

## S. African officials use Twitter for Mandela news

February 26 2012, by Justine Gerardy

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Nelson Mandela's health scares send Twitter into overdrive, but South African officials made savvier use of social media to keep the world informed on the global icon's latest medical woe after Mandela was taken to hospital.

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The presidency used Facebook and [Twitter](#) to tell the public that Madiba, as he is affectionately known, had been hospitalised on Saturday, and later to assure that he was not in danger and had been discharged.

"It's a sign of a modern government embracing a modern era," Matthew Buckland, publisher of South African technology trend site Memeburn,

told AFP.

"By the presidency breaking the news themselves and releasing the statement on Twitter, people followed by retweeting the presidency's statement and referring back to this as the [original source](#) of the news," he said.

"This is exactly how it should be handled as opposed to mass confusion and multiple, contradicting sources and conjecture."

When Mandela, 93, was hospitalised last year for a [respiratory infection](#), a virtual news blackout sparked panic in a public relations blunder for those handling the legacy of one of the world's best-known people.

This time the presidency took control, shutting down online whispers by announcing his admission and giving updates.

The efforts did not go unnoticed by a nation that increasingly uses smartphones and the Internet.

"Fantastic, great 2 c dat the presidency learned some vital lessons from last year's fiasco when it kept the whole hospitalisation thing a secret. Good PR practice! Nice 1," was one response to Mandela's discharge, in typically casual [social media lingo](#).

"I'm not a Zuma supporter, but thank you zuma for let us know about MR. MANDELA. A great deed you did," said another poster on Saturday.

Mandela is adored in South Africa for leading a racially divided country into democracy and is exalted internationally as a symbol of forgiveness and freedom.

Any hint of his ill-health immediately goes global, with hip hop giant Russell Simmons urging prayers and Manchester United's Rio Ferdinand calling him the "most inspirational man alive" after his hospitalisation.

"People want to know from minute to minute what is happening, and previously it was all guesswork and speculation and rumour," said Arthur Goldstuck of high-tech market researchers World Wide Worx.

"They learned a lesson from the last time around and clearly they had a plan of action that was ready to be initiated the moment something like this happened."

The detail-hungry media has offered praise but also criticism. As officials refused to say where Mandela was hospitalised or divulge exact details, unconfirmed reports that he had undergone hernia surgery flowed furiously.

"The whole of South Africa feels that they are part of his family and they feel almost the same rights as his family to information about his condition," Goldstuck said.

"The government has to respect his privacy so they have to strike a balance between the two."

The experts say the conflict between the inquisitive role of the press and the state's gatekeeping will never go away, but that the pre-emptive releases of official information close the gaps for social media to fill.

Getting it right is particularly important with a global figure like Mandela, who has already suffered death-by-Twitter numerous times.

"It's difficult to know where that line is in terms of what they must reveal and what they should hold back," Buckland said.

"It is a balance, and in this case it feels as if the government got the balance right."

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