

# Powerful journalism is easy peasy (and here's how to do it)



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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There something very interesting going on in the Eastern Cape: it won't win awards but it's a totally new kind of journalism for South Africa that has the potential to really make a difference for ordinary people and improve the running of our cities and towns. It also takes the wind out of the sails of those parts of the ANC and SACP that wish to curtail [media freedom](#) and acts as a bridge builder between the media and the authorities.

## Civic journalism, not citizen journalism

It's called "civic journalism", a term you may have heard if you work in media but are probably not sure what is meant by it. Not to be confused with "citizen journalism", civic journalism is not hard to grasp - or to do.

Basically, it involves journalists going out into their communities, holding neighbourhood meetings and inviting the people of the area to come and tell them what bugs them - it could be traffic jams or derelict parks that have become crime hot spots or falling-down street signs. Then the reporters take these issues up with the authorities to try to get them fixed.

The point is that the journalists aren't sitting in newsrooms wondering what concerns the people out there but are actually out there letting the people set the news agenda. Easy peasy lemon squeezy! It certainly doesn't take the forensic skill and experience of high-flying investigative journalists, so why then are not more newspapers and radio stations doing it?

## Civic unit

Well, the *Daily Dispatch* newspaper in East London in the heart of the marginalised Eastern Cape is the first newspaper to have jumped into this new world with a [civic unit](#) comprising four reporters, one of whom is also the team leader.

Since it was formed about four months ago, the unit has set themselves up in [taxi ranks](#) and [coffee shops](#) and invited the public to come and chew the fat with them. It has held eight public meetings in various East London neighbourhoods, from rich to poor, but has also gone further afield to Zwelitsha, King William's Town and Queenstown.

The successes range from getting action taken by the municipality on covering up man holes to cracking down on drunken revellers at beachfronts and a dangerous illegal home brew being sold in shebeens.

## Some disappointments

There have been some disappointments. For instance, the Queenstown municipality has largely ignored the civic unit's stories and follow-ups in the *Dispatch* and sister paper, *The Rep*, in Queenstown. Further, Taralyn McLean, the unit's team leader, says she is aware that the unit tends to tackle the easier stories coming out of the meetings, rather than the more complex ones.

"I think we are making a difference but in small ways," says McLean, "It is too soon to really tell." Yet she says she had learned some fascinating things, namely:

- How easy it is to find loads of stories just by getting out there and talking to ordinary people in an open-ended fashion;
- That there is a limit to what journalists can do. They can highlight problems by writing about them and prompt communities to get organised and campaign further but the journalists can't fix the problems.

- That the formerly adversarial relationship between the paper and municipality has become less so and, in fact, it has actually become productive after the paper has rewarded the council for fixing problems by highlighting this in follow-up stories.
- That the same problems keep coming up across neighbourhoods in a city, for example, rubbish not being picked up reliably. It can get difficult to keep getting these issues into the paper as it does seem repetitious to the news desk. Therefore, McLean suggests to other papers wanting to start such units that it helps to have support and guidance from the very top, that is, the editor. Alternatively, that a civic unit should ideally be staffed by three reporters and led by a senior staff member, a civic editor. This person should not be writing stories but be the civic champion, be able to have a bird's eye view of the team and be a superb organiser who can run campaigns, liaise with communities and authorities, keep the momentum going and manage the team.

## Seeds

There are the seeds of civic journalism in initiatives such as the SABC's "Social Reconstruction Initiative" and Independent Newspapers and Primedia's [LeadSA](#) campaign but Rhodes University journalism lecturer Rod Amner, who is an expert on civic journalism, points out that the *Dispatch*'s is a good model for others as the paper is not setting the agenda at all - the community is.

In a country where we have a weak civil society because the ANC tends to crowd civil-society groups' voices out, says the incredibly clever Amner, this is enormously powerful as the media cannot be accused of being elitist and biased. Amner puts it best:

"I think what the debate and the contest [in SA over the media] is ultimately all about is who has the right to speak on behalf of whom. The politicians say, 'We're the ones with the votes; you people are actually counter-revolutionaries and in bed with white capital and untransformed. You're hyper-critical when you should be getting behind the nation and doing more developmental and collaborative-type stuff with us.'

## "Argument would be much more powerful"

"The press is saying 'public interest, public interest, hands off the press etc' but that argument would be so much more powerful if they were doing what the *Dispatch* is doing, which is going into communities week after week and meeting with hyperlocal people who then see their faces and issues portrayed in the newspaper. Then the *Dispatch* goes back to those communities and tries to close the loop on some stories and actually has accountability measures whereby certain things are followed up on, things actually tangibly change in front of the people's eyes...

"That's an accountability mechanism second to none and there is a real sense of 'the *Dispatch* is my friend and my ally as a citizen. I speak and I get represented.' It then becomes impossible for public officials to hide for very long... The papers can then say [to politicians]: 'Well, the people have spoken here in their hundreds. They have said this and we're not making it up. This stuff exists and you guys are going to have to respond to the anger and the disappointment.' And that's how it should work. It's such a simple thing to do but actually an extremely important and profound thing that the *Dispatch* is doing."

## Far-reaching

Simple and powerful. Easy to execute; far-reaching in its execution. The gods of journalism must be smiling as it doesn't get sweeter than that in the time-pressed stressed newsrooms of today.

*Disclosure: Moodie is married to Andrew Trench, who was editor of the Dispatch when the civic unit was formed but who has now joined Media24.*

**For more:**

- To get a better sense of what the *Dispatch* civic unit has been up to since its launch in the middle of this year, go to the newspaper's [website](#) and search for "Dispatch Civic".
- "[A civic engagement](#)", Rod Amner's analysis of the *Dispatch*'s civic journalism in the *Rhodes Journalism Review*.
- "[A Tale of Two Investigations](#)" by Rod Amner in the *Rhodes Journalism Review*.
- Guy Berger on the [SABC's "Social Reconstruction Initiative"](#)
- "[Why do we need to speak up for free speech?](#)" on Bizcommunity
- [Right to Know campaign](#)
- "[POI Bill is veil for ANC secrets going back 20 years](#)" on Bizcommunity

#### See also:

- Bizcommunity special section: [special focus on media freedom](#)
- Bizcommunity Twitterfall: [#ZAmefreedom](#)
- Press Council of South Africa: [Help make journalism in South Africa better](#)
- Right2Know petition: [www.right2know.org.za](http://www.right2know.org.za)
- Avaaz.org petition: [South Africa: democracy at risk](#)
- MediaMattersZA: [www.Facebook.com/MediaMattersZA](http://www.Facebook.com/MediaMattersZA) and [@MediaMattersZA](#)
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