

# Anti Social Networking

## *A slightly paranoid view of social networking*

social networking is the current big deal of the Internet. But if you value security and privacy, there are things you should think about carefully. It's not all bad by any means. Sometimes it's wonderful. Sometimes, it's unavoidable.

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## **Looking for friends in all the wrong search engines**

By: *irv* on July 6, 2010

I had a slightly weird encounter yesterday with Google Social Search. This is a beta product (which in Google-land doesn't really mean anything) that shows you results from your search that are found via your "social circle." I ran a search and noticed this new and unusual thing at the bottom of the first page of results.

At first, I thought it was amusing. Then I thought it was creepy. Then I decided it was just annoying. Let's examine the meaning of this service by going through each of these points in turn.

Amusing: My search was a catch all for material on an academic subject. It doesn't matter which one. School's out but I've been going to school so long, sometimes my brain just gets in that mode. I had already tried searching Google Scholar and found some interesting stuff, and a lot of other stuff that I could not afford to buy. The ridiculous price of so many scholarly and scientific publications is a pet peeve of mine (I don't mind them making a buck. I just mind that they jack up the prices so high that published research is effectively hidden from most of the world, especially me). So since I didn't have hundreds of dollars to shell out for a very few articles that might or might not be relevant, I decided to broaden the search and see what regular Google would bring up.

There was a lot of useless cruft, as there generally is. But at the bottom of the page I noticed my boss's name. That seemed odd to me. His blog (<http://ribbonfarm.com>) is well read but I didn't think it was that popular or that relevant to my search that it would be on the front page of the search results! So I looked at the referenced post. It was 2 years old, I had read it when it was new, and it was completely irrelevant.

Then I noticed the header that said something about my social circle. Hmmm. Yes, my boss and I have chatted using Google chat. We don't very often, partly because our work is covered by a non-disclosure agreement, so over an uncontrolled forum like Google chat (or anybody else's chat) there's a limit to what we can say without violating confidentiality. So we do most of our discussions over work-based email. We don't do them in person because we work in different states and rarely see each other but that's neither here nor there.

We come here to the question of the definition of "social circle." My boss is a good guy and I consider him a friend, so I don't have a problem with him being included in my social circle (This is an important thing. We're both highly opinionated and a bit hard headed. If we weren't on pretty friendly terms, we'd probably kill each other). I have had bosses in the past who would make me feel exactly the opposite. I work in the IT field, where 24/7 availability is more or less the norm. That means sometimes you use non-work channels to get in touch with people. This means that Google's definition of a social circle may contain any number of inappropriate people. What about the times I've emailed tech support at some company, or complained about a product? They are decidedly NOT part of my "social circle!"

On Google's page describing the social search (<http://www.google.com/support/websearch/bin/answer.py?hl=en&answer=165228>) which I found after some hunting, there is a description of how to remove irrelevant stuff like that from the circle of friends so it won't be considered in social search results. It seems to be possible to just tell Google not to use someone when doing this search, though I haven't tried it. What this means to me is that this feature I didn't ask for puts the onus on ME to fine tune it to avoid seeing results I don't want. Picture me banging my head against a wall at this point. I won't actually do it because I hate pain but **come on!**

Actually, after looking over the options for how to remove such things from my social circle (and the little disclaimer that says it can take weeks for them to actually disappear from your search results. Way to be responsive Google! Thanks!) I'm thinking the only real option is to not use Google. For anything. Because they cull everything you use for social connections.

This brings us to my next emotion about social search: CREEPY.

The use case they describe in their documentation is getting a movie review. They say that movie reviews from your friends will be more relevant to you than movie reviews from some unknown professional reviewer somewhere. Well, there's a good point there. I have no respect at all for professional reviewers. The other night a friend and I were watching a movie review TV show and I remarked that when the critics use terms like, "real emotion," "honest" and "true to life" you couldn't pay me enough to watch whatever it is they're reviewing. Those may be fine artistic qualities but do not, in my experience, make the product very entertaining. Unless you're the kind of person who thinks that emptying a box of Kleenex because you're crying so hard is a lot of fun. That's not me.

On the other hand, I have NEVER IN MY LIFE USED GOOGLE TO FIND A MOVIE REVIEW. Are there a lot of people doing that kind of thing? Why? The world is full of movie review sites. I would expect that anyone who is interested in movie reviews is already familiar with rottentomatoes.com or similar sites. There's no need to search for that. I'd be interested to see what numbers Google has for those types of searches. In other words, does this use case have any relationship to reality or is it just an excuse to jump on the social networking bandwagon?

Facebook, the current leader of social networking technology, has gotten into repeated trouble for taking people's information about themselves and their friends and using it for more than just to let people share a laugh with their friends. When Google rolled out the execrable Google Buzz, they got in to similar product because users of Gmail (myself included) thought they were getting an email service and did not expect or intend to be advertising their whole lives to the world (see my post about Buzz [here](#)).

So now they're doing it again. You search for stuff and they show you irrelevant results from people you have had some contact with in the past, no matter how slight or even hostile that

contact may have been. Does Google understand that what they're doing this way is actually CHANGING your social circle?

