



## Chapter 6

# Journalism in a new world of social media



### Shaka Sisulu

**Shaka Sisulu** is public speaker, writer, social activist and entrepreneur. He is well-known for his columns in City Press and Destiny magazine. He works as an entrepreneur in the media and technology sectors and is currently involved in media monitoring, book publishing, content sharing and social media businesses, many of which are start-up businesses. Shaka is a founding member of Cheesekids, a volunteer organisation which in seven years has enabled over 20 000 young people to give back to their communities, in fun and meaningful ways.

## A brave new world

### – how social media is proving as revolutionary a medium as any

Years ago, a smart young man invented a new technology that allowed for the creation of a new form of media that the world found accessible and easy to use, and essentially changed the way in which information was shared between people. Like a godsend, this new form of media made certain information, especially local news, available to a great number of people, even thousands of kilometres away, and led to an explosion in the stimulation and expression of ideas.

This new form of media would eventually lead to cultural and political revolutions, especially in places where information had been tightly controlled before. It was in every sense revolutionary.

The smart young man was Johannes Gutenberg, and the technology he invented in 1439 was the printing press, which led to books and newspapers being easily published. You would be forgiven for thinking that the young man was Tim Berners-Lee, who invented the World Wide Web in 1989 and which allowed the use of the Internet as we know it today, because online media is changing the world in much the same way that the advent of printed books and newspapers did centuries before.

The Internet is today accessed by roughly 2,5 billion users, 70 per cent of whom use it every day. The growth of this medium has been staggering – somewhere in the region of 566 per cent since 2000. That's the equivalent of eight new people getting online every second. One of the reasons for this growth is the proliferation of devices to access the world wide web – smartphone users are doubling

every year. Consequently, 38 per cent of media interactions today are on smartphones.

Not only are net citizens finding the online world accessible and easy to use, they are exploding onto social media sites sharing an estimated 500 million photos and 144 thousand video clips each day. The top nine social media platforms globally have a collective 3.2 billion users who spend an average of 3.2 hours daily on these sites. After Google, the world's largest search engine, the three most visited sites every month are the video sharing site, YouTube, the friend site Facebook, and the 140 character thought sharing site, Twitter – making social media the web's favourite activity!



At any moment each of the popular social media sites has its own unique *zeitgeist* or 'memes', which very quickly spread like wildfire (or rather 'go viral' in tech-speak), representing a true explosion in the stimulation and expression of ideas.

YouTube was in the past year beset with the 'Harlem Shake' phenomenon – within a month of a group of Australian college students uploading a video of themselves dancing oddly in a room, there were 12 000 copycat videos typically following the same basic structure of a masked man dancing alone before being joined by a huge group all improvising their dance moves, to the beat of American music producer Baaue's 'Harlem Shake' song. Just a few months earlier, YouTube's big craze was 'Gangnam style', a music video by Korean pop-star PSY, which amassed an unprecedented one billion viewers and was the inspiration for thousands of parodies and copies.

Facebook and Twitter have in the past few years been at the centre of somewhat less frivolous trends. The Arab Spring, a region-wide uprising beginning in late 2010, spread like wildfire across the Middle East with the aid of these two social networking sites – not unlike the way the American and French revolutions of the late 1700s relied on newspapers at the time.

In South Africa, Facebook, at 9.4 million, now has more users than Ukhozi FM, the largest

radio station in Africa, has listeners. Increasing by more than two million users since last year, Facebook's local growth is only eclipsed by Twitter, which has experienced a year-on-year jump of 129 per cent in membership to 5.5 million on the back of greater mobile penetration. Despite the oft-lamented state of South African broadband, South Africans are getting online in leaps and bounds, and joining the world-wide trend whereby social media is the number one activity online.

