

Putting your foot into it



By [Janine Lazarus](#)

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Face it. We've all done it at one point or another in our lives: Put our foot squarely into a steaming pile of verbiage - and then prayed in vain that the ground would miraculously open up and devour us whole.

As a no-holds-barred 'straight shooter,' I make no bones about telling things like they are. And what's more, I admire people who do the same. At least you know exactly where you stand. But, I'll admit that this type of sang-froid nonchalance has often landed me in hot water - or at least closer to the brink of it than was comfortable.

This is partly why I have this love-hate relationship with all things social media. Of course I get that being part of this bright new world means that if you're not hanging onto the high-tech fast-moving social network, it will vamoose without you. I also get that since everyone else on the planet has embraced chat rooms, weblogs, social blogs, wikis, microblogging and podcasts, that I'd better just put on a pair of big girl knickers and get on with it.

I can't say that I lovingly embraced the concept of Twitter. In fact, it would be more truthful to say that I was forced to do so by my terrifyingly tech-savvy website gurus who explained in vaguely inexplicable terms why having a live Twitter stream on my website was a must in this information age. I think I may have even nodded wisely and made all the right noises, even though my knees were trembling.

Daily Twitter 'fix'

The truth is that being on Twitter means that I know of news developments even before they hit the mainstream media headlines. In fact, I dare say that my life would be a tad poorer without my daily Twitter 'fix'.

I use it while on business trips in far-flung places, when something really touches my soul, or even when stuck behind a recalcitrant motorist in cement-like traffic that is so much part of the city. But, I must confess that my Twitter digits got burnt when I tweeted, I thought innocuously, about an upcoming workshop for a client. Branding, they called it. Yes, but isn't that the whole point?

All this leads me to the elite Hawks unit spokesperson's much less innocuous tweet about Vaseline. Voted the *Sunday Times'* Mampara of The Week, McIntosh Polela's latest gaffe on Twitter after hearing Molemo "Jub Jub" Maarohanye's guilty verdict for mowing down six Soweto schoolchildren, resulted in a thunderous downpour of outrage. And the fallout is still raining down.

Apart from the Detention Justice Forum, the Centre for Constitutional Rights, the Sonke Gender Justice Network and the

SA Prisoners' Organisation for Human Rights among nine civil society organisations who bellowed for his head on a plate over a tweet that seemingly legitimized prison rape, fast food franchise Nando's also didn't waste much time in poking fun at Polela in their latest advertisement.

Always tasteful

"You shouldn't tweet when you're hungry McIntosh. Unlike your jokes, our flame-grilled Peri-Peri chicken is always tasteful." Just as quick off the mark was the controversial spokesman's retort on Twitter when he parried: "And Nando's owes me money 4 (sic) using my name to advertise chicken."

The burning question that must be asked is whether Polela's defence that he tweeted in his personal capacity holds any water. "He is not just any person," blustered a prisons expert. "He is the spokesperson for a specialised crime fighting unit in the SAPS. "Owing to his position in the public eye, his personal view becomes dangerously intertwined with his views as spokesman for the Hawks."

The rules of Twitter, I would imagine, are still hazy in parts. But the thing with dialogue in public spaces is that they can become echo chambers for ill-conceived notions. Public forums are exactly that - public, so trying to cover up gaffes with "my tweets are my own" disclaimers doesn't really cut it.

Along with other negative things about your business, work, clients or how drunk you are going to get over the weekend, the information you put out there on social media tends to stick around. Perhaps it's better to think twice before posting a comment. Sort of like 'it's better to be safe than sorry'.

If there is good news out of all this it's that real men apologise. Polela did and has since retracted his statement. But, I dare say that the proverbial cat has been let out of the bag.

ABOUT JANINE LAZARUS

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