Just as an experiment, I signed up for a service called Gist a while back. It aggregates stuff from the contacts you supply to it and tries to rank them for importance. One of the things I noticed was that the service gauged importance by how often some of these people posted to their blog or to Twitter, not by how often they had contact with me. So people I have only very slight contact with were shown very high in the listings merely by virtue of being busy. People I've had contact with but hardly ever think of were ranked as important, while those I truly care about were virtually ignored.

There may be tools to fix these rankings. I don't know or care. I'm just trying to illustrate a point that Google social search does something similar. People I may have never had much contact with in the past, because they were never more than casual contacts, could still have their stuff show up in my search results, simply because they are active in blogging or Twitter or some other such thing. And, like anything else in search, putting them on the front page gets them more clicks, thereby increasing their importance (at least as far as Google is concerned). There is also likely to be a psychological effect that the people whose stuff you click on increase in importance in your mind (There's an opportunity for someone to do an interesting thesis here).

Google has turned and information search into a social feedback mechanism. I'm not comfortable with this at all.

True, to some extent, all social networking does this. On Facebook I have connections to people I haven't seen in years, or have only met a couple times. On LinkedIn I have quite a few connections to people I have never met and only know by reputation. But that's what LinkedIn is for, so it's okay. On Facebook, my connections are intended to carry some emotional import and I appreciate the news updates, even from people I don't know incredibly well. It's a chance to get to know them better and I like that.

But search? When I run a search for no sql databases, or research on trusted systems, or encryption libraries or any of a billion other topics that might grab my attention for a few minutes (All of the ones I've mentioned are related to courses I've taken, or to my job, or both), having my relationships vetted and subtly influenced at the same time is NOT what I want.

Here's another little bit that has problematic implications: "If someone you don't know shows up in your social search results, it's likely that they're connected to someone you do know." So now Google is recommending friends. It's annoying enough when Facebook does that. No, I don't want to connect with the lead singer of a band that my family is all connected to (unless it's [Flogging Molly](#)). You see, most of my family is half my age and has one millionth of my knowledge of and taste in music. Leave me alone!

Which brings us to the annoying part. There are probably many people who think that having this sort of thing integrated into search results is interesting and fun. There are probably even situations where I would find it worthwhile. I can't think of one but it's possible. But Google didn't ask me if that was what I wanted. I don't see a place where I can choose "add social search to my results." And it didn't show up at all in a test search I ran just a minute ago. I have no idea why not. The ways of Google are not our ways. Their thoughts are not our thoughts.

If they're thinking at all beyond the dreaded programmer's cry, "Hey! I just thought of a cool

new feature!"

## **Social Wisdom and a Google Fail**

By: *irv* on February 13, 2010

The big tech story of the week is the one about Google making people mad with it's new "Buzz" service. The most interesting aspect of this story is that **everyone** seems to have gotten it wrong.

Here's the short version of the story: Google has some new social media application that makes all your email contacts into "friends" in the social networking sense and a lot of people objected to that, claiming that email contacts should be kept private, not advertised to the world as a friends list. This is stupid on so many levels - Google, their users, all the "analysts" - it's hard to know where to start. So I'll start at the beginning as far as I knew it.

The other morning, as I do most mornings, I brought up my gmail account and glanced to see if there was anything new. There was some kind of banner or thing about something called "Buzz." I immediately thought "Hmm. Could this be a whack at Yahoo's boring Buzz bookmarking service?" But no. I saw that my boss had already been there and made a comment. I also saw that to reply to his comment I had to create a "profile" that would make all of my email contacts into friends who I could then get Buzzy with, or some such thing.

I decided not to create the profile because I don't use my gmail account for general email purposes. I have a yahoo account for that. My gmail account is mostly for poetry and other writing. I use it to communicate with the members of the Science Fiction Poetry Association, a lot of editors and a few close friends and family. It's the kind of account - intentionally - receives the kind of joke emails that people forward all the time. In other words, while it's a public address, I tend to use it for more private purposes.

Weirdly, Buzz shows that I have 6 followers, including 4 who do not have public profiles - which I also do not have. How do you follow someone who does not have a profile to follow? And if you don't have a profile, how is it possible to follow someone else without a profile? What the hell is going on here?

Anyway, notice the one interesting bit here: The complaint the privacy advocates have is that this new Buzz thing is advertising information people want kept private and that Google should have given them more warning of that fact. Google **did** give warning - enough that I decided not to sign up for the thing (but it still tells me there's new stuff for me to look at there, which I find truly annoying). But, apparently, a lot of people failed to notice the warning and are mad AT GOOGLE FOR THEIR OWN FAILURE TO READ.

Don't take my word for it. Here are some links to stories about privacy concerns with Gmail Buzz:

[http://www.theregister.co.uk/2010/02/11/google\\_buzz\\_privacy/](http://www.theregister.co.uk/2010/02/11/google_buzz_privacy/)

<http://www.businessinsider.com/warning-google-buzz-has-a-huge-privacy-flaw-2010-2>

<http://abh-news.com/google-buzz-privacy-issues-for-gmail-users-1126.html>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/02/12/AR2010021201490.html>

Believe it or not, this was highly predictable. At a previous job I used to take help desk calls sometimes (It wasn't exactly my job but it had to be done). One of the things I found amazing

was how often someone would call up complaining about an error message when they tried to do something and then not know what the error message was. The conversation went something like this:

Idiot User: "Hi. I'm trying to use [name application here] and it doesn't work."

