

Towards a People's Information Portal

Concept note as of 16 August 2021

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1. Summary

Against a backdrop of growing unemployment, hunger, and violence, the South African communication landscape is shaped by our unjust history and world beating inequality. A handful of corporations control the dominant media and seek maximum profit at the expense of the information and expression needs of the marginalised majority. This results in a skewed public sphere unable to democratically confront many challenges facing our democracy.

Shifting the public discourse to the left by including the marginalised majority and centering progressive voices and news items of impact/concern to the majority is critical to the peaceful resolution of South Africa's structural crisis.

At the heart of this proposed intervention is a portal website & mobile app designed to serve as a 'landing page' for the marginalised majority, to aggregate the content produced by progressive media projects and organisations and build a demand-side economy of scale for progressive content that serves the human rights and social justice information and expression needs of the marginalised majority and vastly increase the reach - and hence impact - of progressive civil society in South Africa. The proposed objectives are:

1. Deliver progressive content to a massive audience of the marginalised majority living in townships, informal settlements and rural areas across South Africa
2. Promote rights oriented and transformative content and services contributing to the impact of by progressive civil society and journalism organisations.
3. Resource & promote active citizenship.
4. Contributing to the development of a peoples internet, decommodified and free from commercial and state surveillance and censorship.
5. Becoming self sustainable by selling advertising to value aligned organisations.

The portal's content will include news & opinion as well as links to a variety of educational resources, the weather forecast, maps, and a searchable database of contacts for government and civil society bodies that offer the public reporting, advice, and counseling etc.

Promoting the use of the portal will be critical to achieving a demand side economy of scale. To do this we pay to advertise portal content on dominant platforms like Facebook, Google, SABC and News24. We'll have email & mobile subscriptions options to send users daily or weekly 'updates', ensure content is search engine optimised, and nurture a network of progressive 'influences' - comrades with large social media followings - to share content on social media. News/options not already covered in the dominant media will be shared with journalists or op-ed editors encouraging them to cover the story/reproduce the opinion.

Project costs - predominantly a small editorial staff and advertising budget - will initially be donor funded, but will become self-sustaining through the sale of advertising on the portal to value aligned organisations.

The project is proposed as a partnership between the Peoples Media Consortium with the Yetu's Infotech Collective (See [APPENDIX 1](#)), and South Africa's progressive media producers (see [APPENDIX 2](#)).

This concept document unpacks the project's context ([Section 2](#)), strategy ([Section 3](#)) and operationalisation ([Section 4](#)).

2. Project Context

2.1 State of the nation

In South Africa and beyond there are many signs of structural crisis: From obscene wealth alongside grinding poverty and the rising tide of racist, patriarchal, authoritarian populism, to the daily violence - gendered, xenophobia, and others. Despite all the rights won in the 1996 Constitution and upheld by the judiciary, most people in South Africa are confronted daily by a callous state and private sector concerned only with their own interests. The deepening unemployment crisis threatens the social fabric of families and communities. The ecological crisis threatens the planet as we know it.

There is also a massive leadership vacuum across society: While liberals and conservatives of all stripes hold economic and political power and make many populist promises, their economic system - capitalism - is in crisis and they have no sustainable solutions to offer on any of the problems we face. The ruling party, despite attempts at renewal, continues to weaken and divide into elite factions.

The working class and poor - the marginalized majority - are trapped in struggles of daily survival, consciousness is low and collective responses are largely limited to very localised service delivery issues, outbursts of xenophobia and retreats into organised religion.

South Africa enjoys a relatively active citizenship organised into a variety of forms for diverse purposes. However, in this hostile context our organisations are weak. Communities and workers are largely demobilised. Many community organisations form in response to an immediate threat or crisis but lack the internal democracy and more long term strategic perspectives to sustain themselves over time. Our largest unions are deeply compromised by decades of alliance with the ruling party, many are beauracatised and almost paralised with factionalism. Our NGOs compete between themselves for limited donor funds that demand short term results in a context that requires long term organising. Efforts at greater unity - like the United Front and the Working Class Summit have failed despite a strong basis for unity because of sectarianism and the limitations of their constituencies. Low levels of political consciousness, limited resources, as well as repression, make organising on the ground very difficult.

The impact of the Covid pandemic and recent unrest has exposed the unsustainability of South Africa's democracy to many and pointed to the need for [a more popular response from progressive organisations](#).

