

News Beat: Tuning in made easy by Twitter

A new way to check up on friends is taking the Internet by storm. Twitter.com makes it easy and free for people to group-message their social network about their whereabouts.

More than one million users worldwide have visited Twitter.com since its launch in 2006. On the Web site, users publish their current locations, actions and moods online, according to the New York Times.

Twitter users create and receive messages similar to Facebook status updates. Individuals can make Twitter profiles and add followers.

Twitter users make it a point to tell people what they are doing at any time during the day with daily "tweets" - text message-based publications. Tweets can be received through cell phones, Facebook, instant messages, and on the Web site.

"Twitter makes it easy to reach many people with a Short Message Service (SMS) message. It can be used for life sharing, event organization, political campaigns and also disaster management. It's an important social media tool," said Trebor Scholz, a professor of media study.

Presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are also on the social network to update supporters on their whereabouts, according to ABC News' Web site.

Possible uses for students would be for messaging each other while on campus, to sustain small study groups and for messaging during campus emergencies, Scholz said.

Students like Tony Emiliani, a junior communication major, would not use Twitter even though it is similar to other popular blogging and networking sites like MySpace and Facebook.

"It sounds more like a hassle than helpful. What do I care what [a person is] doing at 3 a.m.," Emiliani said.

Other than keeping friends in the know about when you go on vacation or what you just ate, Twitter could be used as a lifeline.

"With Twitter, you can tune in to real-time live feeds of your friends...that can be unbelievably meaningless and a waste of your time or it can be helpful. It very much depends on how you are using it," Scholz said. "If you are a political dissident in an authoritarian regime threatened by arrest, it may well save your life."

While there are possible less extreme uses for the service, Scholz doesn't see it as a breakthrough technology that will become essential to everyday life.

"I don't think that Twitter is the technological Messiah that has come to save us all," Scholz said. "It can, however, be a neat (and free) tool in today's media toolbox."