Me: "What do you mean it doesn't work? Does it give you an error message?"

Idiot User: "Yeah. It does."

Me: "What does the error message say?"

Idiot User: "I don't know. I just clicked okay."

Of course, it's impossible to diagnosis a problem when the only symptom is that you clicked okay but that's not important right now. What's important is that it is perfectly and absolutely normal for people to look for that little "okay" button and click it **WITHOUT READING ANYTHING ELSE**. For Google's Gmail Buzz and any other service anyone ever wants to create the implication of this long standing and widely known user behavior is that people will almost alays accept the defaults, even if it is not in their best interests to do so.

As Facebook has shown many times and Google has proved yet again, when people accept the defaults without even looking at them and later find out there was something about those defaults they didn't like, **THEY'LL BLAME YOU, NOT THEMSELVES**. Therefore, as Facebook has had shoved in their faces over and over again, forcing users to opt in instead of allowing them to opt out, saves you a lot of bad publicity and hassle down the road.

Yes, the users messed up by not reading. Google's even bigger mistake was expecting the users to read in the first place (btw: This is an easy mistake to make and despite having articulated the lesson here, I can not claim to be too smart to be immune from this same error. Funny, huh?)

But there's more that Google did wrong on this one and to understand that, we need to spend a few words discussing social networking theory and practice. Most of the world was introduced to social networking by websites like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter. However, the theory of social networks is not new nor is it restricted to the Internet. The social sciences have long studied the way humans for associational networks and how information and influence travels along those networks.

Also, completely independent of social networking websites, there has long been interest in the way email can be used to learn about a person's social network. Who do you receive the most emails from? Who do you send the most emails to? A lot can be learned about relationships by studying these things.

I was first exposed to these ideas years ago when I was testing a demo of software being sold to law enforcement as an aid to complex investigations. One of the things the software did was take phone records as input and produce a visual depiction of communication patterns. The idea was that this was how police could find out who was really running the gang they were investigating (though really it would only discover who was running the operations, rather than who was calling the shots but that's another story). The application to email is obvious.

And this is where Google really tripped up. They have wanted to get involved in the social networking arena for some time (check out orkut.com, for example) but have never found anything that caught fire. Then some genius found out about social science research into using email to examine people's social networks and thought, "Hey! We've already got all their social network info! All we have to do is start using it!"

This completely overlooked an aspect of email that comes up very often when dealing with users (yes, back in my pseudo help desk days): The expectation of privacy. The upshot is that, no matter how many times you tell people that the company reserves the right to monitor their communications, and no matter how often you explain to them that nothing on the internet is truly private, people still think of their email as being private communications. They put their most personal stuff into email, things they wouldn't want anyone else to know about.

It's not all just forwarded jokes. It's stuff that gets dragged into court in cases of sexual harassment, divorce, fraud, product tampering, negligence, even murder (In an unusual twist to that with immense privacy implications, see [here](#)). Everything people would ever talk about, and anyone they would ever talk to, can be discovered in their email, including their deepest and most humiliating secrets.

Even people who don't have humiliating secrets to hide can be very touchy about their email. Even if they only use it for work, that doesn't mean they want the boss reading it. The flip side to privacy is trust. When someone snoops into someone else's email, or their contacts, or their desktop files, or whatever, the person whose stuff is being snooped feels distrusted. The response is generally anger.

Contrary to the popular formulation, privacy is important to nearly everyone, not just those who have something to hide. And by exposing people's email contacts in one huge batch, Google ran head on into this deep need for privacy. They got anger in return. This is the real story. It's not that Google failed to display their instructions in neon with all kinds of opt in notices to force people to think about what they were doing. It's that by touching email AT ALL, Google made people worry about who they trusted and who trusted them. Consequently, Google lost trust from some of its users.

In this particular aspect, the users are not at fault. Google made the enormous mistake of thinking of email as a resource to be leveraged. Ironically, they tried to develop a social networking feature without giving enough thought to the social context.

The really funny part about this is that they needn't have bothered. My second thought when I first saw that there was such a thing as Gmail Buzz, was, "I already have this stuff on Facebook. I don't need yet another social network."

UPDATE (same day): I found a link wayyyyy down at the bottom of my gmail page that said "turn off buzz." So I did. That's one annoyance out of the way!

UPDATE 2 (also the same day): How did I get all the way through this post without commenting that the backlash on this issue was like Google walked into a buzzsaw?

