

So why isn't SA innovating in online journalism?



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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The recent [Highway Africa](#) conference in Cape Town got everyone thinking about [Africa's ability to innovate](#) in the media and online industries, after Naspers CEO Koos Bekker said the continent and Europe were failing on this score.



Bizcommunity.com talks to [Geoff Cohen](#), GM of 24.com that runs News24 - the biggest news portal in the country - about why South Africa isn't more innovative when it comes to online journalism.

Bizcommunity: So how innovative do you think we are here in the South African media?

Geoff Cohen: In broad brushstrokes, in the US and Europe there have been these absolutely fantastic advances in storytelling - and that's what journalism is at its heart - and there's been advances in using technology to tell a story in multiple facets.

Because the ecosystem of those environments is really rich, it is quite easy for individuals in those environments to grab hold of data, images, content and package up stories that flows very differently from the linear narrative that mainstream media was typically associated with. So you get these fantastic mash-ups of data and information.

One of the ones that really impressed with was *The New York Times* when it did an [overlay](#) on the drug wars in Mexico and how that impacts on America - where the gangs are, the fatalities, the flow of hand guns, etc. It was a phenomenal piece of work that matched up both a written and video narrative with all of this data. An incredibly rich resource.

And there are hosts of this kind of work - *The Guardian's* been doing fantastic work around the [riots in the UK](#).

So broadly speaking, what are we seeing? An international trend where newsrooms are telling stories in a very different way and it's a kind of blossoming of digital media to inform people in different ways - in more engaging ways.

Then the question is: how come we're not really seeing that locally? And I think the answer to that one is threefold. The first thing is the access to raw data. The reality is that the underlying information in South Africa is not that readily available.

Biz: *Such as information from the government? And if you do a PAIA (Promotion of Access to Information Act) application to get the information, it can take a while and may not come in a form you can get easily into a database?*

Cohen: Exactly. A lot of the data itself [in SA] is sitting in silos - in government directly or parastatals or in commercial bodies. And it's a real pain in the arse to get this information to package it up into stories. It's not impossible but it's not as easy as it is in the US.

The second part of it, I think, has to do with the actual storytelling skills.

As much as we are promoting digital as a means of communication in our newsrooms - and this is my personal interpretation - many are still very much focused on linear storytelling, where there's a beginning, a middle and an end, and it's either the written or the spoken word or a video and that's it.

This is the piece of information and if you want to embellish it with new information, there's a whole new department that you've got to deal with. We don't have those guys [in SA] that can take the data and can turn it into a mini-website quickly. It's a very different kind of process.

Biz: *Ja, you need a pretty unique set of skills to do that. I have only known one person like that in a newsroom: a graphics editor who was an absolute whizz with [blogging platform] WordPress so he was grounded in both newsroom content and the tech.*

Cohen: That's news hacking - and I don't mean 'hacking' in the original sense of the word. These are guys who are willing to take a story and use their aptitude for basic technical skills to create something really interesting.

So what we are investing in generally in the media business is good journos - people who know how to find a source, how to track down a story, who know how to angle it and write it - but we're not yet employing people who can do that and who also have an aptitude for technology. I don't think it's quite there yet.

The third aspect is to ask if the South African audience is crying out for this [innovative online journalism] - and this is a hard one to read.

But if you had to take a step back and look at it from an international perspective, the reason why people are creating this great content is that you want to stand out from the crowd. It's not just creation for creation's sake. There's a competitive drive to create really awesome products and stories. It's because the competition in the digital space is so fierce internationally that there is a need to really stand out.

So if you go to *The Guardian*, they own everything around [The News of the World story](#) - and they invested both editorial and technical skills in that story...

While there is a competitive drive to grow [online] audience and reach and engagement in SA, it's not at the point where media owners and editors are saying: "If we don't do this in the digital environment we'll lose our position." Because digital itself is not that deeply entrenched in mainstream media as a media outlet.

Biz: *I wonder if the competitive drive in the UK comes from it being quite hard to find a story that isn't being covered by others. When I worked in the UK, it seemed to me that every corner of every pavement was covered by some or other newspaper, so if a dog dies in the street, you've got to spin it into a different kind of story. There're just so many journalists in the UK. In SA I often feel we are swamped by news - there's so much out there that isn't being covered so maybe there isn't that much drive to distinguish ourselves as journalists.*

Cohen: Yeah, I agree with that.

Biz: *You can see The Guardian has thought long and hard about: "What can we do well?" Does anyone in SA feel*

the need to do that, I wonder?

Cohen: It could be the curse of not having enough people covering what's going on in our country. Someone could say, for instance, "We're going to own Julius [Malema] from top to bottom' with stories and data and graphics but then something happens with the NHI [National Health Insurance] and the attention shifts.

Biz: *Ja, it's hard to follow through on stories sometimes. You have developers at 24.com but they're not really in the newsrooms, are they?*

Cohen: The focus of our [News24] newsroom is very much on breaking news and lifestyle and a lot of aggregation of what's around on the web. So we don't have that focus on owning a story from creation to the final execution. Our focus is very much on making sure that we have a platform that allows people to connect with each other.

Biz: *So you guys are not in the title newsrooms where big stories or campaigns are conceptualised.*

Cohen: No, we're nowhere close to that kind of process. For us, it's more of a process of knowing whether we can aggregate all of the best information around a topic and allow people to discuss and share and upload their views on it.

Biz: *And your division obviously has commercial imperatives. You've got to bring in revenue and pay for yourselves and grow.*

Cohen: Our newsroom is not necessarily focused on creative journalism - it's on aggregating it and getting it out fast. That doesn't mean we're not looking at interesting ways of packaging the information or for people to engage with it.

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- Bizcommunity: [Digital space rewards those who are first - 24.com GM Geoff Cohen](#), March 2011
- Bizcommunity: [Re-designing news challenges journals, publishers](#), June 2010

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