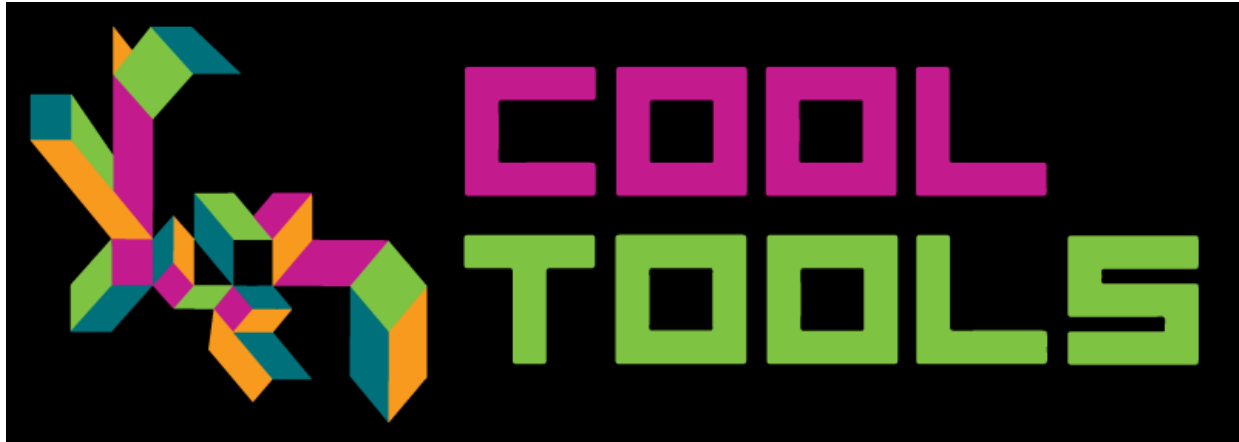




Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 114: Scott Smith

Transcript

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Our guest this week is Scott Smith. Scott is a critical futurist and founder of Changeist, where he leads strategy and research. His work taps over 20 years' experience tracking social, tech and economic trends. He works with brands and organizations to find new futures. He's also a writer and frequent speaker, and on Twitter @changeist.

Mark: Welcome to the Cool Tools Show. I'm Mark Frauenfelder, editor in chief of Cool Tools, a website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us at Cool-Tools.org. I'm joined by my cohost Kevin Kelly, founder of Cool Tools. Hey Kevin.

Kevin: Hey it's great to be here.

Mark: In each episode of the Cool Tools Show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or her favorite uncommon and uncommonly good tools they think others should know about. Our guest this week is Scott Smith. Scott is a critical futurist and founder of Changeist, where he leads strategy and research. His work taps over 20 years experience tracking social, tech and economic trends. He works with brands and organizations to find new futures. He's also a writer and a frequent speaker and on Twitter you can find him at Changeist and that's spelled C-H-A-N-G-E-I-S-T. Hey Scott how's it going?

Scott: It's going really well Mark, how are you?

Mark: Doing really well. You're talking to us from the Netherlands.

Scott: From a very chilly Amsterdam, yes. Almost frozen canals tonight.

Kevin: Wow. Wow. Yeah that's the old days. That's like the old medieval days when everything was frozen.

Scott: It is, that's why it's good to have bike, there's no engines to start.

Kevin: Right.

Mark: There you go. Are people actually riding their bikes in that weather?

Scott: Absolutely, the Dutch will ride bikes in any weather. Nothing's too tough.

Kevin: Wow. Scott, what are some of the things that you use every day, that you'd be really upset if someone took it away from you? A tool or app or something like that.

Scott: In terms of everyday tools, it's interesting. I've been using computers now for 30 something years, and I feel like I passed peak complexity and spend a lot of time now using incredibly simple tools. One that I use on a pretty frequent basis is iA Writer. It's a very, very basic multi-platform text processing editor. I've thrown Microsoft Office overboard, even getting out of Google Docs and just use this incredibly simple, very low feature text editor to spend a lot of my time with and make a lot of notes.