## **The Infection Meme**

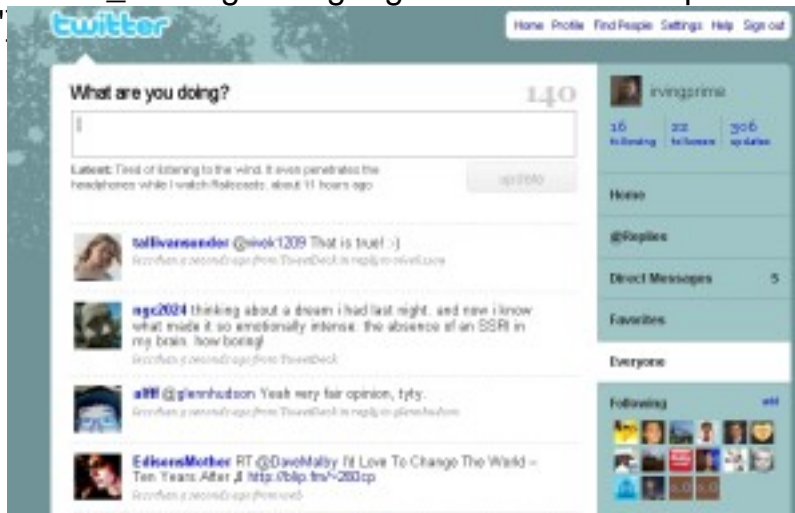
By: *irv* on February 12, 2009

We commonly refer to computer programs that spread and cause trouble in terms of diseases; we call them viruses and we say that a computer that has one is infected. Lots of things spread, though. Butter. Ideas. Economic downturns. Clouds of nerve gas. But there are a more limited number of things that spread between people.

Twitter had a problem today. Not just today but that's when it seemed to come to a head. (If

you don't know Twitter, all you need to know is that

[caption id="attachment\_82" align="alignright" width="300" caption="Twitter without Don't Click"]



[/caption]

people send very short messages that will be seen by their friends who "follow" their posts, or by anyone who looks at the stream of all posts. More on Wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twitter>). This was both hilarious and disturbing. Hopefully that's not a comment on life, the Internet, or Twitter itself.

What happened was that Twitter was hit by a piece of program code that used a simple social engineering trick to fool people into activating it, so it could reproduce. It showed a link that said "Don't click this link." Of course people did click the link, allowing the code to insert itself into their feed, where all their followers would see it - and passive-aggressively do what they knew they shouldn't and replicate the link still farther.

Fortunately, there were no horrible consequences to this little game. It seems to have caused some extra traffic on Twitter (maybe a lot of extra traffic) and the good folks behind Twitter say they've now blocked it (see <http://blog.twitter.com/2009/02/clickjacking-blocked.html>). More information on ReadWriteWeb at [http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/dont\\_click\\_no\\_really\\_dont\\_even.php](http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/dont_click_no_really_dont_even.php)).

There has been a less mischievous but also less funny thing spreading on Facebook lately, too (no, I'm not going to define Facebook too. If I have to stop and define everything, how long will it be before I wear out my parentheses?). It's called **25 things**. People post a note telling 25 things about themselves, then tag (as in "tag, you're it!") 25 of their friends who are then supposed to do the same thing. Basically, it's a chain letter (For the record, I don't participate in chain letters. Ever).

Interestingly, though, a recent article in Slate (<http://www.slate.com/id/2211068>) described it as something else and actually tried to gather data on how it spread. The something else it was called, was a "meme." A meme is basically an idea, usually one embedded in the culture, or skating across the top of one as in, "Where's the beef?" Or, "We're gonna need a bigger metaphor." (Paraphrasing. Try Googling "Big shark" if you can't place it.)

Unlike Twitter's **Don't Click**, **25 Things** did not suddenly appear in its final form. It went through several phases, starting out as "16 random things about me" and morphing through several other forms over a period of several months before it finally caught fire. The Slate

article includes an interesting graph that shows almost no instances of **25 Things** for a couple months. Then, at the end of January, there is an enormous spike, which rapidly died off. One of the reasons for a die-off like that is saturation. Once you've already been hit something like **25 Things**, you don't care if someone tags you again. You've already paid your dues. The same is mostly true for **Don't Click**. It's not really very entertaining. Once you've clicked it, you know that clicking it again will not be particularly interesting.

In the Slate article, the changes in **25 things** were likened to evolution and to the progress of disease. Both of these are weak, though the disease comparison is somewhat interesting, especially in light of Twitter's infection today. A study published in the Lancet not too long ago ([Emerging infections: a perpetual challenge](#)) discussed how the progress of emerging diseases has remained remarkably similar for thousands of year. The authors studied historical records of the plague that decimated Athens in the 4th century BC, the Black Plague that pruned the population of Europe, Asia and possibly Africa in the 14th century, the Yellow Fever epidemic in the U.S. in the 18th century and several more.

They found a remarkably stable set of factors that contributed to the way these horribly destructive diseases spread. Those factors included travel, especially for trade. War and famine were also important factors as was, somewhat surprisingly, the weather. They also found that the lack of the will among public officials to enact really effective containment measures was significant, as was the way existing public health facilities, if any, were sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer number of victims.

Most of these factors have allegories on the Internet (except maybe the weather). But do they have any resemblance to the spread of ideas? **25 Things** is an idea. It depends on people wanting to share with others. **Don't Click** is the opposite. It insinuates itself into the system by way of trickery. If they are diseases, then **25 Things** is like an STD while **Don't Click** is more of a common cold.

I'm not sure what that would make, say, democracy. A major skin rash? One that people are willing to die for, though. While some other people will do almost anything to prevent it or undermine it. Maybe the disease thing only applies to little ideas. Open Source software is another idea that doesn't quite fit the disease model. These ideas are more like animals, like an invading species that gets a toe hold in one small part of an ecosystem and spreads out from there.

The idea of reaching a great tipping point, or growth spike, has more to do with the increased population than with transitory infection. The big difference is that an infection can be cured but a macro-scale population of creatures will generally continue to grow. Right up until a big meteor hits and wipes out all life on the planet. That part is no fun at all.