## The little tweep that could - how media professionals are getting plugged into social media

In a turn of events that shocked the world, South Africans woke on Valentine's Day 2013 to find that their athletic hero Oscar Pistorius had supposedly shot and killed his girlfriend, the rising star Reeva Steenkamp. Whereas the social networks were completely abuzz with news of this tragic saga, one account dominated them all. News reporter with Eye-Witness News (EWN) Barry Bateman followed the story to court and gained a massive 105 314 followers in a single week. Bateman tried to explain the unprecedented rise in his circle of influence by saying, 'Followers appreciated that I took the time to answer the questions ... and that I refused to be drawn on speculation.'

Journalists like Bateman have found themselves gaining prominence as social media users interested in particular news stories have tuned into their profiles or timelines to read about them. One of the most important and yet under-rated skills that fuels this interest and that online journalists are increasingly required to possess is called Live Tweeting – the ability to summarise proceedings via 140 character tweets in real time. Live Tweeting allows journos or even ordinary users to relay events as they take place as well as provide context, commentary and even interpretation.

And so with the ability to serialise the moment, journos like Bateman and his colleague Mandy Weiner are becoming massively influential and credible on social media.

Another skill that successful online journos possess is engagement – or, rather, fun. *The Mail & Guardian's* Verashni Pillay and *City Press's* Carien du Plessis are gaining a name for fun timelines interspersed with information. Meanwhile, journos like Harja Omarjee (formerly of eNCA and now of ANN7) display another important characteristic – frequency. The number of updates and Retweets her Timeline pushes out means that any followers will undoubtedly come across the topical issue at the time – important in a rapidly cluttered social landscape.

Lastly, the analytical prowess of journos is fast coming to the fore. Not only is Radio702's Stephen Grootes a reporter-cum-talk show host, he now regularly posts video blogs giving his opinion on topical issues. Called the Considered View, it is quickly becoming a favourite piece of content for his audience to consume. Ranjeni Munusamy is another journo who increasingly has become an opinion piece writer. In fact, many reporting contributors to the *Daily Maverick*, her online paper, tend to percolate their news articles with their opinions. It may well be that within the next few years South Africa will, like some Western countries, embrace openly biased media reporting.



# The internet in numbers



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Statistics from 2013/14

# Going, going, gone online

## ... how media corporates are using social media

It was a relatively quiet New Year's Eve morning in 2011 when a stir was created in the twittersphere (just one of the monikers the Twitter social network has acquired by some of its 5.5 million adoring South African users). That morning a rundown of the year's highlights was taking place on one of the TV news stations. A local radio jockey half-watching the show during his own radio broadcast was suddenly shocked and dismayed to see a particular story breaking on TV.

It was a story about Nelson Mandela's sudden hospitalisation. This story had actually unfolded a few months earlier. As the highlights package was simply replaying all of the shots related to the incident, the words 'breaking news' and 'Mandela gravely ill' could have fooled anyone. They fooled our jockey, who very quickly reached for his mobile phone and punched into his Twitter application the awful news that the beloved father of the nation was in hospital yet again.

The news spread like wildfire. Within the hour the story was trending.<sup>45</sup>

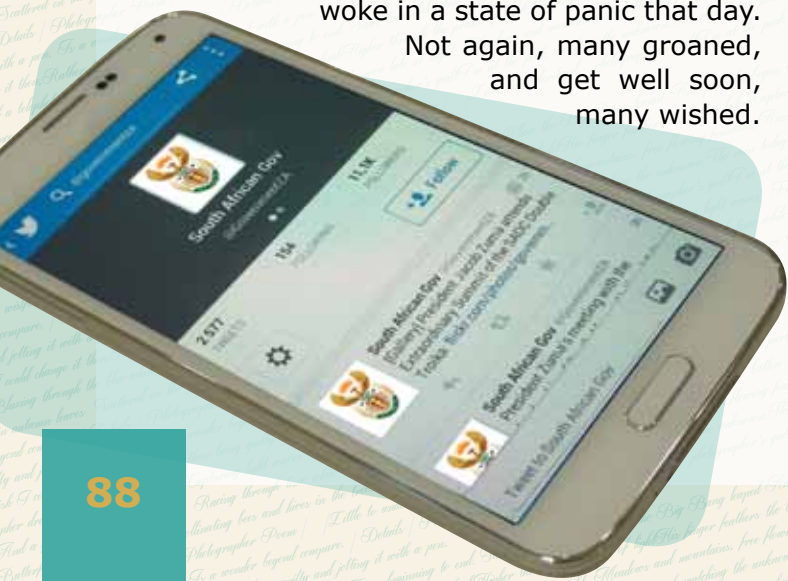
Soon newsrooms picked up the story, and some, notoriously, ran with it. After all, the jockey in question was a seasoned broadcaster, and quite credible among his audience. Many hundreds of his followers and their networks retweeted (RT) this piece of information, and consequently many South Africans woke in a state of panic that day.

