

How Google removed the muzzle on Twitter in Egypt

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From left, Twitter Vice-President International Katie Stanton and Google employees Ujjwal Singh and Steve Crossan pose for a portrait at Google headquarters in Mountain View , Calif., Thursday, Feb. 3, 2011.(AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez)

(AP) -- Even before his first day on the job at Google, Ujjwal Singh was trying to figure out how to use his passion for the spoken word and the company's technological prowess to help Egyptians bypass government efforts to muzzle the massive protests there.

Singh, 38, helped start an online service that lets fans share voice messages with the likes of Miley Cyrus and the Jonas Brothers. [Google](#) bought the startup Jan. 25, and a Google product team leader trying to figure out a way around Egypt's recent Internet blackout asked Singh for help before he reported to work.

A weekend of brainstorming and programming later, Speak2Tweet was born - a service that lets people call a phone number and leave a message, then posts a link to the message to Twitter.

It allowed Egyptians to communicate even as the regime of President Hosni Mubarak cut Internet and cell phone services for days, trying to squelch furious protests in the streets of Cairo demanding an end to his three decades of authoritarian rule.

By the time Singh started his job Monday, his service was already part of the uprising.

"He designed, built and launched his first product before he started at Google, which is now our all-time record," says Steve Crossan, a Google product manager who has been working at the Internet search leader for five years.

Almost 2,900 spoken tweets had been posted as of Friday afternoon on the Twitter account (at)speak2tweet. Some of the heaviest volume came after access to both Twitter and the Internet was restored in Egypt earlier this week. The alternative method of tweeting has turned into a forum for longer-form expression because the voice recordings aren't confined to Twitter's 140-character limit.

Another Twitter account, (at)AliveInEgypt, has been set up to transcribe the messages, which are mostly in Arabic, into text. An [Internet radio station](#) also is playing the voice recordings at <http://egypt.periskopradio.hu> .

The service has been used to express outrage, indignation, fear, exhilaration and pleas for help in the fight to oust Mubarak. "This corrupt regime must be eliminated," said one of the translated tweets on AliveInEgypt. Another said: "For all our Arab Brothers, for all the men

in Tahrir Square. Please help us, stand with us, if you abandon us we will die."

One woman, speaking in English, said it would take more than an Internet blackout to silence her. "The last time when they did this I was completely freaked out," she said. "I was so scared that they are going to, like, shoot us all and nobody would know about us. This time I am not scared at all. I feel like I want to tell them, `Bring it on.'"

There is no way to verify that every tweet came from the site of the protests, or even from Egypt. When the service can trace the country code of the call, it adds a note, or hashtag, specifying the location.

The service's use was limited by the very problem that created it: Without Internet access, most Egyptians didn't know Speak2Tweet existed, says Jillian York, a project coordinator for the Berkman Center for Internet & Society in Harvard University.

Even so, it provided a vital link between Egypt and the rest of the world, says Cynthia Wong, director of the Center for Democracy & Technology's Project on Global Internet Freedom. As the word of the service spreads, York expects it to attract more voice messages because only about one-fourth of Egypt's population has Internet access.

"It's important for activists and companies to do everything they can to keep the channels of communication open when a government is trying to shut them down," Wong says.

The service got its start Jan. 28, when Crossan began to wonder how people might be able to get their messages out to a mass audience without the help of Internet or text messaging on mobile phones.

Crossan says he wasn't interested in making a political statement - he just

wanted to tackle a complex problem that also might further Google's crusade to "organize the world's information and make it universally accessible."

So Crossan contacted a former Google colleague, Katie Stanton, who now oversees Twitter's international services. She referred him to Benjy Weinberger, another former Google employee who is now a Twitter engineer. The two men spent the rest of Friday swapping ideas through instant messages and e-mail.

Cooperating with Google on the project was a no-brainer for Twitter. "[Twitter](#) is more about human communications than technology," Stanton says. "We want people's voices to be heard."

Initially, Crossan and Weinberger tinkered with a system that would interpret the tones of a telephone keypad and translate the sounds into tweets. After that idea proved too complicated, Crossan remembered something he had read earlier in the week: Google had just acquired a Palo Alto, Calif., startup called SayNow, which developed technology that lets teens exchange spoken messages with celebrities.

Crossan, 39, decided to contact SayNow's founders, Singh and Nikhyl Singhal, about the problem before they were scheduled to start work for their new parent company.

Crossan was helping his 2-year-old son ride a bike for the first time in a neighborhood park Saturday morning when he heard back from Singh. The two men figured they might be able to develop a voice-to-tweet service by building on the same technology SayNow used.

"Voices capture emotion, personality and the moment," Singh says. "It gives you the intangible that you can't get through text and data."

The idea had another appeal: It would work whether the person was calling on a rotary telephone or a smart phone.

With the help of Google employees in Switzerland and Australia, the new tweeting service was taking shape late Saturday night when Crossan realized he had overlooked one detail: He hadn't even told Google what he was doing.

That wasn't a major oversight because Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin have always encouraged engineers to devote 20 percent of their time to pet projects. In theory, the freedom is supposed to foster new ideas and drive employees to work harder so their pet projects might turn into actual products more quickly.

The formula worked well in Google's early days, but the pace of innovation has slowed as the company grown to more than 24,000 employees. Google CEO Eric Schmidt is stepping aside from that job in April and handing the reins to Page as part of an effort to weed out bureaucracy and accelerate decision-making.

In Crossan's case, he saw that one of his bosses, Bradley Horowitz, happened to be online late Saturday. Crossan e-mailed him about the new service. Crossan said Horowitz told him the idea was "awesome." Crossan and Singh spent the rest of the night spent coding.

Although the speak-to-tweet service was available before dawn Sunday morning, it didn't attract a lot of attention until Google announced it on its corporate blog Monday afternoon.

Now, Crossan and Singh are hoping the speak-to-tweet survive will survive long after [Egypt](#) quiets down. If nothing else, they say it will serve as a reminder that phones still can serve another purpose besides texting and surfing the Web.

More information: <http://egypt.periszkoprado.hu>

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