

Twitter, a five-year-old changing the world

March 14 2011, by Glenn Chapman



Twitter logo is displayed at the entrance of Twitter headquarters in San Francisco on March 11 in California. San Francisco-based Twitter won the hearts of trendsetters after officially coming out at the South By South West technology festival in Texas in 2007.

At five years old, Twitter is just starting to change the world.

Jack Dorsey fired off the first tweets on March 21, 2006, an automated "just setting up my twtr" message which he followed with the first "human" tweet -- "inviting coworkers."

It was Dorsey who proposed the idea for Twitter while working with Biz Stone and Evan Williams at podcasting company Odeo.

Since then, Twitter has been embraced as a forum for sharing anything from a favorite lunch spot to violations of civil rights and calls for revolution.

"As much fun as we were having, there was always, I think, in the back of our heads the idea of the potential of something important coming from it," Stone said of the startup's formative days.

"Even if we didn't say it out loud and talk about it," the co-founder said in an interview with AFP. "Because we were just getting started and we really had no place saying anything like that."

Williams, Dorsey, and Stone thought it would be fun to build a service that lets people use text messaging to share thoughts, insights and news with the masses.

San Francisco-based Twitter won the hearts of trendsetters after officially coming out at the South By South West technology festival in Texas in 2007.

"South By South West was the real eye-opener to the fact that we had, quite possibly, created a new way for people to communicate that was real time, sort of agnostic with regard to device and potentially transformative in the way people self-organize," Stone said.

"And everything that happened around the world that Twitter found its way into was really just yet another eye-opening display of the potential."

Initially scoffed at by some as a platform for telling the world what one had for breakfast, Twitter has become respected as a lifeline during disasters such as the earthquake in Japan and an organizing tool for champions of democracy.

Stone believed it vital for Twitter to remain a politically neutral technology platform focused on fostering open communication.

He saw the use of Twitter by those out to overthrow oppressive regimes in the Middle East as proof that given the right tools, people will stand for good.

"One of the things I told our team early on was that if Twitter is to be a triumph, it is not necessarily to be a triumph of technology but a triumph of humanity," Stone said.

"If we are successful it is not going to be because of our algorithms and our machines, it is going to be what people end up doing with this tool that defines us and makes us a success or not."

More than 200 million people use Twitter, firing off more than 140 million text messages of 140 characters or less daily. The length limit was set to fit the maximum allowed in text messages sent using mobile phones.

-- Twitter 'brought our fans closer together --

The San Francisco Giants baseball team, which won the national championship last year, has been using Twitter as the ball club's "voice," connecting directly with fans in real time.

"Twitter definitely brought our fans closer together," said Bryan Srabian, director of social media for the Giants. "It didn't help us win the World Series, but there is some destiny with us winning the year we embrace Twitter."

More important than speaking to fans, Twitter is a great way to listen.

"People are talking about you good, bad or indifferent," Srabian said.

"We've gotten more out of listening, but finding your voice is really important."

Giants players are not allowed to tweet during games, a policy that is becoming more common in sports to stem controversy and keep players focused.

Twitter has become a core tool for Marcia Gagliardi, whose free weekly "e-column" TableHopper is devoted to the San Francisco area restaurant scene.

She was originally hesitant out of concern Twitter would only provide strangers another way to pitch stories or harangue her with criticism.

Then she noticed that Twitter was chock full of candid comments by chefs and other culinary insiders. She became a devotee two years ago.



Twitter co-founder Biz Stone (R) and CEO Evan Williams speak at Twitter headquarters in San Francisco, California 2010. Co-founder Jack Dorsey fired off the first tweet on March 21, 2006. It read "just setting up my twtr." It was Dorsey who proposed the idea for Twitter while working with Stone and Williams at podcasting company Odeo.

"I can use Twitter to break big news and learn a lot of gossip," Gagliardi said.

"It's an amazing way to keep up on what restaurants are doing," she said. "I consider it the back room chatter for a lot of chefs... you can see which dishes they are loving, where they are taking their girlfriends for dinner."

