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PERSPECTIVE

WHO'S FOLLOWING

The idea of only six degrees of separation has been crystallised by Twitter – and the conversation has just started.

Story Deirdre Macken

If authorities were curious about catching up with the life and times of Jodee Rich, they would discover a lot in his Twitter account. WingDude, as the former One.Tel chief is known on the social networking service, says he spends his time between San Francisco and Sydney, and he sounds pretty chilled, despite discovering a snake in his waterski boot recently.

On his profile page, Rich describes himself as husband, father, kite-surfer, pilot, battle-seasoned chief executive and techie, but the biggest clue to his life is the list of people he's following on Twitter.

There are new-media analysts, multimedia artists, venture capitalists, the odd financial site, and people who describe themselves as motivators, or spiritual beings. All of them are in some way associated with Rich's new life in media-monitoring.

Twitter might be derided as the banal telling of the banal what they had for breakfast, but the sweet-sounding site that started as a quick messaging service for information technology professionals has also developed into a powerful networking site.

With more than 50 million users – 1.6 million in Australia – who've passed on 5 billion messages in just three years, Twitter is finding new contacts in the same way that Facebook found old friends.

But the most intriguing characteristic, especially for new users, is the transparency of a person's sources of influence, the

weft of their conversations, the information casual visitors can extract from just a profile page.

"The first thing I did was trawl through other people's followings to find out who they followed. I don't bother now but it's a good way to expand your network by checking the people that person you've identified as being worthwhile follows," says Kate Crawford, associate professor at the Journalism and Media Research Centre, University of NSW.

Following the followings might be gobblygook to those who've never popped into Twitter but it describes one of the many professional, marketing and social routes offered by the web's hot new thing.

Take, for instance, the account of Nouriel Roubini, the New York University professor who predicted the global financial crisis. He has 10,600 followers on Twitter but he follows only 17 other tweeters.

Just these two facts establish him in the category of celebrity or broadcaster. While many might follow Roubini for an early warning on markets, browsing through the 17 people Roubini follows shows what influences the influencer.

You'll find publisher Tom Keene of Bloomberg, Paul Kedrosky, author of *Infectious Greed*, a few media and stock-picking sites and the most influential voice on internet stocks, Henry Blodget.

It might not be as informative as accessing his contact book but it's akin to checking out the books in his library.

At the other end of the scale, Paris Hilton's account tells us she has 800,000 followers and follows 155. Among the people she follows are Peaches Geldof and Russell Brand but the vast majority are fan sites devoted to her. Her information sources are all about her.

Locally, twitterers tend to be less prominent. Certainly, ABC boss Mark Scott (2404 followers and he follows 209) is a regular twitterer and likes keeping up with



Twitterers can follow the interconnected stream of consciousness of other twitterers

politicians, journalists and the odd actor, author and intellectual.

The ability to jump through accounts links up some unlikely networks. For instance, if you start in comedian Wil Anderson's account, you can trip across Michele Grattan, then onto Barack Obama, and along the way drop in on Ben Stiller, Amy Whitehouse and Belinda Neal.

Because of the endless linkages between Twitter users, it is the ultimate expression of the idea that there are at most six degrees of separation between any two people in the world. Information jumps through wildly different networks, rapidly forming opinions or spreading news.

Much of the power of the network is a reflection of the people who use it. Worldwide, users tend to be adults established in their own professions who have a lot of opinions, even though they might lack outlets to express them.

Research done in Australia by the online division of Nielsen shows Twitter is the home of the educated, well-paid and, increasingly, well-connected.

Of 1.6 million users in Australia, almost 70 per cent are 18 to 49. There are few younger teens or retirees. Sixty-one per cent of users earn more than \$75,000 and 40 per cent more than \$100,000.

The sort of professional using Twitter tends to be in sales, administration, technical areas and executive management, or self-employed.

As Nielsen director of analytics Mark Higginson says: "It's a good socio-economic group and that's why advertisers are interested." But he adds: "They're still working out their business model for this. At the moment they're working on audience acquisition, then they'll

have to figure out how to monetise the audience."

Apart from the socio-economic profile, the Twitter community is attractive because it is engaged in public issues. Whereas Facebook is akin to a meeting of friends in the local cafe, Twitter sometimes resembles a mass protest through the streets. When users get riled by a news event, they rally rapidly and often very effectively.

Two episodes in the past few weeks have proved how tweeting media can be more powerful than publishing media.

Earlier this month, *The Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger was wrestling with an unprecedented injunction that didn't just prevent the paper from running a story on the oil-trading company Trafigura, but also from reporting on a question asked in the House of Commons.

On leaving his office for the day, the editor posted this comment on Twitter: "Now *Guardian* prevented from reporting parliament for unreportable reasons. Did John Wilkes live in vain?"

