

A kind of bird flu is back, albeit in different guise. It's afflicting millions with addiction and dizziness. It's converting otherwise sane people into an ever-expanding flock of Twitterers whizzing around like the swallows of an eve at Durban's new airport.

Maybe now, as swine flu gains ground, we'll start to see the media piggies heaving into the air, leaving their pokes to be prodded on Facebook.

Today, the public sky is clouded with communicators of every colour, shape, size and source. Their cheeps and whistles come from every conceivable direction – sometimes in harmony, often competing.

Many of these communicators are individuals, numerous others are institutions. Some are machines. No matter, all these newcomers to mass communication have something to profess or a networking platform to provide.

Many are champing for a cut of the advertising cake. But more than a few – unlike the media companies – are happy to chip in their content free of charge because they make their livelihoods in other ways.

It's the "internet-isation" of societies that is causing this ever-widening "mediat-isation".

By comparison to developed countries, South Africa is still in the Stone Age; compared with much of Africa, we're still on the American trajectory towards ubiquitous broadband (albeit by mobile connection).

And, while our newspapers' sales are still growing, non-media players are assembling audiences and advertising – such as through sponsored please-call-me messages or tapping into the estimated 7-million South Africans using the mobile internet.

So media complacency here is not what the doctor is tweeting.

Amid the amazing spectacle of information exploding all around us, and with more and more people's lives and identities invested in the internet cloud, it's fair to ask where's the journalism, and how is it being paid for?

To answer this, you first have to figure out what counts as journalism within this communications clutter.

It's often forgotten that the idea of journalism as independent reportage and comment in the public interest is a modern invention. It is often overlooked that there are different iterations – for instance, Anglo-Saxon vs European journalisms. There are variations between commentary, news, Q&As, narratives, imagery, national-local-hyperlocal, etc.

So, you would be like those who say the ANC will rule for eternity if you thought that journalism was one thing, and fixed forever. It is in motion, and that is because its context and basis are also changing.

Yet the differences are not, at root, what some major pundits believe:

Dan Gilmor coined the notion that journalism is transforming from a lecture to a conversation. Sure, there is increasing interaction in communications. But important as that is, it doesn't change the core character of journalism.

This is because what's distinctive about journalism is that it informs people. It delivers the substance for significant public conversations. When journalism replaces this with only facilitating dialogue, then it's no longer journalism.

Merely moderating discussion means journalism losing its historical strength of setting the agenda for debate, and of helping people make decisions on the issues at stake. This is not to ignore the valuable rise of audience participation, but rather to say that journalists need to manage it, rather than be overwhelmed by it.

Jay Rosen evangelises about how the whole canon of professional journalism is being overthrown. He's right that nowadays there is journalism without journalists. There can even be forms of news generated by software programmes.

But let's get real: the mere fact that people with access to the new means of mass communication can "commit" journalism does not make fulltime

DESPITE THE PRETENSIONS OF THE PROFESSION, BETTER ETHICS AND GREATER CREDIBILITY ARE NOT A MAJOR REQUIREMENT FOR MEDIA SUCCESS

practitioners redundant – anywhere, and especially not in South Africa. This is because journalists carry a meaningful identity that shapes their practice. And it is because they generally generate more and better journalism than incidental contributors.

On the whole, very little user-generated content (such as SMSs carried by the media) is journalism. Even people acting as citizen journalists tend to produce opinion and personal news – journalism with a small j. And, notwithstanding their nomenclature, their content is often of little relevance to citizenship.

We should not romanticise or inflate the role of the professionals in journalism, but their continued existence, sustained within media institutions, remains significant – especially for democracy. Journalists, as we know (and, sometimes, love) them, are complemented, not undermined by, the communications contributions that emanate from outside their ranks.

However, what is now very clear, both despite and because of the crowded communications sky, is that journalists today cannot take their existence for granted. To even survive as unique and distinctive communicators means upping the level of their game.

For a start, that requires reinforcing old-fashioned journalistic skills – which, in turn, depends on improved research, verification, timeliness and quality of expression.

What about better ethics and greater credibility? Despite the pretensions of the profession, these are not a major requirement for media success. You can do well with infotainment, as the tabloid press has shown us. Furthermore, as things stand, not too many South Africans seem to see the press as credible. Online articles about the challenges facing newspaper journalism tend to elicit angry comments along the lines of "good riddance to bad rubbish". So, ethics and credibility are nice-to-have – rather than necessities for the survival of journalism.

The specific value-adds that need boosting are:

First, in the information offering. Journalists can no longer regurgitate press conferences and press releases that are increasingly available direct from source. If it is news, it needs to be exclusive. Alternatively, if it is opinion, analysis or review, it has to be able to compete with the blogosphere in terms of quality of argument and expression.

