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In Akron last week, JuggleNuts coded 250 death certificates in a single day. "A new record," he said. In Bakersfield, jcdoss "(j)ust bit into a rotten apple... almost barfed." Seconds later and half a world away, sauj in Auckland, New Zealand, shared a moment that was, he said, "Beautiful: the early morning train, witnessing the gentle pink blushes or the sun reflected on the wind-caressed waves of the Orakei basin."

Random musings, mundane updates, boredom-fuelled brain farts, the rare poetic outburst – all constant fare on Twitter, the online social-networking (think: Facebook) world's fascination of the moment.

Until very recently, Twitter could have been regarded as little more than that: an always-on inanity machine, indulging spontaneous tedium. In the past two months, though, those narrow parameters have broadened considerably.

In April, an American student in Egypt used Twitter to send a warning and a plea – "tweeting," as it's known – through his cellphone: "Arrested." The journalism grad, James Karl Buck, had been rounded up by police during an anti-government protest; his live Twitter feed rallied the forces necessary – friends, family, and eventually, the U.S. government – to get him out.

Then, last month, Twitter's coming-out party: the magnitude-7.9 earthquake in Chengdu that buried thousands. Twitter users offered the first on-scene accounts. "Slight ly dizzy after being shaken around by the Chengdu earthquake for several hours now," tweeted one user, Casperodj.

Suddenly, Twitter's triviality was no longer its most notable feature. "I saw three people in Chengdou giving reports on the ground long before traditional media could even get close," said Fons Tuinstra, a media consultant in Shanghai and a fellow at the U.S. media nonprofit organization the Poynter Institute. "On that first day, it was a very important tool – a great example of how it could work."

A little over a year into its life, Twitter appears to be reaching its tipping point – the threshold where mindless pastime ends and social relevance begins.

"A year ago, it was a weird little toy," says Jason Pontin, editor-in-chief of *Technology Review*, a publication owned by M.I.T. "Now, its potential seems significantly greater than that."

How much greater? That's open for debate. ("One of the reasons it's not fully mature yet is that it keeps breaking," says Pontin, a nod to the service's iffy architecture).

But if you start to think of Twitter as the embodiment of the original idealism surrounding the Internet itself – all of us part of a real-time, unmediated, globe-spanning conversation, with everyone a personal 24-hour news service – then the possibilities seem vast indeed.

But slow down a moment. The weird little toy is still very much at play, and with tweets like this one, from femmedelacreme, still being the norm, overblown idealism is kept well in check: "I am really craving shavings of parmesan cheese. Plain. Such oddness."

Either way, owing in no small part to cataclysmic disaster, Twitter's entry to the world of mainstream Web use is cranking up: Since February, according to Compete, a U.S. firm that monitors online traffic, Twitter users have soared from just over 600,000 to more than 1.2 million; a year ago, it hovered under 200,000 (Toronto ranks in the top 20 with about 3,300).

As is often the case in the ongoing hunt for Web 2.0's killer apps, growth means money: A reported \$15 million U.S. in first-round financing last week for its founders at Obvious, a San Francisco software company. (Obvious has not confirmed this)

IT WORKS LIKE THIS: Sign up for Twitter. Flounder in the din of constant random "tweets." Right yourself. Find other Twitterers to "follow." Get ready for every mini-update – Twitter limits posts to 140 characters; the accepted term is "micro-blogging" – to land instantly in your

personal Twitterfeed so that you, too, can share in the epiphanies of such users as femmedelacreme.

The enforced brevity seemed also to enforce triviality.

"The great thing about Twitter is that you can only do one thing with it," says Fuinstra. "That's also the disadvantage." But recent events seem to suggest otherwise – a notion that Amber MacArthur shares.

A Toronto-based Web strategist and tech journalist, she is one of Twitter's most-followed members, with 11,608 followers – almost triple the number she had in March. (Robert Scoble, a U.S.-based tech blogger, is said to be the biggest with more than 25,000.)

