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THE TRITENESS OF **KNOWING**

The de-commodification of English news and the online enclavism of opinion-making among South Africa's young educated elite

By Nomalanga Mkhize

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MEDIATED

Why are South African major mainstream newspaper circulation figures in persistent decline? The question was posed to me via email this week when I was sent the figures as published on the media industry blog *Marklives.com*. Between 2012 and 2013 dailies dropped from 1.67 million to 1.54 million; weeklies from 697 000 to 630 000, and weekenders from 2.44 million to 2.29 million. 'Could it be that the readers were disengaging because they are drained by the constant negativity in newspapers?', read the query.

In the context of the exchange, the underlying subtext was that perhaps South Africa's media is, to its own detriment, producing content that spreads a malaise and alienates the reading public. But blaming the drop on a fatigue with the commercial media's traditional "bad news model" seemed way off, especially if one considers the creative vacuum caused by the dismal failure of the public broadcaster to use its considerable infrastructure to enable channels of vibrant civic engagement.

Ironically, part of the answer to the question was actually hidden in plain sight – the person querying had sent me an email with a blog link freely availing valuable information for which no doubt a range of institutions have paid to gather and produce. Notwithstanding the irony of the sender's actions, I felt that laying blame at the door of "the free internet" was also far too simplistic.

In the circulation statistics, I was particularly puzzled by the *City Press*' shocking performance. In a single year it slid from 163 000 to 118 000. This was strange given the high public profile of its editor Ferial Haffajee, who currently has 57 599 Twitter followers (the *Mail&Guardian*'s Nic Dawes stood at 29 424) as well as the kind of social media hype and publicity generated by the newspaper's "sold out" moments such as the "Buy City Press" anti-boycott during "The Spear" debate.

Yet the hard sales figures demonstrate disjuncture between the *City Press*' public and online image as a news leader versus what the newspaper buying public actually believes its news to be worth in print.

Not being privy to industry information, I cannot judge Haffajee's editorial and strategic management abilities. However, newspapers do share the same broader context and economy of knowledge production and dissemination as the academic sphere in which I exist as a history lecturer and education reform activist.

There appears to be cultural shift occurring in the very nature of our relationship with information that is prompted by the internet, and in South Africa, this particularly affects information and news produced in English as the language of global exchange.

The tendency of the internet as a medium is to abolish information hierarchies and democratise the process of production, dissemination and consumption. Online readers of mainstream English language media in South Africa see themselves not just as consumers of information, but also as potential co-producers of content. This is particularly the case with 'younger' readers, many of whom have spent a substantial portion of their lives using the internet and digital services

as primary means of information acquisition and communication. The popularity of news and opinion-sharing via tweeting, blogging and Facebooking is clear evidence of this.

However, what is more interesting is that South African English language newspapers appear to be encouraging these alternative content platforms outside of their hard printed pages not only by interacting with their readers online, but also by reporting on what is discussed on social media and re-blogging content. It appears that the rationale for this is to progressively herd the online traffic towards the newspapers' own websites, presumably to attract advertisers.

A common strategy seems to be the provision of reader opinion blogs. The *Mail and Guardian* recruits young opinionistas to contribute to its *Thought Leader* blogs, *News24* allows the reader to register and upload their own written or visual media content, while the *City Press* invites opinionated Twitter users to contribute opinion columns which appear both digitally and in print.

I am not so much concerned with judging whether this democratisation is a negative or positive development; I am only interested in what these shifts in the way newspapers operate (perhaps prompted by their declining circulation figures) tell us about emerging information-driven civic cultures. It appears to me that this democratisation shapes two cultural shifts in information consumption:

1. It is generally recognised that the opening of the blogosphere has expanded opinion space that newspapers were traditionally parsimonious with. However, the information glut as a whole on the internet has devalued both news and analysis such that they no longer carry distinctive value as information – knowing has thus become trite. Although more voices are heard, it is no longer so easy to commodify them and convert them into revenue.
2. The decline of the dominant print publications in South Africa leads to the shrinking of 'common reading publics'. By 'common publics', I mean those spaces of overlapping social interest where the English language papers could cater for a cross-section of the population even if its main audience was of a particular demographic. This is not yet feasible with online media. The unevenness of digital technology penetration in South Africa means that, for now, certain social media platforms are elite techno-ghettos where there is little crossover into everyday social spheres that physical print media (and broadcast) can penetrate. The effect is that although digital opinion-making has widened, opinionistas address less diverse audiences.

The message of the internet: The 'triteness of knowing'

The democracy of the blogosphere has no doubt led to the toppling of the traditional conception of the "expert" and all the associated cultural baggage of what sort of person can be viewed as being authoritative.

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But this should really be understood as a normalisation of public political culture. From the point of view of those commonly excluded from editorial pages, the recognition of diverse voices can hardly be considered a remarkable advance in human culture.

The critical challenge of the internet is the sheer volume of information made available and the dearth of mechanisms to sort, review and verify it. The result is that information becomes commonplace and is viewed as self-validating by its mere existence and accessibility. If the McLuhanist message of television is to turn information into entertainment; then the message of the internet is that all information is equally valid.