The result of that tweet is now Twitter history. The message travelled through thousands of networks, outing the legal action and eventually forcing Trafigura to withdraw its legal gag.

This week, twitterers scored another blow against powerful forces when users began railing against what they viewed as a homophobic British newspaper column on the death of Boyzone singer Stephen Gately.

Urged on by actor Stephen Fry (860,000 followers), twitterers spread the link to the Press Complaints Commission through networks and within 24 hours 21,000 complaints about the column landed in the watchdog's

box – more than it has received in the past five years.

Fry is becoming something of a media institution himself. He has a huge following and is both active and activist in his tweets. Last month he mentioned a book he liked and the book rocketed from 3629th on Amazon's bestseller list to second.

Indeed for celebrities, Twitter is their own personal media site and one where they can create stories about themselves or, more often,

Paris Hilton's account tells us she has 800,000 followers and follows 155.

refute main media stories about them. As actor LeVar Burton (1.27 million followers) told *The Los Angeles Times*: "I get to control the conversation I have with my fans. It's put my career back in my hands."

While many celebrities have had premature obituaries spread through Twitter, Kate Crawford says it's no more reliable than main media.

"Critics say that Twitter is an unreliable news source but hoaxes are always happening and any news organisation is easy to game. The difference with Twitter is how fast the news travels through re-tweets and that it travels in uncontrollable ways. There are no gatekeepers."

Like the early stages of most new media, Twitter is still largely unpolluted by unsolicited advertising. And users like it that way. Social media expert Steve Smorgon says marketers have to tread carefully when they attempt to break into networks because

GETTING SAVVY

Social media expert Steve Smorgon, pictured, has 11,800 followers and follows 13,000 other users. That ratio alone places him among the business or professional users of Twitter.

"I tend to follow people that follow me, mainly because I wasn't into the routine of sorting when I started but also because it's an etiquette thing – users expect you to follow them back."

As an adviser to companies on how to penetrate social media sites, he is aware of both the manners that he adopts in the networking sphere and the sensitivity business should show to users.

"It might be a marketing tool but it's more for commentary and some businesses don't get this. The best way for business to approach it is to develop a relationship with people who are talking about them already."

Smorgon describes Twitter as more of a public space than Facebook and less of a professional space than LinkedIn but, he adds, it's effective as a professional networking vehicle.



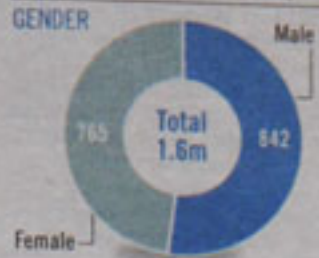
"I've discovered borders don't have boundaries. I've expanded my network to social media contacts in the US that I might never have heard and I've picked up a few speaking engagements that might not have come my way," he says.

Like most long-term users, he is getting savvier. He has different accounts for friends, business and social media and is using a monitoring tool to improve his participation in the Twitterverse.

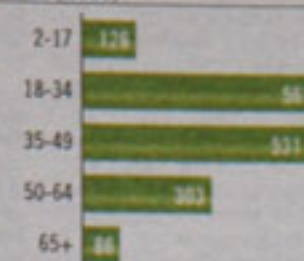
WHOM ON TWITTER?

Who tweets

The composition of users ('000s)



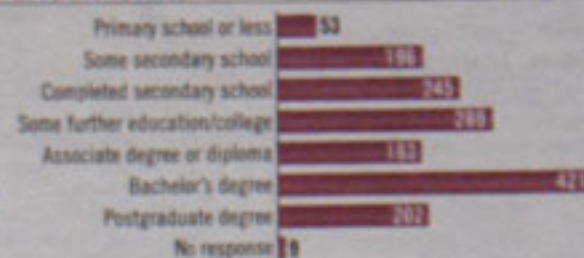
AGE ('000s)



HOUSEHOLD INCOME ('000s)



EDUCATION ('000s)



SOURCE: THE WELLEN COMPANY

lobbing an ad into the conversation is like busting into a group of conversing friends. Sure, they're in a public space but they're not in the mood for a hard sell from strangers.

If they are going to enter the conversation, says Smorgon, "it has to be relaxed, it has to be conversational because, remember, you're pushing yourself into a conversation that's already going on".

Crawford says many people make the mistake of using the new media in old-fashioned ways. They treat it as a broadcast whereas, she says, it's more of a listening technology.

Etiquette is still a major talking point on Twitter. For instance, many users consider celebrities (in finance or showbiz) who have huge numbers of followers but don't follow many people themselves are using the medium as a broadcast, rather than an open conversation.

The *Freakonomics* team, for example, uses Twitter (with 28,000 followers) but doesn't follow anyone else because it uses the space simply to divert users to its blog.

