

THE CONVERGENCE CONUNDRUM

ELVIRA VAN NOORT VISITED SIX NEWSROOMS IN FOUR DIFFERENT SOUTHERN AFRICAN COUNTRIES TO FIND ANSWERS TO THE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES OF CONVERGENCE IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

The current trend towards converged or integrated newsrooms and multiple-platform publishing has found its way to Africa. Originally conceived first in American and later in European newsrooms at the turn of the century, it has proven to be a challenging change to the way newsrooms produce and disseminate content.

For many traditional media, convergence is a possible answer to the upsurge in online and mobile platforms. But not all media organisations or platforms benefit from the long-term processes and outcomes. It is essential that each media organisation analyses its structures and future plans to see if convergence would indeed be beneficial.

Challenges that were found in earlier convergence research in American and European newsrooms include clashes between the routines (deadlines and demands) of the different mediums; resistance to change from both staff and management; staff capacity; changing job descriptions; training; and creating a budget.

These problems are also reflected in African newsrooms as they seem to be essential components in the convergence process. But African newsrooms have additional challenges: limited or non-existent internet access with low bandwidth, tight budgets as well as restricted technical equipment demand a more nuanced solution than found internationally.

A quick audit of a Botswanan newsroom gives a good picture of these challenges: the nine or 10 journalists can only access the internet via dial-up on a select number of computers. There is one fixed-line telephone in the newsroom, with journalists required to use their private mobile phones to make calls. There are no laptops available, meaning reporters outside of Gaborone must use facilities at an internet cafe or write the story in longhand and fax it back to the newsroom.

Integration is not convergence

During research in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Mozambique for both a thesis and report into newsroom convergence, I found that the definition of the word “convergence” was often unclear for most editors, journalists and

media management.

As Stephen Quinn pointed out to me, there is a marked difference between the “integration” of newsrooms and “convergence”: *integration* is what occurs when a media company merges two or more existing platforms within a media house into one newsroom. There is *convergence* when one newsroom provides content for a range of media, such as broadcast, print, online and mobile.

While convergence sounds attractive and is the latest trend in the media world, it is not necessarily the best option for African media houses. Quinn emphasises that one can only speak of a truly converged newsroom when it “provides content for a range of media”. This means that a single newsroom works on one story for several different media, not just two, such as radio and online.

So for Gabz FM or Yarona FM radio stations in Gaborone, Botswana, convergence would mean a complete overhaul as they currently only provide content for one platform. Both radio stations would either have to merge with an existing television station or newspaper or find the funds to create their own.

When a company wants to add to its existing platform, the first choice is often a website. This is because online journalism has the advantage of offering endless capacity, multimedia, immediacy, permanence and interactivity (Stoval, 2004). To this list you can add hypertextuality, nonlinearity, customisation and personalisation (Kawamoto, 2003). So creating a website as an additional platform adds sustainability, brand power and citizen contribution.

But for this to happen successfully, media organisations such as Gabz FM and Yarona FM, One Africa Television in Windhoek, Namibia, and the *Mail&Guardian* in Johannesburg, South Africa, need to go through a process of change.

And, for this process to work, management needs to be committed and accept that the newsroom will produce content for two platforms that are equal to each other. This means that for every piece of content created, the editor or

journalists have to ask themselves: “Would this be more effective on radio or online, or should I combine the two platforms?”

This is a fundamental difference in a journalist’s work routine as well as in job conception, for which additional staff members, such as a multimedia editor, may have to be appointed. The multimedia editor would work closely with the editor from the traditional platform to both assign stories and decide where the story would be published. They would also identify stories that could become cross-media projects.

Changing work routines

Willing reporters play a vital role in accepting a changed work routine. Management can make the strategic decision to first change the work routines of willing staff as a pilot project to erase start-up problems and work on formalising policies and structures.

Since the editors and journalists will have to become “content producers” who are “trained to choose the most effective, entertaining storytelling techniques from a vast menu of multimedia options” (Harrower, 2007:102) they will have to choose the right platform(s) and decide on the right multimedia. An often-heard complaint by journalists and editors is that their workload doubles, since they have to produce for two or more platforms instead of one.

The challenge for management is to convince staff that their changing routines are for the better.

SOICO media house in Mozambique adopted a firm approach in making journalists and editors realise that if they didn’t change, they would be out. Once the journalists changed their routines and became accustomed to it, it was found that they were often satisfied with the changes. Journalists said they were now more knowledgeable, giving them a better position in the job market.

This article comes out of a larger research project into convergence in Namibia, Botswana and Mozambique in 2008 in co-operation with FreeVoice, Southern African Media Development Fund and Highway Africa.

References

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THE FUTURE OF LOCAL

THE IMPLICATIONS OF LOCATION-BASED ADVERTISING ARE REVOLUTIONARY FOR THE AILING WEB ADVERTISING INDUSTRY, ARGUES VINCENT MAHER.

Mobile consumer applications using location-based services are set to double their user-base in 2009, according to the Gartner Group’s latest report, but the backroom conversations at mobile industry conferences tend to disparage the hyping of the technology as something for the frequent flyer. The most common use-case: you arrive in a new city and need to find a good Indian restaurant.

What most industry critics have missed so far is that the implications of location-based advertising are revolutionary for the ailing web advertising industry. The problem most websites with large volumes of web advertising inventory are facing is that they cannot sell local advertising unless users have profiled themselves on their site.

There is no compelling reason for the pastry shop on the corner to advertise on a national newspaper site because the owners really only want to reach people within a 15km radius of their shop. For this type of advertiser Google AdSense and the Yellow Pages make much more sense than the New York Times Online.

Regardless of whether the content on a news story has location, a user always has location and one of the most important challenges for publishers over the coming year is figuring out how to get access to that location and begin selling and delivering advertising that is location-relevant. This is where the difficulty comes in.

Technologically there are several ways of getting a user’s location. Many mobile

operators already have the systems in place to triangulate the position of a mobile phone based on the relative strength of the signals from the surrounding masts and access to these systems is made available to application developers for a fee. Generally speaking location information can be inaccurate by one to two kilometres depending on the density of cellular masts in the area.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, GPS systems are increasingly being incorporated into mobile phones and other devices. In the United States, where the bulk of mobile internet access has been driven by Apple’s iPhone, access to the phone’s location information is easier than in developing countries which have massive volumes of users but low-specification handsets. The other problem with GPS is that it doesn’t work that well in buildings.

There are several other ways to determine location, for example the geo co-ordinates of Wifi base stations, the hybrid model that Google uses that combines the location

of your IP address with a patchwork of other data from different sources. The most recent and interesting development is that Firefox, the popular Open Source web browser recently introduced location information into the type of data a page can access via the browser.

But the technology is only a small part of the picture, and as location-based services continue to grow, the intensity of the debate about the privacy and safety of users is going to grow too. Many users seem to think that there is something subtly dangerous about revealing your location over the internet but, as always, it depends what gets done with this information. The potential to have your movements tracked simply by surfing the web has an ominous feeling about it, even if it helps make advertising more relevant and this is the crux of the matter: simply improving the quality of advertising is not enough of a value-proposition for the general public to agree to reveal their location.