



# “following” the stars

In 2009 the most popular word in the English language was Twitter. This online space has seen marriage proposals, scandals and ‘status updates’ at the altar, but by far the most exciting thing to hit Tweepie-world was the advent of the celebrities. As movie stars, film-makers, opinion-makers and news people took their loves, lives and peevs online, there was an automatic creation of the ‘twitterazzi’. The web crawlers – cyber voyeurs – have made famous people their ‘friends’, innocent people infamous, nobodies into celebrities and the offline media into silent, hapless observers. SITANSHI TALATI-PARIKH tweet talks, to see what kind of bird brings the top movie stars and opinion-makers out to play

ILLUSTRATIONS BY FARZANA COOPER

## From exclusive scoops and candid camera to Twitter

Voyeurism is one of the world’s deep failings. We can’t help wanting to know what’s happening in someone else’s life. The desire to live vicariously keeps the tabloids, gossip columns and celebrity buzz alive – people have made a living (or killing) out of it. There was a time when celebrity journalists were at a premium – privy to the most private boudoirs and most exclusive soirées. With the advent of television, the paparazzi took an ugly, invasive turn, with visuals of celebs being sold for top dollar, candid cameras trailing them at every step – crawling into their homes, even into their bathing suits. There have been fistfights and media bashing – for simply not knowing where to draw the line.

“We are, after all, a society of Peeping Toms. Twitter is not for an asocial person. You have to be a milder version of an exhibitionist to be on Twitter.”  
– Rangita Nandy

Then, the Internet changed everything. Vicious MMSes, scandalous sex tapes and politically incorrect tweets aside, celebrities have found a way to access a world of fans (and potential fans) hailing from all nationalities, without having to actually meet them face-to-face. After all, one person’s voyeur is another person’s fan. The anonymity of the Web appeals to the celebrity that is willing to stay connected to the point of involving strangers in their lives: voicing their opinions, sharing tidbits about their day, their frustrations and joys, and responding to (often inane) questions. While Rangita Nandy (creative director of Prithvi Nandy Communications) may believe that, “It (Twitter.com) is a new fad and people are over-assessing it,” it is an undeniable fact that celebrities are

ruling roost over cyber world and we have no choice but to ‘follow’ them.

## Mysterious inaccessibility or real charm?

Deepika Padukone may cling onto the good old-fashioned sense of celebrity mystery and power couple Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor may think that anyone with a life would not be on Twitter, but others are quickly finding that accessibility is more important today than it ever was. Early last year, when I first met actor Imran Khan, he remained easily accessible only to those fans that populated his unofficial fan site. Recently, he decided to dive into the vast anonymity of Twitter. We know when he’s awake, if he’s shooting or just playing X-box. He admits candidly, “A huge part of my appeal is my accessibility. I’m the universal ‘bro’ – their college buddy who made it big. It’s different from a star.” He continues with a deeper thought, “My mom couldn’t bear the thought of anyone not liking me. She brought me up in a certain way to ensure that – and I go out of my way to be nice to people to ensure that people will like me. A lot of people feel that mystery increases star appeal – and in a certain sense it does. I try and find a balance.”

Shaima, Leha and Saan, the 20-something-year-old creators of Imran Khan’s unofficial fan site, voice a definitive opinion, “If it’s a nice person, it makes him more attractive, because then fans are not just attracted to a picture or a character but to the real person. In this day and age, if any public figure chooses to remain mysterious, it doesn’t give out a good vibe.” Abhishek Bachchan would easily agree. He believes that “more is better”: “I think that age is gone where mystery sells – today if you are a bit of an enigma you are almost

“My appeal lies in my accessibility.”  
– Imran Khan

forgotten. Your audience wants to know you, your thoughts, your feelings and they want an interactive relationship – more tactile and approachable – with their actors; not just one of watching them on the big screen.”

Film critic and *CNN-IBN* entertainment editor Rajeev Masand, who prefers his global film-loving community on Twitter to the “boring incestuousness” of Facebook, seconds the thought: “It is a competitive age – there is a strong need to be quick rather than accurate with the news. It is important for a celeb to stay connected, and to put out information, correct information.”

## The rules of interaction have changed

Priyanka Chopra is the queen bee of social presence: she has the most powerful social outreach programme, born initially out of “curiosity and interest” and later powered by Team Priyanka (spearheaded by Natasha Pal, chief operating officer, Vitcom Consulting). Think an active fan base of over 1,50,000 fans which is growing





## Desi Tweeters (Follow the Verve references online...)

**Abhishek Bachchan** Tweets vary from merely prolific (around the time of the movie release) to interesting and erudite, sometimes including the 'mrs' in his personal anecdotes. Twitter: @juniorbachchan Twitter followers: 22,263 Tweets: 1620.