And restaurants can take advantage of Twitter by firing out notices such as special dishes or when the pizzas are fresh out of the ovens.

A gourmet street food truck scene that has become the rage in San Francisco and other cities would not be possible without Twitter, according to Gagliardi.

Along with letting people quickly spread messages to any interested "followers," it provides access to those who might never return an email or respond to a telephone call, she said.

And that could be a part of Twitter's magic, according to Stone.

"It is not just about connecting to people you know, it is about connecting to people you wish you knew," he said.

"It's about following your interests, not just people but things that are intriguing to you. It's about getting news and information you otherwise wouldn't have gotten."

-- 'All in the same boat' --

If one were to get what Evan Williams calls "hallucinogenically

optimistic," Twitter could bring out the best in humanity, Stone said hopefully.

"For me to be able to look at my phone while I'm in a grocery store to see mixed in with Evan's tweets and my Mom's tweets people from halfway around the world engaged in political dissent unlocks a kind of empathy in me that I wouldn't have watching TV," Stone said.

"I think that unlocks... a realization that we are not just citizens of a particular state or country but citizens of the world," he continued.

"Think of things we could get accomplished if we starting thinking of ourselves as all in the same boat rather than broken up into islands."

At five years old, Twitter is still a child full of promise and dreams of changing the world for the better.

It isn't profitable, but is gingerly rolling out promoted tweets, trends and accounts and doing well with early partners in the program.



Biz Stone, co-founder and creative director of Twitter, talks about his company during an interview at Twitter headquarters in San Francisco on March 11 in California. Co-founder Jack Dorsey fired off the first tweet on March 21, 2006. It read "just setting up my twtr." It was Dorsey who proposed the idea for Twitter while working with Stone and Evan Williams at podcasting company Odeo.

Twitter, which has rejected numerous takeover offers, has no plans to go public with an initial stock offering, opting instead to focus on improving its operations and services, according to Stone.

He said Twitter is, in essence, like a child getting ready to go to kindergarten for the first time.

"It is just the beginning of a life full of potential and adventure, and I really do think that is where we are right now," Stone said.

"We are just about to go to school and just getting started," he said. "The last five years has really just been us getting our footing."

Twitter by the numbers at age five

Here are some facts about the San Francisco-based startup:

- Dorsey's first tweet, sent on March 21, 2006, read: "just setting up my twtr"
- Twitter has more than 200 million registered users sending more than 140 million tweets a day

- Last year, Twitter users sent 25 billion tweets and the company added more than 100 million new registered accounts
- Pop star Lady Gaga (@ladygaga) has the most Twitter followers with 8.78 million followed by Justin Bieber (@justinbieber) with 8.13 million, Britney Spears (@britneyspears) with 7.12 million, Barack Obama (@barackobama) with 6.97 million and Kim Kardashian (@kimkardashian) with 6.73 million
- Actor Charlie Sheen (@charliesheen) was the fastest to one million followers, picking them up in just 24 hours
- The hashtag (#) feature on Twitter which groups tweets by subject debuted in August 2007, proposed by a user
- In October 2009, Google and Microsoft began integrating tweets into their search products
- Twitter has "370-plus" employees and is adding workers almost weekly
- Twitter is based in San Francisco, with additional employees in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington
- Twitter was incorporated in April 2007; it was co-founded by Biz Stone, Evan Williams and Jack Dorsey -- @biz, @ev and @jack
- The initial Twitter logo was created by Stone, a former graphic designer
- Twitter chief executive Dick Costolo is a former improvisational comedian



The Co-founder of Twitter Jack Dorsey, pictured here in 2010, fired off the first tweet on March 21, 2006. It read "just setting up my twttr." It was Dorsey who proposed the idea for Twitter while working with Biz Stone and Evan Williams at podcasting company Odeo.