2.2 The media landscape

The South African traditional media landscape is dominated by a handful of corporations, most notably: Naspers - who dominate newspapers and magazines (Media24) and satellite TV (Multichoice) - and the SABC who dominate free to air television and radio (including African language platforms).

The 1996 Constitution guarantees media freedom and the media is relatively "free" from government censorship. However the highly concentrated nature of ownership and commercialised business model of the dominant media (including the public broadcaster) has resulted in a largely homogeneous media that tend to focus on concerns of urban and middle-class people at the expense of working-class and unemployed South Africans - the marginalised majority.

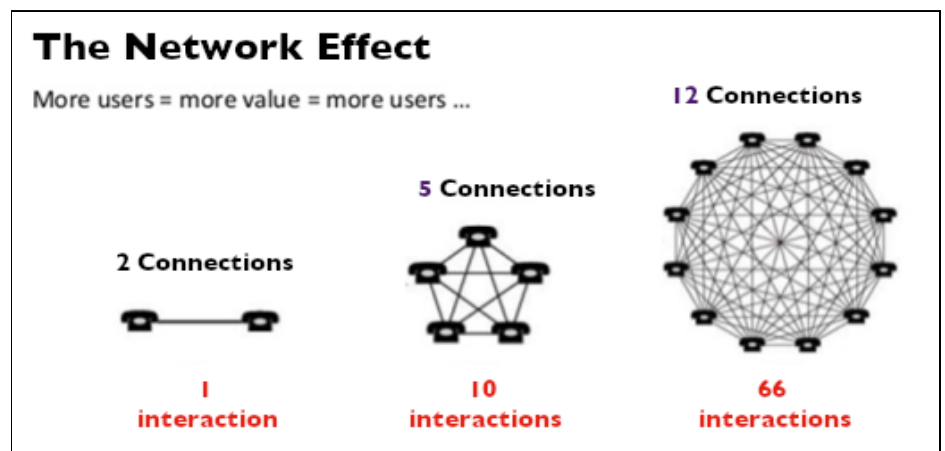
Further, as advertising revenue has moved online media owners have sought to cut costs by downsizing newsrooms and retrenching journalists. This has led to a drop in the quality of journalism as fewer (and less experienced) journalists carry larger workloads and do not have the time to research, grapple with context, or interview sources beyond a small pool of 'experts'.

In short, South Africa's dominant media is ill equipped to serve the information and expression needs of the marginalised majority. As such they cannot enable the inclusive public sphere our democracy desperately needs to negotiate the many challenges we face.

2.3 Going online

While internet access in South Africa remains limited and skewed to an urban middle class¹, more and more people are connecting to the internet to meet their information and expression needs as network and smartphone penetration grows and data costs drop. The Covid pandemic has accelerated this migration online.

The online environment dramatically lowers barriers to entry as anyone can now set up a website and publish with ease. However, the communication system remains dominated by large corporations who have managed to achieve [Network Effects](#) - or demand-side economies of scale - whereby they crowd in large groups of users who in turn attract more users. Corporations like Facebook, Google, and in South Africa Naspers/Media24, enjoy an exponentially large share of internet traffic. Publishers of small websites - including NGOs and movements - battle to reach audiences of any scale, often only reaching those who already share their concerns or have an active internet in their issues.



These dominant online media create 'walled gardens' where they curate content to keep users on their platforms and attract new users to maximise advertising revenue. Again, the result is a lack of content diversity shaped by profit maximising editorial agendas (now often implemented by untransparent algorithms).

The dominant online business model (driven by the harvesting of personal information to sell targeted advertising) seeks to maximise the time users spend on their site, and sell these 'eyeballs' to those paying for exposure without any regard for the information needs of the democracy - or the factual quality of content. The result is a predominance of 'click bait' and sensationalist and 'fake news' content.

There are a number of useful lessons from right wing initiatives who have innovated to confront the dominant media. In 2005 the Huffington Post launched as a [news aggregator](#) site - an innovative publishing model that drew content from other publications and often rewrote headings and stories to be more sensationalist and attract bigger audiences. Stories were [search engine optimized](#) with headlines based on [trending keywords](#). Huffington Post successfully attracted large audiences without the overhead cost of actual journalism.

¹ The Yetu Infotech Collective plans a number of interventions to grow the internet from below - see www.yetu.coop.

Inspired by Huffington, the American neo-facist movement launched the Breitbart News Network, a news aggregation site that drew together the content of a number of small right wing websites. Breitbart played a central role in legitimizing the 'alt right' as a political pole in American society and in electing Donald Trump president. Today is one of the top 3 news websites in the US and in the Top 10 most engaged Facebook pages globally.

