

The Conversation

AFRICA

By Caroline Southey

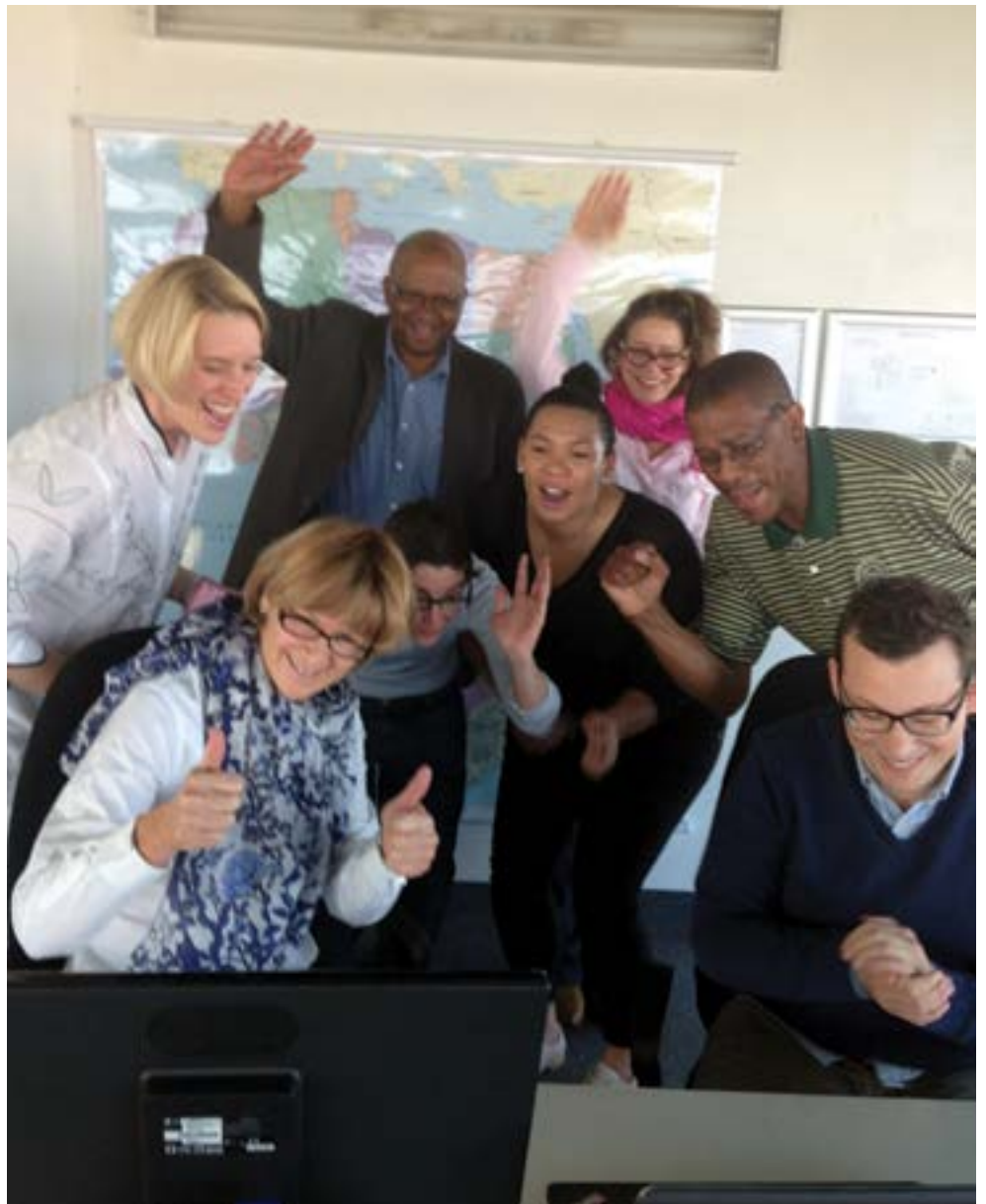
The Conversation is a website that publishes material written by academics and edited by journalists. It exists for the purpose of putting knowledge and information circulating in a relatively small academic pool into the public domain.