Twitter co-founder Biz Stone in his own words

Twitter co-founder Biz Stone sat down with Agence France-Presse for an interview looking at the micro-blogging service as it celebrates its fifth birthday on March 21.

The following is a transcript of the interview conducted at Twitter headquarters in San Francisco by AFP correspondent Glenn Chapman:

QUESTION. What did you think Twitter would be at five years old?

BIZ STONE: Obviously I didn't think it would be me meeting with (Russian President Dmitry) Medvedev. But from our days working on Blogger we definitely knew that the open exchange of information and

these largescale systems that allow people to express themselves and communicate were important things. And in some cases and in some places sometimes the only way that people are able to communicate with one another.

The reason we were really building Twitter was because we really wanted to do something we were emotionally engaged in from a product perspective. As much fun as we were having, there was always, I think, in the back of our heads the idea of the potential of something important coming from it. Even if we didn't say it out loud and talk about it. Because we were just getting started and we really had no place saying anything like that. Having been working now for more than a decade on these kinds of systems, we did know that there was something to them.

The thing really different about Twitter as opposed to the previous work is the speed. I'm having a hard time grappling with the idea it has been five years already. It really doesn't seem like it's been five years. It's weird to even think about it like that.

2008, a year after we incorporated the company, we knew something big was going down. The president was using Twitter and we knew then that it was going to be important. It turns out we would spend the next three years trying to catch up with that level of importance. And everything that happened around the world that Twitter found its way into was really just yet another eye-opening display of the potential. Each time the potential got bigger and bigger.

The initial potential was South By Southwest 2007, that was the real eye-opener to the fact that we had quite possibly created a new way for people to communicate that was real time, sort of agnostic with regard to device and potentially transformative in the way that people self-organize and communicate. That was the first one, everything that happened was yet another one. That we definitely didn't expect all that as

evidenced by the frequent visits by the fail whales in the past three years.

Q: Many fail whale sightings lately?

BIZ: Lately, we've been doing great. Mike Abbott (who joined Twitter from Palm in 2010) has been doing an incredible job. The key thing is we have gotten good at hiring. For the longest time Twitter had 20-30 people, now we are over 350. We have strong engineering operations people and the fail whale sightings have dramatically decreased. We are operating at a much more efficient level.

Q: What is your take on the current role Twitter is playing in the Middle East?

BIZ: My general take is that Twitter is a neutral technology platform and that we, as the people who foster this open communication platform and help it grow and help people use it, are politically neutral and removed from this. That is a very important thing for us to be. The other thing I think though is that it is a testament to this belief that people are smart, people are good. You give them a simple tool that allows them to display those truths and they'll prove it to you every day. That is one of those things that has yet again been proven in use in recent current events: it is all about the people. One of the things I told our team early on was that if Twitter is to be a triumph, it is not necessarily to be a triumph of technology but a triumph of humanity. If we are successful it is not going to be because of our algorithms and our machines it is going to be what people end up doing with this tool that defines us and makes us a success or not.

Q. That is refreshingly humble.

BIZ: I used to work at Google too, and there was a definite ethos that technology could cure all the world's problems, and to a certain extent

that is true. It is a healthy, good opinion to have. But when you take a nice wide view of it, it is not the tools it's the people and that is always going to be the case.

Q. What is the magic? If there is some reason Twitter has been so blazingly adopted what is it?

BIZ: The real answer is I don't know. But if I were to wager a guess a big part is that it is just very simple and connects people to other people they would not otherwise be connected to. I think that is very important. It is not just about connecting to people you know, it is about connecting to people you wish you knew. It's about following your interests, not just people but things that are intriguing to you. It's about getting news and information you otherwise wouldn't have gotten. For me to be able to look at my phone while I'm in a grocery store to see mixed in with Evan's tweets and my Mom's tweets people from halfway around the world engaged in political dissent unlocks a kind of empathy in me that I wouldn't have watching TV. When I watch TV I feel like it is something that is going on in an alternate universe, but when I look at it shuffled in with the rest of my life, I feel an attachment to it that I wouldn't have otherwise felt. I think that unlocks a kind of empathy in people, a realization that we are not just citizens of a particular state or country but citizens of the world. That we are all in this together. Ultimately, if you want to get what Evan calls 'hallucinogenically optimistic' there could potentially be an alignment of thought among us global citizens, and that could be a very good thing. Think of things we could get accomplished if we starting thinking of ourselves as all in the same boat rather than broken up into islands.

