



CHAPTER 2

WE, THE TWEETLE

BY GUS SILBER

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Schooled in the hot-metal era of newspaper reporting, he has triumphed over his initial trepidation and scepticism to become an evangelist of the new digital media, in particular the short-form social network, Twitter, where he tweets as @gussilber.



The social media revolution is changing the way journalists source, distribute, and publish the news. In this fast-changing new media landscape, there are greater opportunities than ever for government to join in the conversation and engage with its citizens.

The first tweet in history was dispatched into the ether on 21 March 2006 by Jack Dorsey, the co-founder of Twitter. 'Just setting up my twttr,' he tweeted, using the original, disemvowelled name for the short-message online social network. As an overture to a revolution in electronic communication, it wasn't quite in the same league as Marconi, tapping out his awe on the telegraph ('What hath God wrought?') or Alexander Graham Bell, barking out an order on the telephone: 'Mr Watson, come here, I need you!'

But that test message on Twitter, sent to a small circle of co-workers, was a perfect demonstration of a new way of getting the message across in an age of ubiquitous, impulsive connections.

The premise of Twitter, inspired by the popularity and convenience of text messaging on the mobile phone, was disarmingly simple. You would create a personal profile, dress it up with a short bio and picture, and you would log on to twitter.com, where you would find yourself faced with a cursor blinking in a blank rectangle, topped by a question that may have sounded brusque and impertinent.

'What are you doing?'

Then you would type your answer, in a maximum of 140 characters (spaces and punctuation in-

cluded) and you would send it to your followers as a tweet.

When I first signed up for Twitter in 2007, I was flummoxed by the question, which threw me into a loop of logic from which I struggled to escape. What I was doing, I kept thinking to myself, was sitting in front of a computer, trying to answer the question, 'What are you doing?' So I eventually typed 'feeling like a twit', and I hit the Tweet button, and my tweet disappeared like the song of a bird that nobody heard.

I perused the tweets of people who seemed to be at home on Twitter, chatting chirpily among themselves about what they were having for breakfast, and how bored they were feeling at work, and what they were going to do when they got to the gym, and, and, and ... it was a convention of friends and acquaintances trading inanities, on a network whose only apparent purpose was to facilitate small talk and make it even smaller. So I gave up on Twitter.

Then, one day, I was half-watching the news on BBC, and I saw an item about a passenger plane that had crashed into the Hudson river in New York. The story was not so much about the aqua-landing, or the pilot whose skill had saved the lives of everyone on board, as it was about a man who had snapped a picture of the aircraft from a ferry that had been diverted to the scene. 'There's a plane in the Hudson,' he tweeted from his phone. 'I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy.'

His tweet included a link to the pic, and within seconds it was being re-tweeted around the world, while TV crews and newspaper reporters were still patrolling the riverbanks, desperately trying to catch sight of the plane. It was a case

study in a new way of reporting the news, and the old media seemed lumbering and lost on the waves, beaten to the scoop by an ordinary citizen who just happened to be carrying the most powerful reporting tool of the twenty-first century on his person. A mobile phone.

This was my moment of epiphany, my flight to Damascus. This was what Twitter was for.

Today, with more than half a billion users sending more than 400 million tweets a day (according to Twitter's own statistics), the network is still at heart a platform for chit chat, banter, gossip, jokes, friendly debate, furious

discourse, random thoughts, fleeting observations, questions and answers, and the obsessive journaling of the minutiae of everyday life, in 140 characters or less. But every now and again, this restless hubbub tunes into the frequency of current events, and Twitter

becomes a broadcast channel for news as it breaks and shatters, leaving other media to scramble and pick up the pieces.

Today, Twitter occupies the same space in the media landscape as CNN did in the early 1990s, when the 24-hour-a-day cable giant began broadcasting raw, uncut footage from the front-line of the first Gulf War. There was so much time to fill between top-of-the-hour newscasts, and so little time to filter, process, and package it all, that the satellite feed was allowed to air almost as soon as it came in. Those jittery, spectral images, of armoured cars on the move, and rockets flaring in the night, and bombs bursting on the ground far below, put the viewer right in the heat of the battle, and cast the news in a strange new light. It felt immediate, gritty, and uncomfortably real.