The site was first launched in Australia four years ago followed by the UK and the US. The three have achieved some remarkable milestones publishing over 30 000 articles from 25 000 academics with 2.6-million unique users a month and over 23-million readers through republication on more than 20 000 media outlets.

The Conversation Africa was launched in May this year thanks to a number of donors, including the National Research Foundation which helped us get out of the starting blocks. Some important milestones were: being endorsed by 21 universities across the continent; reaching over 125 000 unique visits to the site; and over 1.7-million views through republication.

Once established in Johannesburg, we will also launch hubs in Nairobi and Lagos. We are already commissioning on subjects, and from academics, from across the continent. In addition, we work closely with the Australian, UK and US sites, sharing content and ideas.

The beauty of the model is its simplicity because we're combining basic journalistic skills – editing skills



JOURNALISM
NEXT>>

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and having a nose for stories – with the deep pool of knowledge currently locked in the academy.

The Conversation Africa team consists of 9 editors, a general manager and strategic partnerships and social media guru. We are working out of offices in Braamfontein provided by the University of the Witwatersrand. The University of the Western Cape has given us an office for our Cape-based editor.

Like the other sites, our goal is to produce trusted content that draws on the expertise of academics and researchers across Africa to inform public debate, explain complex problems and, hopefully, to collaborate on developing solutions.

The site has a fresh feel to it because our newsroom behaves like all newsrooms. As a team we discuss what's happening in the news and what's coming up, think of story angles and then find academics to write. Our planning differs in one key respect – our stories need to be timeless as they have a much longer shelf life on the site than normal news sites.

The stories we commission come from two sources: academics who pitch ideas based on their work, and ideas generated by us based on breaking news stories.

I believe The Conversation has been so successful because it hits two sweet spots – the need of academics to share their knowledge and the hunger for explanatory journalism that gives meaning to the world around us.

But to make this happen you need a strong editorial team. The editors who have joined The Conversation Africa bring with them the skills set and passion needed to identify angles to stories as well as the ability to wrestle complicated copy to make it readable and accessible.

There is another important reason: we have replicated The Conversation's structures elsewhere and put in place a strong management team. A fifth of our staff looks after the day-to-day

management of our operation as well as cementing strategic partnerships to ensure our long term sustainability.

The founder of The Conversation Andrew Jaspan says the launch of the African site is part of a long-term goal to create a global network of newsrooms to join the existing four. In September this year the first non-English speaking site will be launched in Paris. The idea is to expand into other language zones such as Latin America.

What's different about The Conversation

Four features distinguish it:

It is a not-for-profit journalistic endeavour. The Australia and the UK sites are funded entirely by universities and some government money. In the US and South Africa donor funding has been secured to pay staff costs. Some revenue is generated from a jobs column in Australia but this makes up very little of the total pie.

Only academics can write for the site. This is probably the most unique aspect of the site. To qualify as a contributor you have to be attached to an academic institution, you need to have a PhD or you need to be teaching in a subject that you have developed a degree of specialisation in.

Everything is published under creative commons. This means that it can be republished by any other media outlet as long as two conditions are met: the story isn't changed and there is attribution.

From a journalistic perspective there is one characteristic that make it different from a conventional news operation. The academic gets the final sign off on any article. What this means is that the editorial team edits the material and then sends it back to the academic. The article can only be published once the academic is happy with the outcome. The effect of this is that there is a subtle shift in power between an editor and an author. In practice we have found that in the vast majority of cases academics are happy with the changes that

we make – they can sometimes be quite substantial – and merely correct us when we have misrepresented something or there has been a mis-interpretation of a complex issue.

What we have achieved so far

Since we launched on 7 May the site has drawn tremendous attention and the articles we have published have been republished extensively. Every major South African media house has reused our stories, including Business Day, most if not all of the titles belonging to the Independent group and the Mail & Guardian. Our articles are also being republished regularly by Times Live, the SABC, and eNCA websites. We have achieved global reach too through republication by sites like AllAfrica.com as well as global sites such as IFLScience, CNN, Quartz and Scroll.