Not again, many groaned, and get well soon, many wished.

Meanwhile, in another part of Joburg city, a news team was given the instruction not to run with the story, though it was the biggest news item on a typically slow news day. While the online journos in the room were chomping at the bit, the acting editor was frantically calling around trying to verify the story before confirming it. The company this team worked for had in the past decade spent significant time and resources in building a brand as a premier news organisation and so cherished the credibility it now enjoyed above all else – including breaking a scoop.

This organisation, Primedia's Eyewitness News, had recently been paying a lot of attention to social media, and had issued a directive to its staff to 'not break news' on Twitter – particularly not in relation to the former President and his condition. The argument management made was that any 'scoops' broken by staff would be attributed to their vantage point working in a news environment, and any mishaps such as the one experienced across town would cost the brand dearly. Consequently, all staff, news reporters and others, could only break news on their official account once the normal checks of headlines news were met.

This organisation has begun unwittingly to follow an international trend related to news, breaking news and credibility. As the amount of news and information sources in social media has exploded – every user can now break a news story – and more and more users get their news from social media,<sup>46</sup> the credibility of 'established' or bona fide news outlets is paramount. Samantha Barry, a pioneer of the BBC's social media strategy, points out that as more people find news online, they turn to trusted sources to verify it – thus news brands need not be the first to break the news, but they'd better give a correct, in-depth and possibly also insightful version of events.



'live-tweeting'

Within an hour of his ill-fated revelation, the Joburg DJ was exposed as being incorrect and suffered the double ignobility of having got it wrong and having 'sent Mandela to hospital'. In a platform renowned for 'killing' people (that is, incorrectly proclaiming living people as dead) this was but a short step away.

Strategically, his organisation, although not directly affected, may have erred by not putting a policy in place to address not just the social media behaviour of their official accounts but also that of their staff. Continues Barry, 'the concept of a news or media organisation employing a separate social media or online team is outdated. Now everyone in the organisation should be new media savvy; and be part of the online strategy.'

A local news organisation that has heeded some of these teachings is *City Press* newspaper. celebrity, or rather tweleb (Twitter celebrity) editor Ferial Haffajee famously quipped that the 'scoop was dead', and though the paper is a weekly their account is busy throughout the week headlining news stories that are published directly to the paper's website. This site has become a massive news blog in the guise of *Huffington Post* that posts the lifestyle, economic and entertainment sections of the usually thick Sunday paper within hours of the printed edition hitting the street. In the days leading up to each Sunday, suggestive tweets by the *City Press*' official account, as well as Haffajee's, will punt the headline stories. Many of their opinion columnists are also online, and will be mentioned in 'throw-forwards' or promotional tweets which they in turn will RT to their own networks. Their reporting staff is also very social media savvy and can be seen 'live-tweeting' from press conferences and events, interspersed with quirky or witty commentary and insights. As a result, the paper seems 'switched on' and is as present in the virtual world as it is in the physical world, if not more so.