In South Africa publications like [Politicsweb](#) have shown that in the age of 'fake news' there is an audience for primary news sources like press statements and documents.

3. Strategy

In this highly concentrated and mediated communication environment a number of progressive nonprofit media projects have emerged (see [APPENDIX 2](#)) that aim to transform the media landscape by producing content that challenges the dominant media and serves the information and expression needs of the marginalised majority bringing the diversity of information and voices our public sphere urgently needs to democratically confront the many socio-economic challenges we face.

In the internet age these progressive media projects - and the many NGOs and movements publishing content on their websites - have all positioned themselves to take advantage of the low entry barriers to online publishing. But they all face a fundamental challenge in the online environment: How do they benefit from the Network Effect? How do they build audiences of scale that grow exponentially without depending on the mediation of the dominant corporations (and unwittingly contributing to the expansion of their dominance)?

At the heart of this proposed intervention is a portal website & mobile app designed to serve as a 'landing page' for the marginalised majority, to aggregate the content produced by progressive media projects and organisations and build a demand-side economy of scale for progressive content.

3.1 Goals, Objectives & Indicators

The project's goal is to produce, maintain and promote an alternative information portal that meets the human rights and social justice information and expression needs of the marginalised majority and vastly increase the reach - and hence impact - of progressive civil society in South Africa.

OBJECTIVE	INDICATOR
1) Deliver progressive content to a massive audience of the marginalised majority living in townships, informal settlements, and rural areas across South Africa	Number of (1) visits & hits and (2) subscriptions by location.
2) Promote rights ordained and transformative content and services contributing to the impact of by progressive civil society and journalism organisations.	Number of content partnerships, articles published and page hits.
3) Resource & promote active citizenship.	Number of organisations in contact databases (public services and membership based organisations) and number of visits to contacts.

4) Contributing to the development of a peoples internet, decommodified and free from commercial and state surveillance and censorship.	Use of free open source software, creative commons IP, and low bandwidth design that respects user privacy.
5) Becoming self sustainable by selling advertising to value aligned organisations.	Advertising sales targets.

3.2 Overview of content

Content will be drawn from progressive journalism projects (see [Appendix 2](#)) and progressive civil society press statements from members of the People's Media Consortium - see [live page](#) - and other NGOs, unions & movements.



The main navigation bar will include:

- **News & Opinion:** News feeds from participating organisations presented in geographical and thematic sections as well as a 'front page' of curated news/opinion with a plain language summary/introduction, and profiled video and podcasts.
- **Education:** Links to a variety of searchable educational resources including government's [Thutong learning portal](#), nonprofits [SA History Online](#) and [Wikipedia](#) (in [IsiXhosa](#), [IsiZulu](#), [Sesotho](#), [Sesotho sa Leboa](#), [Setswana](#), [SiSwati](#), [Tshivenda](#), [Xitsonga](#) as well as [French](#), [Portuguese](#) and [Swahili](#)).
- **Weather:** Updated from the [SA Weather service](#)
- **Maps:** A searchable nonprofit open source map from [Open Street Maps](#)
- **Help!:** A searchable database of government and civil society bodies that offer the public reporting, advice, and counseling services related to crime, corruption, consumer protection, etc, etc (some examples [here](#) and [here](#))
- **Organise!:** A searchable database of membership based social justice organisations.
- **Got news?:** A secure form for users to give journalists tips on stories (like [this](#)). Reports would go to user-selected editors of participating journalism projects.
- **Search:** A window with three search options, the portal, the internet (using privacy focused [DuckDuckGo](#)), and [Wikipedia](#).

3.3 Advertising sales

To enable financial sustainability (see [below](#)) we would sell advertising to value-aligned organisations. Adverts will be placed to the right and left of all content and priced at a competitive R0.21 per impression (see [APPENDIX 3](#)). To minimise the administration of advertising sales, we'll approach donors to make bulk purchases to be used by their recipient organisations. Many of the envisaged adverts will be drawing attention to statements/services already profiled on the portal.

3.4 Editorial Quality & Collective

Quality control is vital for the credibility of everyone associated with the portal - information presented must be factual and trusted. We will rely primarily on the content producers to ensure the accuracy and quality of their work. All posts will include the name of the author and the site it was first published on, as well as a link to the authors contact and the original post.