In 1854, during the Crimean War, a century and a world away from CNN, it took almost three weeks for news of the Charge of the Light Brigade to reach London. Now, the gap between a newsworthy event and its dissemination to the public is measured at the speed of finger-taps on a screen or keyboard. The news, now, has very little time to reflect, or even to verify to itself that it is true; it is simply seized, absorbed, distilled to its essence, and detonated almost by reflex into the ether, where it will replicate and spread within seconds.

News used to be something that you actively sought, switching on the radio, turning on the TV, picking up the paper. You could set your watch by the seven o'clock bulletin, or wait until morning to find out what had happened in the world. Now, wherever you are, the news finds you.

I remember standing in a slow-moving queue at Ellis Park Stadium in Johannesburg, waiting to catch a bus after the pre-World Cup game between Bafana Bafana and Brazil. It was the winter of 2009, and in the afterglow





of a brave display by the home team, I was mulling over the way they had lost the game, but won our hearts. I reached for my phone. 'Goodnight Bafana,' I tweeted. 'This was your Song of Redemption.' Out of idle curiosity and habit, I thumbed through my timeline on Twitter, the tweets flitting by, blurring, melding into one. Then I stopped with a jolt, as the words swam into focus. I read, and I re-read, torn between healthy scepticism and an urge to be first with the news. 'Hey,' I finally said, to no one in particular, 'Michael Jackson just died of a heart attack.' Here was the news, delivered like a shot of adrenaline, just after it happened on the other side of the world.

A buzz started spreading through the throng; other people were checking their Twitter too. Soon, everyone around me was no longer talking about the game.

When you actively use Twitter, you get used to this feeling that you are plugged into the current, that you have special access to the news. It is no coincidence, as you compose your tweet on twitter.com, that the default question has evolved from the original 'what are you doing?', into something sharper, more urgent and more open-ended.


'What's happening?'

That is a kick-starter to a conversation. On a deeper level, it is an invitation to philosophise and reflect. But it is also a cue to communicate what is actually happening around you, harnessing your measly quota of characters to craft a dispatch with the punchiness of a newspaper headline. Twitter is a medium made for the media, from the biggest broadcast networks to the smallest community

papers, and millions of media workers have seized it as a complementary channel to report and comment on the news. But that is only half the story.

The real power of Twitter lies in the way it has taken power away from the hands of the media, or at least spread it out a little more evenly among the crowd. On Twitter, anyone can journal, report, edit, publish and distribute the news, enhancing their little bites of information with links to pictures, video and other online content. Here, away from the newspaper 'Op-Ed' pages, where experts, analysts, academics, party representatives and 'thought leaders' are granted space to pontificate on the state of the nation, anyone can claim their say on what they think is right and wrong.

This makes the social medium a powerful, free and open platform for the sharing of information and the healthy interchange of views between a government and its citizenry. Twitter is a megaphone of democracy, and it is re-shouting the rules of public engagement. But in the process, here in South Africa, the voice of government itself is being drowned out or barely heard. Let us look at one example of the way Twitter feeds on the news of the day, and the news feeds on Twitter in turn. In December 2012, at an annual commemorative speech in Impendle in KwaZulu-Natal, President Jacob Zuma made a series of remarks on the importance of preserving traditional African culture. People should guard against loving animals more than human beings, he cautioned. Rushing a dog to a vet for medical care, while workers or relatives were sick in the same household, or driving a van with a dog in the front while a worker sat at the back in the pouring rain – such things, suggested the president, were not the African way.



The Mercury in Durban reported the president's views the next day, paraphrased and translated from isiZulu, and that is where the story might have lingered and faded – in the columns of a regional paper, at the quietest time of year for newspaper sales. But now we have Twitter, with its voracious appetite for something new and interesting to talk about, and here came this story as a gift, right in the middle of what journalists call the 'silly season'. A measured speech in a rural heartland became the sensational tale of a president who warned that it was un-African to buy a dog, care for it, and take it for walks.

