

If used wisely, Twitter can be very wise

 By [Gill Moodie](#)

27 Nov 2012

I confess: I turn to Twitter and Facebook in the wee hours when I can't sleep - and last night a rather interesting thing happened.

After dipping in and out of some diverting articles from *The Atlantic*, *Moneyweb* and *Vanity Fair* (the kid actor from *Two and a Half Men* denouncing the show as the work of Satan was a laugh!), I spotted an amazing photo of our president shared by a Facebook friend.



It came with a rant by someone I don't know about the public money being spent on [Nkandla](#) and, there, at the foot of a staircase with a highly ornate balustrade was JZ, looking like the cat's pajamas - flanked by two sculptures, one of which is an oversized eagle that shouts out presidential ambition.

[click to enlarge](#)

It's a positively iconic image: Zuma surrounded by Afro-baronial bling - and as iconic as that incredible picture of Tony Yengeni and his Merc in front of Parliament. Now that was a picture shot (by the *Sunday Times*, I seem to recall, for a light motoring feature) before the [Yengeni scandal](#) broke and the photo came back to haunt him over and over again.

A similar case

Was this a similar case, I wondered? There was no caption to go with the JZ pic but the inference was that this was Zuma in his controversial Nkandla home. I couldn't recall having seen any images shot inside the extensive compound but then nobody would have taken much notice of the picture of Yengeni and his luxury 4x4 before it became the centre of a major corruption exposé.

So I got straight on to [Storyful](#) - an enterprising Irish-based company that watches social networks to give early warning on breaking stories to clients around the globe. Serendipitously, I had seen Storyful on Twitter a few minutes earlier offering to do social-media verification checks for journalists - probably as a canny marketing tool.

(Started by an Irish foreign correspondent more than two years ago, Storyful has more than 30 staff members and the client list includes *The New York Times* and The Economist Group Media Lab.)

I tweeted [@StoryfulPro](#) about the pic and within minutes, I'd heard back from them to say they would check it out. Within about 20 minutes, they replied that it was a picture from 2008 - probably early November - and owned by an outfit called [Eyevine](#), a London-based agency that sells portraits, travel and stock photos among others.

They'd check with Eyevine to see if they knew the location, Storyful told me, and get back to me - and this was all between 3am and 3.30am in the morning for me!

Amazed at results

Wow. I haven't heard back from Storyful just yet - but I'm sure I will by the end of today. I now doubt that this is an Nkandla picture, much as we'd all love a little peak into the home. It's more likely the interior of Zuma's Forest Town residence in Johannesburg.

But I am really amazed at how fast Storyful got results - I discovered that the Storyful elf beetling away on my behalf wasn't

doing the graveyard shift in Dublin but was on the Eastern seaboard of the US so it was early evening for him.

This is really an invaluable service for news editors and picture desks but mostly what struck me was that in the fast-moving world of social networks - where people can get very shrill very quickly - Twitter itself provided its own force for moderation - its own system of checks and balances... And with the ruthless efficiency that only a social network can provide across continents, time zones and totally different news agendas.

One of the things that has always bothered me about social media is that we tend to seek out like-minded people as followers and friends. Just as the media sociologists tell us that the vast majority of people prefer media that confirms - rather than challenges - their world views, I think social networks - particularly Twitter - can be even more closed and inward looking because 140-character tweets lack context.

I make a point of following back people who are very different from me precisely for this reason. Because I tweet mostly about media, these people tend to be young journalism students. (I don't particularly want to follow someone who's going to warble on about something that holds no interest for me so I stick broadly to my field.)

Lack of compassion

When Gcina Malindi [broke down](#) in court amid the Jacob Zuma Spear saga earlier this year, my generation of journalists - such as [Justice Malala](#) and [Ferial Haffajee](#) - were mostly sympathetic towards the advocate while on Twitter, I couldn't help but notice a distinct lack of compassion for him - especially from the young black kids I follow.

To many of them, his performance was frankly cringe-worthy - and it was refreshing to get this alternative view of what was certainly an extraordinary turn of events in the "Spear" controversy.

As for the Storyful experiment, it saved me from perpetuating a belligerent Facebook posting and picture of unknown provenance. It proved that there are ways and means of quickly cutting through the clutter on social networks but mostly it showed that if used wisely, Twitter can be very wise.

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- Bizcommunity: [Lessons from home-grown "Mandela Story" viral sensation](#), August 2012
- Bizcommunity: [Malema-mayhem coverage belongs to Twitter](#), August 2011
- Journalism.co.za: [Making sense of Twitter, editors and endorsements](#), July 2011
- The Atlantic: [Learning to Love the \(Shallow, Divisive, Unreliable\) New Media](#), April 2011

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