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TURNING TO TWITTER

BY RAYMOND JOSEPH

It was late in the afternoon early in January 2010 and I was at home listening to the radio, when a breaking newsflash interrupted the programme to report a fatal shark attack at Fishhoek, just 20 minutes away from where I was – in ideal conditions.

But conditions were far from ideal: not only was traffic generally slow on the road to Fishhoek because of major road works, but the afternoon peak traffic was already building up and I knew getting to the scene in a hurry was not an option.

So instead I turned to Twitter, which I'd signed up for a few months earlier, but was still grappling to get to grips with. Searching for #sharkattack and then #fishhoek (the hash tag is how Twitter files related information), I found a tweet from IT techie Greg Coppen (@skabenga), who had witnessed the attack from his home perched on the mountainside overlooking the beach – and I knew that I had struck gold.

"Holy shit. We just saw a gigantic shark eat what looked like a person in front of our house..." he tweeted, following up with a second tweet: "That shark was huge. Like dinosaur huge." That second tweet went viral and ended up being quoted in the papers, TV, radio and online across the globe.

Contacting Coppen via Twitter I obtained his contact number and was soon interviewing him by phone, as he described in detail how he had seen the shark take the swimmer while he watched in horror from his mountainside ring-side seat.

Searching again, I tracked down someone who was on the beach as the rescue services rushed to the scene – and with 45 minutes I had enough information to write a story, filled with eye witness details, colour and great quotes, all without ever leaving home.

From that moment on, I was a convert to the blue bird – Twitter's logo – and its power as a game-changing reporting tool.

As an experienced news editor who understands the value of innovative reporters who regularly come to news conferences with great story ideas and the contacts and sources to make them work, I rate Twitter right up there with other great tools that have helped make the job of the reporter easier.

To put it into context, I still remember with absolute clarity standing in the ghostly works of SAAN – home to the *Rand Daily Mail*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Sunday Express* – the day after the Atex computer system went live, marking the switch from hot metal to cold type. Where just the night before banks of typesetting machines clattered in a cacophony of noise and the hot air smelt strongly of molten metal, now it was eerily silent.

I remember working on Atex, driven by huge processors with LP-sized memory discs, all housed in a large air-conditioned room; I remember my first mobile phone, a brick-sized brute with a battery that lasted an hour or two; I remember my first DOS-driven PC with floppy discs and then my first laptop; and now I have a BlackBerry smartphone that has brought

multiple tools together in one slim device.

Twitter is a powerful tool that is a constant source of story ideas; it's great for building contacts and a treasure trove of new sources; it's an excellent medium for crowd sourcing ideas and for keeping track of trends and the latest information; and it beats most other media hands-down when it comes to breaking news.

It's also a powerful aggregation tool, acting as a filter that pushes news and information you want and are interested in, straight to your desktop, tablet or smartphone. I have set up a list of news outlets on my BlackBerry and my day begins with me catching up on the news on my mobile. As an old school journalist – and a creature of habit – I still read several newspapers each day, although I am increasingly finding that a lot of it is old news by then thanks to me having read it via Twitter, sometimes a day or three earlier.

And as if all this were not enough, Twitter is also a powerful search engine that many believe beats Google because, while the giant search engine's algorithms search deep into the furthest corners of the web, Twitter not only gives you links to the usual fare, it also adds the *vox pop* (the voice of the people) into the mix.

Or as Alan Rusbridger, the switched-on editor of *The Guardian* who, with his "open journalism" approach, is taking his publication into uncharted waters, wrote: "The energy in Twitter gathers around people who can say things crisply and entertainingly, even though they may be 'unknown'. They may speak to a small audience, but if they say interesting things they may well be republished numerous times and the exponential pace of those re-transmissions can, in time, dwarf the audience of the so-called big names. Shock news: sometimes the people formerly known as readers can write snappier headlines and copy than we can."

The role that social media, particularly Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, played in the events leading up to – and during – the Arab Spring uprisings are now well known.

And it was as these uprisings unfolded that senior strategist at National Public Radio (NPR) Andy Carvin (@acarvin) "used Twitter to create a kind of crowdsourced newswire... inventing a brand-new kind of journalism on the fly and in full public view," wrote journalist Mathew Ingram recently.

Beginning with Tunisia, then Egypt and now Syria, Carvin curated tweets, from both ordinary people and dissidents on the ground, often from places where few journalists were operating – and then used his large following to stand up, add to or debunk the information.

Carvin told Ingram that he thinks of his kind of reporting as a crowd-sourced newsroom – "with him as the reporter, or the anchor (or 'news DJ' another term he likes to use) pulling in reports from different places, and then relying on his followers to act as editors and sources, fact-checking and verifying and also distributing the news that he was curating."

Along the way he has been able to help his NPR reporting colleagues find exclusive stories

and put them in touch with the sources and contacts he had made through Twitter, and who had grown to trust him.

One of the best displays of the power of Twitter and the role of ordinary people in breaking news is the iconic photo taken by a ferry passenger of a jet that made an emergency landing in New York's Hudson River, the passengers standing on the wings as it slowly sank into the murky depths.

His tweet: "<http://twitpic.com/135xa> - There's a plane in the Hudson. I'm on the ferry going to pick up the people. Crazy", went viral and is now the stuff of Twitter legend.

In South Africa, switched-on reporters – ironically many of them from radio and TV – are using Twitter to cover unfolding news stories in-between news bulletins and editions. A good example was the recent urgent application by the SAPS to have the lifting of ex-spy boss Richard Mdluli's suspension overturned; filing their tweets under #mdluli, Twitter-savvy journalists reported the hearings blow-by-blow in a flow of 140-character length tweets, hours before the news appeared in print.

Live tweeting press conferences and speeches is also happening more frequently, so people on Twitter were able, for example, to get details of President Jacob Zuma's State of the Nation address as it was delivered by following #sona2012. The same goes for disasters and it was possible to keep up with the latest news from the ground during the earthquakes in New Zealand last year by following #nzeq. This threw up a rich timeline of information from ordinary people on the ground and from the emergency services using it to communicate with people affected.

Yet, inexplicably, there are still some papers in South Africa that discourage their reporters from tweeting about a story before it is printed in ink on the product of a dead tree. There are also many senior journalists who should know better, but still call Twitter a waste of time because they're "not interested in what people had for breakfast".

As someone who uses Twitter as a journalist, I also use it in my teaching: for example, the 140-character restriction is a great tool for teaching tight, clear and concise writing.

It's true that there's lots of inane chatter on Twitter, but the reality is that you get what you ask for. So if you follow rubbish, you get... rubbish spewing back in.

But that doesn't mean avoiding following "civilians", just that you should avoid following people who witter on about nothing, often in difficult to decipher SMS-speak.

In this age of Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Instagram and lots of other social media tools, it is often these citizen reporters who are first on the scene when news happens, and often the first hint of a breaking story comes from them.

So, what I do know is that next time there's a shark attack or another big breaking story and I can't get there because of traffic, time or tight deadlines, I know I can turn to Twitter to help me get the story.