Twitter, as one newspaper put it, 'went barking mad'. Quips and barbs flew. Someone scoured the archives and posted a photograph of a beaming Nelson Mandela outside his home in Soweto, affectionately patting the ridgeback that was standing at his side. Zwelinzima Vavi, the General Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), uploaded a snap of himself ('an animal lover and proudly black') in the company of two of his best friends, a boerbul and a terrier. Soon, newspapers around the world were picking up the story, quoting tweets and counter-tweets as a barometer of a nation divided by race and culture.

Then came the press statement from the Presidency. What the president had been pointing out, it explained, was the need to 'decolonise the African mind post-liberation'. It was a thoughtful and resonant communiqué, adding context and subtext to the president's words, even bringing to mind that famous refrain from Bob Marley: 'Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but ourselves can free our mind'. Then it ended on a pang of regret for an opportunity lost. 'It is unfortunate,' said the statement, 'that the

journalists concerned chose to report the comments in a manner that seeks to problematise them instead of promoting a debate.'

Herein lies the crux of a breakdown in communication between government and civil society, and a golden opportunity for its revival. To begin with, press statements, issued from on high, are relics from the 'industrial age' of government-media communication. Using them to rebuke journalists who are merely doing their job – in this case, reporting a public speech by a public figure – only serves to entrench the perception that government and media are natural adversaries. And the statement, delivered hours after the story broke in print and exploded on Twitter, was anchored in the supposition that journalists still drive and control the debate. This has long ceased to be the case. They are merely an active and involved part of the conversation, and government should be so too.

How differently would this story have played out had the president himself taken to the social networks, to contextualise, expand, explain, listen and be heard? A string of tweets from @SAPresident, in ad hoc form or as part of an organised 'social media conference', would have gone a long way towards clearing the air, fostering goodwill, and shifting the focus to more important issues.

The sceptical observer may wonder whether it is beneath the dignity of a head of state to indulge in a tête-à-tête with random tweeters on a medium that is live, open, and unmoderated. Not at all. In democracies across the world, politicians of all persuasions are using Twitter to take the pulse of public opinion, communicate and clarify policy, debate and defend their record, promote parties and electoral candidates, journal their of-



ficial visits, and exchange the occasional pleasantry with a fellow tweeter.

The most followed of all world leaders on Twitter is the US president Barack Obama, who used the medium as a cornerstone of his 2008 campaign, connecting with younger voters in particular. He doesn't tweet much these days, but when he does it is big news: his November 2012 victory tweet, 'Four more years', quickly became the most re-tweeted tweet in history. The tweet alone was perfectly pitched to splash across a front page, but what really made it re-tweetable was the accompanying photograph of the newly re-elected president hugging his first lady. This is a socially-savvy administration, expertly using a social medium as a point of human contact and a tool of political strategy.

President Obama has also appeared on YouTube, the online video-sharing service, to answer questions from the public, and in 2012 he took the hot-seat for a live 'AMA' (Ask Me Anything) on Reddit.com, one of the most popular news and discussion sites on the Web. 'Hey everybody, this is Barack,' he began, launching a 30-minute open Q&A session that took in such big issues as war, corruption, and the American space programme, and such lesser issues as his favourite basketball team and the recipe for the White House's home-brewed beer. Then he signed off with an observation about the medium itself: 'This is an example of how technology and the Internet can empower the sorts of conversations that strengthen our democracy over the long-run.'

Sessions like this are the latter-day equivalent of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 'fireside chats' during the depression and war years in the US. 'Good evening, friends,' he would say, as millions sat by their radios to hear his words of

wisdom and inspiration. The big difference now is that the radio talks back.

A 2012 study by the Digital Policy Council, a Washington-based think tank, found that 75 per cent of countries now have a head of state who tweets from a personal or government account, or perhaps outsources the task to a court tweeter. The world's most active political tweeters have included and include @chavezcandanga (Hugo Chávez, the ex-president of Venezuela), @CFKArgentina (Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, president of Argentina), and @NajibRazak, the Malaysian prime minister, who invited his 500,000th follower and three others to join him for breakfast. On our continent, the most enthusiastic head of state tweeters are the prime minister of Uganda, Amama Mbabazi, who hosts regular #AskthePM sessions (the #, or hashtag, is a Twitter convention that allows topics to be clickable, for ease of reference and organisation) and the Rwandan president, Paul Kagame, who told a press conference that he diligently sets out to meet his 'tweeting responsibilities' at lunchtime.





