

TUNING IN TO CHANGE

RADIO AS A MEDIUM HOLDS HANDS BEAUTIFULLY WITH NEW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES: IT'S A WAY OF STRADDLING THE DIVIDE BETWEEN MASS COMMUNICATION AND PERSONAL INTERACTION, SAYS EAST COAST RADIO NEWS EDITOR DIANE MACPHERSON

We're living in a time when the so-called traditional media is doing everything it can to cling on to its own survival. Newspapers, especially, are being increasingly overshadowed by the internet; they're worried about their place in society in the next decade, and it's not without justification.

Data from the US Audit Bureau of Circulations earlier this year revealed that newspaper circulation figures in the US had declined, overall, by 74 percent, compared to the same period in 2007-08.

The global financial meltdown has not helped. The good news was that the newspapers' online audiences were growing, meaning that at least the thirst for news has not waned. It's the way it's being consumed that has rapidly shifted, and when you think about the younger generation who seem to be genetically wired into the computer mainframe – it's not surprising. So, where does this leave other forms of traditional media, such as radio? Is it in the same precarious position? Not to the same extent, that's for sure.

Radio as a medium is still going strong in South Africa, although results from the SAARF RAMS June 2009 survey reveal that South African radio audiences are down slightly year-on-year, from 93.8 percent to 91 percent. Daily time spent listening (TSL) is 4 hours 9 minutes, up two minutes on the previous survey. So, while audiences have shrunk a little, there's no life-threatening haemorrhage.

African language station Ukhozi FM remains the South African giant with 6.4-million listeners. And, in a sub-Saharan context, radio remains the main source of news, as it's cheap, accessible and crosses literacy barriers.

I recall that more than 10 years ago, the general manager at the company I work for, Durban-based East Coast Radio (1.83-million listeners), warned staff that radio was under threat from the scourge of internet radio. "One day," he said, "and not too far off, people will be tuning in to overseas radio stations on their satellite radios in their cars."

We quivered in our seats and chewed on our fingernails out of concern, dreading the time when local radio was forsaken for global radio. But despite the emergence of internet radio streaming, the international takeover has not happened. It's largely the locality itself that has kept radio strong. A London-based station isn't likely to be able to tell you whether you should wear a T-shirt or a jersey out that day, or which roads to avoid on the drive in to work, or what's caused those massive black plumes of smoke over the city.

But this doesn't mean radio stakeholders can rest on their laurels. Just like their print counterparts, they need to be engaging with the new media. If your media house isn't playing in this arena, you should start to worry. Perhaps "playing" is the wrong word. Radio, in particular, as a medium holds hands beautifully with the digital technologies. It's a way of straddling the divide between mass communication and personal interaction. Give your listeners an

WE QUIVERED IN OUR SEATS AND CHEWED ON OUR FINGERNAILS OUT OF CONCERN, DREADING THE TIME WHEN LOCAL RADIO WAS FORSAKEN FOR GLOBAL RADIO. BUT DESPITE THE EMERGENCE OF INTERNET RADIO STREAMING, THE INTERNATIONAL TAKEOVER HAS NOT HAPPENED

online platform – a solid, respectable and fun one – and watch them engage with your brand in an entirely new way.

In March 2007, for example, East Coast Radio launched a news blog on the Word Press platform to coincide with the weather phenomenon that saw massive waves devastate the KwaZulu-Natal coastline. On its launch morning, a Monday, the site received more than 10 000 unique visitors. By the Wednesday, 35 000 unique visitors had gone to the blog. In technical terms, this amounted to some 25 gigabytes of data being served. Users wanted updates on local weather and to view the photographs sent in by listeners.

The movie line, "build it, and they will come", springs to mind. Except the difference here was knowing what was needed to be built. Key to the success of the site was the technical team's ability to load listener photos quickly, as well as the commitment from the news team to take on the extra work. We were able to talk about something on air, and then point listeners directly to the site to see what we were talking about. The many comments from site users help to add several layers of depth to the breaking story.

We managed to establish a trust relationship from day one, and knew we had to live up to the expectations we'd created from then on.

And when our listeners aren't looking at photos or downloading podcasts or adding their comments, they're accessing information via the more traditional method: over the airwaves.

That's the beauty of radio – it's not an either/or medium. In fact it is one of the few mediums, if not the only one, that can be accessed while driving through driving rain or standing at the sink, washing dishes.

Ultimately, I believe radio should not be threatened by new media. It should be reinventing itself so that it evolves as part of the new media stable. This should not be done without a proper strategy or competent new media-literate staff.

It's not a sideline, and it's not a hobby that you assign to your intern. The web consumer is too sophisticated to be insulted in this manner. If you're a radio or print journalist you should also be honing your new media skills and adopting a new mindset towards the rapidly changing industry.

Resistance is futile and will only make you redundant.