In contrast, Marvin Meintjies, former editor of the *Sunday World*, laments the cannibalisation

of newspaper sales that putting content online ensures. He preferred to put up the content a day or two later, whilst headlining it on the day. Although this maximised sales it meant that the online side of *Sunday World* suffered – like a rather dated blog, the paper doesn't offer a premium online experience. *The New Age*, also confronted with this challenge, prefers to post on its Twitter page entire news clips with headlines, and the text blurred out, all with an enlarged call to 'buy the paper'.

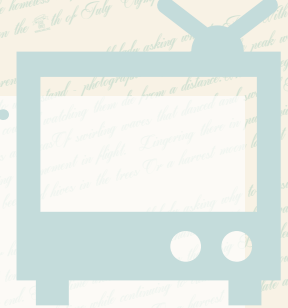
Venturing in a different direction – the Freemium model of established international broadsheets and magazines, BDFM, publisher of the *Business Day* paper and *Financial Mail* magazine, graces online visitors with a number of free readings after which a fee kicks in. After some five years or so of tinkering, their online platform BDLive now attracts half a million unique visitors a month, the second largest online news platform.



## Every user can break a new story

In a similar vein, upstart news site Maverick launched a Freemium service with a twist – an ezine for iPads. It also threw in an offer to its base of 5 000 odd subscribers to get a free iPad with a monthly subscription. Maverick was once a much vaunted business magazine, and has in the past few years reinvented itself first as a daily news blog and more recently as a newswire service. Again, although they may be mavericks, the executive team is watching the shekels quite closely as the online Eldorado is still very illusive for local publishers.

Undoubtedly *City Press* derives its rather 'ballys' attitude to social media from its mother company, Media24, which has created a massive news portal that pulls information from its over 100 magazine and newspaper titles. Complete with smartphone apps, Media24 is South Africa's most formidable online platform, complete with blogs and micro-blog functionality for its 1.3 million monthly visitors. Media24 represents one of the pioneers of the South African digital



world, which is not surprising as they are one of the country's larger media groups with the wherewithal and resources to invest in a division that, until very recently, very few people knew how to monetise effectively.

Some larger players such as DSTv, whilst scoring big with their own digital development, also had the scars of uninspiring portals like MWEB on which to reflect. MWEB cost over a R1-billion worth of investment. When the dust had settled, South African online users had moved on from portals to Google and social media. Such stories would be enough to scare any executives with clever digital ideas.

Back to Primedia now, which also begun to invest quite steadily in social media – it has developed an internal division whose mandate is to find, develop and manage content, especially internal content generated from its four radio stations, and monetise it. Management seems to have taken a page out of Jack Welsh's book when he famously in the early 2000s declared 'destroy-your-business-dot-com'. The idea was very simple: build an online business to rival your bricks-and-mortar business before someone else arrives and does it for you. In a staggering example of the benefits of this approach, GE plastics grew its global online revenues from R15-billion in 2000 to R49-billion in 2006.

In the building of a recent upstart competing with one of Primedia's stations, Power FM, the social media activity is less intricately planned, and yet is intrinsic to all their shows. The new jocks on the block, the likes of Eusebius McKaiser, seem particularly social media savvy, as do their producers, thereby creating a seamless interplay between radio, Twitter and Facebook. Audiences listening in and posting

comments on social media may find themselves driving the conversation in studio, and social media audiences don't miss a word as every salient point is in turn also posted online.

Similar experiences can be found by audiences of younger radio stations – YFM, 5FM, Highveld – which are even beginning to incorporate advertising into their online model. Alas, TV hasn't yet caught up with this level of convergence.

To its credit, TV, especially Youth TV, has shifted from delineating an online audience from its core audience on a demographic basis. Whereas having a social media account may have been elitist a few years ago, today the rural/urban technology gap is roughly 18 months, meaning that a year and a half from now, the number of rural users will be equivalent to the number of urban users. You can thank mobile technology for that. Just as the cellphone has leapfrogged fixed line access all across Africa, it is now rapidly substituting the computer as the device of choice with which to access online sites.