**Amitabh Bachchan** On his blog, he truly connects with his 'extended family' and talks to them, even replies to them on a regular basis. It's only when the media aggravates him that he starts a bit of a rant online. Blog: <http://bigb.bigadda.com/>

**Gul Panag** Ranking among the top tweeters of India, she was asked to be the official tweeter for Delhi Wills Lifestyle Fashion Week. Her views on everything sometimes get lost in the info about her personal life. Twitter: @gulpanag Twitter followers: 32,439 Tweets: 10,307; Website: [www.gulpanag.net](http://www.gulpanag.net)

**Imran Khan** It's his deadpan replies to some of the quack questions he gets (on Twitter) that are really the icing. To really get who he is, read his weekly column in *Hindustan Times*. Twitter: @Imrankhan Twitter followers: 30,072 Tweets: 1764; Unofficial fan site [www.imran-khan.org](http://www.imran-khan.org)

**Karan Johar** His Koffee-time brilliance is missing. No great insights – rather one begins to feel it's a task he's keeping up, wishing tweeples good morning and good night, with info about missed flights and problems/ stress while shooting. Twitter: @kjohar25 Twitter followers: 46,992 Tweets: 418.

**Neil Nitin Mukesh** Engages with his activities and polite replies to his fans. Twitter: @NeilNMukesh Twitter followers: 3,782 Tweets: 287.

**Pritish Nandy** He has serious views on everything – and right after reading his seven daily papers, there will be a barrage of tweets online. He regularly links his weekly column to his tweets with a 'try this' – so you can't miss it. Twitter: @PritishNandy Twitter followers: 12,459 Tweets: 11,658.

**Priyanka Chopra** Always her vivacious self, with a powerful branding machine behind her and an ever-growing fan base, it is unlikely that she will stop tweeting any time soon. Facebook; Orkut; YouTube; Official website: [www.iampriyankachopra.com/](http://www.iampriyankachopra.com/); Twitter: @priyankachopra Twitter followers: 102,640 Tweets: 1182.

**Rajdeep Sardesai** Twitter: @sardesairajdeep Twitter followers: 19,323 Tweets: 1086; and **Barkha Dutt** Twitter @bdutt Twitter followers: 39,580 Tweets: 4165. Are as newsy as you'd expect. It's easier than watching TV.

**Rajeev Masand** He has managed to engage an audience of film-lovers. Watch out for his never-easy quizzes, updates on his interviews and most importantly, film preview reviews. Twitter: @RajeevMasand Twitter followers: 13,729 Tweets: 4699.

**Rangita Nandy** Twitter's her "online diary" and the space is "a world adda for gossip and fun". Twitter: @RangitaNandy Twitter followers: 1767 Tweets: 2059.

**Shahid Kapoor** A new advent on Twitter, sneakily close to his film release (*Chance Pe Dance*). The news leak of Genelia being his first Twitter mate reeks of the true purpose behind getting online. Twitter: @shahidkapoor Twitter followers: 21,009 Tweets: 486.

**Shashi Tharoor** Claim to fame is the apparently incendiary tweet that sent cows racing. After which we only hear of his comings and goings. Twitter: @ShashiTharoor Twitter followers: 525,298 Tweets: 2488.

**Sonam Kapoor** Can be soulful and fun. Never opinionated, more musings. Check out the bravely untouched pictures of her that she uploads – always managing to look ravishing. Facebook; Twitter: @sonamakapoor Twitter followers: 33,916 Tweets: 1014.

**Sitanshi Talati-Parikh:** @sitanshi; **Verve Magazine:** @vervemagazine (Listing in alphabetical order. Data current at the time of printing.)

by the day. She posts pictures of herself while chatting, of the view from her room and scenes from her travels. "These kind of platforms do increase accessibility, but you have to put it into the context of how technology and social media networking have redefined relationships, including that of a personality and his/her audience," she says.

### Private people, public lives

Most of these movie stars are not naturally the kind of people who would get attracted to social networking tools. Admits Chopra: "It's actually quite strange! I am a very private person and to be honest I did find it a bit difficult initially to open up." So one wonders, what makes these people take time out of their busy schedule and bare their

**"Celebs take to criticism from fans better than from critics. After all, you are doing it for them, you have to lump it!"**  
– Rajeev Masand

lives – many times a day – to anonymous people online? Of course, at the most basic level lies a desire to directly reach out to global fans, whom they may not have been able to connect to otherwise. Says Chopra, "I now actually know the names and faces of so many people who have reached out to me on these platforms. Many of them are regularly in touch with their viewpoints, questions and sometimes just lovely words of encouragement."

