

# A big, permanent retweet

—by Cecilia Kang

The Library of Congress' project to archive Twitter is a nod to the significance of the social networking site that gave voice to imprisoned journalists in Egypt and fueled a rallying cry for users to donate money for relief efforts in Haiti. It also will memorialize a mountain of information on the mundane, from burned breakfast bagels to delays on Metro's Red Line.

Internet scholars say those everyday recordings are useful to researchers who will comb through the 50 million messages—known as tweets—spouted each day to provide a snapshot of our culture, in real time.

"We've been seeing in the past decades the rise of new scholarly disciplines that look at social history... which pay attention to everyday people and their everyday lives," said Lee Rainey, director of the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project. "We find ourselves lucky to find the bones of people who are a couple thousand years old so that we can find out about nutrition habits, so I have every reason to suspect this kind of material will tell interesting stories of the state of our culture at this moment."

With 105 million users, Twitter has become the world's electronic town square where a message of 140 or fewer characters can exchange hands at lightning speed in what has become known as "Twitterverse".

The 4-year-old Silicon Valley startup became a symbol of free speech when it enabled Iranians to give and get unvarnished reports of the bloody post-election scene in Tehran. Celebri-

ties use it to connect with fans, as Oprah did in announcing her decision to step down as daytime talk show diva. Bravo's "Housewives of New York" play out their off-camera spats there. And politicians use it to promote bills or their races.

"This information provides detailed evidence about how technology-based social networks form and evolve over time," said Librarian of Congress James H. Billington. "Anyone who wants to understand how an ever-broadening public is using social media to engage in an ongoing debate regarding social and cultural issues will have need of this material."

The project is ambitious considering the volume of messages that go out each day. And the site is exploding in popularity—300,000 new users join every day, about 40 percent of whom are constantly connected to Twitter through their cell phones. The site is as much about marketing as it is about socializing, where companies promote products, journalists circulate their stories, and musicians hawk digital downloads of their songs.

Which begs the question: How does one sort through the heaps of tweets to find something relevant to research?

That's easy, said Ben Shneiderman, professor of computer science at the University of Maryland, because of powerful filtering tools that are able to slice through databases and enable users to "select the wheat from the chaff."

"I'm not troubled at all about the flood of data, and the technology is only going to get better," Shneiderman said. "This is a remarkable resource that for the first time allows us to grasp the mood of the culture minute by minute."

But the Library of Congress' project is also a reminder that information put out on the public platform is a permanent record, according to Brock Meeks of the Center for Democracy and Technology, a public interest group.

"People think of being online as being in an alternate universe, but what you say online doesn't go away," he said.