A few months ago, productions barely mentioned twitter, now it is *de riguer*, with a few production houses putting hashtags onto the screen for the duration of the programme. On live TV shows, reading SMS feedback has slowly been replaced with reading Facebook or Twitter messages. That said, TV programmes locally still play it safe compared to how major US TV events such as the SuperBowl use social media.<sup>47</sup>

Local news channels, eNCA, SABC News and ANN7, are increasingly putting televised content online. However, owing to a mismatch with the South African preference for shorter clips (three minutes and under), and poor or non-existent content mining and exploitation plans, TV journalists still have some way to go in leveraging the benefits of social media.



# Inside the editorial room

## - what media trends are emerging in the era of social media

Sometime in late 2012, Dr Khaled Elmufiti, a surviving local hero of the civil war in Iraq, joined a group of 100 or so net rebels at a conference in Washington DC. In attendance were a blogger dissident from China who spoke of how he and fellow bloggers shared news of what was going on inside China with the outside world by using coded messages, especially pictures, which, as in a dictionary, could represent various things. There was a young Facebooker who organised Russia's largest-ever civil protests simply by posting a protest event. He was woken in the morning by a phone call from a news agency – apparently over 100 000 Facebookers had joined the event overnight. Dr Elmufiti's story was as fascinating: an IT specialist working in London, he was visiting his home city of Benghazi when the Arab Spring hit Libya. Within days he was holed up in the city centre with other combatants fighting against the Libyan army. He restored communication cables and, using an old modem, proceeded to send messages and images to the outside world in a painstakingly long process. Soon, his messages became one of the famed sources of information used by external news agencies and journalists. A real-life citizen journalist.

This trend of citizen journalism has been burgeoning for some time, but nothing has accelerated it quite like social media. Not only are civilians giving reports on local topical issues and events whether in text or video clip, but news agencies are rushing to use this content. Five years ago, CNN launched its I-Report platform which allowed users to share local news stories. It has since become an application for most smart phones, allowing users to simply record and send. To improve the quality of submissions, CNN launched I-Report Awards to honour users with the most useful reports. Most major news networks have since launched similar initiatives.



Back at home we can expect to see increased use of citizen journalism. The tragic story of Mido Macia, the taxi driver who lost his life in late February 2013 after being brutally dragged behind a police van, would probably not have come to light had the clip not been filmed and circulated online. This trend can only increase as the hunger for content grows in proportion to the expected increase in media, and in particular broadcast stations that the digital migration of our television system will bring.

Barry notes that this is a significant caveat of the consumer now being the other person in the editorial meeting. Not only are consumers adding news content; they are providing instant feedback, and even the basis of further debate and discussion. Online users and even bloggers are finding their utterances fair game for quotation in mainstream media.

A potential downside to the increased use of amateur news content by professional organisations is the veracity, integrity and depth of context of the contribution. Media strategist and author Ryan Holiday points out the inherent dichotomy between traditional media and online contributors – the former isn't anxious for name recognition, mainly concerned with protecting reputation whereas the blogger is more interested in building a name than protecting one.

Another aspect worth noting is the rise of alternative user-generated content. Although





some news people have significant followings, the most followed may be celebrities, controversial figures or even parody accounts. Again, the issue of what sort of information is shared online arises, as influential and captivating accounts are more likely to have offbeat observations or representations of a news account. The potential for the narrative of an occurrence to be skewed, for humour, dramatic effect or otherwise is very real. These representations will then probably find further expression in the mainstream media based on their net popularity or the relationship between the news agency and the contributor.

## The potential for the narrative of an occurrence to be skewed, for humour, dramatic effect or otherwise is very real.

One of the people Dr Elmufi met at the conference in Washington was a young woman from Chile, Paloma Baytelman. She unwittingly fell into a form of citizen journalism when some of her video blogs went viral. Then she started stalking community and country leaders for interviews that were zany at best. A few years later, Paloma is considered a bona fide journalist (or, rather, news personality) bringing information to audiences through dedicated

channels. Paloma and the millions of YouTube users like her fulfill the promise of everyone's 15 minutes of fame; where amateur users become professionals without training, and recognised not for excellence but rather for chance.