"I think it's a new kind of social networking based on conversations vs. connections," says MacArthur, via an online chat. "It's just the beginning of powerful new social networks that will change the way we communicate."

By "connections," MacArthur is taking direct aim at Facebook, one of social networking's juggernauts. Users post a profile page, usually with some interests, education and career information (more often than not, drunken party photos factor in). They then link their profiles to dozens, if not hundreds, of "friends" doing the same thing.

For the past two years or so, Facebook has been social networking's how-to model: It exploded to just over 100 million users worldwide in January, from under 20 million in 2006. Facebook's valuation is pegged over \$1 billion U.S.

Needless to say, Twitter's a little behind. But then, not so long ago, a social networking site called Friendster ruled the roost, only to be decimated by MySpace.

"Last summer, everyone was talking about Facebook," says social-networking guru Sebastien Provencher, the head of business development at Montreal-based Web developer Praized. "By fall, we already had the sense that Facebook was starting to fade."

According to comScore, a Web-metric monitor, Facebook use dropped 2 per cent in the U.S. from December to January this year. Whether momentary "Facebook fatigue" or the first of a thousand cuts remains to be seen. Tuinstra points out, "Web users are a fickle lot."

TWITTER IS A SEDUCTIVE new frontier. On a typical home page, the interface is blandly functional: Tweets appear as text only, often linking to points of interest.

But in user-developed applications such as Twittervision.com, the scope and immediacy of the project comes to bear: A Twitterer in Baltimore, Dave Troy, has meshed Twitter's public timeline – no filters, no followers, just random tweets – with a Google map of the world.

Word balloons leap from nation to nation, conveying tweets as they happen, for five seconds, before vanishing and moving on to the next. The result is a sort of globe-spanning catch-all of random babble so dull, it's riveting.

"It's a little like happy hour in a bar," Provencher says. "You can listen to the conversations, and join the ones you like."

Twitter's name suggests one of its weaknesses: separating the content from the noise.

"You have to develop tools to help you focus a bit," Tuinstra says. "You only have one life."

Plus, you don't want to spend too much of it doing what plenty of Twitter users do: Waiting for the site to come back online during one of its increasingly frequent outages.

Pioneers of the site are more likely to be patient, says *Technology Review's* Pontin; the masses – what Twitter needs to build a viable business – less so. "I don't know how attracted I would be to something that keeps breaking." A common page on Twitter has an illustration of red birds hoisting a whale from the ocean with nets. "Too many tweets!" it reads. "Please wait a moment and try again."

"It was never meant to do this," Pontin says. "It was just built as a fun thing to do."

That's another thing about Twitter. As with many of its social-networking predecessors, with growing popularity, there's the sense that the fun's all but over: Born as organic social connectors, many quickly endured rapid corporate incursions. After being bought by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., MySpace clogged with ads, not to mention market researchers hungry for its youth-heavy population.

Ditto Second Life, a clunky, crash-prone online universe where users lead their avatars through simulated versions of their real-world lives (obvious advantages: avatars could fly and were immortal).

Once Second Life topped a million users, the landscape became cluttered with retailers: a Reebok store here, an American Apparel there. Lawlessness abided: A group calling itself the Second Life Liberation Army vapourized them with nuclear bombs.

Already on Twitter, media properties such as MSNBC and *The New York Times* have planted stakes. The British prime minister's residence, 10 Downing Street, has a feed. So do Stephen Colbert and Barack Obama.

Colonization of this sort can temper what Provencher calls Twitter's "ambient intimacy" – the lone voices in the wilderness, piping up just to be heard.

Pontin would be loath to see that happen. "You can say anything you want on Twitter – so long as it's not very deep and not very long," he says. "In a way, the banality is its great strength: There's something mesmerizing and comforting about seeing the most banal thoughts of the people you're interested in."

Finally, though, delivering those thoughts – or any other – are likely not to be Twitter's domain more than anyone else's.

"It's not about a specific site – it's evolution," Provencher says. "Really, it's the story of the ongoing democratization of the medium. And in the end, the conversation is all that matters."