I note that my undergraduate students, most of whom were born in the digital age and highly dependent on Google, have to not only be trained on how to discern the validity of internet sources, but have to also be persuaded that information on popular internet sites is not necessarily equal to that found in scholarly texts. I have to convince them that although some Wikipedia entries cite scholarly works this does not make the repository credible. Does this differ from

a historian taking an archival collection at face value? In the sense of having to validate content, it is not necessarily different, but that is not the essential point.

Of significance is the way the internet makes the acquisition of knowledge a superficial and trite occurrence. At the click of a button one can find out about almost anything. Attempting to sell information in print, particularly news which has a short shelf-life, becomes like trying to commodify soil or air – something that is everywhere in some form or another. Why then buy a newspaper? Put more specifically, why bother to buy a newspaper to read news and analysis when you consume so much information for free online? This returns me to the strange case of the *City Press* and the failure of its online brand dominance to attract and retain readers in print.

One can get *City Press* commentary by simply subscribing to the editor's tweets – why distinguish between what she puts in her editorial page and her microblogging – even if she has put the disclaimer “Tweets in personal capacity” on her Twitter bio? Why would Haffajee have us believe her opinions in tweets

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are any different from her opinions in print? In any case, even if she did not make herself available online, there are many online commentators whose analysis on whatever is being reported in the news cycle can be accessed. It is even tougher for newspapers when broadcast media break news on the internet and steal the attention of the online audience.

Is it any wonder that newspapers sometimes break news online purely for the brand credit and not for the sales?

The lesson of the *City Press* is that growing the online profile does not create value in print. Unfortunately, there is something inevitable about all this. It is difficult to foresee a future in which South Africa’s mainstream print media can claim back the space lost to the vast sea of information that is the internet. But it gets worse.

Gizmos and Apps: The ‘young’ online opinion enclaves

The pursuit of internet audiences by mainstream press often results in online opinionistas, many of them young, being accorded a news profile disproportionate to their offline social reach.² Recently, political commentator Professor Steven Friedman (*Business Day Live*, 29 May 2013) criticised the tendency for online-interactive reporters to treat social media opinion as a representative sample of South African broader public sentiment arguing that

“When some people decide that their world is the world, reality is sure to suffer. Which is why claims that social media are the pulse of the nation should make us wary... social media here do not include most people in the debate — they connect the connected, the top one-fifth or less who are already part of the conversation. And so they do not tell us what South Africans think — they tell us the thoughts of a small section of the population who would have other ways to make themselves heard if new media were never invented... social media may reach many more people and so may no longer be the preserve of the few. But the day will never come when new media can substitute for the task of achieving and building democracy.”

Friedman’s cautioning is important; in an unequal society, knowledge producers and disseminators must come to grips with the creative power of cultural imagination where what is produced and consumed

as media becomes enmeshed with what we experience as reality. That is, the conflation of the real and the mediated in the Baudriillardian sense of *hyperreality*.

One example is the way in which raising one’s online profile has become a favoured strategy among educated elites in order to gain the kind of media exposure that creates a personal brand. One of the most coveted forms of recognition is to gain a spot on the *Mail and Guardian’s* List of Top 200 Young South Africans. Apart from being able to manufacture the kind of public online persona that can edge you closer to a spot on the list, one is also able to validate one’s “credentials” by existing in networks of educated elites who can nominate you for the list.

I am stunned annually by how many top young people I see on the list from my alma mater Rhodes University and similar institutions but very few from historically black universities. It cannot simply be that the formerly white institutions have more than their fair share of bright young things, but that the overlap of networks, particularly through social media and print media, favour them for media profiling.

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What we see then is the segmentation of online audiences such that more distinct marketable niches develop and editors, I would argue, pursue the niches of the affluent in an attempt to increase revenues.

All the while, mainstream print media decline, eroding the traditions where they were recognised as speaking to common reading public – whatever the audience they sold to their advertisers. Increasingly then, there are accusations from politicians (and people such as myself) that the mainstream English press does not represent a political worldview that grapples with the social imagination of the black majority.

This piece is not meant to be definitive; my main goal was to understand the complicated effect of the internet and try to relate this to the unevenness and inequality of South Africa’s public sphere. There is great potential for African language and non-suburban English reading audiences online but that will have to await more column space.



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Endnotes

1. Although circulation figures are down, readership figures are reported as stable (Moodie 2013). In her analysis of ABC and AMPS figures, Moodie tries to make sense of this disjuncture. The trends remain complex – Gill Moodie, ‘Analysis of 2012 Amps readership figures: what lurks beneath for SA newspapers?’, *Marklives.com*, 23 April 2013, retrieved online at <http://www.marklives.com/wordpress/2013/04/analysis-of-2012-amps-readership-figures-what-lurks-beneath-for-sa-newspapers/>
2. Youth in South Africa generally refers to the category of people between the ages of 15 to 35.