## **Random Roundup**

By: *irv* on March 4, 2009

Where I make snide - I mean informative - comments about stuff that caught my attention, instead of the usual long-winded ranting. I've been thinking about this for a while because often I see something, think of a paragraph or two, then get bored and wander away. But maybe sometimes a paragraph or two is enough! First up:

[New Test For Detecting Fake Organic Milk](#)

I couldn't stop laughing when I saw this one. You mean there's a problem with knock-offs of organic milk? Of course there is! Damn that supply and demand! People are willing to pay extra for a product **they can't identify**, it shouldn't come as a surprise when there are distortions in the market. That's what art fraud is all about, after all. Tell a collector you've discovered a brand new Vermeer, then sit back and watch the bucks roll in because even the experts can't tell the difference! (It happened during World War 2. See [The Forger's Spell](#))

Here's a thought: If you can't tell the difference, then maybe it's not worth the extra money.Â (The milk, anyway. The fake Vermeer's in the book I referenced were terrible. The experts were idiots, which is a lesson we'll go into at great length some other time)

### [Martian Volcano Could Harbor Primitive Life](#)

So could my septic tank. How does this kind of empty speculation get to be news? That's one of my big complaints about science reporting and even a lot of so-called scientific studies. This is nothing! Anyone can have just as profound a thought as this after a couple beers! So what?

Patrick McGovern, one of the scientists whose study of Olympus Mons (that's the volcano referred to in the headline) is discussed in the article, should be given credit for saying that the implication that life is possible there is the kind of thing that goes at the end of the paper, meaning it's not the actual point of what he was studying. The point was to figure out the history of that monster volcano, in order to understand Mars better.

So why did the possibility of life get into the headline? Apparently because whatever editor wrote it didn't think extra-terrestrial volcanoes were cool enough by themselves. That's weird.

### [Google's Eric Schmidt looks down his nose at Twitter](#)

My first reaction was: so? He doesn't have to use it if he doesn't want to.

Then I thought, what are the odds this means that Google is going to roll out their own version of Twitter in about 2 weeks?

### [Were gravitational waves first detected in 1987?](#)

Wow. For those who don't know, the detection of gravity waves is a BIG DEAL. Because until gravity waves are detected, we don't really know if gravity is a wave (like we know sound and light are) or not. It makes sense, in the current state of physics knowledge for it to be so but that's the thing about science: If you don't have actual evidence, there's still the chance you could be wrong. Even assuming it's not wrong and gravity is a wave, detecting that wave would make it much easier to measure and develop better models of how it works.

Anyway, the story says that a physicist named Joe Weber claimed in 1987 to have detected gravity waves but no one believed him. The most likely source of the waves was a supernova that was detected around that time but other scientists calculated that gravity produced by that supernova would have been much too weak for Weber to detect.

Now a Pakistani physicist (they have nukes. You knew that meant they would also have physicists, right?) named Asghar Qadir says there were factors that no one was considering back then that modify the math. He says the whole world may owe Weber an apology (not

that he'll hear it - he died in 2000).

Here's the thing though: Before anyone can prove Weber was right or wrong, they have to detect gravity waves again. The math can only be validated by actual measurement. There are efforts underway to do the measurement but they haven't had any luck so far. For my book, the more time goes by without detecting gravity waves, the harder it is to believe that Weber did it in the first place.

The best part is that this article had a headline that made sense, rather than making me laugh or cringe.

## **Protests, Revolutions and Other Loud Noises**

By: *irv* on June 20, 2009

At the beginning of the movie **The Longest Day**, the Germans have broken an important code the Allies use to communicate with the French Resistance. At least they think they have. They believe that when a line from a particular poem is read on the radio, it will be the signal that the invasion of France (D-Day) is imminent. They don't know what the French resistance fighters are supposed to do about it, where it will happen or much of anything else, but they will at least know the time with possibly as much as several hours of warning.

It's possible that the message carries information about specific assignments or even where to find further instructions. The movie (one of those rare masterpieces, by the way, that may be more interesting just to listen to, than to watch) does not go into detail about the communications network that put these codes in place, or the people who were imprisoned, tortured or murdered by the Gestapo to find ways to weld the scattered cells into a guerilla army that could be set in motion so well at the required time.

That brief scene, though, and others, such as the one where resistance members hear the coded signal, should help teach us something that's been missing from the commentary about the really interesting role of Twitter in the protests in Iran this week. That lesson is that spontaneous revolutions are not just uncommon, they are almost impossible in a modern police state.

The short version of what's happening: There was an election in Iran that many people viewed as rigged. Rather than accept the result, supporters of the main opposition candidate protested. There have been huge rallies in the streets around Iran for days now. There have also been reports of the government shooting at protesters, beating them up, dragging them (or people suspected of supporting them) out of their homes (or their dorms, in many cases). There was even one report of an official killed in a "[suspicious car accident](#)", the implication being that he was unofficially murdered by the government.

Meanwhile, Twitter has emerged as an important source of news from inside Iran with activity sometimes hitting the level of thousands of Tweets per minute. As of this writing (Saturday afternoon, June 20, 2009) the #iranelection tag is still the number one trending topic on Twitter. A glance at the Internet/Twitter aspect of the situation:

Some information on Twitter has come from inside Iran. Some has been in support, some against, some real, some false.

