

The story behind *Daily Maverick's Don't Shoot the Messenger* podcast

 By Jessica Tennant 14 Apr 2021

Daily Maverick's Don't Shoot the Messenger podcast first aired in March 2020, coinciding with the beginning of the lockdown, and has since rolled out two seasons. Now they've just kicked off season three, a year later...

Notably, the podcast was recently recognised by Apple as one of its *8 Biggest New Shows: South Africa 2020*. "We wanted to create a podcast for *Daily Maverick* that was a little different to what might just sound like snippets of talk radio. So, we created a really slick and sexily produced product that could be held to international standards," says producer Haji Mohamed Dawjee.

With the first season, the team focused on Covid-19, finding creative ways to give the pandemic a face and make it personal. Making the podcast during the pandemic, of course, presented many difficulties and opportunities. Host Rebecca Davis said, "We had to tweak our technical process and became accustomed to recording from anywhere, including bedrooms and a car. It also provided opportunities in that we had a captive audience. So many people were at home, desperate for analysis, insight and entertainment. And, of course, the topic of Covid-19 itself was so fascinating, scary and new that it cried out for interesting and trustworthy reporting on it."

In the third season, the team is looking at solutions-based journalism, exploring some of South Africa's biggest and pervasive problems, including crime, poverty and education, and how to make things right, finding potential solutions to our problems.

Explaining the concept for the season, Dawjee says the team started looking at what the rest of the world is doing in terms of innovation and how it is implemented, what we can learn from it in South Africa and which unrecognised people and organisations are trying to bridge the gap between problems and solutions. "It's not so much a season where we're trying to tell the public what the solutions to these long-standing problems are, but rather one that's trying to dig a bit deeper and offer interesting perspectives and even possible mistakes other countries have made when trying to fix these same problems elsewhere," she adds.



The team is made up of Dawjee, Davis, Tevya Turok Shapiro (editor), Bernard Kotze (music) and Kathryn Kotze (additional support). They tell us that although it felt good to be acknowledged by Apple, ultimately, they aren't chasing awards. "What we really want is to grow our listenership: not just for our own sake but also to help carve out the podcasting space in South Africa for others." Here, they go on to tell us more about the state and growth of podcasting in SA and more about the podcast itself...

■ Comment on the growth of podcasts over the last few years, and the current state of podcasting in SA.

Podcasting is still in its infancy in South Africa, but we are definitely seeing some exciting growth. Up until recently, what you'd see in the local podcast charts would be bits of talk radio, Gareth Cliff's shows, and some house DJ mixes. That's changing now. We're seeing local true crime podcasts, we're seeing interview-type podcasts, we're seeing a lot of motivational podcasts aimed particularly at local women, relationship advice podcasts... the list goes on. But although a number of media outlets have started putting out podcasts with news discussions and so forth, we felt there was still a gap in the market for a news podcast that's not just reporting but interesting storytelling that has a narrative arch specifically designed for the platform. That's where *Don't Shoot the Messenger* comes in.

■ When did the *Daily Maverick* launch this particular podcast and why?

Don't Shoot the Messenger was launched on 26 March 2020, the day South Africa went into a hard lockdown. The podcast had been months in the making, but when Covid-19 hit it put the pressure on for us to launch sooner than we had originally anticipated to allow us a new platform with which to cover this topic.

One of the things *Daily Maverick* is best known for is its bold and irreverent editorial voice. Podcasting was a logical next step for us to capitalise on that factor. We'd actually been experimenting with the idea for over a year, testing various hosts and format combinations, because we wanted to make sure we ended up with a product which appropriately complemented our news website and stood out in terms of the quality it offered its listeners, both in information, creativity and production.

■ Comment on the impact of the pandemic on the various aspects of the podcast.

Our first season was entirely Covid-19 themed, as it was being produced in real time as South Africa - and the world - grappled to come to terms with the pandemic and its lockdown. In March 2020, there was just so much that was unknown about the disease, its effects, and the strange state of enforced isolation that societies around the globe were entering into. In that sense the topic was a bit of a gift to us - and we hoped to also provide a kind of comfort to those listening; that they weren't alone, that we were all trying to figure this out together.

We were very much aware that, on the one hand, our potential audience was massive because people were stuck at home all day and keen for any entertainment. On the other hand, it felt like literally everybody on earth started a podcast during lockdown, so the competition felt quite intense!

We had set up a bit of a studio in the *Daily Maverick* offices before lockdown, but as soon as the hard lockdown hit, we had to kiss that goodbye. What followed was simply making do with whatever technology was around. Rebecca recorded a number of the scripts sitting in a car using phone voice notes, because there were no other options.



■ ***Tell us more about Rebecca and why you believe she was the best candidate to host the show***

Rebecca is one of *Daily Maverick's* most respected journalists and we believed she had the right combination of wit, intellect and curiosity - together with a good radio voice - to make this a success.

