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EVERYDAY TWEETLE: *A look at some of Santa Barbara's Twitter users*

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When the Jesusita Fire was burning and some 30,000 Santa Barbara residents were evacuated earlier this month, for some, the most precious commodity was information.

While some residents relied on traditional media, others were glued to their computers and mobile devices. And local users of Twitter, from everyday residents to fire agencies to the local American Red Cross, kicked into high gear with a flurry of real-time updates on the social messaging site.

In 140 characters or less, they sent eyewitness reports of the fire's spread, information about mandatory evacuation zones, offers of help to evacuees, links to photos and more.

It was clear from that experience that "Twitter has come full force into Santa Barbara County," said Kristiana Kocis, 25, who sent updates or "tweets" on her BlackBerry throughout the fire for the Red Cross. (Twitter address: @sbredcross).

For those unfamiliar with it, Twitter allows people to post and receive text updates via the Web, mobile devices or text messages. A user subscribes to other people's accounts by clicking on a link to "follow" them at twitter.com and streams of messages from those people appear on their chosen device.

With a huge boost in users after recent media coverage of celebrity tweeters, like Oprah and Ashton Kutcher, Twitter has become one of the fastest growing social utilities on the Internet. According to U.S. comScore Media Metrix, a marketing research company, the site had at least 17 million U.S. visitors last month.

In spite of its growth, Twitter lags behind social networking sites Facebook and MySpace, which had about four times as many U.S. visitors in the same time period. A Nielsen study showed twitter.com has a mere 40 percent

retention rate. And some folks can't imagine subjecting themselves to a constant barrage of tweets - particularly if they're the mundane, play-by-play details of a Twitterer's life (for example, "Skipping out to the laundromat").

Still, while venturing into the Twitterverse, one sees Santa Barbarans represented in almost every conceivable way, from promoting businesses and sharing Web links to keeping up with friends and cultivating hobbies. The total number of local Twitter users isn't readily available (not all users identify themselves by geographical location).

Those who already have blogs or use the Internet for their businesses are probably some of the most natural adopters of Twitter. With nearly 35,000 followers, Daryl Cagle, a cartoonist for msnbc.com, has one of the largest followings among local Twitterers. The Santa Barbara resident (@dcagle) uses the social media to drive people to his cartoon blog, by posting links to recent features. (A recent post: "Funny cartoon about the reason babies cry at birth <http://tinyurl.com/ogfhvh>.")

Mike Elgan, 47, who blogs and writes about technology culture for Computer World and Datamation, has four separate Twitter accounts: One for his readers (@mike_elgan), one for news feeds he wants to read, one for a book he's developing and one for tweeting experiments.

"The funny thing about Twitter is it's really like a mini version of the Internet," said the Santa Barbara resident, who has nearly 12,000 followers. "It can be used for anything and everything."

He's used it not only to receive feedback on projects and to keep up with professional contacts, but also to keep in touch with family (his phone rings when his 26-year-old son tweets) and to track FedEx packages.

To a certain extent, Twitter can even be used to reduce or replace e-mail.



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Public speaking coach Lisa Braithwaite of Santa Barbara uses Twitter to network, promote her business, keep up with friends, as a kind of virtual water cooler and more. Some of her tweets are included above. "Of course, I have nothing against people in real life, but it's nice to have a way to stay connected when working from home," she said.

Tweets can be directed to a single user, made private and filtered with a click. "Twitter probably has fewer downsides than other types of forms of communication," said Mr. Elgan. With e-mail, "it's time-consuming and problematic spending a lot of time trying to manage spam."

And "the great thing about Twitter is messages are short, so you don't have to wade through pages of information that isn't of interest to you."

Lisa Braithwaite, a public speaking and corporate skills coach, likes the immediacy of Twitter. "When I say something on Twitter, several people might respond immediately," said the 44-year-old Santa

Barbara native (@LisaBraithwaite), who has a public speaking blog. "It's kind of like you're instant messaging with a lot of people all the time."