Kevin: How is it better than Google Docs, say?

Scott: I think it seems to be everywhere that I am, it's a proxy for a blank piece of paper. I was listening to a recent episode, somebody talking about Notational Velocity and it seems to work quite similar to that. It's on my phone, it's on my iPad, it's on my laptop. I travel a lot for work, I have to do a lot of talks and I'm also constantly making lists of notes and ideas and workshops. Everything's come down to these really simple ten bullets, five bullets, three lines of text and then move on. I can see all of it from one screen so it makes it really simple.

Kevin: I guess the text is living the cloud, that's why you have access to whatever device you're using?

Scott: Yeah it can either I think, sync with iCloud or Google Drive, Dropbox so somewhere in all of that I have it. I probably couldn't even put my finger on the directory at this point but it's out there so that if I think of something while I'm walking I can write it down really quickly and then pick it up somewhere else. That stripped down elegance is becoming incredibly useful and seems to be able to survive where a lot of other systems can't.

Kevin: Just to be clear, is this something that runs on Android as well as Windows and Mac and the whole lot?

Scott: It runs on, I think they just launched a Windows client actually, quite the reverse of the usual development. It runs on Windows, Mac and Androids so I've got it on an iPad, an Android phone and a Mac.

Kevin: Cool.

- Mark: Cool and so one thing I see is that in its list of features it has something called syntax highlight, where it finds superfluous adjectives, weak verbs, repetitive nouns, false conjunctions. Is that doing some kind of scanning of your document and highlighting certain things where it thinks you can improve some weak writing or something?
- Scott: Exactly and when I remember to I turn that feature on. I don't use it a lot but it's really helpful because you can get carried away writing and suddenly start over elaborating and find you've got duplicate adverbs or adjectives. And so you can turn on and off different colors for different parts of speech and it will allow you to see where you've stumbled over yourself and take that out. And it also publishes to I think, WordPress? It publishes to a couple of different blog platforms but it's just incredibly simple, very basic almost markup text.
- Mark: I like that. I like the fact that you can export to HTML. When you try to do that with Google Docs and Word you get this bloated mess. Is the HTML that it exports, clean?
- Scott: It seems to be. I don't use that part of it a lot as well. I almost don't want to press too many of the buttons. I adopted it because it was at its core, originally really, really simple. There's been a little bit of feature creep but things like word count are really helpful for me when somebody says to me a 500 word or a 50 word bio or something. It allows you to just do it on the fly really quickly and obviously and you can have those little focus areas that blurs everything else out and just lets you look at what's directly in front of you.
- Kevin: You I really like, retreating to the simplicity and the simple, dependable ones. That's really a great choice. Is there anything else, you mentioned you travel a lot. Is there anything else that you rely on, on a regular basis that you would be really shagrin to leave?
- Scott: I think contrary to the popular vibe right now, I would be stuck without something like Twitter. I find that TweetDeck has become my email box and email has almost disappeared. That's a really simple thing, just the diversity of communication. I make a really, really heavy use of Skitch, which is integrated in Evernote but the amount of things that I can screenshot and keep in a library seems to be endless for me.
- Kevin: Let's just go back to TweetDeck for those who don't know what TweetDeck ... Can you explain how that works?
- Scott: Well TweetDeck is basically it's a Twitter client, sits on the desktop and allows you to run multiple columns so you can have your regular feed, your notifications, your DMs. I'm usually running three or four accounts for different projects, so to be able to run them left to right and see different feeds I guess, simultaneously is important. And then another element of it is the work that I do is very heavily tilted

towards horizon scanning, towards constant collection of new information and intelligence to feed our research.

Some days for me it's this big, almost a war room screen in front of me. With a lot of different messages coming in, a lot of different people in different places of the world talking about what they're seeing. Papers they've read, conferences they're live tweeting and it just becomes a big board for me to pay attention to during the day.