The overall editorial policies of the portal will be developed by an Editorial Collective made up of participating representatives of the Peoples Media Consortium and editors of contributing news sites. This collective will meet quarterly to discuss progress, address concerns, and develop policy for the portal.

3.5 Privacy & Personal Information

The portal will not collect any personal information about its users except for (1) a record of pages they visit and how long they stay on each page (without any identifying information) and (2) their location if they consent to such.

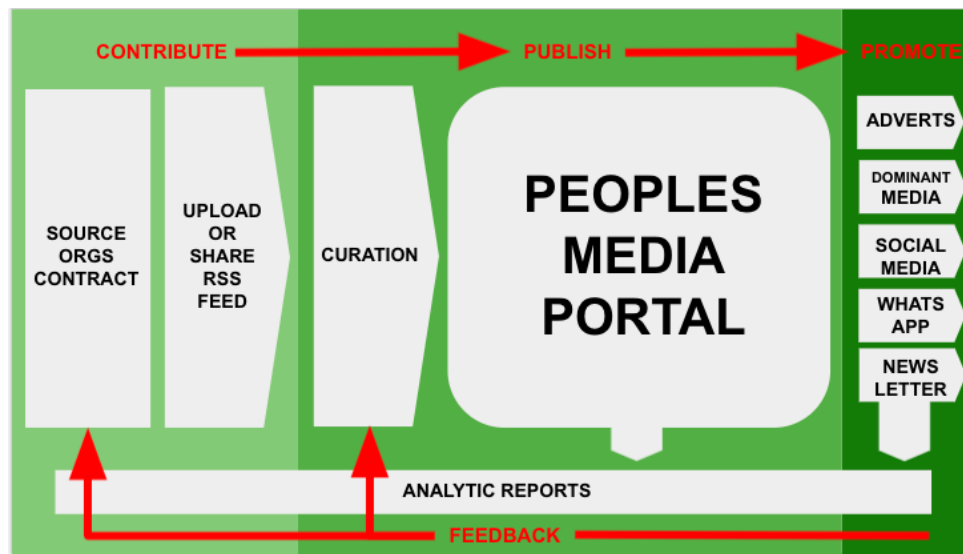
All information stored in the databases of bodies that offer the public reporting, advice, and counseling services and of membership based social justice organisations will be either already in the public domain or stored with their consent.

3.6 Copyright

All content on the portal will be 'copyleft' licenced under the creative commons [Attribution-ShareAlike \(CC BY-SA\)](#) licence allowing others remix, tweak, and build upon original work even for commercial purposes, as long as they credit the original source and licence their new creations under the identical terms. Portal content will be drawn from projects that either already have a compatible licence or agree to syndicate content on these terms.

4. Portal Operation

Elements of the production process are represented here and unpacked below:



4.1 Sourcing content

News and opinions will be sourced from NGOs and progressive journalism organisations that sign a syndication contract giving the project permission to republish material under a creative commons licence.

A contact database of bodies that offer the public reporting, advice, and counseling services and membership based social justice organisations will be built and maintained by the project.

4.2 Publishing

News & Opinion content will be received via RSS feed immediately as it is published. It will be categorized by theme, geography and language, and added to the portal. Excellent contributions will be added to the print page as 'top news/opinion'. Material Added to the front page could include a rewritten heading and/or introduction to attract greater audiences.

The two contact databases will be largely maintained with users feedback on the site including options to 'report incorrect details', 'update details' and 'suggest new contacts'.

4.3 Promotion

Promoting the use of the portal will be critical to ensuring large user numbers. To do this we need to go to where our desired users are currently engaging content on-line:

- **Advertising:** Most users are currently trapped in the walled gardens of commercial and social media. To access them we will pay for advertisements promoting specific articles and services (See [financial sustainability](#) below).
- **Dominant Media:** News/options not already covered in the dominant media will be shared with journalists or op-ed editors encouraging them to cover the story/reproduce the opinion.

- **Social Media:** Promoted content will be shared in Twitter (tagging relevant people/institutions) and on facebook (including in relevant groups with tags). We'll also maintain a network of progressive 'influences' - comrades with large social media followings.
- **Whatsapp & e-Newsletter:** Have email & mobile subscriptions options to send users daily or weekly 'updates' of new content with links back to the site. Users will be encouraged to share these 'updates' with others.

4.4 Feedback & community

Critical to the success of the portal will be profiling and promoting popular content. To do this editorial decisions - or content producers and portal moderators - must be informed by feedback automatically generated as people visit the site. In addition each post will have the author's name linked to a contact form allowing the public to give direct feedback to the relevant organisation and the portal moderators.

