

Saving SA journalism: Opportunities in AI development

 By [Lerato Mkhethi](#)

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Like every creative during this time, I have been spending a lot of time at home reading and quarantining. Increasingly I have started to turn to business and financial news as I begin to plan the coming year as a freelancer and consultant for hire. However, the more I plan and the more I read about the state of news and news business, it's become increasingly clear that our global and local media is getting pummelled by second order economic effects resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and there is an urgent need to reinvent the journalism business for increased business model resilience through diversified revenue streams, as well as reorienting for innovation in practice.



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Investing in quality content and diversifying revenue streams are key elements in news media businesses' long term success. One need only look at the examples of the *NY Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian* and the now private Axel Springer Group for successful case studies in pivoting operational and revenue generation strategy.

While shifting to subscription models and increasing reader revenue is no doubt the future, more can still be done to drive down costs and increase quality in content. One specific area that offers opportunity for innovation is the use of artificial intelligence in journalism in various use cases.

AI and journalism

Looking abroad for inspiration in this field one would find that the German equivalent to South Africa's Media24 group has already begun developing roots for AI and machine learning integration in news and media; While its in-house Axel Springer Akademie in 2020 is teaching a module in AI and journalism for the first time in its prestigious two-year cross-media journalism trainee programme to take advantage of the newly created innovations and products. This is not an isolated industry occurrence as similar developments are being tested and implemented around the world.

Across the pond in Australia, the *Guardian* published its first report written by its in-house automated system in 2019, while in the US about a third of all content published by Bloomberg News already uses some form of automated technology.

The question I now ask is why can't we, in South Africa, do the same?

Invest and develop new technologies in SA

I have no doubt we have the talent. From what I have seen and heard, our universities produce talented programmers and developers who could easily take on such a project and succeed.

It is not only cost-effective but alleviates output pressure on journalists to produce daily churn. Instead of wasting time on researching, gathering data and pumping out 500-600 word filler pieces of sports results or daily stock movements, that repetitive task can be assigned to software program to produce in an instant with an editor picking up the last mile for stylistic changes and quality control. And boom, all of a sudden a reporter has an additional three hours in a day which gives them more time to work on the more nuanced analysis in quality long-form content the consumers actually want, enjoy and most importantly have come to expect.

The time could not be any better to invest and develop new technologies to supplement quality journalism and news media in South Africa.

ABOUT LERATO MOKHETHI

Lerato Mkhethi is a freelance journalist and creative content consultant with experience working with clients from research and development to international higher education.

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