

Milking the Yak for all its worth

[James Pascoe](#) examines Yik Yak, the app that has taken university campuses around the world by storm

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Image: Tiger News

In recent months, university campuses across Britain have become increasingly gripped by localised anonymous social media app Yik Yak. The University of York is no exception to this trend, with dozens of “yaks” being posted every minute at peak traffic. For the unbelievers yet to be converted, Yik Yak allows users to post anything you want on the app with the perk of total anonymity, but anything you post can be voted up or down by fellow yakkers within a ten-mile radius. A post that receives five down-votes is kicked off the yak feed. No one can tell who posts what. It’s arguably the most meritocratic social media tool yet created.

So far, the app – free to download – has proven to be indisputably popular. Either in spite of or because of its low-key and simplistic interface, the app is used regularly by two million people across the English-speaking world. It recently broke into the top ten most downloaded social media apps in the United States. According to Yik Yak co-founder Brooks Buffington, the app was once tied with Facebook for amount of downloads at the height of its US boom in early 2014.

As with many tech start-ups today, questions remain about its potential for staying-power and long-term profitability. The company does not currently bring in any revenue, and analysts fear that any attempts to tamper with the app’s simplified formula would ruin its unique appeal. However, it seems that Buffington and Tyler Droll, his co-founder at Yik Yak and fellow graduate of Furman University, South Carolina, are pretty clued up about where they want to take their company at the moment. Now, in March 2015, Yik Yak has been reported as having an estimated market value of \$300 million to \$400 million, and its two young co-founders are showing no signs of packing up and selling.

Expansion, rather than profitability, dominates their current agenda. The two know that introducing advertising would represent a huge faux-pas at such an early stage of their development. Yik Yak received a hefty \$62 million in investor funding last November, to add to the \$11 million it accumulated in early 2014. The source of the funding could prove telling in the long-run: Yik Yak’s key backers include Sequoia Capital, the venture capital firm who had a sizeable investment in WhatsApp before it was bought by Facebook for \$21 billion in February 2014. Given their experience in backing messaging apps, Sequoia’s support for Yik Yak is a massive vote of confidence for the young start-up.

The capital they have received from investors has gone towards hiring more staff for their Atlanta

headquarters. Buffington and Droll have decided against moving to Silicon Valley at the moment, choosing to remain in Atlanta's growing tech scene for the time being. Last month, they signalled their intent by poaching Google's experienced former senior engineering director, Michael Morrissey, in a bid to bolster their credibility in the industry.

Despite its seemingly bright future, the anonymous nature of the app has perhaps unsurprisingly not been received entirely without controversy. Incidences of harrassment have been reported in dozens of high-schools in the U.S., and at least ten schools in Britain have banned their students from using the app following reports of cyber-bullying. A staggering 85% of American schools have restricted access to the app on their premises.

So far, only one university, Norwich University in Vermont, has banned their students from using Yik Yak on campus. There have not been any suggestions that any British universities are considering similar action.

For now, the popularity of the app seems to smooth over such hiccups. New rounds of venture capital are set to be announced in coming months, and it would seem foolish to bet against their success. Buffington and Droll are now in the hunt for campus reps at British universities, so keep on the lookout, and in the meantime, keep yakking.



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