

# In tough times, journalists should invest in social capital

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With digital options increasingly available, why would any journalist undertake the trek to attend a conference in person? And especially when budgets are tight?

One good reason is to network informally -- outside of the formal knowledge transfer from speakers to audiences.

Reporters know that, at conferences, it's the private comment and the ensuing business card that deliver value for them. But not all journalists remember this when the conference is with their peers.

One such gathering within the "family" of journalists is set down for this September. A mega-mash-up of media people will congregate in Grahamstown for the annual [Highway Africa conference](#). It is the 13th iteration of the event, which is co-hosted by Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies (my employer) and the South African Broadcasting Corporation, with sponsorship from Absa, MTN, Telkom, and the Department of Communications.

There will be high-value sessions at this year's *Highway Africa* under the topical theme of "democracy, development and 2010". Experts will talk about media and elections, reporting the recession and covering the World Cup.

Absorbing all this will be over 500 media people from more than 40 African countries, who constitute the bulk of *Highway Africa* attendees. But without minimising the learning they'll get, it's the connections they make which will endure long after life has moved on from the points to be made by this year's speakers.

The connections, in turn, hinge on the quality of networking at the conference. Last year, this was the subject of a research project by my honours students.

Our aim was to map who connected to whom at *Highway Africa*, and what kinds of people served as hubs that enabled much of the matching to take place.

We also wanted to find out what the networking amounted to. Here, the theory of social capital came in handy. It posits that the greater the trust, altruism and reciprocity in relationships, the greater the collective resource for all.

In practical terms, it's about what connections can yield in terms of value or advantage -- either on-the-spot, or in the future. Our research looked at three kinds of relationships that underpin social capital formation at *Highway Africa*:

- **Bonding:** when like-minded journalists connect up with each other;
- **Bridging:** when journalists network across languages, platforms, beats;
- **Linking:** when they create ties with other networks and groups (for example, with NGOs, corporates, community radio activists, et cetera.)

Here's what we discovered:

- Social capital lives in moments when delegates buttonhole a speaker after his or her presentation, and when people are mingled together, eating or commuting.
- Some journalists arrive with a premeditated plan to network and participate to the full. Others come mainly to learn, but with a low view of the personal value they bring.

That means delegates can be classified in two groupings, with the following features:

- Not surprisingly, more men predominate among the "supernetworkers" group. Women feature disproportionately among the passive networkers;
- Those most adept at networking tend to be more fluent in English and familiar with the internet;
- Also colouring the networking divide among delegates are different levels of confidence; and
- In some cases, nationality differences are an obstacle to networking, with some delegates holding back due to fears and stereotypes about Nigerians and South Africans.

In general, across both groups, the most common bonding seemed to be among journalists of the same nationality.

Bridges between French- and English-speaking journalists were harder to build, and the same applies to linkages between journalists and other constituencies.

This means there is a lot of social capital still to be realised at *Highway Africa*. But the research also showed that the conference is spreading social capital outside the boundaries of the event itself.

Thus, most participants, regardless of their level of networking, have an altruistic motivation. They all want to take away knowledge in order to help their country and fellow journalists back home. Much as some may feel like marginal networkers at *Highway Africa*, they still see themselves as hubs when it comes to their homeground.

The "supernetworkers" took away a lot from the *Highway Africa 2008* besides the formal proceedings. They gave of themselves, and in turn gained information about other key events and opportunities for consultancy research and freelancing. They calculated which contacts they planned to keep in touch with.

In overview, what the research reveals is that to network and generate social capital, journalists have to overcome any inhibitions linked to gender roles, confidence levels, national identity insularity and linguistic competence.

To improve networking in the future, *Highway Africa* needs to find new methods to empower delegates to exchange more stories and create more shared memories that can grow and sustain social capital.

This is beginning to happen with a [Facebook page](#), a [Twitter feed](#), and a [blog](#)

For their part, all delegates need to participate more extensively in the event -- both in giving and receiving information and insight.

In this way, African journalists -- on a uniquely Pan-African basis -- can deepen their joint capacity to support each other at difficult points in history.

There's no better time for them to invest more in social capital than now.

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