

# SABC online quietly revamping in a big way



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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There are big things on the go with the SABC's digital strategy but the state broadcaster's been keeping quiet about it so far, as the first phase of the revamped website is still in a testing phase. Already there's news and sport upfront (plus a lot more video elsewhere on the site) instead of dull corporate information.



With its massive scope of content, the SABC ([@SABCNewsOnline](#), [Facebook](#)) has the potential to become the premier news portal in SA so Bizcommunity.com talked to veteran print and broadcast journalist [Izak Minnaar](#) ([@izakminnaar](#)), who became the SABC's editor of digital news in February 2011, about what's been achieved since then and the road ahead.

**Bizcommunity:** *So it's lekker to see things happening at the [SABC's](#) website. It's been in desperate need of a rethink and a revamp for ages.*

**Izak Minnaar:** Ja, I think we were really seriously in need of getting out of the traditional mind set - into a proper content-creation mind set, as opposed to platform-based mind set.



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**Biz:** *Ja, I see it's been jazzed up and there's a lot more video. So is this the start of a process - of a new digital strategy?*

**Minnaar:** In its [turnaround strategy](#), the SABC identified the establishment of a digital-media division as part of a key strategy going forwards - essentially to make sure that digital media would become a business unit that would take its rightful place alongside radio and TV...

Now, as you may know, this turnaround strategy has not been finally approved by Parliament so there's a bit of a delay in the implementation of all of the plans. But... really for the first time, the range of digital services will be elevated. It will get more attention and, hopefully, resources so that we [at the SABC] can reach audiences across all platforms and not mainly on radio and TV.

**Biz:** *And do you have staff and developers in your unit?*

**Minnaar:** We have an editorial team and we rely on the SABC's centralised IT unit to do all the IT work on the site.

**Biz:** *So how many editorial staff member have you got?*

**Minnaar:** In total we have about 15 people, from editors to writers, and then we also rely on a couple of people from other units. But we are in the process of realigning the staffing structure with what we think we should do, going forward. So we are currently recruiting a few more people and specifically to bring a few skills into the unit that we do not have.

**Biz:** *So can you tell me what you are going to do, going forward, or is it still under wraps?*

**Minnaar:** You know, this is where we are coming from: we had a website that could not really handle multimedia. We... were in the SABC - an organisation rich with audio and video - but the website couldn't handle it.

My predecessor [started the process](#) - also part of the corporate digital strategy - to upgrade the site so that it can, firstly, actually compete with other news websites, and secondly, that it can develop into a good multimedia website. So when I joined in February [Minnaar was previously SABC head of news research, which he founded in 1998], we started to relook and refine the plans that were already on the table and put some timelines in place.

And this resulted in us [launching in April](#) the first element of the new website, in the form of a [national] election website. So on that [election website](#), we were able to start using, for instance, the SABC's election debates and some of the very good election campaign video inserts and audio from radio programmes and so on. We had a rich mix of content for the

elections and a vehicle to publish election results.

The next priority after that was to publish a [Nelson Mandela Day website](#) - so in June we launched a site which effectively became a sub-site of the current site. And then at the end of August we launched the first version of the whole website - of the new website that can now handle multimedia much better.

We are keeping quiet because we have lots of plans in the pipeline, some of them linked to a broader SABC technology rollout plans - like, for instance, part of the SABC's digital turnaround plan is to get a proper digital media library at the SABC, in the same fashion that you find at other big broadcasters, that will give us real control over what you can make available and how you can also financially exploit the material.

**Biz:** *Do you mean digitising [historical stuff](#) in the SABC's radio and TV archive?*

**Minnaar:** It would include archive material available.

**Biz:** *The SABC must be sitting on some amazing TV and radio content going back decades.*

**Minnaar:** We hope to launch a sub-site that will mainly work with recent history - provide a very nice insight into recent history using some of the best SABC investigative and other material from the late '90s. We hope to say more about that project soon. We just have to get all our ducks in a row but we're working with third parties to make something that, I think, could become a really good educational site and material for researchers worldwide [looking into] South Africa's recent history.

**Biz:** *I know a couple of online people at rival news sites who say that if the SABC ever gets its act together online, they'd be rather worried because the scope and depth of content from all the SABC radio and TV stations is staggering.*

**Minnaar:** Ja, but it's a process. You can't one day have something that's not really working and then the next day have the best things. So I really see the current site that we have as the first phase. In this first phase we have a better-looking site that you can navigate much easier and we can start highlighting some of our audio and our video.

What we can't do now, for instance, is really put video in your face on the home page. We need some development work to do that. And we need more flexibility around special reports and feature pages and so on.

**Biz:** *So how come it's taking so long? Is it a CMS [content management system] problem or is there just so much information on the site...?*

**Minnaar:** As part of its digital strategy, the SABC decided about 18 months ago that they needed to bring all their websites under one umbrella. Eighteen months ago, the SABC had dozens and dozens of websites [for all the different stations] but very few of them actually had the word "SABC" in them. So, for instance, you had "safm.co.za" or you had "sewendelaan.co.za" and there was no association with the SABC.

So part of this plan was to build a strong corporate portal and then launch main brands around it as part of that portal. That is why "sabcnews.com" - as the site was previously known - has changed to "sabc.co.za/news". In the same way that we have "/sport" or "/radio" or "/safm". And this is where we're heading...

And to bring all of these under one umbrella, we also needed to implement a new content management system... In terms of the SABC news site, we're still in a testing phase... At the moment the site is there. We're trying to fine-tune the content and the systems and so on. And, as we become confident that everything is there and the technology can handle higher traffic, we will then start promoting it.

