



Selfie journalism

when the smartphone meets storytelling + sharing

By Yusuf Omar

#FutureFit

I'm writing this on my iPhone, meandering along the Garden Route from Durban to Cape Town. The goat that just bounced off our fender is a vivid reminder that life is short. Long drives lend themselves to quiet contemplation.

I pass Rhodes University for the first time since graduating from the journalism school five years ago. A lot has happened since those early bylines in *Grocott's Mail*: I flirted with minefields in Congo, reported from Syria (wearing a bulletproof vest), followed the illegal rhino horn trade through Vietnam, ran a couple of Comrades Marathons and got caught up in the Arab Spring. I've also produced a dozen documentaries and features for eNews Channel Africa (eNCA).

Most recently, in an hour-long doccic called *#FutureFit*, I arm-wrestle a robot in the intro sequence. It's not just a TV gimmick, the contest symbolises the modern workplace and the immense technological changes redefining employment. Robots are now

not just imitating our minds, but also our muscles, and if you think creatives are safe, think again. News stories no longer need a human filter – thanks to complex algorithms and crowd-sourcing writing. Top that with everyone shooting everything on their smartphones, and Darwin was right: adaptability is survival. If you're in the media, it's best you listen up.

Selfie journalism

The first stop on our road trip is the geological formation known as Hole-in-the-wall in Coffee Bay. I'm showing Dad how to shoot time-lapses on his phone, wedging a selfie stick between the rocks on the beach to form a monopod. It's an overcast day, but using a few nifty apps we toy with the phone's shutter-speed and exposure like a real camera. It hits me like the goat's horns to the bonnet; the quirkiness of MOJO (mobile journalism) is rapidly being replaced by a dangerous reality. There's almost no barrier of entry to this craft.

I'm increasingly leaving my DSLR, and bigger cameras, and honing my skills on smartphones to produce multimedia reports. In the age of YouTube, audiences have never been more forgiving of handheld, poorly-lit content. Mobile journalism too, is as much



about using a phone to capture the footage, as producing made-for-mobile content. Engagement is now key. Counting how many Facebook likes our stories get or tallying YouTube views for a video is yesterday's social media strategy.

Today we want to know how people are commenting, starting conversations, and more importantly, how they're sharing our content. The news stories people post on their timelines represent their identities, and what issues they care about. We must pitch story ideas considering editorial content in equal measure to how viewers will engage with our stories.

Now, being able to shoot, edit and send on one device, like a smartphone, means I'm packaging news stories faster, and creating content with mobile viewers in mind (ie mobile-first), as opposed to simply making TV content resized to fit on a cellphone screen. They say we're living in a world of small screens and short attention spans.

But beyond the three basic Ss; stability, sound and sending, anyone with a smartphone can and will tell these stories. Facebook, Twitter and other social media giants have convinced us that online sharing is a natural facet of the human condition. The millions of hours of footage being posted online is testament to that.

Journalism is after all just two things: storytelling and sharing. We are now exploring the space where the smartphone meets these two disciplines.

With the explosion in consumption on mobile devices, our content has never had a bigger potential reach.

Yet news organisations struggle to go viral like the 18-year-old YouTube sensation doing a video-blog in his underpants at home. The equipment we use is no longer significantly better than that of a layman's pocket or within his budget. So media professionals need to differentiate themselves with something else. Something that makes us stand out. Let's call it a plus one factor. That something that makes you different.

For some it's a beat specialty, an intricate knowledge of a major court case, or inside contacts within government's inner circles. If you don't possess these noble journalistic traits, you might be like me, in which case there's no orthodox pathway to make it in this business.

Do something crazy

Our road trip momentarily pulls over at Bloukrans River. Along the bridge lies the world's biggest bungee jump. It reminds me of

a video blogger who jumped off London Bridge in July to increase traffic to his YouTube channel. He did get more followers, but he also almost drowned. You may need to do something a little crazy to get the attention of this industry, but make it a journalistic conversation starter; your latest assignment adventure. Something other reporters can't or aren't willing to do.

"I hitchhiked solo from Durban to Damascus, working in newsrooms along the way." That was my go-to line in 2010. With a backpack full of old T-shirts and a head full of young dreams, the East African adventure was the establishment of my journalistic brand, aspiring to uncover the 'dark continent' for myself. I planned almost nothing in terms of routing, using just an A4 map of Africa and a thumb to the wind to head north. However, the blog, business cards and Durban to Damascus branded T-shirt were in place. I'd make no money from the adventure, but create a portfolio of zany stories, pictures and videos along the way. Travel, and stories will find you. Better yet, I inadvertently practised the basics of photography, writing, and most importantly, shooting video journalism alone. My newfound Selfie Journalism would be vital for the revolution.

The uncanny journalistic luck of being in the wrong places at hideous times landed me in Egypt amid their (first) Arab Spring at the end of the hitchhiking adventure. Stranded with thousands of foreigners on the marble floors of Cairo International Airport for almost a week, we watched as modern-day pharaohs fell, and I got the exclusive angle of holidaymakers trapped in the turmoil.

Returning to South Africa, I joined the Independent Newspapers cadet school, and at the first opportunity, went off on my own adventure. Driving a 1979 VW beach buggy, I drove to Namibia's Henties Bay to document the annual clubbing of thousands of seals.

Several days, one engine fire and too many desert kilometers later, I arrived at a beach of happy seals and a local community that largely supported the annual culling. Many said there were too many seals, eating too much fish. I didn't get the story of the blood-soaked sands I went to capture, and I almost became the story when dagger-wielding bandits robbed me near the Zimbabwean side of Beit Bridge. What was supposed to be a graphic expose became a wacky travel tale named "Tarmac Sailors", but again, a journalistic brand was forming, in whichever newsroom I emerged.



