

Not just a plaything of the North

Bruce Cohen

LAST YEAR I WAS INVITED to speak at the first Pan-Arab Newspaper Publishers' Conference in Lebanon. I went to Beirut to share my experience in having launched MisaNet, an Internet service linking several independent newspapers and media resources in Southern Africa. I also told them about the services I had developed for the *Mail & Guardian* (if we only had the Net during PW's states of emergency in the mid-Eighties!), about the potential of this medium to empower and democratise the communication process.

I was there with a mission — to warn the Arab media not to allow the information highway to bypass them; that the Net was not just a plaything of the North, but a powerful liberating information tool for the South too; that if they did not create their own on-ramps they would become squatters in the global village, marginalised at the periphery of a wired world.

My evangelism was met by polite applause and general disinterest. Few of the Arab publishers seemed to give a damn. It took me a while to realise why.

The Net is by its very nature an uncontrollable and open communication space, offering no comfort to the sheiks of Saudi Arabia, the emirs of Qatar and Oman, the Husseins, the Hassads — or their appointed editors and publishers. Cyberspace is simply a threat to their closed and ordered information universe. Correctly, they slammed the door shut.

So I flew home swigging a duty-free bottle of Arak, which softened the rejection somewhat.

A year down the line my zeal for promoting the Net as a liberating force is less missionary, but no less enthusiastic. As I have become more involved in on-line publishing, I have become fascinated by the relationship between the on-line world and the world of ink and paper. How will these "hard" and "soft" media relate in the future and what are the implications for newspapers and journalists?

Statistically, the wired future is apocalyptic: at the current rate of growth, the entire population of the world will be plugged in to the Internet in the first decade of the 21st century, around 2004. This

utterly ludicrous prediction is based on the doubling rate of Internet host computers every six months and a thumbsuck extrapolation of usage (somewhere between 5 and 10 users per host which gives us the current figure of between 20 and 40 million users). We know that tens of millions of people from Angola to Afghanistan will never be wired to a light bulb, let alone the information highway, by 2004. We know that millions of young people in our own country will never touch a PC keyboard in their lifetimes.

Does this mean that newspapers in the (under)developing world which are going on-line are simply elitist and irrelevant? Is being wired just cyber-masturbation? If so, the *Mail & Guardian*, the first newspaper in Africa to go on-line, has a lot to answer for.

But then so too does a paper like the *Post* in Lusaka which, operating in a country which is poorer in every way when compared to ours, now offers a bi-weekly Internet edition of its feisty and fiery journalism. As does the *Namibian* in Windhoek which provides a limited worldwide daily feed through our MisaNet service.

The simple fact is the Internet is a compelling and powerful medium of communication that should be exciting and challenging journalists everywhere. It is a unique medium that holds out great promise for an improvement in both the quality and quantity of our journalism and our role as mediators and interpreters of the shrinking-widening world.

I want to explore some of the key features of the Internet that make it such an important new medium and describe how we at the *Mail & Guardian* are experimenting with this new technology.

■ CONTEXT

Because we're able to store and retrieve digital information so easily on the Internet, we're able to develop a new kind of reporting, one that's been branded "context" journalism.

It means anyone who's wired can follow the *Mail & Guardian's* coverage of any event or issue back in time as a continuous and seamless thread of

information. You don't have to be a researcher or a computer boffin to do this — simply enter our electronic archive at the Worknet gopher site and you can key-word search through more than a year's worth of copy.

We are also able to offer readers a greater continuity of coverage by "re-packaging" running stories on our on-line service. A recent example was the bitter row over the ghost of Steve Biko, sparked by the attempts by Azasm to close white teachers out of black schools. Over a number of weeks the "hard copy" *Mail & Guardian* published several opinion pieces and letters on the issue. We then assembled all these discrete elements — including unpublished material — on our Web site, with hypertext links connecting them, enabling visitors to browse and read the entire debate in context.