At one point there were many Tweets and re-tweets about how to contribute to distributed denial of service and other attacks on government sites in Iran (See [here](#) and [here](#)).

The Iranian government has tried to block access to Twitter and similarly subversive sites, but that actually began before the election. See for example [here](#).

Twitter delayed scheduled maintenance so as not to interfere with the Internet arm of these election protests. Reportedly, this was at a request from [inside the U.S. State Department](#).

One other notable response to the huge Internet presence of the Iranian protests was [Facebook's very fast rollout of a Farsi language version](#) of its service. This could be seen as a sincere attempt to give the protesters a platform that can help them organize and communicate. It could also be a very cynical attempt to exploit the situation for growth, or merely a realization that a previously overlooked market is bigger than previously thought. Personally, I think it's a mixture of all of the above.

This brings us to the point where I point out that almost all of the analysis I've seen of Twitter and the Iranian election protests has been wrong (Except for this excellent piece [here](#)). We may or may not be witnessing a real revolution in Iran. If the government succeeds in putting down the unrest, the resentments that fostered it will not disappear, they will go underground. That's the way totalitarian governments like it. They believe that the majority of people just sort of follow the herd and if the only herd that's not in prison is run by the government, that's the one they'll follow.

Where the discussions of the Internet's role in general and Twitter's in particular go wrong is in acting as if the volume of traffic is an indicator of its importance. It is not. It's an indicator of passion. Twitter can help organize protests by broadcasting their timing and location to anyone who has a phone or a web browser. That "everyone" includes the government and the counter-protesters as well. This is a crucial point: It's much less demanding technically to run a search on Twitter to find out where to send the goons to greet the next big protest than to tap the phones of a few thousand known dissenters and follow them.

Likewise, if you want to infiltrate a revolution, setting up a Facebook page or a Twitter profile loaded with false subversive messages to establish credibility is **much** easier than spending months or years living a fake life, trying to finagle an introduction to a friend of a friend of a friend who might be involved in the resistance (or might also turn out to be working for the Secret Police). Some of the old KGB informers must be turning green in their graves (pun not intended) with envy at the ease of it all.

This is the point I was trying to make with the reference to **The Longest Day**, above: That real revolutions tend to take years of quiet and hideously dangerous organization to build. They don't happen because a bunch of people on Twitter all say, "I don't like this government. Let's overthrow it!" In a country like Iran, someone who puts up a message like that runs the risk of a severe beating, imprisonment or death if the government comes to believe they mean it.

That's why the resistance in **The Longest Day** (and even in real life!) consisted of small groups of people who did not know each other or even respond to the same codes. When the government tortures someone into betraying the revolution, if they only know 3 other people who are involved, that's all the people the revolution will lose. If they have a hundred thousand Twitter followers, the potential loss is much greater. And the government will quickly figure out that it doesn't have to kill all 100,000 of that person's Twitter followers. It only has to kill the ones of those who have the most followers. The top of the food chain is easy to find when easily available software can graph an online social network in a few moments. See for example [Twitter Friends](#).

My guess is, therefore, that if Iran has any smart people who really want a revolution, those

people aren't using Twitter or Facebook to draw attention to themselves. Popular unrest can be a powerful force. So, unfortunately, is the stubbornness of a violent and autocratic government. It's possible that the current unrest will gain some concessions from the government. It's very unlikely the government will fall (though I wouldn't rule it out). Twitter and the Internet in general help give the people a voice to raise up against oppression and that's important. But it's not a revolution and can even get in the way of one. Think about that.

UpdateÂ 6/27/2009

It seems others are beginning to understand the double-edged nature of the sword of Internet-enabled revolution. Via Slashdot, we find a Wall Street Journal story about high tech used to fight the revolution (read it [here](#). It's interesting) and a Slate.com article describing ways the government of Iran is using Internet technology to break up the protests and identify protesters ([here](#)).

Nice to see the media starting to catch on, finally.

## **Welcome to 2044**

By: *irv* on June 13, 2009

I read a few articles this week about the 60th anniversary of the George Orwell novel 1984 (including this interesting one at [National Review Online](#)) and one thing that struck me is that very few literary works get reviewed 60 years after their publication. Even fewer **good** ones get reviewed/taught/discussed 60 years later. Everybody knows at least a little about 1984, even those of us who have not yet read it (In school, I was in the class that was assigned **Animal Farm** instead. Interesting book. Hated the pigs).

But this is not a review of 1984. That would be silly since I just admitted I haven't read it! But it seems I should. Traditionally, reading has been seen as a way of passing on culture - not the kind of culture that causes people to donate money to the opera or spend time at museums but the kind that shapes the way people think. That's why an old fashioned Classical Education valued Socrates and Thomas Aquinas among others. Agree with them or not, these were smart people and excellent teachers.

Well, that's the official story, anyway.

It's interesting that the list of important books for a Classical-like education now includes 1984, a book that has infiltrated popular culture with phrases and ideas about the awfulness of a huge, all-controlling government, without actually doing much to discourage the growth of such governments. Don't believe me? Use Google or whatever resource you want and try to develop a comprehensive database of government operated databases. Don't forget to include notes about laws allowing or even requiring these to exist as well as the sources of information (such as intercepted emails, credit reports and public records such as court filings) that go into them.

