Prof Peter Clayton of Rhodes University's Computer Science department presents the Telkom Interactive Multimedia Project to the Highway Africa delegates via satellite.

Systems that work for

By Virgil Tipton

A few years ago, a newsroom information manager at a newspaper in the United States was getting frustrated. No surprise there — newsroom information managers' lives are full of frustration, panic and other raw emotions. In this case, the manager saw that reporters and editors were wasting prodigiously the newsroom's most precious commodity — knowledge. The manager, George Landau of the St Louis Post-Dispatch, realised that he could do something about it.

His frustration and the insight that followed led to the founding in 1996 of NewsEngin Inc, a small software company with a remarkable list of customers and a remarkable approach.

Here's my disclaimer for the report that follows: I'm the chief technology officer for NewsEngin. I was so impressed by Landau's vision that I resigned as deputy editor of the Post-Dispatch in 2000 and joined NewsEngin, when its customer list already included The Boston Globe, The New York Times and The Washington Post. My colleague Jim Mosley, also a former editor at the Post-Dispatch, had joined a year earlier as CEO.

Here's what is compelling about this story for African journalists: as you join the Information Society, you'll have choices about how to manage information in your newsrooms. However you build or enhance your systems, I'd encourage you to think about how to manage not just stories, but the wealth of other knowledge available in your newsrooms.

First, a couple of salient facts about journalism not always acknowledged:
1. Newsrooms know more about their communities than any other single source. But often that information is scattered in small puddles. Power derives from combining those puddles into one central lake.
2. Journalism starts before anyone starts writing a story and continues after the story has been published.

Journalists are knowledge workers. They refine news from knowledge gathered from and about their communities. That knowledge can and should be retained and made easily accessible to everyone in the newsroom. That helps produce deeper, more informed coverage; better continuity; fewer mistakes and, in the end, a more enlightened community.

Journalists understand this. Software designers often don't. So instead of providing journalists a way to store and share the raw material they use to craft stories, many software designers simply provide a big box for journalists to write their stories in. What results is that everything gets typed into the big box and, at the end, the raw material — interviews, phone numbers, quotes from documents, etc — gets cut.

It doesn't have to be that way. With any level of technology, newsrooms can establish systems to share information more easily. For example, newsrooms can use shared source lists. They can share story plans so that everyone knows what's running in the paper. And they can share a common calendar of upcoming events.

Key is a change in mindset, that it's beneficial for everyone in the newsroom if much of our information is shared. The result will be journalists spending less time hunting around for information someone already

"Stories are just an expression resource: the knowledge about

Weblogging is 'We Media'

By Sim Kyazze

"**B**logging technology has begun to deliver on some of the wild promises about the Internet that were heard in the 1990s," wrote Matt Welch in the September/October issue of Columbia Journalism Review, America's leading media monitor published by the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University.

Internet junkie and surfer supreme Jorn Barger is credited with this definition: "A weblog (sometimes called a blog or a news page or a filter) is a web page where a weblogger (sometimes called a blogger, or a pre-surfer) 'logs' all the other web pages she finds interesting." Barger says the format, "is normally to add the newest entry at the top of the page, so that repeat visitors can catch up by simply reading down the page until they reach a link they saw on their last visit."

Another feature of the weblog is that each post contains one, and often several, hyperlinks to other websites and stories, and usually there is a standing list of links to the author's favorite bookmarks.

In a sign that the Internet is catching up with the rest of the world in terms of bickering, some people have tried to change this definition, others have denounced it, while others have jazzed it up. Still others (the majority) have decided to just do it: to become webloggers.

South African Rudy Nadler-Nir, whose expertise lies in the creation of mostly online communication concepts and strategies, is a passionate weblogger. Nadler-Nir got together with Arthur Goldstuck of World Wide Worx and Dan Gillmor, technology columnist at the San Jose Mercury News in the US, at the 2003 Highway Africa Conference in September, to talk about the democratising influence of weblogging.

Gillmor talked about convergence by suggesting, "we started with 'Old Media', added 'New Media', and then we added 'We Media'. Making the news is now possible for anyone."

"Are weblogs a form of journalism?" Nadler-Nir asked. He answered himself by asking another rhetorical question: are the telegraph, tape recorder, photography, the modem, or the ultra-modern videophone a form of journalism, or are they just mediums? Nadler-Nir said they are mediums, and so are weblogs. He called them "a collaborative medium" with "commentary pages" and which occasionally look like "online diaries".

Nadler-Nir admitted that he was a big fan of the Drudge Report, the website that first revealed the adulterous relationship between President Bill Clinton and White House intern Monica Lewinsky in 1998, and effectively put weblogging on the map.