There's been excellent work done by other media in this area, such as Newscorp's on-line coverage of the recent Beijing women's conference or CNN's ongoing coverage of the Bosnia crisis where its Web service offers a wide range of background reports, graphics and pictures linked to the running story dispatches.

Providing context and continuity to complex stories is something that the Net can do better than any other medium. In a world of sound-bites and dislocated news items, this is a significant advance.

■ DEPTH

We're able to provide this context because the Net allows us to publish in depth. Our on-line editions can carry stories in their entirety, copy that would, in our "hard" editions, inevitably suffer heavy editing due to space constraints.

A recent *Mail & Guardian* example was the leaked foreign affairs document we published on SA's arms sales policies to the rest of the world. The document offered fascinating insight (on a country by country basis totalling dozens of pages) into government's world view.

In the print edition of the *Mail* we were only able to highlight the mainpoints of the document, but on our Web site that week we published the entire document, offering on-line readers unprecedented

depth of information on the subject. (The large number of visitors to this story from foreign sites, including numerous "hits" from the American.MIL(itary) and .GOV(ernment) domains, was in itself illuminating). The more recent — and somewhat controversial — publication of the full 35 000-word manifesto of the Unabomber is a further illustration of the powerful role the Net can play in disseminating a far greater depth of information. *The Washington Post* (with agreement

of the *New York Times*) just published it on 19 September in its dead tree edition. Thereafter Time Warner and *HotWired* posted the full text on their Web site, attracting immediate worldwide attention. The Net also facilitates the publishing of more balanced coverage. Rebuttals and reaction can be published in full, not simply relegated to the last few paragraphs of a story.

INTERACTIVITY

The unique power of the Net is that it is a truly interactive environment, linking us directly to our readers. Over the last few months, e-mail letters to the editor have rocketed, and we're planning to place all e-mail letters unedited on our Internet site, whether they appear in the print version of the *Mail* or not. There is simply no longer the excuse of "lack of space".

Our readers can also immediately and effortlessly challenge us on our reporting. I've had the experience of being "flamed" (criticised) for a story. My e-mail box was quickly brimming with angry letters that I simply could not ignore.

Being so accessible should make us more accountable, and more careful about what we write.

But by far the most interesting experience in this area has been the *Mail & Guardian* forum, which we launched a year ago. Operating like an electronic mailing list, the forum has become a local cyber-institution, routing thousands of messages a month to members who use it to discuss subjects both trivial and serious.

The forum has had a fascinating spin-off, with members building a strong camaraderie with one another. They've got together for braais in Cape Town and booze-ups in New York. Those living outside SA who have visited the country recently have found a warm bond of friendship with local forum members.

Several senior staffers on the *Mail*, including the editor, are on the forum, and are thus constantly interacting with our on-line community, listening to and participating in debates and discussions that often evolve from *Mail & Guardian* stories.

MEASURABILITY

A rather extraordinary feature of the Net is that it is the most measurable of all media. Its in-built market-research mechanism enables us to gather regular, detailed information about reader preferences and tastes. We run a monthly statistics programme on our Web site which reveals which stories and sections of our on-line service get the most and least "hits".

There's no gut instinct or self-fulfilling and inadequately sampled market research. We can monitor exactly what interests our on-line readers. We also run a monthly interactive competition in which we actively canvas feedback, so we are constantly taking the pulse of our on-line readers. The combination of the Net's interactive feedback loop and the detailed, objective audience research can be of great value to editors and journalists who actually want to listen to their readers. I suspect that in the mahogany rows of many newsrooms, this may not be an altogether attractive idea.

I've covered briefly what I believe are the four key editorially important aspects of on-line publishing — context, depth, interactivity and measurability. Each one of these four areas offers fascinating opportunities for further experimentation and investigation. The learning curve has just begun.

Bruce Cohen is a director of the Mail & Guardian and executive trustee of the SA Newspaper Education trust (SANET). He brought the Mail & Guardian on-line in March 1994.

Who's winning the battle to get more and more South Africans to buy newspapers?

(There's nothing Irish about the answer...)

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