

Major *Mail & Guardian Online* redesign in the works

In a series of interviews with South Africa's top online managers, *Mail & Guardian Online* editor Chris Roper tells Bizcommunity how the *M&G's* website is reinventing itself and why new media has improved the quality of journalism dramatically.

 By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA^{21 Apr 2011}



Chris Roper, editor of the Mail & Guardian Online.

Bizcommunity: *There is a lot of pressure on the big local news portals such as [News24](#), [Times Live](#) and [IOL](#) to turn a profit. Does the [Mail & Guardian Online](#) have the same pressure?*

Chris Roper: Well, we are profitable and it's the same for us but I guess the difference is that the kind of commodity that the others sell is breaking news - or they have breaking news as their main product offering. We spend our money in different ways, I think. So the cost of investigative journalism is more for us. It may be a little unfair to say this of News24 as they do a lot of their own content production but it's not really the big resource stuff that we have to do.

Biz: *But what kind of online investigative stuff are you doing. [Amabhungane](#) [not-for-profit investigative unit] doesn't fall under you guys, does it? Do you liaise with them on content or do they just push it to you guys?*

Roper: The relationship with them is very similar to the relationship with the newspaper and that is that we complement stories that they do. An obvious example is: we will do video or multimedia around the kind of complex stuff they're talking about or put up source documents.

But we're really a part of the editorial process of the newspaper and they're a part of ours. The diaries get synched and we make sure that whatever big stories they're doing, we either complement or do other versions of it. The tricky bit is having a weekly newspaper and a 24-hour website - and when you publish what. So it's a constantly evolving thing.

Biz: *How many staff members have you got then?*

Roper: About 18-20. About 14 editorial and we have five guys in the tech department. We do outsource a lot of the bigger projects so our guys do maintenance and the core projects.

Right now they're building the new *Mail & Guardian* website. We've been working on it for quite a while and we've had to start with the basics, which involves replacing the equipment in the company and then moving on to getting a new CMS [content-management system] for the newspaper that works with the website.

We've started from scratch... but, as you know, it's quite tricky to change something that works. In making i

better, you've got to be very careful that you don't lose the core of what you are and what the readers are comfortable with.

Biz: *And you must protect your archive, which must be very valuable for the M&G.*

Roper: Exactly.

Biz: *Large parts of the Avusa titles' archives are impossible to access online after various revamps. I think that's a sin.*

Roper: We had some problems years ago when we bought back online from MWeb but I think most of the archive is there... I must get a call a day from someone looking for stuff in our archive and they come from over the world. It might be seemingly obscure; for instance, someone is looking for articles on health in the Eastern Cape going back 20 years... The *M&G* is very highly rated on search engines because it's been around so long.

Biz: *So it sounds like the new site is more than just a new look?*

Roper: Well, there's a couple of obvious changes that all websites are going to have to go through. A website [like ours] that was [last] designed about four years ago was designed for the specifically South African situation in terms of [slow] bandwidth and what people wanted to look at - and the sophistication of the market.

We served up over a million pieces of multimedia last year. So the website we currently have - and, I think that of most of our compatriots - is not geared to putting multimedia at the forefront. There's also the need fully take advantage of social media. That means that you really have to have a lot of real estate that belong to the reader and that's something that you have to fundamentally build into your architecture so that's quite a big job.

From our perspective, the other main reason for change is that the *Mail & Guardian* focuses on a more longer-form journalism and investigative journalism. We appeal to a segment of the market that wants a little more complexity, a little more long-form. But as a news website, we have to compete in the breaking-news area as well.

The problem is competing with the breaking-news journalism websites is that the quality of the [wire] feeds South Africa [such as SAPA] means you compromise your brand quality if your brand speaks to quality and professionalism and accuracy. So the problem is how do we build a website that satisfies the need for breaking news and for something a little more high-end without diluting the brand?

I have a kind of a rule here that, if my guys break a story before News24, then they're in trouble. They have to be at least 10 minutes later than News24 because we rewrite every SAPA story. It has to be given a *M&G* slant...

Another important factor is advertising. Going forward in the next couple of years, rich-media and video advertising is going to be the big money-spinner. And you need to have a site that's built for this.

Biz: *Are the people coming to the M&G Online there for different reasons to the newspaper readers?*

Roper: There's a big crossover because there's just not enough of the newspaper. There's always so much more to stories and people get really gripped by the big thematic stories that carry on and on - not just the breaking corruption-busting stuff - and a lot of the extra content is online.

But one of the major differences is that we have a large ex-pat audience and, don't forget, there is a difference between the kind of person who reads a newspaper and the kind of person who reads online. Don't get me wrong - it can be the same person reading in different ways but there is no question in my mind that people who read newspapers and people who read online, do so differently.

The *Mail & Guardian* brand is incredibly important to us on the website but the brand has to speak in different ways online.

Biz: So when are you're hoping to launch the new site?

Roper: Probably in about October, I'd say, but the date does change as we really want to get it right.

Biz: When you say that you need "real estate that belongs to the reader" in terms of social media what exactly do you mean in practice?

Roper: There's a couple of things. The one is making sure that you have all the social-media functions embedded into all the stories but you also need to have a very clear way for the readers to become part of the commenting system - and that can't just be comments at the bottom of the story. There must be ways commenters can be ranked and ways that they can push their comments out to other part of their online experience.

And the idea of creating your own content is very important. How do you get user-generated content on to your website while also being an absolute stickler for accuracy?

Generally online it's quite easy to hive off your commentators and user-generated stuff from your main-body stuff because it's so obviously different. Let's take, for example, News24. Their breaking-news stuff is very separate from the commenting - and it's quite easy to show the difference between what users do and what they do.

With a brand like the *Mail & Guardian*, you have to give users a different kind of respect in that they are almost given as much weight as the journalists. Because that's what you're selling - that you have the most literate, educated audience online so you have to allow them to have as much brand equity as possible. And that's quite a challenge as there's a very fine line between crazy and contributor.

Biz: So the paper is on Kindle. Are you working on iPad apps?

Roper: We've got an iPhone app and we've got iPad, Android and BlackBerry apps in development... We also working on a Zapiro iPad app...

Tablets are massively important for a number of reasons: it's a way to get people to pay for content and it's a way to make your content really available 24 hours a day. It's all very well being available on a mobile but that's a very different kind of content compared to what you can get on a tablet.

Biz: There's a fascinating [article](#) at The Atlantic magazine debunking the idea that the web has meant a drop in the quality of journalism. I'm interested in your view of this because the M&G is serious newspaper for readers who want quality journalism.

Roper: I think new media has improved journalism dramatically. We're in much better shape than we were five years ago. The way that journalism is evolving now is so exciting. There're so many more stories out there and there're so many more people reading stories.

When traditional-media people say that new media is undercutting the core bedrock qualities of journalism

what they really mean is that people now have a way to check up on journalists and call us on things. We can't under-estimate the amount and kind of work a reader can do him or herself in terms of understanding stories.

The biggest growth for newspapers in the world is tabloid journalism and some people might not view it as proper journalism. I'm not one of those people. This is reflective of what new media has done to journalism it's made it so much more available.

The most intelligent reader in the world is the reader who mistrusts what he reads and big media organisations have always traded on the fact that their brand is the one that you can trust. Twenty-first century journalism is about which brand you mistrust the least. For me, journalism is in a much better place with new media and social media.

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