What's really gratifying is that there has been interest in articles on a wide-range of subjects. For example in the last week of July our most read stories of the week were about drones delivering tangible benefits to ordinary people in Africa, the KZN caves that are under threat, lessons from Cuba on mother to child HIV transmission and lessons Buhari can learn from Obama on managing an economic crisis.

The academics

We are still in the early stages of developing a deep and wide pan-African network of academics writing for the site. So far we have had nearly 240 academics write for us. Over 450 have registered as potential authors.

The response from academics has been overwhelmingly positive. The site is designed in a way that makes it easy for academics to write into it. Once an academic has registered we send them a commissioning note summarising what we've agreed they will write about. Once they've written the article they can see us working on their material, and vice versa.

Once we've done an initial edit we let them know and they can check what we've done, adjust the copy and answer any questions we might have. Once both sides are happy the academic approves the article and we publish.

These are some of the responses we've had from academics.

"Often, we as scientists are sceptical of journalists, as we fear that our work may be wholly misinterpreted and the wrong message purveyed: not in this case – The Conversation Africa's editor took my work and expertly crafted it into an article. I guess that's why we are scientists and journos are journos! Such an easy process from suggestion of the article to completion – only a matter of days with excellent editing. Also the platform for submitting, editing and accepting the final draft before publication is easy to use and gives the author a lot of control over the final product. Look forward to writing my next article!" Dr Janet Viljoen, Chair, Departmental Ethical Standards Committee, Department of Human Kinetics and Ergonomics, Rhodes University

"I'm astonished! I've now seen the stats on my author's page; 400 views in less than a day is remarkable, to me, being used, as I am, to the kind of hits that scholarly journals receive." Dr John Butler-Adam Vice Principal for Research and Graduate Education, University of Pretoria

"Thank you very much for doing a really great job. I am impressed. Have you ever driven or walked past a major engineering work, at the start of the project and wondered what must be going on? That is how I felt along the way. But now I see the neat work you have done. You are indeed an architect that builds with words. I particularly appreciate and enjoyed how you were able to simplify my complex language by translating it to a simple language." Professor of Education, University of Pretoria

"I really appreciate your patience with me while writing this essay and apologise for coming across as rude and temperamental. Hopefully your other authors don't give you as hard a time as I did!" Biologist, University of Free State

Given the initial reaction to the site we are confident that it will grow from strength to strength. We have support for what we're

doing through our governance structures, which includes a group of powerful and well-connected advisors who give us guidance and will be helping us raise additional funds for the years ahead.

I think the incredible uptake of our stories through re-publication shows that there is tremendous hunger for the explanatory journalism that we are producing. It shows that journalism can be both relevant and appealing to a very wide audience when the content is produced by experts and experienced editors apply their skills to the copy.

Key statistics

(data from launch on 7 May – 27 July)

- **Total number of views:** 1 792 002 (Views of our content since launch, including republication)
- **Total users to site since launch:** 127 630 (Unique users to the site)
- **Number of authors published:** 239
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- **Number of institutions:** 76 (Institutions to which academics that have written for the site are affiliated)
- **Number of authors registered:** 457 (Academics that have registered with the site as potential authors)
- **Number of African countries authors have registered from:** 12
- **Number of endorsing universities:** 21

Caroline Southey:

WHAT I LEARNT FROM STARTING A START-UP

- 1 There are gaps! (The Conversation had no Africa presence).
- 2 Finding money and funders: be clear about your model.
- 3 Know what the funder wants. It's about them, not you.
- 4 It's all in the team: find people not like you who do things you can't do.
- 5 Leave your comfort zone.
- 6 Don't deviate: stick to your knitting.
- 7 Find and follow your readers.
- 8 The readers are the only reason we do what we do (we have 24-million a month globally).
- 9 Starting a start-up is harder than anything I imagined.
- 10 Starting a start-up is exciting: we got 307 000 followers in five weeks.



Previously Caroline was editor of the *Financial Mail* in South Africa. Prior to that she worked for the *Financial Times* in London and Brussels in various roles over 17 years including as *World Desk Editor* and as a foreign correspondent covering European Union agriculture and social policy. caroline.southey@theconversation.com