President Zuma, as @SAPresident, is an infrequent tweeter who reports mostly on diary matters, in between sending good wishes to communities and birthday celebrants. In South Africa, it is the official opposition that commands the House on Twitter, and nobody more so than the Western Cape premier and leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA), Helen Zille. She has a multipronged approach to Twitter, using it to dispatch items of municipal or provincial interest, challenge and criticise the ruling party, trumpet victories and achievements, confront her critics, and chit chat about family news and the quirks of life on the frontline of South African politics. ‘Lolest!’ runs a typical tweet, ‘City Press has photoshopped my head onto JZ’s dancing body. I love it! It looks as if I can dance. Made my day.’ As a journalist by background, @HelenZille is clearly at ease on this lively, newsy, quick-thinking medium, but she has experienced its perils too, sparking widespread outrage with a 2012 tweet about Eastern Cape ‘educational refugees’ attending schools in her province.

Twitter is a megaphone, capable of being heard around the world. It amplifies indiscretions, wrong-headed comments, insensitive or glib remarks. Twitter does not forget, and it holds its users, famous, infamous, and ordinary, to ruthless account.

But if used wisely it can be a politician’s powerful ally, allowing information to bypass conventional channels and make a direct connection with a constituency. Why issue press statements as a first resort, when the issuing of a tweet can be a statement in itself?

For all its potential pitfalls and the strict discipline of the 140-character restraint, Twitter is as easy to use as Facebook or e-mail. It

requires no great technical acumen to set up. Building a community of followers is an organic process that takes its cue from the simple act of tweeting interesting content, and from following interesting tweeters in turn.

There is no other medium that is capable of putting Government in such close touch with so many people at the same time. People don’t always carry radios with them, or pause to watch TV or read the paper. But they have always got their phones.

This is a mobile revolution. According to a 2012 study by World Wide Worx, more than ten million South Africans use smartphones, typically equipped with cameras and Internet connectivity. That is a significant and growing constituency of people who can use their mobile devices to document and share what is happening in and around their lives.

We like to think of Twitter (2.4 million South African users, according to the same study), Mxit (9.3 million users) and Facebook (6.8 million) as ‘social media’, but in truth they are simply media, because all media, by definition, are social. They connect the individual to the broader society, and they shape, and are shaped by that society.

All media rely on social interaction to survive. Ideas, opinions and stories cannot exist in a vacuum; they need to be read, heard, watched and talked about. When we refer to ‘the media’, a multicellular organism with a vast diversity of voices, opinions, markets, platforms and personalities, we tend to picture the traditional models of publishing: newspapers, magazines, radio, television. But they are not the only media in town any long-



er. In this shifting media landscape, the social networks function as a sort of 'para-media' force: swift, informal, self-replicating, and unconstrained by commercial concerns or the cherished principles of journalistic scrutiny and balance. A Twitter user who is not a journalist may feel no compulsion to verify a juicy 'twitbit' of news before publishing it as a tweet, status update or blog post. But what happens if the news turns out to be wrong?

Anyone who has ever fallen for a fake celebrity death rumour or a hoax hijacking alert on Twitter will know that, sometimes, it is wrong. News travels at the speed of thought on Twitter, even if it does not require too much thought for someone to hit Retweet and accelerate the distribution of a dodgy story. In 2011, a Twitter user in London, acting on a tip-off received by e-mail, tweeted a warning about a GUNMAN on Oxford Street. 'Please keep EVERYONE inside,' she advised. 'NO JOKE. Armed Police are on the scene.' Coincidentally, at around the same time, another tweeter sent out a tweet about a 'street-style shooting in Oxford Circus', seemingly reinforcing the warning and helping to spread the alarm. As it later turned out, she was referring to a photographic fashion shoot that was turning heads in the vicinity. But that little distinction was lost as reports of 'sirens' and 'gunshots' began streaming in from other tweeters, their ears freshly attuned to the everyday sounds of the big city. Then someone called the police, and alerted the broadcast networks on Twitter. It didn't take long for the story to be shot down. There was no gunman. There had not been a shooting.

