Birds of a feather: Making the connection

• JEAN SUTHERLAND

AS strange as it may seem, a casual SMS interchange with a friend as he struggled with home renovations on a heat-packed California afternoon back in 2007 was the first chirp in the Twitter revolution.

Well almost. It was a shot fired across the bow! Or a tweet in time ...

Biz Stone was trying out the prototype of what was to become Twitter.

While the laugh-out-loud moment, sparked by that abbreviated message (even as SMSes go) from co-founder Evan Williams – "sipping Pinot Noir after massage in Napa valley" – still informs the enjoyment aspect of Stone's approach to social networking, tweet has entered the global lexicon and Twitter is now a force to be reckoned with when it comes to breaking and hard news.

Barely two years after the Napa moment, Stone and fellow Twitter co-founders Williams and Jack Dorsey found themselves ranking on *Time* magazine's 2009 list of the 100 most influential people in the world, headlining the section 'Builders and Titans'.

Twitter, of course, is a microblogging service that restricts each entry, or tweet, to 140 characters.

24/7 Wall Street reported last year that because of it word limit and because it can be used with ease on both PCs and mobile devices, it has become one of the largest platforms in the world for sharing real-time data.

ZEN & THE ART OF ACTIVISM

For 29 journalists from overseas, a recent visit to the social media company's spacious San Francisco headquarters was the second stop on what a colleague dubbed the Holy Grail trail of new social media.

The airy almost Zen offices are in sharp contrast to the activity and activism that Twitter enables – 50 million or so tweets a day are generated globally.

From celebs to companies, from everyday people to everyday news, Twitter has become the pulse of the digital world.

That it has caught on as quickly as it has appears to have almost caught co-founder Biz Stone and his colleagues by surprise.

When talking to *The Namibian* and other overseas journalists, Stone was frank about the challenge the company faces.

They are grappling with how to make Twitter pay its way into a future that the company is helping chart.

Stone says he is happy that Twitter is adding value to businesses, and is now looking at how it can make money without compromising the essence of the company.

He is quick to add that he would never consider selling Twitter.

Photo: Ido Kenan (Room 404)

ON THE TWEET BEAT … Twitter co-founder Biz Stone highlights some of the ways in which Twitter is being used during an exchange with overseas journalists.

EMPATHY & ENGAGEMENT

It's evident that for Stone it's more than a business; that it's not about "cashing in" but about sustaining, and developing, an idea whose time has come. And that, at heart, it's people-centred.

"Twitter is about the triumph of humanity, not the triumph of technology," he says, referring to ways in which the microblogging service has been used in a transformative way – from protesters in Iran to individuals dealing with community issues "people are using it as a tool to do things for others".

While Twitter has to field its fair share of criticism, Stone sees it as leading to more empathy and more engagement.

In short, he believes it connects the global and the intimate, and that in many cases it helps people start to think of themselves as global citizens; that it's not only about information sharing, but also about caring.

Stone also sees it as contributing to news processes, rather than detracting from them.

"It is a new form of communication happening in real time," he says. "Everyone can benefit."

He's right. It has emerged as a frontline tool when it comes to breaking news – during the aftermath of the Chile earthquake one TV commentator referred to Twitter as the information equivalent of the speed of light.

THE FAST & THE SEMINAL

Eyewitness reports and dramatic personal accounts from any given news frontline are now available in all but a nanosecond wherever there's a person with a cellphone.

It's a far cry from the chilly Ben and Jerry's (ice cream) 'compliment' paid to Twitter when it first burst onto the social media scene – that it was fun but not useful.

Still, like ice cream, Twitter is more than just a passing scoop.

Although Twitter has entered the global phenomenon realm, Stone is not shy to talk about almost 'ordinary' chapters in the Twitter storybook.

He refers to the day "something happened in Austin, Texas", a springboard moment in Twitter's history, when he saw its ability to mobilise people.

In short, a young man and his friend to go a bar, it's too crowded but the young man couldn't get hold of his friends. So he tweets suggesting they hook up at another bar.

By the time the duo arrived at the new drinking hole, it was packed with a queue snaking round the corner. Everyone had tweeted their friends, creating a chain reaction.

"The image that comes to mind is perfect for the word Twitter is this idea of a flock of birds moving around as an object in flight, it looks perfectly choreographed it looks practiced but it's not, it's just rudimentary communication amongst individuals in real time," Stone says.

It was just one of a number of seminal moments – large and small – in the rise of Twitter, which has evolved from social to socially conscious.

Among others:

• Twitter was used by people who found themselves in the midst of the horrific Mumbai bombing.

• Its role in detailing the protests in the wake of the Iranian government's crackdown after disputed elections has been well documented.

• More immediately it has helped highlight the plight of people caught up in natural disasters such as the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile.

"The more connected people become around the world, they have the opportunity to walk in other people's shoes for a few seconds," Stone says.

** The Namibian's Jean Sutherland took part in a weeklong programme on the new social media in the United States arranged by the Foreign Press Centre in the State Department.*

Inside tweets

TWITTER co-founder Biz Stone's approach to business is straightforward: "We can change the world, build a business and have fun."

Some of the thoughts Stone and his colleagues have mapped out, so far, on building a new company:

• We will win if we always do the right thing for our users.

• There's a creative answer to every problem.

• We can do better (or someone else is going to).

• The only deal worth doing is the win-win deal.

• Assume your co-workers are smart and have good intentions.

• There are more smart people outside the company than in it.

• We all have room to grow; we're just getting started.

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