Q. How is Twitter handling the pressure to make a profit?

BIZ: A lot of people don't realize we have these revenue products. We have the suite of promoted products: promoted tweets, promoted trends,

and promoted accounts. That is growing great actually. Some Twitter watchers are frustrated that we are not making more noise about it and making a whole big deal about it. Our whole thing all along has been value before profit. First let's show there is value in the system. Let's see where we are creating value. Let's watch as the movie studios realize that word of mouth on Twitter can help their film and then ask ourselves how we can make that even more valuable and then create promoted revenue generating products that follow that and make it more valuable. Great, movie studios are using Twitter to get the word out about a film. Do they want to get the word out even more? Do they want to see when they buy a promoted tweet to measure the impact? So we give them a dashboard where they can track it. Are we having high-level engagement with people? The answer is yes. For the limited amount of partners we have engaged with, they are seeing incredible success, beyond what we had anticipated. That is going really well, it is going to continue to roll out slowly because engineering and operations are always, at this point, higher priority.

We do now have a small sales team. We have sales engineers working on promoted products. We are trying out cool new stuff. It's an exciting, fun time, because for a lot of people joining Twitter now it is kind of just the beginning. We've proven that Twitter is an interesting global communication and information network, but we are just beginning to prove that it can be a really good business. And we continue to prove internally to our employees that we can have a lot of fun along the way. For us, that has always been the definition of success: have a positive global impact, make money doing it, and have fun along the way. You've got to have all three of those things in order to be Twitter.

Q. Is Twitter profitable?

BIZ: We make money; we are not announcing that we print money over here. We are at just the beginning stages of revenue generation and we

are at that point where we are still very highly engaged with the partners that we have let in as we try to figure out what is working and what we should change. A lot of high touch going on right now as we try to figure out what is working and what is not working.

Q. Any thought to an IPO?

BIZ: I don't know why people don't believe me about this, but that is not even something we discuss. We don't even talk about that in the board meetings. It is something that is so far off. We are just beginning to start with making revenues, just getting a handle on being able to celebrate the amount of uptime. We shouldn't be celebrating uptime. We are still getting out of that phase. It shouldn't be an issue. It's 99.9 percent uptime we should be thinking about. We are still at the beginning of what Twitter is going to be. It is still way too early to be talking about that stuff.

Q. Where do you think Twitter is as a five-year-old?

BIZ: I think putting it on a human scale is actually good, if you think about a five-year-old, that is a kid just getting ready to go to kindergarten, it is just the beginning of a life full of potential and adventure, and I really do think that is where we are right now. We are just about to go to school and just getting started. The last five years has really just been us getting our footing.

Q. How does Twitter balance its need to control features with developers making applications that enhance the service?

BIZ: It is working out. The main thing we learned here is this is something we knew but didn't communicate well enough. Our ultimate end-goal is to serve a user, which is the most important thing we can do. That is what we are in it for, that is why we are building services: for the

users. The developers have a role in that they help Twitter help users. They themselves have their own goal of providing for the users. So our end goal is not to serve the developers but to serve the users. We serve the users in some way by serving the developers.

What we are heading for now is being more communicative and highlighting those areas that we think developers can go after in order to have a greater impact for the users. Essentially, that isn't re-creating Twitter features and Twitter clients that already exist. That is coming up with new and innovative ways of, for example, accessing Twitter's immense amount of information through analysis and statistics and things to provide new interesting innovative ways for users to get more value out of Twitter. That could be consumer level users, or it could be building and developing ways for small businesses to access Twitter in innovative new ways.

