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COMMENT: Why I don't follow @stephenfry

Twitter evolved

by Chris Hall published on 16 April 2009

Barely a day passes without a news item on Twitter. Some may see this as jumping on the latest fad bandwagon: mainstream media tapping in on something that typifies the glorious rise of innovative web 2.0 applications, but really, it isn't a bad thing. Twitter is something that is worth talking about.

So you might see it as a fad, the next in a line of social online trends that will peak and fall from favour, only to be replaced by something leaner and meaner. But that said, Twitter is pretty lean as it is, which is one reason why it is so beautiful.

For many of us the first expression of our digital selves was Friends Reunited. That was fun wasn't it? Plugging in a few details and finding out that the geek at school now ran his own business, with the option of "getting back in touch" if you forked out some cash. But it wasn't a patch on Facebook, which promptly came along and squarely kicked it in the balls, offering more features, more fun and all for free.

Facebook is pretty simple to understand. Too simple, in fact, as we all face that scary moment that your mother asks to be your friend and she's in there looking at what you were really doing at the Reading Festival in 1996.

But Twitter is still a different beast. I meet people everyday who don't "get it", people tell me I don't "get it". People think that there is a right and a wrong way to Tweet, and that says to me that Twitter is something that is still very much worth talking about.

Twitter has experienced a meteoric explosion in following because it is so very simple: 140 characters, say what you want. What is there not to understand? You can shorten links in a flash,



...cont.

share your pictures, get something off your chest. The only limit is your own creativity.

The same is true of the growing sphere of Twitter apps and services that allow you to manipulate Twitter in a different way. Barely a day passes without someone discovering something new: what happened when you Tweeted about your cat being sick? Where in the world are Twitter users? How can I see the real time experience of people trying to buy Michael Jackson tickets? It's all out there being done.

For many, Twitter raised its head as the ultimate stalkers toy. Friends Reunited lets you know your ex-girlfriend is married and working in a bank, while Facebook lets you see her holiday snaps. Twitter, by comparison, gives you a creepy insight into her daily thoughts, what she is watching on TV, who she is going to the pub with and potentially where.

For many the attraction of being able to celebrity stalk is simply too much to resist. Nothing typifies this more than the Stephen Fry effect. Having followed @stephenfry for some time (simply because that was what one did on Twitter), it was a few comments on Friday Night with Jonathan Ross that saw UK awareness go through the roof.

I saw people coming onto Twitter who didn't know why they were there. They were hunting for a piece of Mr Fry and taking a plunge into something that, at first glance, is a little creepy. Hollow Twitter profiles followed, ghost users who sign up but never speak, and a huge number of people who just didn't "get it".

Of course there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, that's my point entirely. If you want to follow the exploits of Mr Stephen Fry in almost intimate detail, then who is to tell you how to do it?

In fact the boom in users was what helped me decide that I don't need to follow @stephenfry any more. It is no longer just "what one does on

Twitter". The growth of Twitter has seen the emergence of a new stream of information becoming more comprehensive all the time.

I can now follow the news and the people behind the news, I can follow friends, colleagues, competitors, contacts and use Twitter for both work and play. I love the immediacy that Twitter brings, and I love the fact that I can watch that stream of information come in on my laptop or my phone, with no conflict between the two. For me it has knocked some RSS feeds aside, giving me a better handle on the information I want to see.

But the best thing is that you can make it your own and everyone is different in what they want. Some people collect followers, compare numbers, promote themselves. Some people are voyeuristic, watching, reading, following your every move. Some people use it as a soapbox to stand up and rant about the things that annoy them the most. It is this rich and thickly weaved cacophony that makes Twitter so compelling.

There is no right; there is no wrong. Lots of followers doesn't make you a success, just as lots of posts doesn't necessarily mean you are more (or less) influential. The point is that Twitter should enrich your life however you choose to work it.

I've got nothing against Stephen Fry; in fact, I'm a huge fan and have always enjoyed his intelligent, affable and the downright ruddy British twist that he brings to entertainment. But in my new Twittiverse I simply can't keep pace with him. Sorry old bean.