Or in another exchange, Pritish Nandy and daughter Rangita often discuss their personal lives on Twitter – with public tweets running back and forth: about feeding the dog, coming home, catching a flight, etc. Rangita doesn't find it invasive: "We choose how much personal space we want to share online. It is about being yourself, not always having to put opinions out there.

We are, after all, a society of Peeping Toms. Twitter is not for an asocial person. If you can barely converse with the person sitting opposite you, then you can't say anything on Twitter. You have to be a milder version of an exhibitionist to be on Twitter."

Pritish Nandy clarifies, "I am cautious about what I say on Twitter, more for reasons of security than privacy I guess. After all, when we go on a social networking site we know what to expect. There will be serious intrusions: the odd crackpot who comes at you with a slingshot, hysterical ideologues jumping out of the screen at you. There will be a whole bunch of humourless people taking offence to what you say. But that's all pretty much compensated for by the warmth and friendship of thousands of genuine tweeters having a great time out there."

Sonam Kapoor gamely accepts it as a professional hazard: "I understand that in my profession privacy is a rare commodity and I am comfortable with these new mediums of interactivity. If Mr. Bachchan, who is reclusive, can do this, then I guess anyone can!" It actually seems to be a case in point that Amitabh Bachchan was one of the first to generate a buzz with his online presence. Often eliciting doubts about whether he is actually the blogger, die-hard fans continue to believe that the Big B is blogging daily into the wee hours of the night, from whichever part of the world he may be in. He has an avid fan base called the 'extended family' – to whom he directs his thoughts, angst, stress and pleasure.

The anonymity of the online space creates a great deal of confusion about whether the online tweeter is the real star or not on Twitter. A flurry of

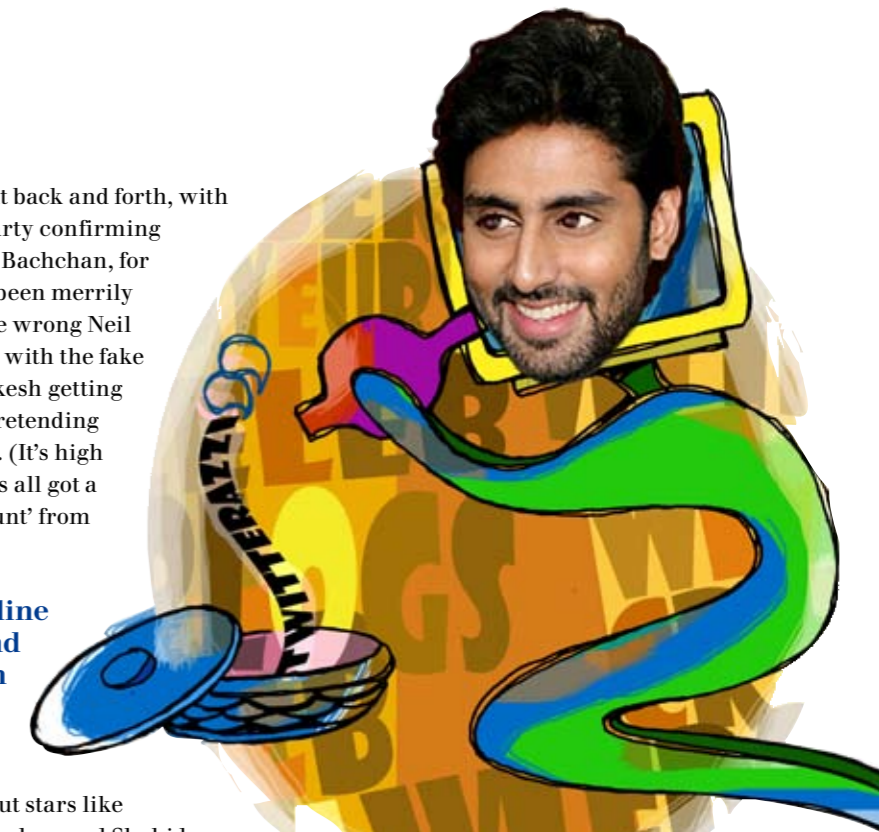
**"Film stars can get a huge and instant fan base on Twitter, but can they sustain an interesting dialogue?"**  
– Pritish Nandy

tweets are sent back and forth, with an external party confirming that Abhishek Bachchan, for instance, has been merrily tweeting to the wrong Neil Nitin Mukesh, with the fake Neil Nitin Mukesh getting a kick out of pretending to be the actor. (It's high time the celebs all got a 'verified account' from Twitter.)