Kevin: How many people do you follow or how many accounts are you following just to give a-

Scott: That's a good question. I think a little over 1,000, so it's not a lot but that's been 10 years and that's 1,200 and so I adjust that probably monthly to get good signal-to-noise ratio, turn down whatever conflicts are going on and try to bump up the high value messages.

Kevin: Does TweetDeck allow you to filter in some ways? Are there filtering keywords or are you just unfollowing and following?

Scott: You can mute words and phrases so I find that I keep a pretty good running board of mutes. And something-

Kevin: [crosstalk 00:09:03]

Scott: Yeah so it's just Super Bowl, being able to tune out the nonsense about the Super Bowl or I think I'm pretty sure I have a running Trump filter running here because it's just going to be so much noise one way or the other and if it's really critical little breakthrough. Anything that's hyper-topical and just getting over saturated, I could filter it out and then make sure that I'm getting useful information instead of just echoes.

Kevin: There has been other tools besides TweetDeck that give you that overall portal to Twitter. Have you used those others and comparing tweets or is this just the one you happen to use?

Scott: I've tested a few over the years and of course once Twitter cut off access to a number of the third-party ones, that's bringing that number down. I think I've used Tweetbot and a few other different ones but this one, you get used to a particular look and feel. I just recognize it when I see it and so I've stuck to that one tool.

Kevin: Does it also allow you to schedule outgoing tweets as well?

Scott: Yes it does. It does. I use that occasionally, whether it's something that's a project we're working on that we want to talk about but not until several days later. Or if I'm going to bed and I want to set something that's going to pop up in a certain time zone. I'll make occasional use of that tactically.

Mark: It's not a download, you just go to [TweetDeck.Twitter.com](https://tweetdeck.twitter.com).

Scott: Yeah there is a browser based one but I've just used the desktop version since it came out.

Kevin: It's like an app.

Scott: Exactly. It's a fairly lightweight app that sits, that floats on the desktop there. the good sized screen, you can see five, six columns at a time.

Kevin: And so each column would be a different account?

Scott: Different accounts or different slices of an account so my left hand column is just the main newsfeed and then notifications of direct ats to me. To the right of that direct messages, maybe a couple of filters or if there's like today I was following a conference feed. You can pop up a column and put in a hashtag and see your search term. I wanted to go follow a particular colleague's talk and what the reactions to it were so you can set that up temporarily and then delete it so it's nice.

Kevin: You said that has in some ways replaced a lot of email for you. Do you find that if you're trying to contact someone that you haven't contacted before, that you get better response by trying to tweet them than trying to email them?

Scott: Strangely yes and I think part of that's just context or situation. I think if people know who I am or can see who you're connected to, it's email plus context. I think sometimes there's a little bit of extra benefit there. Somewhere in my head I keep track of whose available there and whose available somewhere else, on Slack or email or whatever the other channel is or WhatsApp. But it's just become a thing over the past six or seven years that if you want to find me, that's the best place I think.

Kevin: For people to find you but in terms of finding other people.

Scott: Yeah well I guess the people I keep a pretty steady conversation going with and then of course there's locked accounts. There's the accounts that are in the sunshine and there's the accounts that are locked and you can't really see and it almost provides a separate communication channel for that as well.

Kevin: You just mentioned WhatsApp. I've heard of more people going to WhatsApp for private long-form conversations. Are you discovering that as well?

Scott: Definitely and I think particularly having moved from the US back to Europe again and really seeing how much earlier Europe could have embraced WhatsApp. I was teaching in Spain for example and if you see a flyer up on the wall, somebody's got an apartment to let or a bike to sell, they're going to put their WhatsApp number up

there rather than their email address. The neighborhood watch in my neighborhood here outside of Amsterdam has got big WhatsApp signs up on it.

It's become a proxy for a lot of different things and I find that I was recently in Singapore for a mix of personal and business visiting and immediately I got added by other people who were there, to a couple of WhatsApp conversations. Again they're situational, they can emerge and then disappear, they become topical. It's interesting to see how much they're used but I find it to be a pretty heavy utility.

