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How Twitter could save your life

Inane chat about runny noses, or pandemic predictor?

By [Frances Cook](#) ^[1] Published 03 May 2013 9:52

Inane chat about runny noses, or pandemic predictor?

Back in 2010 AMC set up co-ordinated “zombie attacks” in major cities around the world to promote its zombie thriller series *The Walking Dead*. Gaggles of blood-dripping “walkers” invaded trains and lurched around landmarks like Big Ben and The Prado Museum.



Just one small scratch, or, worse, a desperate, flesh-eating bite, and you would become a zombie too – in the drama, of course.

AMC’s most popular programme now pulls in over 12 million viewers per episode and has nearly 1.5 million Twitter followers, each obsessed with the dramatic, but scarily plausible, scenario of a true life version of blockbuster films like *Outbreak*, *Contagion* or *28 Days later*.

But as Twitter continually proves itself to be such an adept viral tool, the sheer number of users – which is 500 million and counting – flocking to its pages could make it a hefty ally in the fight to contain such an outbreak. Twitter, it seems, may not only be the best place to send a meme like the walking dead ‘viral’, but also the perfect platform for stopping a virus dead

in its tracks.

Twitter users react to current events and tweets contain real-time information about their perspective and location. If Lori Grimes, for example, had been on Twitter, could word have spread faster than The Walking Dead's zombie outbreak? And could Contagion's MEV-1 virus have been prevented if Beth Emhoff had tweeted about her supposed cold symptoms?

These questions might read like science fiction, but Professor Simon Hay at the UK's University of Oxford believes there is a "revolution occurring" in the amount of public health data that is available through social media, particularly from Twitter.

While scientists have traditionally used mapping techniques to track outbreaks, it is just 4 per cent of infectious diseases that have been effectively mapped. New technology is required to improve results and Twitter could provide the answer.

In fact, Twitter has already provided geo-positioned information to inform scientists about public health. A study from the University of Iowa proved that content embedded in Twitter feeds relating to the H1N1 flu outbreak in 2009 allowed the tracking of "rapidly-evolving public sentiment" and "actual disease activity".

By using Twitter's streaming application programmer's interface (API), the study explored public sentiment from 29 April to 1 June 2009 by identifying 951,697 tweets out of 334,840,972 that matched specified search terms, such as flu, swine, influenza, H1N1 and illness.

The second phase selected 4,199,166 tweets – which conformed to certain guidelines, such as they had to be in English and originate from the US – from eight million influenza-related tweets that included relevant keywords sent between 1 October and 31 December 2009. The study found that these Twitter feeds actually predicted outbreaks one to two weeks in advance of traditional surveillance.

Scientists are currently struggling to map the current outbreak of the H7N9 avian influenza virus in China – which is considered by the World Health Organisation to be a "serious threat" (126 have been infected to date and 24 have died), despite it not spreading through people as yet – so why isn't Twitter's data stream being utilised?

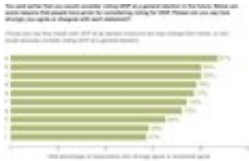
Could it be due to the lack of Twitter users in China? According to a programmer (@ooof) on the South China Morning Post blog, the number of live active Twitter users could be as little as 18,000. If this number was more, would scientists have been better able to predict this very real threat to our society's health?

As an online flu detector exists in the UK, which has been created by a team at the University of Bristol through identifying keywords from Twitter's geo-located content, then couldn't similar programs be used to identify and predict other, more serious, infections?

Twitter has come a long way since it launched, when it attracted intense criticism from naysayers questioning why they would want to tweet inane information about an erupting spot or runny nose. But, in the battle against pandemic outbreaks, it is ironically these kinds of observations that could empower Twitter to become a sophisticated tool and actually be more than just a social lifesaver in the future.

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