Many more popular users have thousands of followers but follow a hundred or so users themselves. This is considered a more engaged use of the media (Fry, for instance, may have 860,000 followers but he follows 54,000, which is akin to opening the door to a lot of comments).

It's undeniable that Twitter is, as Higginson says, "a popularity contest. It attracts people who are good promoters."

"If you've got something to say, it's your vehicle and you've got a good chance to stand out in the crowd. If you don't, then it's not your network."

Indeed, the most popular tweeters are those who have opinions on events and are often witty and wise. While many take the opportunity for self-promotion, they balance their posts with personal comments.

Perhaps the biggest reason that business finds this medium challenging is because it is based on personality. It demands a personal presence and it's mainly interested in viewpoints, not unique selling points.

Companies have conflicted relationships with Twitter; they

might want to break into it but at the same time they're trying to control staff use of it.

Hollywood movie studios recently began gagging stars from twittering about movies, sporting bodies have limited player use of it, and most media companies are reluctant to let journalists have unfettered conversations on it.

But companies want to monitor Twitter, to catch negative comments and shape discussions about their products. And there's no shortage of tools that can monitor and analyse the conversational space.

One of those monitoring tools is run by Jodee Rich. In his Twitter account, Rich describes himself as team leader of PeopleBrowser, which promises to "monitor your brand, identify your audience, analyse tweets sentiment, filter the buzz, manage feedback" and various other data manipulations.

Another group, Klout, gives scores to users, measuring their sphere of influence, how well they use the media and whether their score is improving or not.

In the US another group, Sysomos, ranks political circles of influence, rating those who are

followed by the most politicians and those who are followed by the most media groups or personalities.

Twitter itself displays a list of trending topics on its home page that informs everyone about the topics cropping up most often in conversations. In the same way that Google measures what people search, Twitter tracks conversations.

Although Twitter has had phenomenal growth since its launch in 2006, attracting 200,000 new users in Australia in the past month alone, there's still debate about what it is and what it might be.

"I don't think we've scratched the surface yet," Higginson says. "It's used for so many different purposes, it's yet to settle into any form."

"For instance, just recently it has been used as a public art space, and then there's an account like skinnypopcorn, which is aggregating what people are saying about movies. So it's a content space now."

Crawford thinks it might suffer the typical life cycle of new media. "Look at what happened to Friendster and MySpace," she says. "Twitter is trying hard to find a way of becoming essential in people's lives but it's hard to beat the cyclical nature of these new media."

Smorgon thinks the next 12 to 18 months will be crucial for long-term viability, and while he thinks more people will join the conversation, he also sees contraction - at least in the way that long-term users handle their participation.

"People will start to descale their accounts or they'll start to separate their public and private accounts so it will become more of a private network," he says.

For some, the public nature of their engagement is wearing thin. They are beyond competing in the popularity contest, they don't want their library open to all comers and they're beginning to close doors to the never-ending conversation.

Higginson says, "There's a sense that people might not want to tell everyone about everything they're doing. Some want to limit how much people get access to, to keep some of their sources secret."

And he acknowledges that while he is happy to put some of his sources up for public view on his Following list, there are a couple of people he follows but doesn't list.

"Notions of privacy have become more important and I think that will be part of the next development of Twitter," he says.

TWIGGING TO THE TWEET

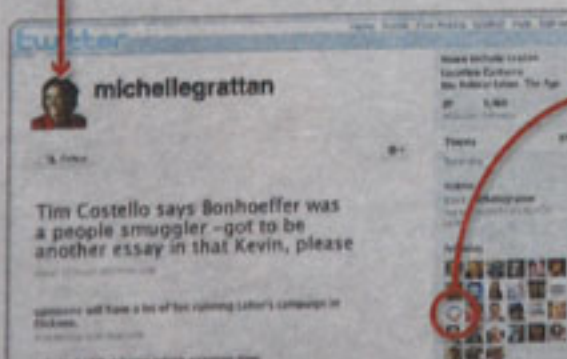
Sarah Prout, who describes herself as an publisher, ranks among the top Australian media profiles and it's not an opportunity she wastes.

"About 20 per cent of my tweets are business and 80 per cent are personal and you have to maintain that sort of ratio to keep people interested," she says. "The focus, even for a business, shouldn't be on the business. It should be about building relationships."

Prout says she gets up to 600 hits on her website for each tweet she makes - depending on the day and the style of tweet. When she was launching a book earlier this year she did 10 tweets a day, which were picked up by a Los Angeles talkback radio. After doing an interview with the station, she found she'd made \$4000 in 24 hours.

Prout, who also advises companies on how to use the medium, says many business people find it hard to break into the global conversation.

"They have to humanise their business. I tell them to talk about their kids if necessary, but get into the conversation. But a lot of them find it a difficult concept, especially accountants and share traders."



Six degrees of separation: the social network connects users to comedians, writers and other opinion makers

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