Mark: I find that there's different levels of expectation for different kinds of systems, at least for me. Email I feel like I have more of an obligation to answer someone. A Twitter direct message I feel less of an obligation. A Facebook direct message I feel like almost no obligation. Do you feel different levels of obligation to respond over WhatsApp or different kinds of systems?

Scott: I do but it's probably less pronounced. I think email becomes almost like official correspondence. It's things that have files attached, it's work. It tends to be like there's an ongoing project or business to be done. That's actually quite a manageable feed whereas somehow, I'll probably regret saying this publicly but I've managed to sidestep a lot of the trash on Twitter.

I don't feel like I get a lot of unnecessary @DNs. Pretty much there's very few, nobody's doorstepping me, nobody's surprising me so thankfully it's under control. That will probably go away now but it's manageable but yeah I do think there's a little bit of a different prioritization. I wouldn't ignore a one-time message.

Kevin: Are you using Slack as well as a tool?

Scott: I am, I am. We have our own internal group. I teach classes in a couple different places and we use Slack as an out-of-hours conversation tool. It's a great place to post bits of curriculum, papers to read. I'm less connected to the broad topical Slacks that seem to pop up, whether it's a conference. I think I was one on election night reports, the business publication that was freaky but I use it where it makes sense.

Kevin: Okay. In passing earlier, when I diverted you to talk about TweetDeck, you mentioned something about screen grabbing. What was that tool?

Scott: Skitch. S-K-I-T-C-H, yeah.

Kevin: What do you use that for?

Scott: I use it because there's such a high velocity of stuff going through my desktop I guess. I use it to catch articles, images, ads, to grab visuals for talks if I'm putting together a presentation or a talk really quickly. And you can grab screenshots of various products or headlines from newspapers, that kind of thing.

Kevin: How is that better than Evernote?

Scott: Well in this case it's integrated to Evernote so when I snap something on Skitch it shows up in my Evernote library. That's really helpful.

Kevin: I guess maybe I'm confused about what it is. You can have a command on your desktop to make a screenshot. This is different than that?

Scott: It is, I mean I guess part of the attraction is, and part of it's habit but part of the attraction is that you can either time a screen, if there were images rotating through for example. And you wanted to catch a certain ad showing up, as an example of something or it's just got an elastic drag and click so instead of getting your entire desktop, I can just catch the thing I want.

I know there are other tools that probably do that but again it got in my workflow early on. And the fact that you can see the whole library of shots that you've captured. I can collect them and basically if I'm going to do a talk in a month and I want to go ahead and start building visuals, I'll just grab quick snapshots of them and have them all in one folder somewhere so that's helpful.

Kevin: Cool.

Mark: All right. Let's see, let's talk a little bit about your traveling. Do you have any interesting travel tools or even tips that come to mind?

Scott: Oh gosh. I think these days the one thing that I find the most tricky is things like having a dual SIM phone. And this has gotten easier over the past few years, of being able to go to another country and instead of having to deal with roaming just grab a SIM for \$10 or \$15. Get a few weeks worth of data and be done with it and have disposable data plans.

I think again, that's one of those things that's easier outside the US than crossing in and out of the states. I spend a lot of time working in Dubai where I'm teaching, and also in Spain and even in Singapore where I was recently. I have SIMS for each of those rattling around in a Ziploc bag.

Kevin: I see, you collect them like currencies. You have a-

Scott: Yeah it is, it's like a baggie of currencies only I have a baggy of SIMs.

Kevin: A little bag of SIMs. Do you have an approximate number in your head of when you're buying a week's worth of data. What is that, is that like a gig, is that several gigs, did you have a rule of thumb?

Scott: It's probably, I think to be on the safe side, two. Generally I go for two gigs although in some countries it's cheaper to go more, but you're only talking about \$10 or \$20 maximum to get that much data for two weeks.

Kevin: I find that lot of those have time expirations on them unfortunately, where if you don't use it for whatever it is, a year, a month or even sometimes by month. If they expire do you find that as well?