Maybe, instead of discouraging those things, 1984 provided the inspiration. It has certainly inspired plenty of books and movies along similar themes. Arguably, the entire sub-genre of dystopian science fiction started with 1984. Personally, I always found that good science fiction taught more about people and society than the majority of the so-called classics I read in school. I preferred Asimov to Hemingway, Heinlein to Homer. (ANYONE to Homer, really,

though a couple of the movie adaptations were somewhat enjoyable). Few English teachers sympathized with this view.

Maybe it's different today. That's something that would be interesting to hear: Are there more science fiction books infiltrating the things considered classics? Probably **Fahrenheit 451**. That's the only one I can think of but I'm a student of computers and security, not literature (though I've also had some short stories and poems published - mostly fantasy stories and science fiction poems, believe it or not). In a world where Twitter is the new literature (see below) and cars and TV sets contain computer chips, there may one day soon be practical value as well as intellectual in science fiction classics about a robot uprising, or first contact.

Now if someone could feed 1984, or even some of the more traditional classics, into the 140 character chunks of a Twitter stream, maybe I would get around to reading it sooner.

Random sources of Twitter Literature (some of it surprisingly good, though no classics yet):

[Thaumatrope](#) -- I should mention this one has bought 2 of my pieces, one of which appeared on Christmas Eve last year.

[VeryShortStory](#)  
[Outshine](#)  
[nanoism](#)

## Twitter, Poetry and Bad Humor

By: *irv* on March 23, 2009

I ran across an interesting internet hoax yesterday. Apparently, a number of people believed the announcement that Twitter was going to start offering special accounts - for a fee - that would allow both more than the usual 140 character limit on posts and would, apparently, randomly force people to follow these special pay accounts. (For the record, no, I'm not one of the people who fell for it. Really. You believe me don't you?). See [Twitterville Falls For Premium Accounts Hoax](#) for more information.

Poor Twitter. People are making fun of their business model just because they don't have one!

Let's just take it as stipulated that Twitter is cool. That's one of the reasons it gets targeted for silly jokes like that. If you don't even know what Twitter is, you're not cool. Sorry. That's life. Look at [The Infection Meme](#) and [Twitter](#) to broaden your education. More importantly, it sometimes has value, though not always where you think. And I don't just mean this: [Ohio Cops Use Twitter to Talk to Residents](#).

One feature of Twitter (apparently not entirely planned by the creators) is the ability to tag posts for subject matter and search on those tags, so that you see what the whole world is saying about a subject, not just the people you personally follow. During the final episode of *Battlestar Galactica* I posted several items with the tag #BSG, to show that I was talking about BSG. See how it works?

There are services out there that allow you to leverage these tags. One such service,

[WeFollow](#), lets people register their user names in conjunction with up to 3 tags and then when other people search WeFollow for those tags, they will see posts from the users who associated themselves with the tags (Maybe it makes more sense if you just go look at the WeFollow website.).

I'm undecided about registering with WeFollow myself. The biggest reason is that it requires you to validate your membership on Twitter by allowing WeFollow "to access and update your data on Twitter" (That's from the authorization page. Emphasis theirs), and I'm not sure I want to do that. Funny. I let applications access my profile on Facebook frequently - but ask for the same thing in a different context and it seems ominous. Paranoid much?

See [WeFollow Twitter directory: Kevin Rose's latest](#) for more about WeFollow.

Anyway, having found that mildly amusing, I tried something I thought would be more interesting. I searched Twitter for the tag #haiku. Twitter is well suited for haiku because of the 140 character limit on posts. More accurately, the 140 character limit makes Twitter better suited for haiku than for sonnets, or almost any other kind of poetry (though one of these days I'm planning on doing a series of tweets modeled after the old Burma Shave stuff. This Social Web / Is kind of fun / but I'm bored with Tweet Spam / You're following is done. Twitter Shave.")

The search brought up a lot of haiku. I won't reproduce any of them here. If you're interested, try it by clicking <http://search.twitter.com/search?q=%23haiku>

For full disclosure, sometimes I post things that will come up in that search. It seems to me that the ephemeral nature of 140 character posts streaming by is well suited to the moment-of-surprise aspect of haiku. Either that, or I have too short an attention span for anything else. My blog posts certainly seem to wander, don't they?

Or maybe not. After reading several hundred Twitter haiku I learned two things:

There are some amazingly good poets putting stuff on Twitter.  
But the overwhelming majority of them are TERRIBLE.

It was a surprise to see the high proportion of Twitter haiku that concerned fecal matter (not usually as politely described as that). I'm pretty sure this is not what the great Japanese masters of old intended when they invented the form. That "moment of surprise" was not intended for shock, disgust and even sadness at the empty heads of so many people. Well done haiku can be truly beautiful. It can evoke profound thoughts (not that I know much about those) and make you feel a wide range of emotions.

I'm particularly fond of a modern variant of haiku, scifaiku, which is (basically) haiku with a science fiction (or other genre) twist (see [Scifaiku.com](#) for more on this fascinating art form). I've written and even published some of it. Scifaiku (and the wider range of science fiction poetry) is some of the most creative work you'll ever see. I would even be willing to go out on a limb and say that poetry should have more creativity and less excrement.

I subscribed to an RSS feed of Twitter haiku but if the feces-to-poetry ratio doesn't improve I probably won't keep it. But it was an interesting experiment.

