

JOURNALISM new



Why GroundUp?

By Nathan Geffen

When explaining the reason why GroundUp was started I like to tell this story. Sibongile Mazeka was a five-year-old child dying of AIDS because the family who looked after her could not afford antiretroviral treatment. These medicines were not yet available in the public health system as they are today. The Cape Times ran a moving story about Sibongile which showed the tragedy of untreated HIV infection. A couple of weeks after the story was published, I was in the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) office in Khayelitsha, and alerted to the sad news that Sibongile had died. I phoned the reporter who covered the story, one of the country's better health journalists at the time, and asked her to run a follow-up story on Sibongile the next day. "Sorry, there's no chance it'll make the paper tomorrow," I imperfectly recall her saying, "a plane has just flown into the World Trade Centre in New York."





We've published stories of police using live ammunition to disperse housing protesters, bribery at Home Affairs, how you can buy your driver's license in Khayelitsha, the removal of people from informal settlements on the West coast, the shocking conditions in the Free State health system and drug stockouts in the KwaZulu-Natal public health system.

The example of how the life and death of young, black and poor Sibongile was displaced in the main newspaper in the city in which she lived is startling but perhaps a bit unfair. 9/11 was hopefully a no more than once-in-a-lifetime event, and the Cape Times could not be blamed for prioritising it. But the point remains that while working with the TAC in the 2000s, I became increasingly frustrated with the mainstream media's lack of attention to the daily struggles faced by ordinary people confronted with the HIV epidemic. Not only did reporters struggle to understand the science of the epidemic, they or their editors

tended to ignore, or get wrong, the human side of the disease. Not always of course – there has been much fine South African reporting on the HIV epidemic over the years – but often.

This struck me as not only a problem for TAC, but also in other areas where human rights are frequently trampled upon such as education, sanitation, sex work and immigration. Poor media coverage of these issues is deeply frustrating for organisations working to improve our society's responses to these issues, such as Equal Education, Social Justice Coalition, SWEAT and PASSOP. It the need to fill this gap in the mainstream media that the idea of GroundUp was born.

GroundUp is a news website based in Cape Town. Most of our articles are hard news, though we do run opinion and analysis pieces, and most deal with issues of social justice in townships and immigrant neighbourhoods. We try not to go where the mainstream media goes. Instead we offer our copy free to anyone to republish. Thankfully, Daily Maverick, News24, Mail & Guardian and other publications have been publishing our material regularly. We typically publish from Monday to Friday, aiming to average three to four stories a day.

Many of our stories are daily news items: short and often ephemeral. However, we've published many breaking news stories of continuing interest that have been widely read, for example police using live ammunition to disperse housing protesters, bribery at Home Affairs, how you can buy your driver's license in Khayelitsha, the removal of people from informal settlements on the West coast to the low-cost housing development located on the periphery of Cape Town called Wolwerivier, the shocking conditions in the Free State health system and drug stockouts in the KwaZulu-Natal public health system. GroundUp, so far as I can tell, was the first news agency to run a report on the unprotected strikes by farm workers in Western Cape in 2012, though at the time we didn't foresee how the situation was about to explode.

We also strive to follow-up on stories. For example, we have regularly covered the aftermath of the evictions of people from SANRAL-owned land in Lwandle near Strand in Cape Town. We publish in-depth longer articles and photo essays, such as a struggling Cape fishing community, Redhill an all but forgotten

neighbourhood from which people were removed in the 1960s not unlike District 6, and the “karretjie mense” of the Karoo.

Our reporters are mostly drawn from working class communities and some are former activists in social justice movements. They have insight and contacts in working class areas that most middle-class reporters lack. But they also lack experience and are battling the deficits acquired through the South African education system that for the most part fails to teach people to write competently. This means the editing process has to be more time-consuming and involve more feedback to the reporters than at most publications.

Producing fact-based news is hard and expensive.

Even simple short reports can typically cost a few thousand rands when you take into account the entire apparatus involved in putting them together.

Complex, important and long stories cost considerably more. A

question nearly everyone I speak to about GroundUp

asks is how do we finance it. It's almost entirely funded through grants from donors and smaller donations from our readers. Advertising money is negligible. In the beginning we harboured ambitions of attracting adverts. But with time it has become apparent to us that advertising is not an appropriate model for GroundUp.

First, our articles are read much more when republished in the mainstream media. And for us it is crucial that GroundUp articles are widely read. Obviously we can't attract advertising revenue when published in publications belonging to other organisations.

Second, as a non-profit, too much advertising has the potential to subtly affect editorial policy.

Third, it is hard enough at present for large, mainstream, serious news publications to attract advertising, having to compete against outlets like BuzzFeed that specialise in clickbait articles that are certainly entertaining but of limited newsworthiness; it would be especially hard for GroundUp to compete for this advertising.

Donor-supported journalism is not a new thing. In 1969 the Fund for Investigative Journalism gave Seymour Hersh \$1 000, which he used to uncover the massacre committed by American troops against Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. Hersh's reports helped turn the American public against the American invasion of Vietnam, and he won a Pulitzer Prize.

ProPublica in the United States “focuses exclusively on truly important stories, stories with ‘moral force.’ We do this by producing journalism that shines a light on exploitation of the weak by the strong and on the failures of those with power to vindicate the trust placed in them.” Their website articulates precisely the same purpose behind GroundUp: “It is true that the number and variety of publishing platforms are exploding in the internet age. But very few of these entities are engaged in original reporting. In short, we face a situation in which sources of opinion are proliferating, but sources of facts on which those opinions are based are shrinking. The former phenomenon is almost certainly, on balance, a societal good; the latter is surely a problem.” ProPublica is supported by philanthropic funding.

In South Africa, GroundUp is not the sole media publication primarily dependent on donor funding. AmaBhungane and Health-e are too. All three organisations are publishing important news of considerable public interest.

Is donor funding a sustainable model for news organisations like ours? I hope so but I'm not sure. I can't see any other way to finance what we do. I hope enough donors, big and small, can be convinced that what we do should not be subject to market forces, that this is work which must be done, and that news reporting of this sort is an important public good.

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Nathan Geffen founded GroundUp in 2012 and is the current editor. He worked with the Treatment Action Campaign alternately as treasurer, national manager and policy director from 2000 to 2013. nathangeffen@gmail.com