The same is true for opinionistas and columnists – thought leaders are increasingly blurring the lines between reporting, providing analysis and actually just providing their own opinion. Many public relations professionals are capitalising on this phenomenon: @Anatius, @KaySexwale, @TebogoDitshego and @JJTabane, known for his #DearSpinDoctor tweets, which give practical solutions to how PR specialists could handle current PR hot potatoes.

The rise of the thought leader has become an interesting social media phenomenon. South Africa's TV and radio personalities tend to have the greatest numbers of followers, particularly on Twitter but, surprisingly, news aficionados and opinistas are increasingly ranking among the twelebs (twitter celebrities): names like @TOMolefe, @ComradeSipho, @Noma-langaMkhize, @Sentletse and @KhayaDlanga are known for getting debates started. @Sbo-shmafu has recently gone on to join a Cape Town talk radio, which is indicative of how media companies are looking for a social media presence and following alongside the more traditional qualities.

## The looking glass – what the future holds for social media

Any good salesperson born before social media will tell you that in their day there were two options for attracting sales – hitting the road and speaking to as many people as possible, or taking out an ad and speaking to hundreds if not thousands of would-be buyers. Insofar as mediums go, the telephone is most like a salesman on the road, as it is about direct one-on-one conversation. The radio on the other hand is what the salesperson would use to advertise.

Social media typifies a very nuanced but significant caveat to the media world. Now, social media allows for many people to communicate many messages to one person or to a small group of people, or broadcast it to everyone. It provides a distribution and production flexibility far superior to that of any other media before it, and as such is a key driver for convergence between the media – and that includes content and style.

Importantly users are not merely consumers of content; they are also participants, creating what is known as user-generated content, and they are sharing these types of content with common users of different online (or virtual) communities. Stylistically, social media encompasses a number of different application platforms that include collaborative projects where users collaborate to achieve a collective objective (Wikipedia); content communities where users primarily share content like pictures (Instagram), video (YouTube) or music (Soundcloud); blogs (Wordpress) and microblogs (Twitter); where users journal their thoughts and reflections; social networking sites where users network for commercial, romantic or shared interests (LinkedIn); virtual game worlds where users play games together or against each other; and, finally, virtual social worlds where users create entire virtual worlds to inhabit and connect in (SecondLife). Without doubt the most important aspect of social media are the social trends that have emerged.

Each of these types of platforms demands a particular protocol or style of engagement. It is a user's proficiency with such style guidelines that will ensure their continued prominence in their social media of choice. Newsmen and women are no different. They will increasingly deliver their news content within a specific style mandate, whereas non-traditional journalists will increasingly encroach on the reporters' 'turf' and report the news. Other certain trends are a conglomerisation of the various big media, which will inevitably drive to a consolidation of narratives. Recently, in the wake of South Africa's fifth democratic national election, media commentators have found themselves pondering the chasm between the poll results and the dominant pre-election narratives widely expressed in the media – narratives of South Africans looking for change.

One of the likely reasons for this contradiction is that

certain narratives find more expression across the media than others, giving the impression that they are dominant in society. This is one of the challenges that media platforms must guard against.

As the tools for self expression increase daily, we will continue to see a glut of news being produced by professionals and by amateurs. The most valued commodity of the social media networks will at this time become trust. Currently 'the persona' is the online commodity of choice.

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## 'The revolution will not be televised' – it's online

Like the Gutenberg press, the web has brought forth a truly revolutionary media. When American the activist and poet, Gil Scott Heron wrote the now famous poem 'the revolution shall not be televised', little did he know just how right, and completely incorrect, he was. The revolution shall in due course be televised, but first it will be brought to you by an engaged, informed persona, whom you trust, in real time, live and in packaged sound-bites.

The revolution will not be televised brother – it's online.

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