But in a genuine crisis the community spirit at the heart of the network – the sense of shared

interest and belonging that makes it 'social' – can bring out the best in people. Consider this tweet from a South African user in April 2012, rendered here exactly as it was tweeted: 'Be on the look for DSS041GP. my boyfriend has just been hijacked and is in the boot please RT.' Spurred by the tone of breathless urgency in that message and the plea to spread it far and wide, Twitter users rallied to help in the way they know best. The flurry of tweets and re-tweets alerted private security companies on the network, and they joined forces to track and trace the vehicle, sending progress updates as it sped from Gauteng into North West Province. Within two hours, the drama was over. The hijackers abandoned the car at a police roadblock, and the boyfriend in the boot was released, shaken but unharmed.

The surprising thing is that there are not more hoaxes, mass panics, and false alarms on Twitter. It is so easy to take someone for a ride on this medium, with its absence of mediators and its casual disregard for rules and conventions beyond the 140-character limit.

But Twitter, to me, has come to mean something other than free expression, mischief, and anarchy, as much as I enjoy it for those things too. Twitter is a tribute to the power of the social compact, the unspoken, unwritten set of coordinates that allow us to find the good in each other. In my everyday experience, it is a network of good neighbours, keen to lend a hand and share their knowledge, expertise and advice on matters mundane and momentous.

I recently stepped out of my car in a Johannesburg suburb, to find a toy rubber snake coiled on the pavement. I looked a little clos-



er, but not too close, and I saw that it wasn't a toy. I recoiled. I guessed that the snake was probably harmless, because it wasn't moving, and I could see the claw marks that suggested it had been the victim of an attack by a cat. But I wanted to make sure, so I snapped a picture with my iPhone and attached it to a tweet. 'Found this poor ex-snake in the road outside my pal's house in Joburg. Anyone know what species?' The first reply arrived within seconds. It was a California king snake, said someone, pointing out the distinctive black and yellow markings. Someone else said it looked like a venomous garter snake. Then my tweet found its way to a man named Johan Marais, one of South Africa's foremost experts in herpetology, and he tweeted a confirmation of the initial ID. An 'escaped exotic', he said of the nonvenomous North American, most likely somebody's pet. It was like having my own private Google, personable, dynamic, conversational, authoritative.

This act of tapping into the collective mind is known as crowdsourcing, and it turns Twitter from a strictly social hub into a powerful tool for dialogue and research. As a news medium, Twitter is perpetually wired and alive, its receptors tingling as the data charges through the system, conveniently corralled into discrete little bulletins.

The impulse to check Twitter is now ingrained in the journalistic workflow, as is the impulse to tweet the news to your followers while it is still hot and fresh. Herein lies the caveat. The professional journalists, guided by the age-old maxim, 'If your mother says she loves you, check it with a second source,' will holster their twitchy Twitter-finger until they have gathered enough material to weave a story

from the patchwork of truth. They will treat rumours, speculation, social media chatter and unconfirmed reports with caution, testing their veracity with eyewitnesses, independent sources and official spokespeople.

There is another journalistic adage that says 'first is first', and in the rush to cross the line it is easy to be led in completely the wrong direction. A cautionary tale lies in the online coverage of the tragic school shootings in Newtown, USA, in December 2012. In the aftermath of the awful news – 20 children and six adults gunned down by a man with an automatic assault rifle – journalists began scouting for background information as soon as the alleged perpetrator's name was released. The arena of first resort, as it almost always is nowadays, was the Internet, and in particular, the social networks. Within minutes, major news sites, including the New York Times, CBS, and CNN, were carrying the first picture of the young gunman, copied and pasted from his Facebook page. Except that it was not the young gunman. It was his brother, an innocent party, who had been sitting far away at his desk at the time. That misidentification was only one of a string of errors that tangled the story in knots, leading later to outlandish theories – promulgated, of course, on the Internet – that the shootings had been a hoax, or an intricate plot orchestrated by government agencies to justify gun control legislation. The truth was much more prosaic.