### Greater online buzz around a movie: an agenda?

As we begin to wonder about stars like Abhishek Bachchan and Shahid Kapoor taking time out to get online on Twitter suspiciously around the time of a big movie release (*Paa*, *Chance Pe Dance* respectively), Bachchan apparently felt the online tug from his director-friends Tarun Mansukhani and Rohan Sippy. He suggests that, "people do end up promoting a lot of their work over there and that's fine – but that should not be the only reason you are on Twitter. It is nice to share your life with the audience, too!" While Sonam Kapoor insists that there is "no larger plan" to her online presence, we cannot miss the fact that during the good-natured online banter between Imran Khan and (Sonam) Kapoor they are unconsciously recreating the characters of their upcoming film *I Hate Luv Stories*, which they happen to be shooting for at the time. Inadvertently, a buzz is created surrounding their films – and what the directors and producers hope will lead to more eyeballs on the first weekend. Not surprisingly, a fan recently tweeted to Khan, 'I'm excited to watch *IHLS* becoz you give us day to day updates... I feel somewhere I am also connected with it.'

Rajeev Masand may not be off the mark when he suggests that a larger weekend turnout for the movie *Wake Up Sid* was because of Karan Johar's (and Konkana Sen Sharma's) tweets.



**"If you are a bit of an enigma, you are almost forgotten."**  
– Abhishek Bachchan

What would have happened had Ranbir Kapoor found the time or the inclination to twitter talk?

Khan, on the other hand, thinks it's debatable, pointing out that Twitter can actually damage collections from the first day with the spiralling effect of a bad review.

### I won't promote myself online, someone else will

Twitter can easily become polluted as a space for blatant promotions and in-your-face marketing. Rangita Nandy battles with using the domain as an area to promote the films she is producing. "The noise on Twitter is revolting people. We need to clear the clutter. Marketing should be done intelligently." Actors like Priyanka Chopra, Imran Khan and Abhishek Bachchan have kept the demarcation pretty clear, with a separate handle for their personal tweets (managed by themselves via their mobiles), and a promotional fan handle for their marketing tweets (managed by their staff or fans).

## Podium to direct public opinion

Speaking directly to this young global audience is also a perfect platform to generate public opinion or voice their own on important issues. Like voting, for instance. Chopra tweeted a picture of herself and her brother showing their voting mark, while Khan (who also lends his voice to being environment-friendly) and Sonam Kapoor urged

**“I understand that in my profession privacy is a rare commodity.”**  
– Sonam Kapoor

the youth to get out and do so. Newscasters like Rajdeep Sardesai and Barkha Dutt, opinion-makers like Pritish Nandy and political leaders like Shashi Tharoor inform us about their opinions (some more strongly than the others) and thoughts on a daily basis. Gul Panag, considering herself “more of an opinion-maker than a celebrity”, believes her credibility and integrity comes from not mincing words – despite who may be ‘listening’.

Pritish Nandy believes that the dynamic online space is not just about interaction, but about sustained interaction, and prefers to watch to see whether these celeb tweeters will stick. “Film stars can get a huge and instant fan base on Twitter, true. But can they sustain an interesting dialogue? Currently I see only Abhishek Bachchan, Priyanka Chopra, Gul Panag, Riteish Deshmukh, Mallika Sherawat and Imran Khan reaching out to their fans through Twitter. Some are succeeding. Some are already getting boring.”

## The good, the bad, and the ugly...

An autograph is so 1950. A mobile photo is dependent on being at the right place at the right time. An online chat is a rarity. But being ‘followed’ by a star is the new mantra for young fans who throng Twitter-world. Lording it over their friends when they get a response, fans are incessantly demanding and movie stars are responding to their demands. It takes a lot of courage for celebrities – despite the fact that they are gathering brownie points and a huge online fan base – to engage an audience that can be as fickle as they are loyal.

Privy to some of the disturbing hate mail that Khan got after simply

requesting people to avoid air and noise pollution via firecrackers during Diwali, leads me to see how people misuse the platform to lash out with personal angst and impolite criticism. “The downside of accessibility is that you’re also open to abuse and negativity. It takes a lot to not snap and react,” says the young actor, who chooses to concentrate on the landslide of positive responses. “I do feel overwhelmed, that’s why I go off Twitter for a few days. There are weird people out there; people who feel that you owe them something – ‘why aren’t you replying to me?’ or pleas of ‘please follow me!’” Creators of Khan’s fan site agree that even on a moderated forum, the space is deeply invasive. “The weirdest one was a guy, spamming our mailbox everyday to pass the message that Khan was in great danger and that only he could save him!”

