

News at the Speed of Twitter

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At 1:07 yesterday one of my senior staff Developers, Chris Tierney, came to my office door asking if I knew anyone at Millard South High School. He said there had been shots fired there but he didn't have any details. We later learned that in a horrific incident a troubled young man shot both the principle and vice-principle of that school. He then fled and took his own life a short time later. The principle survived but the vice-principle tragically passed away shortly thereafter. Before I comment further I want to say sincerely that my thoughts and prayers are with the parents and teachers at Millard South as well as the families of these two administrators and even with the family of this young man.

Now I want to say something about these events as they transpired and (especially) how I came to learn the details. I have never been more shockingly aware of how technology has changed our world than I was yesterday. I said that Chris informed me at 1:07. What I did not tell you is that the shots were fired at 1:05. While the local news crews were rushing to the scene, students with cell phones were furiously tweeting and texting. This new grapevine spiders its way across multiple devices and platforms in a lightning fast nervous system that blurs the difference between news and real time events.

Shortly after Chris, others began gathering to watch the TV that is in my office. Video editor Erin Oesterberg contributed to our conversation by telling us it was a disgruntled student (that was new information). Others added additional details and Chris learned details from a student inside the school (a child of a friend of his). By 1:12, a mere 5 minutes after we heard the initial news, we knew the student and we knew the names of the principle and the vice principle. We knew that the student had fled the building and had likely taken his life. In short we had virtually all the details of this incident within 5 minutes of its occurrence. Meanwhile the local news was still trying to interview arriving parents and policemen on the scene.

Some Conclusions

I wonder if it's even possible to draw conclusions from this, but perhaps I can draw some general observations. First, processing of information on a personal level can no longer be done at a measured pace. When something important happens, if you are nearby you are de facto drawn into the story. You almost become a part of the scene experiencing it along with the "folks on the ground". Secondly, there is no adequate filter any more. Information comes too fast. It leap frogs over traditional filters like newspapers and even web sites and ends up directly on my desktop or phone or I-pad or whatever. Overall I take this as a good thing. But it does mean I have to make more judgments about information veracity.

Finally, TV is increasingly just *one voice* among many choices. It's old advantage of being where you saw the video footage is gone as well. I would wager that 30 percent of the students at Millard South had cameras capable of capturing video and uploading it to Youtube. Along with tweets (which spread like wildfire) and texts these snippets are disseminated widely and reach platforms that traditional TV can't touch effectively.