

Straight from the horse’s mouth. Almost

Celebrities have long used ghostwriters for autobiographies and other acts of self-aggrandizement. Now they are letting them loose on social networking sites like Twitter

BY NOAM COHEN
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The rapper 50 Cent is among the legion of stars who have recently embraced Twitter as a way to reach fans who crave near-continuous access to his life and thoughts. On March 1, he shared this insight with the more than 200,000 people who follow him: “My ambition leads me through a tunnel that never ends.”

Those were 50 Cent’s words, but it was not exactly him tweeting. Rather, it was Chris Romero, known as Broadway, the director of the rapper’s Web empire who typed in those words after reading them in an interview.

“He doesn’t actually use Twitter,” Romero said of 50 Cent, whose real name is Curtis Jackson III, “but the energy of it is all him.”

In its short history, Twitter — a microblogging tool which uses 140-character bursts — has become an important marketing tool for celebrities, politicians and businesses, promising a level of intimacy never before approached online, as well as giving the public the ability to speak directly to people and institutions once comfortably on a pedestal.

But someone has to do all that writing, even if it each entry is barely a sentence long. In many cases, celebrities and their handlers have turned to outside writers — ghost Twitterers, if you will — who keep fans updated on the latest twists and turns, often in the star’s own voice.

Because Twitter is seen as an intimate link between celebrities and their fans, many performers are not willing to divulge the help they get putting their thoughts down in cyberspace. Britney Spears recently advertised for someone to, among other things, help create content for Twitter and Facebook.

Kanye West recently explained to *New York* magazine that he’s hired two people to update his blog. “It’s just like how a designer would work,” he said. It is not only celebrities who are forced to look to a team to produce real-time commentary on daily activities; US politicians like Representative Ron Paul have had staffers assigned to create Twitter posts and Facebook personas. Candidate Barack Obama, as well as President Obama, has a social-networking team to keep his Twitter feed tweeting.

The famous, of course, have long used ghostwriters for autobiographies and other acts of self-aggrandizement. But the

idea of having someone else write continual updates of one’s daily life seems slightly absurd.

The basketball star Shaquille O’Neal, for example, is a prolific Twitterer on his account — The Real Shaq — where he shares personal news, jokes and occasional trash talking against opponents with nearly 430,000 followers.

“If I am going to speak, it will come from me,” he said, noting that the technology allows him to bypass the media to speak directly to the fans.

As for the temptation to rely on a team to supply his words, he said: “It’s 140 characters. It’s so few characters. If you need a ghost writer for that, I feel sorry for you.”

Athletes seem to be purists. Lance Armstrong, only hours after breaking his right collarbone, tweeted about it, using his left hand. Charlie Villanueva, a forward for the Milwaukee Bucks tweeted at half-time from the locker room on March 15 about how “I gotta step up.” (His coach, Scott Skiles, was not pleased with his diversion, but the Bucks did win.)

But for politicians like Paul, who sought the 2008 Republican presidential nomination, Twitter is an organizing tool rather than a glimpse behind the curtain. “During the presidential campaign,” said Jesse Benton, Paul’s campaign manager, “we assigned a staffer to each social network site. Each was used to generate the same message as a way to amplify the message and drive people back to our site.”

He said that in a rare few cases, however, supporters would read in more meaning to the online relationship than was there. “On a bunch of social-networking sites, we would get some sincere written notes, that would say ‘thank you for letting me be your friend,’” he recalled.

Many online commentators are appalled at the practice of enlisting ghost-Twitterers, but Joseph Nejman, a former consultant to Britney Spears who helped conceive her Web strategy, said there was a more than a whiff of hypocrisy among critics.

“It’s OK to tweet for a brand,” he said, noting how common it is for companies to have Twitter accounts, “but not OK for a celebrity. But the truth is, they are a brand. What they are to the public is not always what they are behind the curtain. If the manager knows that better than the star, then they should do it.”



Above: Twitter founders Biz Stone, left, and Evan Williams pose for a photo at their office in San Francisco. Right: Britney Spears needs a little help.

PHOTOS: AP AND BLOOMBERG



[SCIENCE]

Pandemonium breaks out at Taipei Zoo

Zookeepers became suspicious of the resident giant pandas’ true pedigree after Tuan Tuan and Yuan Yuan began acting strangely

BY STAFF REPORTER

Taiwan-China relations were dealt a severe setback yesterday when it was found that Taipei Zoo’s “pandas” are not what they seem.

