

Yik Yak's frat-bro founders shrug off growing pains

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The most popular post of all time on Yik Yak is a dirty joke. Less than 2 years old, the Atlanta-based social network is geared mostly toward college students who access and post unsigned announcements through an app on their smartphones. At best it's a local forum for public conversations that might otherwise only occur in private. At worst it's a platform for immaturity, racism and cyber-bullying.

During the recent TechCrunch Disrupt NY conference, some of that tension theatrically played out during a roughly 20-minute Silicon Valley-esque conversation.

Co-founders and Furman University fraternity brothers Brooks Buffington and Tyler Droll, both of whom went to high school in metro Atlanta, sported mint-green, Yak-mascot-themed socks onstage and said much of what you'd expect:

The business, reportedly valued around an astounding \$400 million, is growing. Anonymous social networks are good. Et cetera.

"(And) another thing that we like to use in the tech world to determine a company's success is whether or not they have a founder suing them," said Jordan Crook, a TechCrunch writer who has closely followed the company, as preface to her question:

"Can you tell us about the status of the lawsuit?"

She was referring to litigation contesting ownership of the [app](#). Another former frat bro, Dougie Warstler, who apparently is still Facebook friends with both Buffington and Droll, claims he's in fact the third co-founder.

Droll said, in a sullen tone: "Unfortunately, we can't talk about it."

"Which means it hasn't settled," added Crook to the amusement of the audience, "so that's something."

Yik Yak declined the Atlanta Journal-Constitution request for a conversation, despite granting them with other local and national publications.

Meanwhile, the social network has prospered on equal parts brilliance of concept and family connections that inevitably led to investments, according to an expansive Business Insider profile.

Inspired by 1950s hit song "Yakety Yak," Droll's parents came up with the app's name. It's supposed to be synonymous with "chit chat," reminiscent of the buzz you might hear in an audience before a movie starts.

As innocent as the concept might sound, there have been some headline-grabbing growing pains, including: the recent arrest of a Virginia Tech student who is accused of making threats over the social network; an Atlanta-area middle school principal who issued a letter warning parents about the app; and an uproar at the University of Mary Washington where feminist group members say they were harassed on Yik Yak.

The company has made adjustments - for instance hiring a person whose job is to classify Yaks and root out questionable content. The startup has also blocked users from accessing the app on [high school](#) campuses.

There are other filters, as well.

The app only allows communication within a 10-mile radius, which the co-founders say creates community. The anonymity, Droll said, levels the field among users "so that you can be the star athlete, or the quietest kid in the class."

While the app has generated worries in some places, they cite other examples of instances when it was used to more beneficial effect.

At Franklin & Marshall, Buffington said, Yik Yak posts helped people organize and change college policies. At the University of Michigan, students banded together on Yik Yak after someone posted about a planned suicide. At Liberty University, the app's anonymity revealed the political attitudes of students who were forced to attend Ted Cruz's presidential nomination speech.

"We've done such a good job of setting the right tone, you know, domestically of how the app should be used," Buffington said. "It's one of those things that once you set it, it's set and you can't change it and so making sure that as we expand, you know, to post grad or international markets making sure that right tone is set."

Yik Yak is now on nearly every campus in the U.S. and moving on to those in the U.K., Canada and Australia. Droll and Buffington, however, refused to give the number of active users.

Despite roughly \$73.5 million in venture capital funding, Yik Yak doesn't make money yet. Eyeballs are more important than profit for emerging social networks. The former can lead to the latter, either through acquisition or yet-to-be discovered business models.

"Don't worry about the money,' is what they say in Silicon Valley,"

Crook said, by way of asking about the plan to make the app profitable. "But, in New York, they say: 'Worry about the money'."

Buffington answered that it could potentially be ads.

Yik Yak's privacy policy does state that if a user mentions a "business partner" in a message, the startup might disclose that fact to the company that's being talked about.

"I think these sorts of things sort of linger in the back of our minds," Buffington said. "But, it's nothing that we're looking to even test at this point."

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