

Twitter and the Kabul suicide bombing controversy...

 By [Sandra Roberts](#)

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Are journalists prepared for all Twitter offers? It's a question that needs to be asked, following the recent firing of a photographer by *The Citizen* for commenting on Twitter about an image that was altered.

The ethics of 'cloning' dead bodies out of images aside, the recent controversy about the *Citizen's* photograph of the Kabul suicide bombing that killed eight South Africans also demonstrates the power (and danger) of Twitter for journalists.

The story, if you have been following, was about comments made by ex-*Citizen* photographer Johann Hattingh on Twitter, after *Citizen* removed dead bodies from an Agence France-Presse photograph by cloning bits of the surrounding environment over the bodies, rather than obscuring them in another way (such as blurring them).

Hattingh was later dismissed after a disciplinary hearing for bringing the company into disrepute, and irrevocably damaging the trust relationship between employer and employee. Those who had been at fault for altering the picture have also reportedly been 'dealt with', and the *Citizen* has apologised.

While much of the controversy has been about the ethics of taking out dead bodies as if they were never there, I've been asking myself how well journalists are prepared for the rigours of Twitter. A knee-jerk reaction is only 140 or fewer characters away, and what has been tweeted cannot be untweeted. Even deleting Tweets can never destroy them.

Embracing Twitter

Journalists are increasingly embracing Twitter as a means of getting information, following stories, and finding sources. There is the dual benefit of also promoting their own work and developing a direct feedback loop with their audiences. Twitter is now, undoubtedly, the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of a journalist.

However, Twitter can also expose journalists, and sometimes through them their sources, to spying and even persecution from authorities. Just like other platforms, it is possible to hack Twitter. But more than that, much of what happens on Twitter is public, so hacking may not even be necessary.

Twitter can also, as in the Hattingh case, lead to disciplinary action. Companies, media companies included, need to manage their online reputations. The career of anyone who Tweets carelessly online can be jeopardised.

Clearly, in order to engage on Twitter in a way that is safe, for journalists, their sources and their careers, a little know-how is necessary.

It has its uses - quite a few in fact

This is even more the case when trying to reap the multiple rewards of engaging on Twitter. For instance, what easier way is there to follow a story as it unfolds? You can follow tweets from people on the frontlines, *Citizens* and journalists alike. You can literally be in several places at once while accessing a range of different perspectives.

Following the right people can also be a continuous source of inspiration for stories. Rather than waiting for stories to come to you, or rehashing tired stories, following an interesting tweet or twitter user can lead you to a new take on an existing story or a new story altogether.

Having gotten that brilliant, different story idea, Twitter can help you investigate the story further, using the eyes and ears of multiple Twitter users to get leads and piece together events.

Tapping into what people are thinking

Twitter also allows you to tap into what people, from the powerful, the rich and the famous, to the ordinary man and woman, are thinking and saying. It can be a great place to find sources. It is also an immediate feedback loop with your readers and listeners.

To get the greatest benefit out of Twitter, however, you do need much trial and error or you can use learn from someone who has done it all for you. Raymond Joseph, veteran journalist and media trainer (@rayjoe) will walk you through the technical details as well as the social aspects of Twitter. He will also show you how to use it strategically to build your career.

As Raymond Joseph says "Every time I run this course, I refine it, it's getting better and better. I'm discovering how to exploit the potential of Twitter more and more." This coming from someone who has left past delegates gobsmacked by what they have learnt.

Rather than having joined those who tweet inanely, those who have attended are now more effective writers and better journalists. They have made the leap to better develop their own brand (and career) all the time.

[Twitter for Journalists](#) takes place in Johannesburg 12 October 2012.

Contact Maki Mathe on print@iaj.org.za.

[Twitter for Communicators](#) takes place in Johannesburg 15 October 2012.

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