesman's online successes can also be attributed to Austin's unique high-tech culture.

"Austin is not only a tech savvy city, but it's also big on social media," Quigley said, referring to the umbrella term which now includes Twitter as well as related Web services like Facebook, MySpace and YouTube, among others. "I think that has made it easier for us. We're up to almost 2,400 followers now on the Statesman account, and it would be hard to build that in some other cities. There is potential in other markets, but it definitely helps that we're in a social media hub like Austin."

David Geisberg is a University of Texas at Austin student who also believes in the power of Twitter and other forms of social media. As one of the founders of the university's UTweet student organization, he helps teach students and other members of the UT community about the benefits of using these online tools. He said that the personal and professional value of utilizing social technologies like Twitter is immeasurable for students in particular.

"The real reason why we think this is important is because social media is cutting-edge new stuff that's been developing for a number of years now, and it's rapidly becoming more and more mainstream," Geisberg said. "In one form or another, it's going to be a part of most students' lives, both while they're in school and after they graduate and are out in the real world. No matter what kind of work they're doing, there's a good chance that they'll be connected to this stuff. So it's in everyone's best interest to be educated about it and fluent in social media."

According to Geisberg, there are many potential student uses for Twitter – both as a professional networking tool as well as a means to enhance one’s educational experience. He said that his own academic life has already been directly affected by the site. Earlier this summer, Geisberg was searching the university’s online course schedule for potential classes to take during the fall semester, when he stumbled upon a Twitter link for the professor of a course he was considering.

“So I posted something to Twitter saying I was looking at the class and it looked really interesting,” Geisberg said, “and the professor actually responded to me within a couple of minutes, asking what I thought about the class description and so forth. And that’s part of why I ended up taking the class – because he had that presence and there was that opportunity for interaction.”

Paul Terry Walhus is another Austin-based Twitter advocate, who has helped contribute to the rise of the site as a means for political activism. Following the lead of Sen. Barack Obama, whose presidential campaign was noted for its innovative use of social media tools (the campaign’s @BarackObama account amassed more than 130,000 followers), Walhus worked with the founders of the Stop Domain Subsidies group to create a Twitter account for supporters of Austin’s Proposition 2 ballot initiative, which sought to end financial incentives for retail developers.

“We wanted to build a local base of people who supported the cause, and we thought Twitter was a good way to do it,” Walhus explained. “We searched Twitter to find people that were talking about it, and then we added them as followers, and a lot of them added us back.”

Although the initiative was ultimately defeated, Walhus said the Stop Domain Subsidies group would continue to foster its Twitter following and harness the power of social media for its future political endeavors.

“We haven’t given up on the cause – we narrowly lost the election by just a couple of percentage points,” Walhus said. “We’re looking to use Twitter and the community to get people in the city council’s office and the mayor’s office to support the cause.”

Walhus, a veteran of the Austin tech scene who has worked for several area high-tech firms and now runs local Internet community Spring.net, said that Obama's campaign was a testament to the staying power of Twitter and other forms of online social media.

"With the example of Obama, he realized that the social networks were one of the big keys to get his base behind him and be able to communicate quickly," said Walhus. "And that's certainly proven to be the case."