

New technologies promise a wealth of media and messages, says Guy Berger.

The new media maelstrom

South Africa's democracy decade coincided with the popularisation of the Internet on a global scale. New society, new media, it seemed.

Prior to 1994, email was the preserve of the computer-savvy at the elite universities. The power of the World Wide Web was but a tiny treasure tucked away behind arcane interfaces. Back then, the idea of journalists being a part of an interconnected global network of email and websites, all linked by a common Internet Protocol (IP), was undreamt of. Now it's here and indeed old hat.

From early on the main utility of the Internet for South Africa's mass media has been less as a new publishing platform than a resource for research. Thus, over the democracy decade, a new journalistic skill came into being: computer-assisted reporting and research – CARR. It entailed learning how to locate and assess relevant websites, and how to use search engines efficiently. Email became a powerful tool to receive information electronically, and to conduct interviews.

With these developments, however, have come several concerns. First, too many journalists nowadays do too little primary research, and rely on the Internet instead. Second, our online knowledge horizons are set by the specifically white, western and male origins of most information in cyberspace. Third, plagiarism – “cut-and-paste journalism” – is increasingly easy.

Another new media instrument, that over the past decade has become integral to journalism (for better and worse), is the mobile phone. Cellular telephony, nowadays taken so for granted, was expected back in 1994 to be a tool for top business people only. Ten years on, of course, South African journalists don't think twice about the convenience. And though we are not yet using the devices as tools to record audio or capture images, nor to manage address books, that will surely come.

Distinct from all of this, there has been less success in the use of the Internet and cellular phones as output platforms for journalism. At first glance, this is surprising, given the huge rate of both Internet and cellular growth over the period.

To start with the Internet: in 1994, according to Arthur Goldstuck, there were an estimated 100 000 South African users. His estimated figures for 2004 are 3.6 million.

This mega-growth, however, conceals that escalation tailed off over the period – suggesting that South Africa's elite markets (primarily white) have reached relative saturation (in low bandwidth at least).

Hopes were very high for the online publishing industry earlier in the decade. A small number of

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South African publications went online in 1995 – notably the *Financial Mail* and *Business Day*, following in the footsteps of the veteran *Mail&Guardian*. Their online publishing back then seemed more a matter of prestige and experimentation than part of any clear business strategy. The country then saw a wave of online publishing emerge between 1995 and 2000 – and a crash, once it became apparent that the South African market could not sustain the level of investment. Vast illusions of success had emerged in the 1990s, fuelled by a range of new tactics in the search for viability.

Initially, mainstream media simply put content online, expecting that visitor traffic would attract advertisers. Most online content was “shovelware” – information simply re-purposed from a parent medium. A number of innovative publishers took advantage of the low costs of running a website to launch new operations. The *mg.co.za* was a daily, whereas its parent was a weekly; *iafrica.com* and *woza.co.za* were stand-alone sites. Most media sites were text-heavy, though a small quantity of audio and video was available on broadcast sites. When content in these forms proved insufficient for viability, new tactics evolved.

One tactic was to set up web destinations that aggregated information from several sources. For example, both *Business Day* and *Financial Mail* content became available under *www.netassets.co.za*; three Afrikaans newspapers' content (and later that of the *Natal Witness*) was grouped under *www.news24.co.za*. Belatedly much of Independent Newspapers content from around the country was brought together under *www.iol.co.za*.

It also became fashionable to create online communities as a means to cement audience allegiance to a website – and thereby offer a consistent prospect to potential advertisers. The “sticky” attractions offered to users were chat rooms, scheduled events and services like email newsletters.

None of these formulae, or others that were tried, brought in the necessary returns. The first site to fall was *www.metropolis.co.za*, followed soon by *www.woza.co.za*. Universally, South African media companies pulled back their web operations, cutting staff and services and relocating them back to home base. The democracy decade ended with South African websites still struggling to survive.

If there had been enormous growth in Internet use over the period, the expansion of cellular to some 16 million lines in the same time was simply humungous. Yet, as with the web, hopes that cellular phones could become platforms for distributing content, had to be tempered. Today only seven percent of cellular traffic consists of data transmission (as distinct from voice). However, there has

been some event-driven uptake of text-messaged headlines and of audio services provided by SABC's Newsbreak.

Several factors point to why publishing via new media proved to have limited prospects. The cost of Internet connectivity remains too high for market growth beyond the elite or for extended use by the existing users; slow download times under the majority of existing connections have meant a less-than-compelling media experience; advertisers were slow to recognise the value of Internet audiences, and it took until 2003 before the Online Publishers Association was formed, and another year before they installed “Red Sheriff” – a uniform and credible audience measurement system to present to advertisers.

Lastly, online media content has generally been the same as (or even less than) that offered on traditional platforms. The facility to search it electronically has been insufficient to turn these sites into must-visit and must-advertise places.

Likewise, content delivered by cellular phone has been disappointing in quality, not to mention being costly and clunky in terms of access. The much-hyped WAP never took off, severely setting back possibilities of cellular phones as mechanisms to consume media content.

Unsurprisingly, in the light of these limitations, audiences and advertisers for new media have been in relatively short supply.

However, things should improve over the next decade. Competition to Telkom will lead to cheaper connectivity, and there are signs – like the *www.mg.co.za* special feature on the elections – that content will become far more interactive and attractive. Advertisers will begin to see value in the growing audiences reached by new media. More online sites are likely to offer paid-for content. If the quality is good enough, visitors – who should become increasingly more e-commerce familiar – will pay. Online access will grow, and this is likely to increasingly include Internet links via mobile phone devices.

Cellular phone screens will improve. Special content will be customised for them and faster transmission speeds for data will emerge. Meantime, the traditional platforms – especially print – will become more expensive, making new media a more competitive option for the consumer. Most of all, there will be greater convergence between new and old media, with greater economies of scale and cross-promotion across myriad digital delivery channels. This will not supplant the existing divergent media forms, but it will spread content across them all and drive traffic from one to the other.

There will also be online information growth among non-mass media sources like local governments, NGOs and SMMEs – making the Internet more attractive to the public. We can expect web-logging, and increased content in African languages. The enlarged middle class, and indeed even the wider public, will deepen peer-to-peer content messaging. News images captured on individual cellular phones (or plagiarised from elsewhere!) will be sent from device to device, often bypassing the mainstream media – including its online contingent.

It will be a challenge for journalists to keep their visibility – and role – within this expanding maelstrom. The bottom line, however, is that society can look forward to more opportunities for more black and women's voices online and information diversity becoming much richer. Once Internet access becomes more mainstream in the next 10 years, there will be an unimagined wealth out there for South Africans to choose from, contribute to, and celebrate.



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