

THIS IS NOT THE FUTURE, IT'S THE NOW

Earlier this year there were wonderful headlines in a number of South African newspapers about a young man called Mandla Lamba who was being trumpeted as the country's "youngest billionaire".

He had supposedly made his fortune with savvy mining deals and financial wheeling-and-dealing and was not

averse to blowing R50 000 in a night at one of Joburg's swankiest clubs.

But it was all a lie.

Lamba was no billionaire. He was a fraudster and a fugitive from justice and just about every detail of his life turned out to be an elaborate fiction. It took my Media24 Investigations team little more than a morning to pull the stitches from his fabric of lies – and in doing so we turned to the many new tools available to journalists today.

For example, we used online databases to check company records which showed us where we should start looking to track down people connected to his past. Colleague Julian Rademeyer and I began sending out tweets on Twitter asking if anyone had, or knew anyone, who had worked at any of these now defunct companies. Within a day we had been contacted by people who had worked with Lamba and who were willing to talk about his dodgy business activities.

This is one example of how we can harness the power of social media to accelerate what would have taken many days of gumshoe reporting to achieve.

The digital tools available to us open new potential and power in our reporting. Using webscrapers we can, for example, mine thousands of pages of government gazettes for information on tender deals turning what used to be an exercise in looking for a needle a haystack into a five-minute search.

Late last year I scraped about one million records of mining and prospecting right applications from the Department of Mineral Resources website. I wrote a programme in Python to rapidly search through these records for evidence of a company mining rights or applications across South Africa, a tool which remains valuable to this day. We have used it to write about companies connected to disgraced former ANC chief whip Tony Yengeni bidding for mineral rights. We also used it to tell a major story about the mining interests of Chancellor House, the controversial ANC front company.

There is a brilliant website called Scribblemaps which we make regular use of. It produces amazingly useful maps, allowing you to layer data in really useful ways. We used it often in our reporting around mining applications since the mining application data came with geo co-ordinates which made it a breeze to get information onto a map. In doing so we could see, for example, that a large number of prospecting sites by the controversial Imperial Crown Trading company ran along, and in, the Vaal River, producing a story which would have been almost impossible to uncover in any other way.

I believe that any journalist who is not learning how to unleash these tools and technologies on their journalism is about to get left in the dust.

Consider the power of social media. There are an estimated four million people using Facebook in South Africa today and they're spending about 50 minutes a day on it, far more

than they are spending on news sites or reading newspapers. Twitter's online audience has grown from some 90 000 at the beginning of 2010 to more than one million by mid-2011.

That's a massive opportunity to make journalism richer even as it gets faster. We don't have to become hamsters on a treadmill, as some critics suggest of our profession. We simply need to work smarter and quicker.

A journalist who knows how to use social media and who can access significant audiences on these networks will fly. There is wonderful potential for crowd-sourcing information and bringing in an even richer set of voices to our reports in a fraction of the time it would take using traditional methods.

Social media provides a rich source of news leads. At the end of last year we wrote a major expose of Yengeni, whom we discovered was illegally a director in a number of companies following his fraud conviction. Where did this lead come from? Straight off Facebook where a savvy user posted an update wondering how Yengeni was able to drive a Maserati and live the high-life considering his apparent fall from grace.

That story led to a high-level criminal investigation into Yengeni which continues.

But there are many other possibilities that still lie ahead. For example, journalists in the United States are starting to use Foursquare, the location-based social network, to locate potential eyewitnesses to stories.

Another journalist in the US wrote a fascinating piece about how hotels exorbitantly pushed up their room prices during snow storms, exploiting vulnerable travellers. She did it by analysing Twitter feeds for key words and was able to build the framework of her story from these indignant tweets.

YouTube and other user-generated video websites provide rich hunting grounds for exclusives and for the investigative reporter. Following a tip-off recently we were able to locate footage from different sources (and the details of which we corroborated ourselves) showing that South African-made sniper rifles had been sold to Libya and were being used by government forces there. The South African government has never officially confirmed this weapons transaction despite being repeatedly pressed to do so. We were able to reach across the world into a major conflict to report on a story of significance in South Africa simply by harnessing the power of the Net.

I often have conversations with colleagues who talk about the things that I have mentioned here as "the future". I always tell them: "No, this is not the future, this is now".

JOURNALISTS WHO DO NOT UNDERSTAND THAT THESE TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES NEED TO BE PART OF OUR DAILY ROUTINE ARE SIMPLY SIGNING THEIR OWN REDUNDANCY NOTICE.

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<http://erikapryor.com/2010/04/12/how-journalists-are-using-social-media-for-real-results-from-mashable/>