Scott: I do it's actually in some cases it's actually pretty generous. I think I have a six month SIM in Singapore, whereas in Dubai and the UAE there's a metering attached to things like SIMs, that are just meant for temporary visitors. It's almost like a Visa, it will expire to make sure that you're done. Every 60 days I think, I have to go and get another one.

Kevin: Yeah. You mentioned a dual SIM so what are the phones with dual SIM slots these days?

Scott: There are a number of the Chinese models have dual SIM slots, the Huawei's and devices like that. I find that I've got a OnePlus 3T that's got two. I think all of the OnePlus mobiles have two SIM slots and-

Kevin: The idea there is that you keep your ... What does the two SIM slot, I mean that you can just change from one to another without having to remove cards or-

Scott: Yeah I mean I keep my home SIM in one slot and then whatever I'm visiting goes in the other one and you can turn them on and off over on the screen. It's a soft control, so if I know I'm landing in a country I can switch the SIM on, data's ready when I get there and turn my home SIM off or switch the data off and leave the calling on. It makes it really easy to duck in and out of different networks I guess.

Kevin: Have you compared that T-Mobile's or the other ones professing or even the Google, I can't remember what it's called, the Fi I think it's called.

Scott: The Fi, yeah.

Kevin: Where they promote this idea that you have basically universal coverage. Have you experimented with that at all?

Scott: When I first moved back to Europe I had a T-Mobile SIM from the US and because it's tied to a German operator and Bush Telecom, I could get access within Europe. I basically just keep VOTO phone when I'm in Europe and can roam at no extra cost throughout the European Union and then have other SIMs for outside of the region.

Mark: Okay. I use T-Mobile and I've had a great experience with it everywhere I've went, Japan, Mexico, Canada, different parts of Europe and it's great not having to swap SIM cards out or anything. I know it's not the fastest service, especially if you're outside of North America but it's great not having to worry about the international roaming fees.

Scott: Yeah, although I find that more and more in some countries, if you want access to certain services you need a local number and so it helps to have that second number that's in the local code. That's definitely the case in the UAE. If you need to log onto Wi-Fi or something it will ask you for your local number and it just becomes a lot easier to have one on hand.

Kevin: That's also true in China too.

Mark: That's a really good reason. Scott, one other thing that you do, you shared with us some really cool photos of your Minitel collection. Maybe you can talk about what Minitel is and your interest in it.

Scott: Sure so I never thought I would become a mid-life collector of electronics. Minitel for those people who don't know, was the internet before the internet in a way. It was a project really kicked off in the late 1970s in France, to create a single advanced platform for basic online services across the country. The planning started in the late '70s, '78 with a really important white paper that was written about basically fear that IBM was going to take over the world's technical infrastructure. The French wanted to make their own system and they also had amongst the world's worst phone systems at the time.

They put a lot of money and effort into building out these X25, at the time, advanced data networks across the country and created this amazing little terminal. An all-in-one single terminal screen, I mean basically it looks like a kind of proto Mac, Macintosh in a weird way but the Telecom decided that would build these units to sit on their network and give them out to subscribers, so they were given away for free.

You could go to a French Telecom shop and pick up a Minitel unit. It's a bit larger than a laptop, integrated keyboard screen, gray scale graphics, ran at 1,200 bits per second on a network but 1980, '81, '82, France had this system even as places like the US were still experimenting with early Videotext or late ARPANET type systems.

Kevin: Is this still operating?

Scott: Actually some said, "It ended in 2012." so it ran for almost 30 something years and the last ones were actually taken offline in 2012 but there was still apparently a half million active subscribers in it, because so many businesses or older people. Farmers had become really dependent on it in the early days because it was a great way to get market information, weather and you can pick them up now for not much money on various auctions. I have two operable still running Minitels from the very early days. It's just on a network to run them on.

Kevin: Can you put two together and have them work peer-to-peer?