The professional benefits have been tangible: One-third of her mailing list, about 250 people, has come from Twitter; as well as invitations to appear on Internet radio shows, to be a guest blogger, and to participate in writing projects. She's been able to connect and maintain relationships not only with clients, but with her teenage nieces and friends who live far away.

And, Ms. Braithwaite admits, when using it just for fun, "Yes, I'm one of the people who tweets about food. Some

people think that's the worst, most horrible thing we can do."

But the vegetarian likes swapping ideas with other foodies. "I think you should use it however it works best for you," she said. "And if people don't like the things you're talking about, they can unfollow you."

Brick-and-mortar businesses, like the Canary Hotel (@Canary_Chirp), Blue Bee clothing (@BlueBee) and Silvergreens (@silvergreensb), also have picked up on the trend, plugging their specials and promotions to followers.

Cheryl and Michael Gardner, who just launched The Burger Bus last week, are using Twitter and Facebook to promote the whereabouts of their mobile burger stand (@TheBurgerBus). (Example: "We'll be at Tri-County Produce today! See you there!") Though they've used Facebook before, this is their "first foray" into tweeting, said Ms. Gardner, 34.

They were inspired by the wildly popular Kogi Korean barbecue taco truck in Los Angeles, which uses Twitter. "They have the ability to reach, like, 15,000 people at a time," said Ms. Gardner. Though The Burger Bus also posts updates on their Web site, theburgerbus.com, Twitter could come in handy if they need to change their location, she added.

Nonprofits like the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation (@napf), Catalyst for Thought (@CatalystSB), Vitamin Angels (@vitaminangels) and even the Santa Barbara Zoo (@SantaBarbaraZoo) have gotten into the act. (A post from the zoo: "watching the penguins swim oh so gracefully.")

The Jesusita Fire was the first time the American Red Cross of Santa Barbara used Twitter during a major emergency.

"We were telling people where our shelters were, how to get there, things they should start gathering if they were on standby for evacuation," said Ms. Kocis, the nonprofit's major gifts officer, who spearheaded its social media program. She tweeted close to 200 posts throughout the incident. "People were able to get information literally around the clock," she said.

Now that the fire is over, Ms. Kocis is continuing to tweet for the Red Cross. In a down economy, "people are being much more selective in what charities they support," she said. She feels Twitter delivers donors a continuous, immediate update of how their money is being spent. "It creates a level of

transparency that might not have been as prominent."

Likewise, area politicians, such as Santa Barbara City Council members Das Williams (@daswilliams) and Helene Schneider (@HeleneforMayor) and State Sen. Tony Strickland, R-Thousand Oaks (@TonyStrickland), keep up with their constituents by tweeting and, much like President Obama, have used Twitter and other social networking sites as part of their campaigns.

Local colleges have begun building a presence on Twitter, Facebook and other sites. Twitter-savvy schools include Westmont College (@WestmontNews), Brooks Institute (@BrooksInstitute), Santa Barbara City College (@lurialibrary for the library) and Antioch University (@antiochsb).

UCSB has multiple Twitter accounts, such as those for Career Services (@ucsbcareer), the engineering department (@ucsbengineering) and college sports (@ucsbgauchos). And with more than 1,000 followers, @ucsbantabarbara, which is overseen by the school's alumni association, tweets about upcoming campus events, college advice, athletes of the week, and more. (Recent tweet: "Everything you need to know about Commencement 2009: [http://www.ia.ucsb.edu/comm ...](http://www.ia.ucsb.edu/comm...)")

Peter Epstein (@pepstein), 20, a senior at UCSB who's majoring in business economics, has noticed more people his age starting to use Twitter in the last month or two. "My generation seemed very tentative to use it for a while," he said. Before, Twitterers seemed to him "more like marketing and advertising people, tech engineers and stuff like that." (A Nielsen report in February showed the heaviest users - about 42 percent - were ages 35 to 49, followed next by ages 25 to 34, who made up about 20 percent.)

