



Twitter explained...

'Tweeting' has become a normal part of life for millions of people, but there are plenty of others who still aren't sure what on earth it's all about. If you're in the latter camp, here's what you need to know

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Twitter, like Facebook and blogging, is a huge internet phenomenon – since its launch in 2006, it's become a massive global success, with millions of users. But why? Coined 'micro-blogging', users give brief updates (140 characters or less) about what they're doing or thinking, or simply as a reply to other users' updates, called 'Tweets'. Think of it as eavesdropping on portions of other people's conversations or reading snippets of a diary and that's Twitter in a nutshell – the 21st-century version of curtain-twitching, with permission from the person who's being watched.

So why would *you* want to use it? Its immediacy means it's increasingly becoming an essential supplement to traditional news coverage, especially of huge stories – it was in the 'Twitterverse' where many followers first heard about the untimely death of Michael Jackson, before the story made it onto the TV news. One of its more fun uses is to give fascinating snapshots into what's going on in celebrities' lives and heads. You may well be aware that Jonathan Ross is a keen Tweeter – he was setting

up an informal book discussion group as *Easy Living* went to press (to find it, look up wossybookclub – first book up for discussion was Jon Ronson's *Men Who Stare At Goats*). It's also a place people use to broadcast personal news. Jamie Oliver used Twitter to break the news of his baby Petal's birth, writing, "Can't believe it!!!! A lovely little girl!!!! She arrived early early this morning jools and baby doing fine!!!" (As you may infer from this Tweet, Twitter is likely to bring all us grammar sticklers out in a rash.)

Twitter also opens a window into the mad, mad world of Hollywood celebrity: actor Ashton Kutcher hit the headlines when he cheekily posted pictures of his wife Demi Moore. These two, by the way, are bona fide Twitter addicts. It's worth following them just to witness how their Tweets are really too much information sometimes, but if you can't bear the luvviness, you could follow their dog Bamacita – yes, really – instead. Sample Tweet: "If Demi & Ashton don't come home soon I am going to find something to chew like silk or cashmere."

Twitter does have a serious side. The site hit the headlines when the US

government asked the site administrators to delay shutting the site for maintenance during the Iranian elections, so news could get out of the country despite a communications blackout. It also saved the life of a missing skier, Jason Tavarria, in Swiss resort Verbiers during a blizzard. Tavarria was able to Tweet his location coordinates, which were passed on to mountain rescue teams.

If you don't want to bother with silly applications as per other social networking sites, Twitter is refreshingly no-frills. Go to twitter.com to register for free and pick a username. Within minutes you can start following others who you find by email address or name, or import contacts from sites like Facebook, and they can reciprocate.

Twitter's immediacy is hugely appealing, whether you want to vent a frustration, tap into the world's preoccupations at a given moment or just drop in and out of friend's updates wherever they may be. And if you're curious about the real lives of the rich and famous, this is a way to get a glimpse into their lives, but it would be prudent not to expect them to read your Tweets – though you may be lucky enough to get a reply.

WANT TO GET STARTED? HERE'S THE LEXICON YOU'LL NEED

TWEET A 140-character message that is publicly viewable.

FOLLOW Click the 'follow' button under the user's icon to become their 'follower' and read their updates. Others can also follow you.

@ When using the @ sign, a message goes out publicly but also into the recipient's @username message box. Users can check these to see who messaged them.

RT Or ReTweet – use this command when you're

retyping a message from someone else so your followers can view it, too.

DM Or Direct Message – can be sent privately to and from mutual followers.

FAVOURITES Highlight the star at the end of a tweet

and the message will be saved to the favourites tab in your profile's sidebar.

BLOCK Got a nuisance or spam 'follower'? Click 'block' in their profile to prevent them from seeing your tweets.