Heading into this year, I think it's important that what we called an API becomes more like a platform in that it's useful for everyone who is involved. It is useful for the end user, it is useful for the developer and it makes Twitter a stronger and more relevant company. I think we are going to be encouraging developers to do those kinds of things and try to make it easier for them to do that.

Q. How do you see Twitter's relationship with UberMedia?

BIZ: The main thing with UberMedia was that we treated them like we would treat any other API developer -- that they have to abide by these rules. What people don't realize is we suspend or shut down hundreds of apps on a regular basis. We have a whole trust and safety team regularly doing this. The situation with UberMedia was they had violated these specific rules which we told them about. We had to basically say 'As advertised we will defend these rules,' so we had to act. You just got to do that. You got to say you will put your money where your mouth is.

And to their credit they did fix those things and we turned them back on. That is just how you have to do it. That one got a lot more publicized than the hundred a day that we shut down.

Q. Does Twitter see UberMedia as a business threat?

BIZ: I don't. I never have. The biggest threat to Twitter is Twitter. If anyone is going to defeat or screw up Twitter it is going to be us. And it appears that we have been trying the past four or five years as hard as we could and have yet to be successful. I think it's important that you don't obsess about what somebody else is doing; you obsess about what you're doing. You know about what you're doing, work on your execution and things that you need to get done and you don't worry too much about what other people are doing. You take a market check and you see what other people are up to but to get too worried or upset about what someone else is doing is to take your eye off the ball. It's just a mistake.

Q. What will Twitter be like as a teen?

BIZ: I think the future for us is mobile. It always has been. The reason for the 140 characters was so that we will fit within SMS. That was always the thing. In recent years we've worked more aggressively on building out a good experience at the website. I think for the future, all signs point towards mobile. There are five billion registered mobile users in the world; there are two billion Internet users. There are whole populations of people skipping over the PC Internet and going straight to the mobile Internet. We are fortunate that mobile is very much in our DNA. Mobile is just the way to go for the future, because that is where we can have more positive impact globally. That is where we can affect more users, and that is where we excel. That is really the future. Ten years from now, Twitter is a very mobile company. People getting the information that they need to get, when they need to get it, where they need to get it using their mobile device and Twitter is a very critical and

important part of their life.

Q: How does Twitter stay Twitter as it grows?

BIZ: We have a real emphasis on this idea that Twitter as a company can have a positive global impact. We care about what is going on in the world. We take a global view, we care about what is going on locally, we want to do good things, our culture here, that is one of the reasons we made that fledglingwine.com, so that everyone could participate in making something together that was going to help fight illiteracy. A strong focus and a watchful eye. We've had a corporate social innovation department since we were 40 people; we have someone whose sole job it is now to particularly keep an eye on our culture. I do that too. It is very important to pay attention to these things, that you over-communicate.

We always stop work at 4:00 pm on every Friday and we have a two-hour all hands meeting. If you are not in the office you tune in via video conference. It is very important. Even folks like Jack (co-founder Jack Dorsey) who don't work here on a day-to-day basis; he comes over here and participates in T-time with us. It is very important that we do that, that everyone is here and we stay on the same page as a company.

Q. Is there any big misconception about Twitter?

BIZ: Just like you don't need to create a website in order to get value out of the Internet you don't need to tweet in order to get value out of Twitter. A lot of people think 'Oh, I don't Twitter,' but they do. They search Twitter every day for what people are saying about their company or what is going on in the news. You are still a Twitter user, you don't have to tweet. I think the big misconception is 'that's not for me I don't have anything to say.' Fine, then what are other people saying? There are 200 million people on here sending 130 million tweets (now officially 140 million) a day. I guarantee you there is information in there that is

relevant to your life. Once you start using Twitter and searching Twitter and using Twitter to get information you will probably end up tweeting at some point because you will have an opinion on something. I think a common misconception is that you need to tweet in order to use Twitter.

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