Media need to invest in compelling content

By Anton Harber

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It is when one travels, and follows South African news online, that one gets a real sense of how our newsrooms are doing in the digital world.

It is disappointing.

About 18 months ago, a number of our newspapers announced they were going "digital first" - the signal that they have recognised a need to shift their paper audience online and stop treating the new media as an add-on option. But a look at most news sites tells you that this policy is like the National Development Plan: most people nod enthusiastically in agreement that it is a good thing, move a few desks around and then go back to working the way they were before.

Most of our news operations still have the more futuristic platforms waiting on their arthritic old uncles. It is a bit like an early 20th-century modernist buying a car, but letting his horse tow it for fear of losing his noble steed.

A state of limbo

The problem is that our traditional media are in a state of limbo. The old products are losing audience and advertisers, but they are having difficulty shifting them to the more efficient and cost-effective online modes of delivery. In particular, few readers are prepared to pay for online news, because they can still get so much for free. The bulk of revenue still comes from the traditional media, though it is diminishing. The steed might be hobbling on three legs, but it is still more trustworthy than the shiny new car.

Around the world, it is those newspapers that are investing heavily in online content and experimenting boldly - particularly with fresh ways to tell news stories that take advantage of the incredible multimedia potential of the web - that are building viable digital operations. It is those that are investing in compelling content that are getting people to take out their credit cards.

Meanwhile, overseas...

Examples are *The New York Times*, the *Financial Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Others, such as *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* are continuing to allow free access to their online content in the hope of building such a strong global presence that the revenue will have to follow. *The Guardian*, in particular, is pouring money into turning this challenge into an opportunity to move from being a British morning read to a 24-hour multiple-platform global leader.

Local newsrooms have still been in a phase of cutbacks and consolidation, rather than investment in the future. The trend across the board is to move from multiple newsrooms to one serving all of a group's titles. This brings efficiency, but we are not going to get people consuming and paying for information online unless there is also an investment in the journalists who can produce unique and valuable content. We are not seeing this yet.

Where's the good, must-read content?

Those who are spending are tending to do it on everything - all the gimmicks - except having good journalists produce must-read stories for multiple platforms. This is why consumers are reluctant to pay online: there are few products yet that are worth paying for.

The company that is known to spend boldly on new ideas is Naspers. Indeed, its latest report put its annual development spending at a mouth-watering R7.7bn, and that was up 79% from the previous year. But the spending is on e-commerce and pay-television. Its newspapers got a mere 53 words in its 1,750-word results announcement last week.

Eyewitness News is a leader in integrating multiple platforms, partly because radio lends itself more easily to this. But when they recently asked me to write something for less than R1 a word, I sensed that they could produce fast-moving news, but weren't investing in depth.

The *Mail & Guardian*, as a top-end weekly, might be best placed to make the shift, but its news operation appears to be still largely print-focused.

It is easy to sit outside and demand spending, and harder to get one's shareholders to think long term. It is even harder to change the working habits of journalists. Everyone is grappling with different strategies. But no-one is going to get far without investing in what it is that we want and need: compelling content that is worth paying for.

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

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