During the past quarter, Mr. Epstein tweeted about controversies being covered in his business ethics class, such as sweatshops and the environment. He said stirring up discussion among Twitterers helped him learn how to better argue different sides of the issues.

Once he graduates, Mr. Epstein said he plans to use Twitter in his job as a tech recruiter.

"There's a really big use for it. I hope my generation adopts it," he said. "It's a great source to open your eyes to other people, other professionals, other experts who are doing what you want to do when you get older."

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Santa Barbara's Twitterati

With more than a million followers, part-time Montecitan Oprah (@oprah), is the most famous Twitterer on the South Coast.

Here's a sampling of a few other locals hitting Twitter, along with their tweets:

- **John Cleese** (@JohnCleese): Monty Python comedian, podcaster (lives part-time in Santa Barbara, though currently in Europe)
"Weighing up minty plenitude against tongue-cavorting freshness"
- **Clayton C.J. Boyer** (@CJamz): Local Red Cross volunteer and former firefighter, who was tweeting continuously during the Jesusita Fire
"The County of Santa Barbara urges you to prepare for more evacuations and power outages. #jesusitafire"
- **Billy Goodnick** (@Gardenwiseguys): Landscape architect, host of TV show "Garden Wise Guys"
"Very exotic looking plant for the palette I'm working on... Echium wildpretii... <http://tinyurl.com/o82eae>"
- **Jean-Michel Cousteau** (@JMCousteau): Explorer, environmentalist, film producer, president of Ocean Futures Society
"Last week an international treaty banned 2 types of flame retardants (penta & octa), which you can learn about at <http://tinyurl.com/r8bdkp>"
- **Elizabeth O'Neal** (@littlebyteslife): Stay-at-home mom, genealogy blogger
"Trying to figure out how to have my kid's name read on PBS on her birthday. I searched their web site and found no clues. Anyone know?"
- **Graham Dryden** (@gdryden): International oil and gas finder and energy trader
"Just got the news that we are now able to sell Russian gas via the Baumgarten Pipeline system in Austria. Wow!"

Twitter Tips

Starting to use Twitter can be somewhat daunting for those unfamiliar with it. But "it's just like any other tool: It's how you use it and how well you use it," said Lisa Braithwaite, who co-founded Body Electric, a nonprofit to encourage women in sports.

The local public speaking coach was skeptical about the social messaging utility when she started tweeting a year ago. Now I can't imagine not using it, she said. For business, it's been great. For personal use, it's been great, and I find myself now sort of proselytizing about it to other entrepreneurs.

She found that using a desktop application, like Tweetdeck, makes it easier to manage the information flowing in from all the people she follows. She's able to sort her tweeps into different columns for high-priority contacts, such as clients and friends, professionals in her field, other interests and hobbies, and tweets directed just to her or in response to her.

And though she's following 2,600 people, like most users, I don't really follow all of them, she laughed. Ms. Braithwaite might read posts from 100 of those people regularly but doesn't try to keep up with every tweet, nor does she expect her nearly 3,000 followers to keep up with hers.

"The most important thing is to give value to people," she added. "Be helpful, answer questions and don't just take and take and expect it all to be about you." She also acknowledges it's not for everyone: "My husband thinks I'm a little crazy, in fact," she said with a chuckle.

Tech writer Mike Elgan, who was the editor of Windows Magazine and HP World, "back in the day when they had computer magazines," says a wider audience may be slow to adopt Twitter because they're creatures of habit and there's a learning curve.

The universal thing that people experience is they go into an empty room, said the Santa Barbara resident. It's like a cell phone where you haven't given your number to anyone. You have to engage people with your cell phone. You have to follow interesting people for Twitter to be interesting.

He recommends that new users add as many people to their account as they can stand and then start eliminating anything that's boring to them. One place to start exploring is twitterholic.com, which ranks Twitter users based on the number of followers they have - an indication they might have something interesting to say. Twitter directories, like wefollow.com and twellow.com, can also point to people with similar interests.

People should be constantly adding and deleting, he said. Over time, it gets better and better and better because you're always improving it.