

Journalism in the age of AI and digital transformation

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Let's talk about NARRATIVES.

In other words, about an ongoing story themes. Which exist often behind the scenes, underground as it were. Like much of your water supply in Namibia, which is what much of your surface life depends on. What then is the underlying tale about AI?

One is that AI is a magical mystery. This is because people use the term to mean many different things – but especially for marketing purposes. Use your imagination here: How about an advert that says: “Magic-bullet meat: Eat our bloubok steak: we hunt humanely with AI-enhanced cyber darts”. Any other ideas? What else could be sold here with AI as a tagline? “Sizzle up your sex life with our new AI app?”. Or “Vote for me in 2024 – I’ll bring AI to Namibia?”. How about: “splash out on a commercial licence for GPT – it’s a solution to finally secure the sustainability of your news outlet”.

Yes, we do marvel at the promises of AI-wrought prosperity to come. But of course reality is not quite as malleable. And besides the volume of tall tales about AI, we encounter the inspiring words “digital transformation”. Not just digital change or evolution, but “transformation!” no less. Together we’re offered the dazzle of the new, even though of course what’s new is not per se positive.

You media people here are all good at your work. You won’t take any of these words at face value, as if the meanings are clear and shared by all. Am I right? Hoping so!

Now, let’s get back to narrative. Our views on AI are linked to a selection of stories emanating deep in the context of culture. We don’t always see it, but many of these fundamental sense-making systems have emerged elsewhere. Especially in the minds of American tech bros and their sci-fi predecessors, and their narratives have permeated over the ocean to influence how we, down this way, think about AI. We somehow think it’s a technology that’s just up for grabs, but we get more insight if we see how systems of meaning play out in our thinking.

Here are three basic narratives about AI, each of which is linked to other cultural themes and stories.

First, the narrative of inevitable progress. Forget about the proven human power to cause massive destruction to people and planet. What we're talking about in this narrative is the enhanced / augmented human. Thanks to AI, goes this story, we have moved from stone axes and scrapers to invisible super tools - all the better to master our environment. This is basically the magic meme that we touched on earlier. AI at our disposal. And AI for good.

As a second broad narrative, there is cautionary echo that recalls the stereotype of an attractive woman out to seduce (especially) men - to give them a false sense of agency and of being in charge – yet all the while making use of them. Indeed, AI companies do indeed promise us – of all sexes - instant availability and fast gratification. But in terms of this cautionary narrative, they are ultimately vampires sucking up your data to use for their own ends, even against you. You innocently bite on Eve's AI apple and you begin to lose the Garden of Eden, along with your data, your jobs and your hopes that tech tools can reduce inequality.

The cautionary narrative resonates further: like when chat-GPT responds to the prompt "who is Guy Berger" and conflates me up with an economist who goes by the same name. Or when Google's AI advises you to use glue to make cheese stick to a pizza, or that eating rocks is a healthy habit. Luckily you in Namibia are not short of stones for your diet, if you want to follow that AI advice. In other words, the caution is that these tools aren't as good as often made out to be.

Of course, there are other real risks in this narrative to beware of AI. The omissions in dominant data sets, and the cultural assumptions that permeate the operating algorithms, lead to biased outcomes. For example, in terms of gender and race equality. The consequences are severe, whether in assessing candidates to hire or deciding on judicial punishments to give out. It's because we are talking about tools that are actually not "intelligent" but only work according to - an impressive, but still, unthinking - computer logic based on predictions of words and historical patterns. Finally, we shouldn't forget that the tools depend on huge databases housed in giant water and energy guzzling data-centres. Forget, therefore, about Africa competing in AI foundation models even if we had the necessary chips, compute power and skills. We simply don't have the water or the electrical power here – meaning that we

have to make do with taking the apps developed elsewhere, and on the basis of foundations where African languages, data and development concerns are largely absent.

Turning the third narrative, this is the tale about a robot apocalypse. Here AI creates chaos. It's like the Frankenstein monster run amok, or the "cook little pot, cook" story. This feeds the sci-fi scenario of AI as a supreme being. Here, AI is seen as taking on a life of its own, with its own volition, even consciousness. It is already able to manipulate us, in future it will shape our reality - and how we perceive this reality.

