

The tweet hereafter

A new documentary about Twitter could change the film industry forever, says Kate Bussmann

Midway through my interview with Siok Siok Tan, the woman behind the first film about Twitter, she accurately predicts my next question. "You're going to ask me, 'Are you crazy?' The answer is, yes," she says, laughing.

That is exactly what I was thinking. Not because she conceived *Twittamentary* as a quest to define what the social-networking site means to its wildly disparate 100m regular users. Instead, we were discussing the generous, if not foolhardy, way she has been distributing the film: anyone who wants to set up a community screening can do so, free of charge. "It sounds immature, but I made the film out of curiosity," she explains.

A Singaporean documentary-maker, she had the idea for the film in early 2009. "Back then, Twitter was just entering the mainstream. What I found amusing was that it was difficult for people who were on there to explain it to people who were not. Even now, there's still the perception that it's not serious, that it's full of people talking about what they had for lunch. But that wasn't my experience."

Tan got her first taste of the power of Twitter when, after making a film about the Beijing Olympics, she realised that the majority of the publicity had come via contacts on the site. With *Twittamentary*, her experience has been repeated. A case in point: I first heard about the project not through anything as old-fashioned as a press release, but while combing the site when researching my book *A Twitter Year: 365 Days in 140 Characters*. When I approached Tan about it (in a tweet, of course), I discovered that one of her friends had just tweeted her a picture of the book jacket.

At the outset, she decided the film should mirror the values of the open culture Twitter celebrates. What that meant in practice was that every aspect of the production was crowd-sourced through contacts made on the site. "We didn't have a budget, just travelling costs. Almost everything was done free of charge by people on Twitter who said, 'We like the idea and we'd love to help you.' Soon after we announced the project, we received about 100 leads for stories through Twitter. A New York-based photographer and artist named Geo Geller

offered to come with me across the country and shoot it. An audio engineer in LA volunteered to do the sound. The titles were done by another friend on the site.

"There were a couple of places where we paid for accommodation, but the people who picked us up from airports and ferried us around were people I got to know on Twitter and later met in real life. People were very generous. The back story of how the film is made shows you how Twitter works, how it helps you find stories and solve problems. We used Twitter to make a film about Twitter."

Filmed primarily on a three-week road trip across America, *Twittamentary* tells the stories of people whose lives have been affected by the site. In New York, Tan meets Janis Krums (@jkrums), who tweeted the first picture of the plane that landed in the Hudson River. In Chicago, she finds AnnMarie Walsh (@Pads Chicago), a homeless woman who used Twitter on library computers and, in detailing the difficulties of her daily life, made connections that gave her the emotional and practical support that would eventually get her off the streets. Outside Las Vegas, Mika Tan (@mika_tan), a porn star and semi-retired legal prostitute with 38,000 followers, cheerily details the discounts to law enforcement and the military she offers through her Twitter feed.

The film will form part of the launch of the Life Online gallery at the National Media Museum, in Bradford, on March 30. Tan plans to make it available to buy on iTunes soon after, so it may yet turn a profit, although the free community screenings have, in some cases, led to traditional ways of making money — one highly publicised viewing in Tel Aviv in December prompted an Israeli television station to request a licensing deal. For Tan, the film has been an experiment in a new way of film-making that takes its cues from the tech community, rather than the film industry. She's already planning version 2.0 — in June, she will debut a website featuring more Twitter-related stories from around the world.

"I want the film to be ever-evolving, rather than having a fixed beginning or end," she says. "I don't really expect anything from it, except to learn something — which is another way of saying I'm crazy." □

Twittamentary screens as part of Social Media Week on February 17; see media140.com/twittamentary

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