By Mona Eltahawy  
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Twitter is my lifeline to the world. Twitter is the bane of my existence.  
Twitter connects me to everything I care about and Twitter is ruining my life.  

Yes, yes, I’m Mona; I’m a Twitterholic, etc. etc.  

Here are the places I tweet: In bed (when I wake up in the middle of the night, I’ll reach out for my iPhone and check in on the Twitterverse). In the bathroom (don’t ask). On the street. At bookshops. Standing in line to pay at the grocery store. You get the idea.  

Sometimes I’ll even tweet while I’m on the phone with my sister (we follow each other on Twitter) and she’ll tweet back, “I can’t believe you’re tweeting while we’re on the phone!!!”  

Yes. It’s bad.  

But in all seriousness, before we start to talk about A for Addiction, let me tell you how – for this columnist and news junkie – Twitter has become part of the backbone for my work along with my laptop and Internet connection. It has broken more stories for me than any other news “source” recently.  

I spent almost six years as a Reuters correspondent in Cairo and Jerusalem, honing my thirst for speed, which along with accuracy is wire reporting’s forte. Twitter gives you the first and can leave you free-falling when it comes to the second, but if you don’t know how to navigate, then you don’t belong on the Twitterhighway.  

I first learned of the bomb attack, which took place a few minutes into the New Year against a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria, Egypt, via Twitter. Granted it was a very slow news day regardless of time zone, but on Twitter there’s always someone awake somewhere.  

Twitter wasn’t just the first place I heard about the uprising in Tunisia but it was, for many days, the only place. The US media mostly ignored the worst unrest to hit the North African country in a decade. It started on December 17, when a young man poured gasoline on himself in Sidibouzid to protest
police confiscating the fruits and vegetables he sold without a permit, in lieu of a job he couldn’t find despite having a university degree.

This is where who you follow along that Twitter highway matters. Thanks to a group of activists, journalists and bloggers (sometimes they are all in one), I got not just the latest information from Tunisia – blog entries, video straight from demonstrations, news about arrested bloggers and campaigns for their release – but also live updates from solidarity protests in neighboring countries too, such as the one in Cairo.

And then where else could I follow in real time as Boston-based Mauritanian-American activist Nasser Weddady – who has for years run advocacy campaigns to release activists and journalists imprisoned in the Middle East – demanded that Alec Ross, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s Senior Advisor for Innovation, explain why the U.S. Administration was silent as Tunisia arrested protesters and bloggers and used live ammunition against demonstrators.

Ross is a champion of social media and his boss often extols the virtues of net freedom so it was captivating to follow their discussion because here was Tunisia conducting a vicious war against Facebook users, bloggers, and other online activists to shut them down and yet it got little of the condemnation Washington meted out to Iran when the latter went after online activists after the 2009 elections.

So, of course, I’m on Twitter. I don’t care about Lady GaGa or Justin Bieber who between them have about half of the world following them. Twitter helps me mine the world for small gems of optimism to hold onto – those tireless and increasingly frantic tweets from Cairo protesters corralled by police for more than seven hours, or tweets from Egyptian Muslims who attended Christmas Eve services to show solidarity with their Coptic compatriots and pictures showing them standing outside churches holding candles: I demand to be moved to the edge of tears, rage and optimism and Twitter delivers.

And that’s exactly why it’s destroying my life, my ability to write and my ability to look away from the computer screen. I see a number up there on the Twitter tab and I must refresh, immediately – must.know.now.
I’m glued to Twitter for hours on end. It’s exhausting not just because of the amount of time I spend on it – I don’t just read, I tweet too – but because it keeps you in a constant state of alertness. To write, you need to move beyond that alertness, to stop refreshing that Twitter feed, and to wander away. Twitter never lets me wonder. Its tentacles hold me too tightly.

Just disconnect, you ask? I would lose a vital pipeline of information. But also social interaction. Writing is a lonely endeavor – the payback for the constant dripdrip-drip of distraction is an army of people across the globe. First up are the Australians, Malaysians and Indonesians. I’ll catch a few hours of them before I head to bed just as the Middle East is waking up. By the time I’m awake – or if I sneak a peek in the middle of sleep – I’ll get Europe and then during my day, it’s the Middle East’s night owls along with North American tweeps.

When I’m up all night to write, I’m never alone. But when I need distance for focus and analysis, again I’m never alone.