Now, which of these three echoes with you? Raise your hands (physically or metaphorically) as often as you like:

1. "We" - i.e. humankind - have new tools! We're in charge
2. We gotta be careful: the tools don't exist outside of powerful interests. Altman, Musk and gang are in charge. And their tools are both biased and not what they are cracked up to be.
3. This tech's learning logic will improve to the point that it gets out of control of both users and owners. To the point that AI will be a thing, a king, above us all.

Once you understand these deep perspectives on AI, you are better able to form your own perspective. And you can take what you want to figure out:

- a. how you as media want to use these tools,
- b. assess whether you will become dependent on them as gatekeepers as happened to many media that put their eggs in Facebook's basket – until being unceremoniously dumped;
- c. whether you can count on the tools– for example for doing accurate translations, salient summaries and reliable outputs;
- d. whether you're feeding a machine that in the end will have you and your data for dinner. And all the while, reality is working hard to show us which narrative is better reflective of where we're really heading.

Let me conclude this discussion of AI narratives by recalling what the theorist Neil Postman once said. It was this: reporters find and convert facts to information, editors (by selecting and editing) convert information to knowledge. And great editors convert knowledge into wisdom.

In the age of AI, we can take this insight further. Machine learning draws on data inputs, and it outputs yet further data. That's it.

It remains for media then to scrutinise both sets of data, their origins and their limits, and to not confuse AI outputs with facts or information.

Instead, it is for journalists to examine the AI lifecycle and issues of who owns and who benefits from the process, i.e. the age-old tip: follow the money. And it is for journalists to assess AI output data for its potential to be (or not) a useful element in producing information, including critical information that assesses the quality of these outputs. In a word, for journalists to treat AI content only as data.

As the Windhoek+30 declaration puts it, let's focus on our primary task of contributing information as a public good, providing an oasis within the ever-expanding universe of AI-generated content. And, in this, let's be sure that we also add value at the levels of converting quality information arising from or about AI, into knowledge as a public good.

And, of course, media must also move a tier higher to also share wisdom as a public good. Wisdom about AI, amongst other topics.

Hopefully you now see the relevance of narratives of AI and digital transformation, and what they mean for journalism. Now, let's turn to more immediate narratives. About your democracy and your fast upcoming 7th general election. Let me, from the outside, guess three of these narratives:

- One, is the historical narrative: the national liberation movement deserves continued support - both for its history of fighting apartheid occupation and for its remaining true to democracy and non-racialism.
- Two, a youth narrative. In this, the Swapo government, like most post-independence governments, has disappointed - especially on the jobs front, and it's time for radical renewal. (Recent case: Botswana).
- Three, a narrative of pragmatism and the middle class. It's time for more pluralism of power, with no single political faction able to do its own thing henceforth, but instead being kept in check by others. (Recent case: South Africa).

Maybe AI could give better narratives than these propositions coming from me. But I'm guessing that elements in these most likely exist, and that they have

some real significance in your society. Of course you will soon be taught by reality which of these three narrative options is likely to prove correct:

- Incumbents deserve credit and support
- A change of generation in national leaders is called for
- The moment of balancing power has arrived.

When the voting results come through, ask yourself if reality actually bore out your narrative, or whether instead it brought a realisation that the story unfolded differently to what you wanted or what you expected.

Of course, it's not easy for busy editors to do this kind of fundamental reflection on narratives, with all the zillions of concrete and immediate surface issues yelling out for attention. Here's a story nevertheless, that I hope can give some insight into the value of thinking about deep narratives.

Six weeks ago, I was in Ghana speaking to the head of a media outlet. We discussed a book I co-edited for the SA National Editors Forum (Sanef) some 16 years ago, and which was called "The Extraordinary Editor". In it, various editors gave their tips on how they managed things. Amongst others, how they managed: 1. Their newsroom staff and journalistic processes; 2. Technological convergence; 3. Money and budgets; 4. Bosses and politicians; 5. Change.