The portal will not include user login or comments features because we do not intend to build the capacity to moderate such engagements. We will connect to third party community features like hypothes.is as well as the social media pages of the publisher.

Partnering NGOs and journalism projects will have access to real time analytics from the site detailing user numbers, most/least popular content/tags and historical trends for different sources, themes and geographies. Automated updated reports will be sent to participating organisations weekly or monthly as requested.

4.5 Technical development

The major technical aspects of the portal that we'd need to develop and maintain include:

- **Portal front ends:** The public facing portal will be designed for computer, tablet and mobile browsers. It will be user friendly and [lite weight](#) to increase loading speeds and reduce data costs.
- **Portal back end:** A user interface that draws RSS feeds from participating organisations and enables easy tagging for search engine optimisation, thematic/geographical sections, author details, language, etc.
- **Databases:** Searchable contact databases of (1) bodies that offer the public reporting, advice, and counseling services and (2) membership based social movements.
- **Newsletters:** Automated production and distribution of email and whatsapp updates.
- **Advertising Admin:** Software to manage advertising sales/invoicing, placement and reports - including allowing advertisers to view real time reports.
- **Analytics:** Automated generation of real time and periodic usage reports.

Much of the required software is available 'off the shelf', is open source, and would require limited modification/integration.

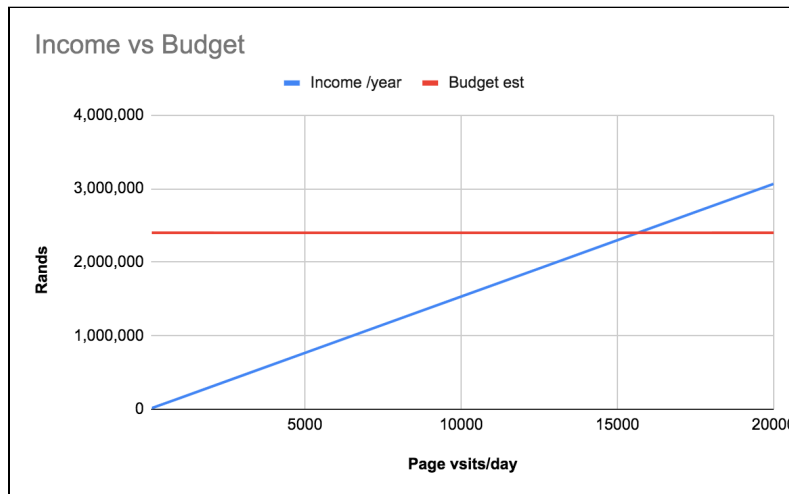
4.6 Capacity & Financial Sustainability

To sustain the project a core staff would include a Project Coordinator (responsible for project management, content and advertising partnerships, and technological development), at least one Editor (responsible for selecting front page content, writing popular summaries and promoting posts on social media) assisted by interns, as well as part time finance and technical support.

Additional capacity will be crowd sourced from selected activists who volunteer to moderate specific sections/geographies writing popular summaries and checking translations.

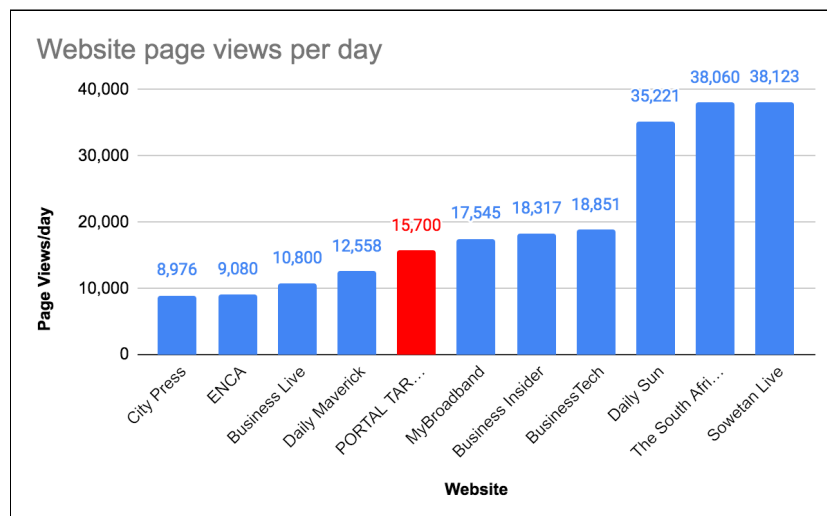
Initially core donor funds will be required to develop the technical infrastructure and secure the initial content and advertising partners, and launch the portal. As traffic increases we will transition to an advertising funded model securing advertising from (1) progressive organisations promoting their services and (2) donors supporting their partners to use the advertising service.

