

Snowden journalist may soon miss his newspaper

 By [Anton Harber](#)

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As this column went to press last week, Glenn Greenwald, the writer who broke the Edward Snowden story about US surveillance and who I described as the present rock star of journalism, resigned from The Guardian to join an internet start-up.

It is no ordinary new media venture, as it is lavishly funded by Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay. Omidyar had thought of buying the Washington Post, which was going for just \$250m, but considered the money better spent on a new news venture. Another internet billionaire, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, got the Washington Post.

Is Greenwald being visionary by choosing a new venture over The Guardian, which has built one of the world's biggest online audiences but is losing about £3m a month? Or is he overblown with hubris, thinking he is bigger than the story and one of the best newspapers in the world, which has given him the resources, support, protection, audience, editing and clout he needed to get the story to the world?

An opportunity of note

Greenwald described it as a "once-in-a-career ... opportunity that no journalist can possibly decline". He was not just going to be a reporter: "My role, aside from reporting and writing for it, is to create the entire journalism unit from the ground up by recruiting the journalists and editors."

Greenwald is a formidable character, but he has never really worked in a newsroom and was just a columnist when the story of the decade found him. And as he cannot for now go back to the US, for fear of arrest, he is going to have to do this task from Brazil, where he has been living.

As interesting as the new venture promises to be, I suspect that, for a while at least, Greenwald will miss the clout, backing and experienced editors of the Guardian. He tells us some of the best stories from the Snowden leaks are still to come, and just this week he stirred things up between France and the US by reporting in Le Monde that the Americans had tapped into at least 70-million French private phone calls. Will this story be enough to draw an audience to his start-up? Can he do justice to this huge story and all its ramifications while building a new venture? It is going to be fascinating to watch.

He had said that the "corrupted" mainstream media were instinctively cautious and careful. I think he is going to discover that these can be virtues when you are taking on the most powerful and ruthless intelligence organisation in the world.

Scoundrels can relax... but perhaps for not too long

This week, Africa's scoundrels can relax a little, as some of the continent's best investigative journalists come to Joburg for our African Investigative Journalism Conference - about 200 of them from more than 20 countries.

Although the focus is on the cutting edge of new journalism - involving mapping, spreadsheets, big-data analysis and super-Googleing - my hope is that we also focus on the craft of storytelling. Certainly, in South Africa, we seem to be good at publishing all sorts of stories about the shenanigans of the rich and powerful, but we are less good at telling these tales in a way that is captivating to read.

Key to this is one of my favourite writers, Alex Kotlowitz, who is coming to talk about this aspect. He has written some extraordinary studies of life in the poorer parts of Chicago and done great radio and TV. He has more awards than is proper and decent for one person.

His work is certainly not the quick and dirty of shock exposé, but the long hard slog of observation. A bit like the Daily Dispatch's "Hostels of Shame", which last week won the CNN African Journalist of the Year Award. This team spent its weekends visiting all of the 120 school hostels scattered across the Eastern Cape (those that actually existed, that is, outside of a budget line). So we will be celebrating those reporters who take time to dig below the surface, not looking just for some quick dirt, but to understand what brought the dirt and how to deal with it. The stuff of lasting effect.

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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