I asked the head of the media outlet to whom I was talking, for his top management issue. He said, without hesitation, "managing money". I responded, "what about the people – on whom you count to generate income?" His answer: "I need money to pay them first".

His solution is news for sale. Anyone wanting to be covered, including government and opposition parties, has to pay for it. This gives him some political independence. But the way he implements this business model also means that his audience don't get to know what items are sponsored and what are not. And that's happening in an election environment. Hopefully in Namibian media, it's editorial considerations in the driving seat (albeit that someone in all media outlets also ensures that the tire pressure is right for the terrain, and that there's gas in the tank).

My exchange with this media leader in Ghana, however, taught me that there's another aspect that people like him and like you have to manage. What's that?

You have to manage your relationship to journalism. That means surfacing your personal narrative about journalism, and its place in the mix of media issues that you need to manage.

To do this in an informed way, you also need to keep eyes wide open about what's upcoming. Here's a list of sand-storms that could increasingly batter your country's media sector:

- Public attention continues to shift to towards entertainment and diversion, while news gets smothered under the dramatic clouds of dust.
- Like desert creep, advertising continues to move to social media, leaving a revenue crisis in its wake.
- Generative AI means your journalism will compete with that of machines – whose output is often fuelled in part by your own content, taken without permission or recompense.
- Journalists, especially women journalists, become prime targets of hate, not least powered by new norms that are hegemonic in the US of A.

Consider each of these scenarios, and ask which could be the most consequential for your narrative about how your media outlet's journalism matters to Namibia.

Speaking from the South African case, your counterparts there today are valiantly fighting all these four trends, but it's not guaranteed that they will emerge victorious.

Maybe the sandstorms won't come your way. But let this be a shout out to you to pre-emptively act so that this kind of narrative - of media on the defensive, media role in decline - does not become your Namibian reality.

What could be worse than such a scenario, in the country that gave the world the 1991 Windhoek Declaration on the need for a free and pluralistic press? Actually there is something worse that could happen. This is the spectre of obsolence of the 2021 Windhoek Declaration of Information as a Public Good, (which principles were endorsed by all UNESCO member states). And indeed this obsolence will happen if media, as the main engine of information as a public good, is shoved to the sidelines in your society.

What this analysis suggests, I respectfully propose, is that you could well face existential issues – individually, and collectively, and for Namibia as a whole.

Yet it is in the collective character of these challenges, those already here and those still on the horizon, that you have the opportunity to push back. It's now, more than ever. Because if you don't build your joint actions, you seriously risk being rolled over. So, you need a new narrative – underpinned by reality – for your society, and it about the Namibian media sector as a whole. Now is not the time to do business as usual – going it alone, scooping your rivals, and turning a blind eye to a slowly-leaking ship.

Now the imperative is synergies within the sector and alliances outside it.

You're already overworked. But there's a lot more to do, if you want to tackle and mitigate the trends that are inexorably unfolding elsewhere. That includes you catalysing initiatives to ensure that there is monitoring and research in the market opportunities and failures in Namibia

It means formalising partnerships – for instance to energise the access to information implementation. Doing advocacy, raising public awareness and media literacy. People won't know how much they miss you, until indeed they find you gone and that there's left perhaps only some compromised journalism in a desert of non-journalistic content, a desert so big that it makes the Namib look tiny.

So, in summary, you need to act as an industry, notwithstanding overwork, differences, real competition and inevitable egos. To meet as often as it takes, and to develop systematic actions - before it becomes too late. You don't just want your media to survive, but also to thrive – and be visible and respected as it soars across your famous skies. That won't happen unless you make it.

So, let me conclude with by hammering home an additional narrative for you consider, alongside the wider narratives of AI, of Namibia's election and your sector as a whole. I refer now to the narrative of the EFN itself. What's your story? And what's the reality you'll make that's either gonna back it up – or expose it as hollow?

That you are here this evening shows you can move ahead, together. You, the country's sultans of story-telling, and your supporters, have gotta super-charge the story of your organisation. And you can.

Thank you – and good luck for the EFN's own narrative.