Based on an estimated annual budget of R2.1 million/year (see [APPENDIX 4](#)), with advertising sold at a competitive R 0.21 per page impression (see [APPENDIX 3](#)), the project should break even with around 15700 page visits a day:



The surplus generated after 15700 pages/day could be invested in advertising to increase traffic and/or shared proportionality with content providers as an incentive. Alternatively it could be invested on zero rating either the entire portal or specific resources so users could visit the site at no cost to them.

The portal's 'break even' target of 15700 pages visited a day is ambitious but realistic:



ENDS

APPENDIX 1: About the partners

About the Peoples Media Consortium

The Peoples Media Consortium aims to contribute to the promotion and protection of human and labour rights by strengthening the organising capacity of poor communities and vulnerable workers in South Africa to take up their own interests. They do this by developing democratic community based alternative mass media platforms and contributing towards raising awareness and build strong democratic organizations within local communities in which women play a central role based on principles of unity, independence, democracy and non-discrimination. In the process of doing so, they aim to transform the targeted community radio and TV stations to be democratically owned resources of their communities and serve their interests.

The Consortium focuses on institutional support for media production and dissemination (broadcasting and distribution) in target communities including media/journalism education and skills training. Consortium members include [AIDC](#), the [Benchmarks Foundation](#), [Black Sash](#), [Environmental Monitoring Group](#), [Groundwork](#), [Right2Know](#), [SAFCEI](#), [TCOE](#) and [Workers World Media Productions](#). WWMP serves as secretariat for the Consortium.

About the Yetu Infotech Collective

The [Yetu Infotech Collective](#) is united by a common commitment to gender liberation, anti-racism, solidarity, participatory democracy, and environmental and economic justice. They envision a people's internet that is user owned and controlled, decommodified, free/affordable, safe and secure - a communications network that enables a world where all the resources required for life are produced democratically in harmony with the biosphere by each according to their ability and shared according to their needs - a world where everyone enjoys equality and dignity, and are free to contribute their creativity and live in peace.

They aim to build the internet from below by supporting working class community initiatives to establish and maintain secure and affordable networks and provide progressive civil society organisations – and social movements in particular – with affordable and secure communication technology and capacity development so that they can maximise the benefits of information technologies while mitigating the risks.

APPENDIX 2: Progressive SA News Sources

These are examples of non-profit South African news sites that would be invited to be contributing partners:

- [Action Voices](#)
- [Amabhungane](#)
- [Amandla](#)
- [Cape Town TV](#)
- [Children's Radio Foundation](#)
- [Daily Vox](#)
- [Elitsha](#)
- [Ground-Up](#)
- [Health-e News](#)
- [Karibu](#)
- [Labour Bulletin](#)
- [New Frame](#)
- [Not Yet Uhuru](#)
- [Spotlight](#)
- [The Conversation](#)
- [Viewfinder](#)

In addition to these initial sources we aim to partner local community radio and online-news projects.

APPENDIX 3: Online Advertising rates

Platform	CLick MIN	CLick MAX	Display MIN	Display MAX
Facebook Ads	0.33	0.94	0.03	0.10
Google Display ads (low SA)	1.32	34.08	0.56	
Google Search ads (ave)	9.84		0.05	
Instagram Ads		52.30		0.05
Twitter Ads		5.58		0.01
City Press				
Daily Maverick				TBC
Dispatch			0.28	
IOL, Isolezwe, Pretoria News, Cape Argus, Star, Daily Voice, etc			0.30	0.38
News24			0.32	0.29
sabc (.co.za)			0.35	0.20
SABC african lang				0.20
sabcnews			0.35	0.30
Sowetan banner			1.89	
Sowetan, timeslive, Sundaytimes, Dispatch live, Herald live, Businessday				0.17
The Citizen			0.26	
Timeslive banner			0.26	

APPENDIX 4: Summary of budget

Salaries	1,019,021
Overheads	559,400
Programme Costs	220,000
Advertising	480,000
5% contingency	102,921
TOTAL	2,381,342
<i>Rounded</i>	<i>2,400,000</i>

ENDS