Gillmor, perhaps owing to his background as a nuts-and-bolts journalist, was more wary and was quick to quip that much of what the website said about the Clinton-Lewinsky story at the time was false. This point, Nadler-Nir acknowledged, but he too massaged it with his own quip: "At least he got the story out where Newsweek failed!", referring to the fact that Newsweek, the prestigious news magazine, had had the Clinton sex story for months, but did not have the courage to run it until it was broken on the Internet by a weblogger!

Weblogging is therefore clearly exciting. But it is so much removed from the daily existence of even regular Internet users in Africa.

This will not be for long. Said Matt Welch in the Columbia Journalism Review: "Blogging technology has, for the first time in history, given the average Jane the ability to write, edit, design, and publish her own editorial product — to be read and responded to by millions of people, potentially."

Said Gillmor on this exciting new development: "Journalism's new world involves ubiquitous networks and powerful new tools for reporting. Anyone can publish. It empowers not just the former audience but also the people (and institutions) we cover."

It seems, then, that weblogging is up the alley of the alternative media that has captured the imagination of many African commentators in the recent past. What Nadler-Nir, Gillmor and Goldstuck all agree on is that weblogs are cheap and simple, the software is widely available and it's easy to install.

As Gillmor said: "Weblogs can complement traditional journalism." Blogs can break news and keep issues alive, he added.

Now all we need are weblogs clanking away at African stories.

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Dan Gillmor – weblogger

journalists

has collected and more time doing journalism.

To show how these ideas might manifest themselves in software, here are descriptions of some of the tools that NewsEngin has developed:

♦ SourceTracker: like some other NewsEngin tools, it's based on Lotus Notes. It provides a personal database for reporters and editors to store information about people, interviews, documents and drafts of stories. They can associate those bits of raw material with stories they're working on. And they can share those pieces with other people in the newsroom. They can clone the database to a laptop and take it with them into the field.

♦ My NewsEngin: a more advanced form of SourceTracker, this tool automatically builds a navigational interface for journalists based on their roles in the newsroom. They can have one-click access to all of the tools they need to do their work. NewsEngin built this tool in partnership with The Boston Globe.

♦ NewsFront: stories are edited in this central database. As they move through the editing process, they automatically build story plans — what journalists in the States call budgets. The newsroom can see at a glance what stories are planned for which section of the paper and how far along they are.

♦ EventTracker: NewsEngin is building this tool in partnership with The Washington Post. It will provide a central database for all event-driven information that the newspaper or its website will publish. Information can be exported out of it already formatted for publication. This tool is based on the open-source platforms of MySQL and PHP.

Whether or not African journalists end up with tools like these, I hope you will listen to the spirit that produced them and understand that stories are just an expression of a newsroom's greatest resource: the knowledge about its community. Journalists — and, more importantly, our communities — are better served when we manage that resource wisely.

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of a newsroom's greatest
its community."
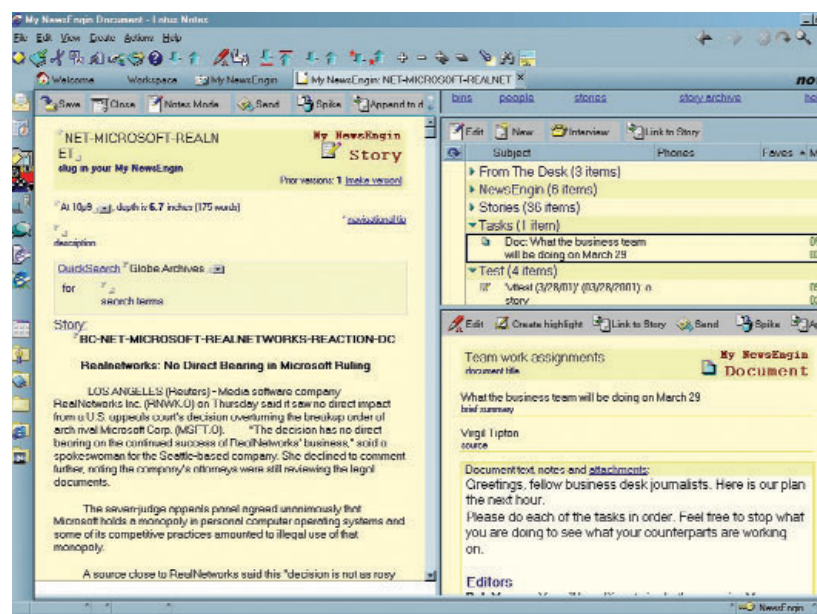
Above: My NewsEngin

Left: Virgil Tipton and Highway Africa delegates