Zookeepers discovered at feeding time yesterday that the two pandas are in fact Wenzhou brown forest bears that had been dyed to create the panda’s distinctive black-and-white appearance.

The Taipei Zoo’s head of ursidae ex-procyonidae care, Connie Liu (劉長春), said she became suspicious when the pandas, Tuan Tuan (團團) and Yuan Yuan (圓圓), began to spend almost all of their waking hours having sex. Pandas are notorious for their low libidos, which make them difficult to breed in captivity.

“Let’s just say Tuan Tuan and Yuan Yuan would *tuan yuan* at every chance,” said Liu, referring to the combination of the panda’s names, which means “to reunite” in Mandarin. “They would do it doggy-style and every armchair zoologist knows that pandas favor the missionary position — when they do it at all. Their behavior caused chaos. Children

screamed and parents became irate.”

Her suspicions were confirmed yesterday when she noticed that the animals’ new hair growth was discolored.

“Their roots began to show,” she said.

A zookeeper who asked to be identified only by his nickname A-diung (阿忠) because he was not authorized to speak with the media said he and his coworkers had long had their doubts, but were discouraged from publicly voicing their concerns by management.

“Whenever the moaning from the panda enclosure gets too loud we gotta go in there and hose ‘em down with cold water,” he said. “After a while, parts of the animals’ black-and-white patches started to turn brown.”

He said he alerted senior zoo staff who dismissed his concerns.

“They told me pandas at the zoo in Washington, DC, get lethargic and sometimes lie in their own feces because they can’t tolerate hot weather, so it didn’t surprise them at all that their fur was turning brown since Taipei’s hotter on average than Washington,” he said.

The pandas arrived in Taipei last

December as a gift from the Chinese government. The pair were first offered three years ago, but were rejected by then-president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁). After the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) candidate Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) won the presidential election last May, the pandas were accepted, though critics continue to decry what they see as an attempt by Beijing to bribe Taiwanese with cute, cuddly furballs in lieu of a more meaningful gesture of goodwill such as removing some of the 1,500 missiles China has pointed at Taiwan.

Even the pandas’ most diehard supporters were brokenhearted yesterday. Some angrily compared the subterfuge to last year’s contaminated milk scandal, when melamine that had been added to watered-down milk sickened 300,000 victims across China and led to a recall of dairy products in countries including Taiwan.

“First the milk scandal and now this. What are we going to hear next?” said Chang I-jun (張麗君), a Taipei resident.

Chang, who operates a souvenir stand near the zoo’s entrance, added



Above: Tuan Tuan, right, and Yuan Yuan caught in flagrante delicto on CCTV. Right: Wild behavior.

PHOTOS: TAIPEI TIMES

that the scandal would affect sales of her stuffed panda toys, panda T-shirts, panda pens and notepads, remote-controlled pandas on wheels, caps with panda ears on top, panda fans, panda flashlights, panda mugs, panda eyeglass cases, panda face masks, panda slippers, panda wallets and panda purses.

“China certainly owes us an apology,” said Chang.

In a statement released yesterday evening, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang (秦剛) addressed the panda scandal.

“We understand that our compatriots



in Taiwan are very upset. We wish to assure them that we have taken steps to address their concerns. We hope that our Taiwanese friends enjoy the gift of two extremely rare Wenzhou brown forest bears,” Qin said.

Local media reported yesterday that, in December, traces of melamine were found in Chinese bamboo that had been shipped to Taipei to feed Yuan Yuan and Tuan Tuan when the pair were rejecting Taiwanese bamboo and had each lost 3kg.

In 2007, thousands of dogs and cats in North and South America died and became sick after Chinese companies

added melamine to wheat gluten that was used to make pet food.

The reports said blood samples have been collected from the bears and sent to a lab at Academia Sinica where they are to be tested for harmful adulterants.

Substances to be tested for include glycol, a chemical similar to antifreeze which in 2007 was found in Chinese exports of cough syrup; chloramphenicol, a powerful antibiotic that has been present in honey from China since 1997; and the banned antibiotic nitrofurant, which is often detected in Chinese “hairy crabs” and shrimp sold in Taiwan.