Scott: There are various projects where people are either running emulators or they've recovered a server somewhere and they're running one. You connect directly to,

people have connected them with Raspberry Pis. There seems to be a dark market in hobbyists, waking them up and running them off on really basic servers but there's, mine come on, you can type on them but they have an old school French Telecom plug that's a T shape that you would actually have to break that off and hardwire that into something else.

Mark: Right.

Kevin: Oh wow.

Scott: It's the 40th anniversary of the first development and it's an interesting moment to be thinking about the viability of it as everybody's getting upset with Google and Facebook and Apple and Amazon. Here's this system that was successful in the country that it was developed. It gave us some really interesting things. It was the first real, I mean there were BBS chats but it was the first big platform with chat.

It was the first service to really show that sex chat could be a cash cow because that's really what floated it. E-commerce, you could book trains, restaurants, buy things, trade stocks, early micro billing. The first micro payments were really running off this thing because everything showed up on your phone bill. Portals, you name it.

Kevin: If you like that kind of history you should really read *The Friendly Orange Glow*, which was about the system that preceded Minitel by decades that actually invented all those things even before Minitel. They called PLATO, P-L-A-T-O, which invented the flat screen, messaging. The whole thing was done in the '60s and '70s and the story of how they or why its influence was bypassed is really interesting. There's another example of this lost history, where all these things were invented and for various reasons they were bypassed.

Mark: A lot like Xerox PARC.

Kevin: Yeah, again this preceded Xerox PARC by decades.

Scott: The funny thing about Minitel is it's a lost history for certain parts of the world that didn't know about but it's also an alt timeline that here was this other place. I stumbled into it as a researcher because US West in the early '90s basically tried to do a partnership and bring it to the US. I have the emulator software and actually got a bridge running to the French system from the US from my university.

But it's just this evolutionary fork in the road, the rest of the world went one way and France went another. But it was also built in the public interest, which is a little bit different than the public internet in the later days. It was an initiatives that national infrastructure initiative and the type of things we're starting to talk about again now.

Kevin: Right yeah, there are a lot of lessons I'm sure but just for your own edification you might enjoy The Friendly Orange Glow, which was this again, an alt history of where things could have gone because they had, there were public terminals. It was orange instead of the green screen and it was completely open et cetera, et cetera, and mostly students who invented all these things from multiplayer games to instant messaging to the hardware like flat screens, all came out of that initiative.

Scott: I'll definitely look it up.

Kevin: It's really cool.

Mark: Before we go I just wanted to let people know that you can learn about a lot of the really interesting work that Scott does at Changeist.com. and there's a great bio of Scott in there where he talks about his influences including Ray Bradbury's books, which were a huge influence to me too and just some of the cool artifacts and things you designed. Right before we go, why don't you just give us your 30 second description of this upcoming audio documentary that you're working on?

Scott: Sure so we, it's inline with this interest in something like Minitel. We're very interested in how the future differs culturally in different parts of the world. How people from different countries, different backgrounds, different experiences, what forms their perception of what the future should be like. We've put together an upcoming series called the Future From because we're always talking the future too and what's coming next. We wanted to go back and look at what is the future look like from the point of view of someone who grew up in Kenya, in India, in Singapore?

And in particular how the stories you hear when you're young and the media you consume and the big national stories of where your society is going. Frame what you expect from the future. We're doing a series of interviews in the next couple of months of creatives around the world and turning that into an audio documentary series of eight episodes that should be up hopefully starting in the second quarter, that we think will shed some really interesting light on why do we think the future should be a certain way, based on where we're from?

Mark: That sounds great and it will be available as a podcast at Changeist?

Scott: It will be available as a podcast, it will have its own website, the FutureFrom.com and we'll be sign posting it as we move from early audio to production in the next couple of months. And it will also possibly be an exhibition as well at some events.

Kevin: That's really great.

Mark: That sounds great.

Kevin: Fantastic.

Mark: All right well Scott, this has been a real pleasure talking to you, learning about some of things that you use in your daily life and about your Minitel collection so thanks so much for joining us.

Scott: Thank you very much Mark and Kevin.