■ ***How did you come up with the name?***

“ Levels of trust in the media are at a historic low internationally, and what we are also experiencing online are high levels of active hostility towards news outlets and journalists. Some of this mistrust is justified; some is definitely not. People tend to respond to news these days from an emotional and personal perspective. We're saying: that's fine, but our job is to tell you the truth. ”

Under these circumstances, the old saying “Don't shoot the messenger” seems more appropriate than ever. It's Haji who came up with the title because she was kind of like “look, here's the story, we're telling it, and what you need to do with this information”. It's also a catchy and interesting title that speaks to the variety of types of stories we're telling. We're able to cover the hard-stuff and bring real problems into people's homes or their cars or wherever they do their listening but there's also room for wit, originality and a bit of spice.

■ ***Tell us more about the podcast itself.***

The show's tagline is “The story behind the stories”, which is our way of saying that we're not giving listeners a summary of current affairs, or the kind of interviews you'd get from the week on local talk radio. We're always looking for the less obvious take on issues. For example, for one episode during the hard lockdown The Great Slowdown - we spoke to a sloth scientist for advice humans could benefit from in terms of how slowly sloths go about their lives.

We're also interested in telling stories from the past which may have been forgotten. In our second series we spent two episodes on the astonishing bombing of Koeberg nuclear power station in December 1982, for which we drove for six hours to interview the reclusive bomber.

In general, we want to provide content you won't find anywhere else: always interesting, never boring, with international perspective but firmly rooted in our local reality.

■ ***Tell us more about the focus of season three.***

Feedback we often receive from *Daily Maverick* readers is that they love our stuff but they are so drained by the endless torrent of negative news stories. And honestly, we frequently feel the same way.

Meanwhile, at *Daily Maverick* generally - particularly since the introduction of *Maverick Citizen*, our report arm dedicated to social justice issues - we have been interested in the idea of “solutions-based journalism” Which is to say: not just reporting on a bad situation, but also reporting on potential ways to improve that situation.

In our third season of the podcast, we decided to bring those two threads together with our *How To Fix It* season. What that entails is focusing on solutions rather than problems. Because all over South Africa, there are people getting on with the business of fixing things in really interesting and inspiring and innovative ways. We wanted to tell *their* stories, as well as looking internationally to see what solutions have worked elsewhere.

■ **Share some of the highlights to date.**

We have a close-knit team and we work really well together and laugh a lot - though Haji is always on hand to whip us into shape if needed. We all share the vision for the show and take the same pleasure in its success, so that in itself is a highlight.

We had one of our episodes in Season 2 - our interview with the Koeberg bomber - go viral and attract over 100,000 listens, which is phenomenal for a little podcast like ours, so that was definitely a highlight.

Other than that, we've recorded some really fascinating interviews with brilliant minds. In this season alone being able to talk to the likes of Urte Evert, the curator of Germany's museum of toxic monuments; leading pan-Africanist Professor Adeke Adebayo, author of *The Trial of Cecil John Rhodes*; and one of America's foremost legal scholars, Professor Bernard Harcourt – that has been a real privilege and an education.

■ **Each episode has its own soundtrack. Why is this and what value do you believe it adds?**

With each season what we're aiming to do is add layers of complexity and dynamics to the production of the episodes. These tools and mechanics may be groundbreaking in South Africa but brilliant international podcasts like *This American Life*, for example, have been using resources like original scores for literally decades. What we're trying to do is to reach for an international standard; and part of the production in successful international storytelling podcasts is the element of music. Our producer Haji has always thought of music, in each individual episode, as a character by itself. A character that could be as important as a source for example. Scoring the episodes from scratch lends itself to the rise and fall of the narrative, it piques the listeners' interest and has the ability to turn something that's already quite interesting to listen to into something a bit more magical.

Now while we don't have as big a team or as many resources at hand as American podcast teams, *Don't Shoot the Messenger* is blessed with two people who have music degrees in Haji, its producer and Bernard the engineer and mixer and composer-in-chief. Together they're able to strategically create and structure something that complements each episode and gives each story a unique sound that makes each episode stand out from the rest. Both Bernard and Haji are extreme perfectionists and wildly creative so the music element is just another way to put these skills to effective use and produce something beautiful. It's not always smooth sailing. It's a lot of time and hard work and at times it feels like there are far too many moving pieces on one chess-board. But we're learning from the experience and trying to be better with each

season.

▣ ***What have been some of your greatest learnings with regards to producing the podcast, to date? Any tips or tricks of the trade?***

With every episode we put out, we're learning. Because we are fundamentally a *Daily Maverick* creation, we're never going to chase downloads at the expense of editorial integrity. But we are understanding more and more about the small things that can see an episode sink or fly: seemingly insignificant tweaks to the title, for instance. We've also learned that if we're dealing with a single topic over multiple episodes, the content has to be really strong to keep people interested. And we're learning more about our listeners, more importantly, and what kinds of stories people want to hear and there's room to experiment with the best ways to tell them that are perhaps slightly off-center but very well written and handled with as much intrigue and creativity as possible.

▣ ***And finally, comment on the success of the podcast.***

With every episode, our aim is to get at least 5,000 downloads with at least 1,000 listens within 24 hours of release. We are mostly hitting those targets, which may seem modest but put us within the top 10% of all podcasts internationally.

Being able to attract a prestigious sponsor like Ninety-One for our third season also confirmed for us that we were on the right track.

Season 3 and all previous episodes of Don't Shoot The Messenger are available on Apple Podcasts and all podcast platforms.

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