## **April Random Roundup**

By: *irv* on April 15, 2009

A random roundup is what happens when I'm so busy (or lazy, or disorganized) that I start a number of blog posts over a period of several days, but never seem to finish or post any of them. So instead, I slam them together into one big one and pretend like I'm being conscientious. The latest crop includes some notes about Twitter, Facebook, Roadrunner and my old employer the Democrat & Chronicle.

Twitter is bad for you

In other news - if you can call it that - Twitter makes us less moral. Really. Scientists said so ([Can Twitter Make You Amoral? Rapid-fire Media May Confuse Your Moral Compass](#)). Apparently, someone thinks that the stream of consciousness that characterizes much Twitter content is too fast to allow people to reflect on other people's feelings. Do we need to use more smileys? Can you do smileys on Twitter? Having never used a smiley **anywhere**, I wouldn't know. But surely those will make us more moral by putting our feelings out there for others to see, right?

Actually, the research seems to imply that Twitter is not good for **teaching** morality and that someone brought up on 140 character or less communication may have some deficiencies. So when raising children, remember to talk to them sometimes, not just Tweet at them.

Do I need to go into a rant about the poor quality of most science reporting now or can I get away with something under 140 characters, like "Are they kidding?"

Roadrunner updates

I warned in [The Roadrunner Rip-off](#) that Time Warner was running the risk of provoking government regulation by instituting completely unnecessary use caps on consumers. Some evidence begins to emerge to support that: [New York Representative Goes After Time Warner's Metered Broadband](#) (Thanks to the hard Twttr work of [Susan Beebe](#) for bringing that to my attention). The rep in question is Eric Massa.

Now we have New York Senator Charles Schumer jumping on the anti-TW bandwagon (see [Sen. Schumer to Get Involved in Bandwidth Battle?](#) - again noticed in Susan Beebe's Twitter stream!). While Senator Schumer does not appear to have promised anything, he is a powerful man and TW would be foolish not to take notice.

At the time, I wrote about TW's plan, I wasn't even thinking of individual reps grand standing for attention (or responding to constituent concerns, if you prefer). I was thinking that Internet service has become a utility, like the phone or electricity. New York state regulates utilities heavily. This alone indicates a willingness to put a lid on companies like Time Warner that they should have considered before moving toward instituting caps.

A very smart comment at TechDirt ([Law To Ban Broadband Caps Moves Forward](#)) points out that, rather than regulating caps away, it would be better to improve competition so that companies like TW would think twice before handing their competitors issues to use against them. And if politicians were that smart, cable executives might be too!

Update

You gotta love this: [Time Warner Cable tells FCC to shut up about net neutrality](#). Apparently they're feeling a little heat and rather than respond to customer rage by playing nicer, they've

brought out the lawyers.Â The bad news is, that approach sometimes works, though usually only in the short term.

Bigger update 4/6/2009 2:07 PM

Time Warner appears to have backed down. This was announced by Senator Schumer. I warned them not to get the politicians involved! See [Time Warner Cable cancels Internet tier pricing plan](#). I'd be doing a victory dance except I figure this just means an across the board rate hike will be hitting any minute. Oh well. You win some, you lose some. The good guys won this one. Thanks to [Ceejayoz](#) of the fabulous Democrat & Chronicle IT department for getting this up on Twitter so fast.

Facebook Bad, too

Somewhat better reporting here from Jeremy Hsu at LiveScience.com about the correlation between Facebook use, reduced study times and reduced grades among college students. I say this one is better because the article ([Facebook Users Get Worse Grades in College](#)) points out that correlation is not causation, meaning in this case that no one is claiming that Facebook use is what causes the students who use it to get lower grades.

What no one covering this study seems to have noticed is that the "lower" grades of Facebook users averaged between 3.0 and 3.5. Those are passing grades. The high end of that range is roughly a B+. That's not exactly terrible. So maybe Facebook isn't as evil as Twitter after all. Of course, I use both of them so I guess I'm doomed to both immorality and passing but unspectacular grades.

Here's Hoping I'm Wrong

News leaked this week ([Rochester: Bauer confirms for-pay website 'option'](#)) that the newspaper I used to work for, the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle is soon to launch a pay web site with premium multimedia content. I still know quite a few very good people at the D&C and, for their sakes, I hope this works out well for the paper.

Realistically, though, I think it's about 5 years and a lot of layoffs too late. Pay-walls rarely work. In those instances when they do (The Wall Street Journal is the only one I can think of offhand) the product as a whole has a reputation for high quality niche content that attracts a wide audience with a fair amount of disposable income.

That doesn't describe the D&C. Sorry folks but it really doesn't. Even if the paper once had a rep for exceptional content (and those of us who remember the afternoon Times Union might dispute even that), what's the niche? Rochester? Sorry but there are weekly papers in most of the suburbs and several TV stations covering the same area. It's not "nichy" enough. Besides, the layoffs I mentioned above have likely gutted the ability to not only keep it up but add enough value to a pay site to attract more than a few die-hard D&C fans.

For a hint of the long-term prospects of walled off online newspaper content, see [Teens Love Aggregation and 'Free', Newspaper Study Finds](#).

This is one time where I wish I had something more positive to say than, "Good luck with that!"