Personally-intrusive negativism aside (Celina Jaitley and Mallika Sherawat have had to fight off online pursuers); through this medium, work criticism (and praise) also finds its way easily to the eyes of actors. But maybe, as Masand suggests, the bitter pill is better digested when coming from a fan rather than a critic? “The celebs are happy to respond to the praise and the criticism – they take to criticism from fans better than from critics. After all, you are doing it for them, you have to lump it!”

## The changing role of media

The big question is where does the media fit in? Chopra believes in its continued importance: “Platforms like this present the opportunity to connect one-on-one with the audience, with a two-way direct dialogue, with no one else in between. Currently and for some time in the future, I believe that both will continue to co-exist. The only difference is that, as with the Internet, information dissemination on these platforms is immediate, creating, in a sense, an alternative source of news and information, as many recent world events prove.”

Khan finds that there will always be a space for deeper interactions. “There are some people – I am one of those people – who want to know more about people they admire in some way. There are some things I won’t find out through Twitter or online chat. Besides, you don’t realise how many people are in places that don’t have the Internet – they wouldn’t know Twitter if it jumped up and bit them. It is arrogant to ignore the fact that newspapers and magazines, particularly in the Hindi language, are immense in scope.”

Panag has found that talking directly online means not waiting

**“I am a very private person and I did find it a bit difficult initially to open up.”**  
– Priyanka Chopra

to be interviewed to share an opinion or a thought. Besides, it is an optimum place to make an announcement – replacing a press release – she finds herself quoted straight from Twitter on many occasions.

One form doesn’t need to be different from the other, though. The definition of media can be all-inclusive, as Abhishek Bachchan points out: “We are all part of the same medium which is media. A film at some level is also a form of media. Yes, I think artistes do have a new conduit to reach their voice, their opinion to the audience but I don’t think that means they should do without the media – it is a conscience of a nation and it should forever be there.” Pritish Nandy adds another dimension to the thought, “The media is a great intermediary. But intermediation does not always improve or enhance communication. Sometimes, in fact, it distorts it. For me, both media and social networking sites are crucial in

today’s world. They support each other and correct each other’s failures.”

I can’t help but agree. Being fatalistic about the future of media is irrelevant. Factually, we have no choice but to embrace newer forms of interaction – whether we chose to be early adopters, or the grudging lot who will squeal, drag their feet and find themselves lost in a sea of information; go online we must. Maybe for the media, the fear stems from a loss of control, even a missing sense of ownership – at a point of time the intermediary remained of paramount importance, now it becomes a bystander in more transparent proceedings. For the others, it’s a whole new world out there – brave and demanding. Sharing your thoughts; and getting to know your ‘neighbourhood’ celeb can be deeply gratifying: find that voyeur in you, and you may surprise yourself by enjoying it. 📺

## Tweets Buzz

**@Imrankhan** (replies)  
‘the thing to remember is, no one ever starts out thinking “this time, I’m going to make a REALLY bad movie. A real stinker!”’  
‘I take compliments where I can get them!’ (in response to: After all, you don’t look like a liar)

**@juniorbachchan**  
‘We actors are a weird lot. Out of the thousands of well wishers and compliments and good things said to us, it takes just one negative... To ruin it all. Why are we so myopic? Wish we could focus on the positives. Takes a very strong person to block out negativity and focus.’

**@kjohar25**  
‘i woke up feeling restless today...wondering if only my work defines me...do i really have a personal life??’  
‘Saturdays and i have a strange relationship!! they always get me down for some reason! so..’

**@priyankachopra**  
‘one of those nights... decisions????! why do we even have to take them...’

**@PritishNandy**  
‘We cant afford to have both dying on us together. The integrity of media n the integrity of our art n culture. Tweeples must be vigilant.’

**@RajeevMasand** (reply)  
‘Lol...we shd all be allowed our own opinions, don’t u think? If u hated it, why shd I be expected to feel the same way. How foolish.’

**@sonamakapoor**  
‘Feeling very lazy. Very comfy and relaxed. Sometimes being single is fun. Watching TV series and vegging out alone is really rejuvenating.’

**Dialogue between @kjohar25 and @Imrankhan**  
kjohar25: ‘hey tweeples...at the office...feeling terrible for my best friend and CEO apoorva mehta...he is a huge pile of work everyday to tackle...’  
Imrankhan: ‘I believe that’s called a Freudian slip.’  
kjohar25: ‘sorry...i meant he HAS a huge pile of work to tackle’  
kjohar25: ‘ha! ha! trust me it was a genuine language slip!!!’  
Imrankhan: ‘I’ve met very few people with better grammar than you. I ain’t buying the story!’

