

Insight into the new way of doing journalism

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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As Friday's aircraft to Brazil rolled down the runway at OR Tambo International Airport with most of South Africa's investigative reporters on board, I wondered what would happen to our journalism if it went down...

We certainly would get fewer embarrassing stories in our media. Would that be good or bad news for those who think we get the balance wrong between the two?

The journalists were on their way to the 11th Global Investigative Journalism Conference in Rio de Janeiro, which this year drew about 1,300 muckrakers from more than 80 countries. They shared techniques and tricks - especially all the smart new ones involving data, spreadsheets, the internet and social media - and stories of the year's triumphs in calling to account those with power. These ranged from the exposé of masses of information about offshore accounts and how they are used to launder money, through the publication of Pakistani MPs' tax records, which showed that 25% of them paid no tax at all, to the revelation of South Korean intelligence using social media to interfere in that country's elections, and the sale of Matric exam results in Jordan.

South Africans fared well against this stiff competition. The Sunday Times' crack team of Mzilikazi wa Afrika, Rob Rose and Stephan Hofstatter were joint winners of the global Shining Light Award for their story of a KwaZulu-Natal police "hit squad". And the Daily Dispatch's Msindisi Fengu and Yandisa Monakali were finalists for their work on the conditions of school hostels in the Eastern Cape.

Picture imperfect

But they were all overshadowed by the present rock star of journalism, Glenn Greenwald, one of the key players in the Edward Snowden exposé of the extent of surveillance being undertaken by US security agencies. If journalists should avoid being the story themselves, then Greenwald is in trouble, judging by the way he was swamped by fawning journalists wanting to be photographed with him.

I took a picture of journalists taking pictures of other journalists taking pictures of a celebrity journalist. Layer upon layer of irony.

In a conversation with a Dutch journalist, Greenwald took the opportunity to trash the mainstream media, particularly the New York Times, which had held on to the story of the US National Security Agency illegally listening to the phone calls of Americans for 18 months, during which time George Bush was re-elected. Even the Guardian was not spared, despite the support, resources, audience and credibility and impact they had lent to him to make his story the biggest of the year.

It must have been hard for the Guardian's recently retired investigations editor, David Leigh, recipient at the conference of a Lifetime Achievement Award, to listen to this. But it is the new way of journalism: an activist and independent blogger becomes a newspaper writer and delivers the story of the year, though he has an ambivalent relationship with his outlets.

A corrupted profession?

Journalism was a corrupted profession, he said, and he celebrated that the mainstream media are in demise. He had contempt for the rules that suggest he should keep a professional distance from his source and be dispassionate about his subject. "I am not going to pretend I am a robot," he said.

Greenwald was more eloquent about the dangers of a surveillance state. People who were always watched would opt for behaviour that was cautious and conformist, he said. Surveillance made impossible a whole range of activities, including journalism, where one could not protect a source if one was constantly watched, he said. Even if it was true that US intelligence had only gathered metadata - the information of when, who and for how long you phoned - it meant they could know an enormous amount about what one was doing.

The idea of democracy, he said, was that we should know as much as possible about the activities of the state and government, to hold them accountable, and we should have as much privacy as possible, to keep the state out of our private lives. But the opposite was happening: the state was getting more secretive and we were losing our privacy. Those who did not care, were giving themselves up as slaves, he said.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote *Diepsloot* (Jonathan Ball, 2011), *Recht Malan* Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of *The A-Z of South African Politics* (Penguin, 1994/5), *What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic* (Jacana, 2010) and *Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism* (Jacana, 2010).

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