**Biz:** *What is very noticeable is that the news site is not dominated by wire agency copy but seems to be SABC-generated.*

**Minnaar:** I would say we would probably use 80% SABC content... We have access to the SABC's radio and TV reporting teams across the provinces... At the moment we rework it for the web and we are systematically trying to see what are the big stories of the day and then see what else can we do to produce, in some cases, something different - but, in most

cases, to do something more for the web so that we start promoting the site.

[Then it will be] possible for the radio and TV presenters to say "... And get the full story on the web" or "... And get more background on the web". On most news stories, a TV reporter will go out and shoot a five-minute interview or a 10-minute interview and come back, package the story and use 50 seconds. What we are going to really look at is if there isn't a full three minutes of that interview that may be interesting.

**Biz:** *But how would that work in such a large news organisations? Would you spot the big stories of the day and then phone up the relevant news editor and say: "Haven't you got more?" Or would they come to you.*

**Minnaar:** We are an integrated news organisation so we [in our unit] see the radio and TV news diaries on the corporate news production system so we know what's coming in...

**Biz:** *I couldn't help but notice that you had a nifty little Google map of the Malema walk last week. You lecture quite a lot on computer-aided reporting [for instance, at the latest [Highway Africa](#) conference] so you must want to do more of this at the SABC?*

**Minnaar:** Well, we've just started so watch us doing it. It's new for the team that I joined. I came into a team whose main focus was moving mostly radio and TV copy on to the site. Also, there wasn't a site that you could really do stuff like that.

We're now starting to explore data journalism and the nice thing is that [Malema map] was produced by the TV graphics unit. This was just an experiment. The next time we will see if we can do it better.

**Biz:** *TV graphics unit'... they probably very skilled people. That's a great resource.*

**Minnaar:** Yes, we have access to them and we have started to use more and more of their material. So we're going to complement what we have on the site with professional TV graphics and, where necessary, adjust it for the web. But we've seen that 80% of what's created for TV can be used for the web, whether it's a quick illustration or whatever...

At the moment we're phasing out an old newsroom production system and the SABC is busy with the training now. [The new system] has the ability to link into it - not only text like our old system - but also video and graphics.

And so, for the first time, our producers in our online unit will be able to see from where they sit what kind of video is available so they will no longer have to run off somewhere, find a tape, find a video booth to watch it in. They will now be able to see it online and go into the graphics archives and see what's available. All of these things will really make it much easier to put a better product together.

**Biz:** *This sounds like a huge undertaking. Are you talking about a couple of years, do you think, to get where you want to?*

**Minnaar:** We're taking it step by step. There are so many things that we can do... and we have big plans and we have small plans. What we need to do is put those plans in a timeline and see what we can achieve soon and what's going to take longer...

For some of it, you need some serious development and serious money but for there's so much stuff that [we can achieve] if we just utilise the resources available in the SABC. There's a big drive in the SABC from [Mike Siluma](#), the head of radio news, and [Jimi Matthews](#), the head of TV news, to try and change the mind set in SABC news - for people to start thinking multiplatform - and not just traditional outlets. And we're [all] working closely together...

## Online tools

Tips for journalists from computer-aided reporting expert [Izak Minnaar](#)

- [Know your search tools](#): don't just Google it. Search like an information professional by using the power of advanced search; and by understanding the differences between traditional database search engines, deep-web searching and real-time search.

- Use timeline and time-based searches to quickly compile profiles and history fact sheets of news events.
- Be the best informed reporter in the newsroom by setting up customised beat search pages and news dashboards, and by using the versatility of specialised news search engines and RSS feeds to receive automatic updates of the latest stories on your beat.
- Use a social bookmarking service and follow the experts in your beat area, and see how they daily find the best resources on the Internet for you.
- Use online content curation tools to easily merge your best content with the best of the web to provide a new content offering, including multimedia from all over the web and the social buzz about the topic.
- Use online mapping services to scout news locations and check out the lay of the land: aerial shots of an area with search overlays of public, health, education and other facilities together with [Street View](#) navigation to determine access routes and locate entrances.
- Use simple analysis tools such as word clouds to quickly determine the gist of a long speech - and then use it as illustration material.
- Set up a real-time news search dashboard and follow the social media flow of updates on the main news stories of the day - and for big breaking stories, project it on a big screen in the newsroom to keep everyone instantly up to date on developments.
- Online translation services will help you find the best content about a country with a different language - and can help you communicate with journalists and newsmakers in that country.
- When on a story, record exact addresses and information that will help you plot the story on a map - and then use the map to illustrate the story and give users a better sense of where it happened and how the event unfolded.
- Use text-to-voice services to listen to your reading material while you are doing other things - like on your morning jog. Or use voice-to-text services to dictate your story as the news event unfolds.

#### For more:

- Poynter Institute: [A Guide to Computer Assisted Reporting](#)
- Bizcommunity: ['Fast and dirty' with Zappon; more measured with tablet](#) (interview with Avusa Media Live GM Elan Lohmann), May 2011
- Bizcommunity: [Power to the IOL title sites](#) (interview with IOL GM Quentin Wray), May 2011
- Bizcommunity: [Major Mail & Guardian online redesign in the works](#) (interview with M&G Online editor Chris Roper), April 2011
- Bizcommunity: [Digital space rewards those who are first - 24.com GM Geoff Cohen](#), March 2011
- Journalism.co.za: [Design challenges and opportunities behind award-winning online work](#), May 2011

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