In the mad scramble to get a story out, the facts are sometimes trampled underfoot. Eyewitnesses are fallible and may contradict each other. The kaleidoscope of perspectives may be skewed, by accident or design, particularly where the story has a political bent.



It is always difficult to make sense of the news while it is still new and happening. This is why journalism is called the first draft of history, and traditionally the news gathering and distribution process has had buffers built in to minimise inaccuracies and misreporting. But news organisations now publish on multiple platforms. Social networks and the Web are too hungry to wait for the checks and balances; they must be fed, and they must be fed now. So modern journalists are placed in the uncomfortable position of having to scoop their own developing story, dashing off molecules of the news as a teaser to the headline attraction.

In South Africa, it has become commonplace for print and broadcast journalists to tweet from the scene of a breaking news story, or to 'live-tweet' the proceedings from a press conference or courtroom trial. Only later will the big story or picture emerge from these words in progress, these strings of notes and quotes and observations. This makes their job tougher, but it also opens them to new audiences and new ways of storytelling. One journalist I follow, who treads the political beat for a weekly paper, has earned a reputation for balancing her serious news reports with crisp, light-hearted dispatches on the quality of the food at party gatherings, and the fashion triumphs and foibles of the delegates. Her tweets have the quality of thoughts spoken out loud, and she has come to epitomise a new breed of 'social reporter' who is able to cover hard and soft news with equal aplomb.

Either way, there is no longer any convincing excuse for journalists not to use Twitter, as a source, a platform, a springboard or a grandstand.

Journalists can be bull-headed when it comes to adopting new technologies. Would I go back to using a typewriter? I may haul out the old machine and run my fingers dreamily over the keys every now and again, but no. Cellphones, computers and social networks have made the job of being a journalist different, more challenging, in some ways harder, but more thrilling and rewarding too. A social network is to a journalist as a stethoscope is to a general practitioner. It lets us tune into the heartbeat.

I follow more than 17 000 people on Twitter. That may seem like a burden, but I have learned to distinguish the signal from the noise. I follow poets and politicians, architects and engineers, trade unionists and tycoons, atheists and holy rollers, singers and soccer players, daydreamers and curmudgeons, anarchists and mavericks, sociopaths and humanitarians, standup comedians and prophets of doom. I follow people who rant, rave, argue, declaim, pick fights, sling insults, and issue challenges and manifestos. And I follow other people who hardly ever say anything other than 'Good morning'. But they are all part of my network.

Twitter is a parliament of the people, raucous, self-elected, beyond any calls to order or decorum. It is a restless lekgotla of opinions and attitudes, a free-flowing assembly of experts on any matter from the Middle East crisis to the Bafana Bafana lineup. It is a vigilant community too, self-correcting, protective of its freedoms, but quick to pounce on those who reveal themselves to be a bully or a hate-tweeter. But those sort of battles are rare. This is an open forum, and you choose the characters you follow as much as you choose the characters you use to get your message across.

Twitter finds its greatest freedom in its greatest limitation, with that strict 140-character restraint imposing a sharpness and clarity of thought that is often absent from other on-line forums, such as the comment sections of blogs and newspaper websites.

More than two-million South Africans belong to this network, a microcosm of the country and a broad spectrum of its society. But there is one set of voices that needs to be heard more loudly. The citizens are here. The government, with very few exceptions, is not. Every cabinet minister should be tweeting. Every director general, every head of department, every provincial premier, every MEC, every government communicator.

Here is a space, free to use, open to the world, where government can tell its own stories, share its own views, compose its own narrative, and engage with its own citizens, not only about the big issues but also about the little matters that help to define the State of the Nation. In 2012, reacting to a flare-up of rumours and speculation on Twitter, a senior South African government spokesperson described social networks as 'a reality we cannot wish away'. He was right. It is time to stop wishing, and start embracing. It is time to get social. Why should journalists have all the fun?