

Hot Potato offers tool for event-based chats

Nick Bilton

Twitter and Facebook offer incredible social networks for conversation about almost anything. But one feature they don't offer is the ability to engage in conversations with a select group, either based on a location or a specific event.

Some in the Twitter community have tried to remedy this problem by using hashtags. Under the hashtag system, people add a hash or pound symbol (#) before a keyword that is used as a sort of index term for messages on that topic. For example, if I were at a Britney Spears concert (not that I have ever been to one of her concerts), I could create a group discussion by appending #britneyspears to my messages. Others at the event could search Twitter for this hashtag and find all the messages tagged with it.

But this is only a halfway solution. You have to actively search for related terms every time you want to plug into the conversation. And all the unrelated chatter can be frustrating to friends and followers in your network who aren't interested in the discussion.

Hot Potato, which recently launched at the TechCrunch Crunchup, takes a different approach to creating conversations centered around places and events.

The service allows you to create a public or private chatroom, built around an event or location. Last night, for example, during the weekly episode of Bravo's "Top Chef," a group of six friends created a Hot Potato room and shared thoughts on the show from their respective locations. Comments focused on the show's cast and how tasty the pork belly and Brussels sprouts looked. There were also separate chats about holiday parties in New York and San Francisco and a discussion about the re-launch of AOL that was geographically centered on AOL's party at the New York Stock Exchange.

Hot Potato currently works through its Web site, Facebook or a free Apple iPhone application.

Justin Shaffer, founder and president, said he is not trying to compete with Twitter or Facebook. "They are excellent solutions to personal monologues and sharing thoughts and links with your friends," he said. "We want to facilitate collective storytelling, encouraging group discussions around events."

Although Hot Potato can be used to create a conventional Internet chatroom, its real distinction is the integration of location, especially for mobile users. Mr. Shaffer, formally of MLB.com, hopes people will use the service for everything from concerts to sporting events.

Although the original goal of the service was to create event-based discussions, some in the community are taking the chats in other directions. Last week, a group of users started a 'crazy eyes staring contest,' uploading photos of themselves staring into their computer Webcam.

The user interface for the iPhone app can be a little confusing. For example, when trying to create your own Hot Potato, you will need to go into the search panel, then scroll down and finally click "Create an Event" — not very self-explanatory.

However, in my experiments with it, it seems to be a fun and promising solution to the problem of creating event-based conversations. Hot Potato hopes to launch versions of the service for Google's Android and Research In Motion's BlackBerry platforms by late February 2010.

Fonte: New York Times, New York, Dec. 10th 2009, Technology, online.