Everything is a story

Our road trip to Cape Town detours to Jeffrey's Bay. An Aussie surfer recently came face-to-fin with a shark during a live-televised competition. The video has gone viral online, so my parents kindly face the roaring winds and rain as I scour the beach for follow-up stories. Family holidays aren't safe from the hunger. Back in the car, I'm editing the videos on my cellphone faster than I used to on a laptop.

Even my own marriage proposal became a story, running the 89-kilometre Comrades Marathon with a Go Pro video camera strapped on, I proposed at the finish line. "You're hydrated and hallucinating," was Dad's advice at the halfway mark when I told him of my plan. I was already going to be on my knees at the finish line anyway.

When I arrived at The Star newspaper in Johannesburg in 2011, I received perhaps my toughest opposition to the do-it-all-strap-a-camera-to-your-head approach to journalism, from the seasoned photo desk. Newsrooms were already tight, staff being shed, and this young buck wanted to take his own pictures and videos to complement his writing. The more noise they made, the more it became known; I could work alone, and deliver content across platforms. While I wasn't as experienced as senior reporters, a technological repertoire was increasingly becoming valued in the modern newsroom, and a natural fit for foreign assignments.

One Friday evening, covering the Joburg Fashion Week, I could barely hear a phone call from the assignments desk over the loudspeakers. The Gift of the Givers was sending a military plane full of medical relief to the Congo. An ammunition depot had exploded in a densely populated community of Brazzaville and thousands were maimed. Twelve hours later I was in a military hospital, having been transported from a scene of models with long legs, to the devastation of women without any. The gruesome visuals made for compelling video journalism, and in some sick way, it's true, their misery was my gain.

Be a self-promoter

"The Otter Trail is the best thing I've ever done in South Africa," I explain to Mum and Dad as we pass the Tsitsikamma National Park. "Have you watched the travel feature I did? It's on YouTube!" They haven't. Few people are tracking your career progress, so you must do it for them.

As a journalist, you have just two things: integrity, and your stories. We're perpetually one newsroom downsize away from

unemployment, so package yourself, all the time.

There's a really simple model for getting into the media industry. Give them the images (read: story, videos etc), and they give you the money. Remember when Julius Malema got expelled from the ANC Youth League, and he did what any self-pitying person would do; found shelter in his Gogo's house? I happened to be one of the only people in that township of Seshego in Limpopo at around midnight after the announcement. Some factions of the local community started pelting Malema's crew with rocks, guns were drawn, shots fired and police cars stoned. I shot it all on my cellphone, posted it to YouTube, and sold it to eNCA the next day. And, more importantly, the 24-hour news station offered me a job.

Finding your #mojo

We're driving past Qunu as a cold front lashes the Eastern Cape. Wet, grey and uneventful today, the ancestral home of Nelson Mandela was anything but quiet in December 2013. Satellite trucks paved across lush hills, broadcasting perhaps history's most-watched funeral. No place for a newbie reporter like myself, having recently joined eNCA. Unless you ambush the story.

Being able to broadcast using a 3G signal and my iPhone changed everything. I did live crossings during all those colourful moments, with the crowds heading to the Mandela Memorial at FNB Soccer City. Senior reporters had waited entire careers to cover those 10 days of mourning, and I scooped them because cellphone technology got me closer to the action.

Oscar Pistorius' trial was the same. Using Skype to live stream the drama outside court, I could take viewers closer, and faster than the traditional satellite trucks could deploy.

Mobile journalism was increasingly defining my career. When the latest xenophobia violence sparked the South African police and military to launch Operation Fiela, I livestreamed with the Periscope app, walking viewers deep into Joburg's hostels as police broke down doors.

But almost immediately after the broadcasts, negative feedback flooded social media. We'd taken live reporting too far. Police were dragging seemingly innocent half-nude men out of their beds, and we were broadcasting the unadulterated visuals live. I tried to avoid identifying faces, but some made it on air. Mobile technology allows us to do live crossings in more places than ever before, bringing new ethical conundrums. Greater awareness for privacy is required. Though the greatest ethical challenge would be my own. Recording my religion.



#Mecca_Live

Our road trip ends in Cape Town, and being a Friday, we head to the nearest mosque for Jummah (Friday prayers). All Muslims pray towards Mecca, and earlier this year I journeyed there.

The Umrah Pilgrimage is like a mini-Hajj. Seeing the Kaa'ba for the first time, the holy mosque we prostrate toward, is an indelible memory of submission, humbled in its presence. Yet, my first memories of Mecca will forever include a cellphone and selfie stick. I lived it through my lens before my heart. I filmed people praying, edited videos in between rituals, and uploaded videos at every opportunity.

On the spiritual 27th night of Ramadan this year, popular social media app Snapchat hosted #Mecca_Live. For the first time ever, Islam's most sacred sites became social media broadcasters, as thousands of pilgrims shared video snippets of their spiritual journeys with the world.

At a time when Muslims are expected to distance themselves from terror groups like ISIS, and excuse themselves for acts allegedly committed in their religion's name, selfies and mosque-glam-shots offered a new perspective to many online.

That's why I shot my first pilgrimage. To share it. I couldn't turn my storytelling identity off, or divorce myself from its ways. I'm a journalist, and a person, in a modern, connected world. Mobile journalism is my movement, however abstract or ill-defined. Telling stories gives me a kind of spiritual home.

Follow me: @YusufOmarSA

With social media, it has never been easier to present yourself to potential employers. It won't be your prose that differentiates you, but your ability to push your content. Personal homepages are outdated, I prefer YouTube channels for show reels and video archives. It's free to setup, and lasts forever. Like good writing, show (the work you've done) don't tell. Hell, this entire article is one big self-promotion.

Now check out mine:

www.YouTube.com/Journalisminaction



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