Second, to stay different from other communication, journalism needs to assert its critical and independent *raison d'être*. On this foundation, it should also do more to contextualise and to curate its output – for instance, making stories available via parameters of geography and interest. It further has to deal with the fact that news consumption is increasingly located in the ecology of a much wider news network, and consciously link into that.

Third, news in its traditional subject matter can no longer assume automatic self-importance. Journalists have to become more responsive to the interests of active audiences. Jarvis correctly observes that "one man's noise is another man's news", and he's spot-on that journalists need to recognise there's not one story to fit all tastes (as was the case in the era of mass-production). Instead, it is now necessary for journoes to acknowledge the longtail of diverse micro-interests.

Fourth, different ways of telling stories are also needed – for example, by drawing on networks to 'mash up' content from various sources, and by making use of crowd-sourcing energies.

Journalists also need to take on board the skills of distribution in the emerging search-engine-driven consumption of news. That means

learning the importance of tags, metadata and search-engine optimisation, and customising stories to play across several platforms. It

also means taking steps to get presence in social networks and people to link or re-tweet in the mode of trusted personal recommendations.

Fifth, embracing dialogue and participation (but without losing information value-add), is another area to be underlined. Martin Langeveld has expanded on this by portraying journalists as potential convenors and leaders of a conversation around a story – and as people who can ensure that the conversation is solutions-oriented.

In these five ways, journalism can stay journalism – retaining its defined general features – and, at the same time, it can be reinvented in a way that responds to the potentials of the new technology and new information environment.

So far, so good. But the question still arises whether meeting such historic challenges will be enough to save journalism. We may breed birds in new and flashy flocks, but who is going to feed them?

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There is, sadly, no guarantee that a new, improved journalism will bring with it a sustainable mechanism to underwrite its practice by institutions that focus on this service.

In developed countries, old media institutions are collapsing. The carnage in the US newspaper industry is partly a function of over-gearred financing and the recession. But these factors have only hastened the fact that the primary business model that supported journalism is coming to an end. A Spanish blogger has a website titled 233grados.com – named for the temperature at which paper burns. That’s a powerful statement about the heat on the press in developed countries to the newspaper industries.

The problem in the US’s crisis is not lack of audience. Media institutions, whether on paper/airwaves/online or all three, attract ample audiences (although online they come via search engines and social recommendations, not via brands and home page editorial selections).

The real trouble is that these news ventures have not been able to compete with online ways of matching purveyors and possible purchasers – for instance, with online search-based advertising. This means that even if journalism can still manage to compete to secure scarce attention from people, a lot of advertising increasingly intercepts them en route, rather than at destination. Much other advertising is finding audiences at the watering holes of pure-play conversation and personal news locations like Facebook. The media, in short, is being dis-intermediated from this historic relationship.

Some people see what’s happening to old media businesses in terms of natural evolution. There’s wishful thinking that a means will be found to support something that society needs, that a bright new journalism can arise from the ashes of the old.

The answer is: Not necessarily. Having undercut the old media, the new media itself could yet come crashing down.

Mega-sites like Facebook and Twitter are not financially secure. YouTube could go down the tubes if it doesn’t find a viable business model. Google is a part-parasite on news media content, but runs the risk of having the hosts disappear and thence a diminution of journalism it can link to.

“Journalism will survive because it fulfils an important social need,” claims researcher Jane B Singer. But there’s no social imperative or invisible hand to decree that journalism will be sustained on the internet (even if it is reincarnated in novel form).

Instead, the future depends on what strategies work in trying to secure the institutional resources to sustain journalism as a powerful and specialist form of communication.

An historic quote by Antonio Gramsci applies to this historic period: “The old is dying, the new is not yet born, and in this interregnum all kinds of morbid symptoms arise.”

One such symptom is the industry’s new-found enthusiasm about protectionism – such as blocking companies like Google from profiting from news searches. As Jarvis writes, this is a sure-fire way to reduce journalistic influence as well as revenues.

Another morbid symptom is a second wind for the misguided belief that consumers can be made to pay for online journalism. It didn’t work before. Even in old media, modern audiences seldom paid the full price for journalism. It’s typically been free or indirectly subsidi-

sed by advertisements and/or broadcast licence fees.

Instead of dead-end floundering in mindsets of the past, the current moment also allows for creative responses. It’s the responsibility of media owners and managers to find new models that will ensure institutional sustainability. But journalists can play a part – even help lead and shape the process.

Many journalists may understandably object to agreeing to cuts, accepting corporate mergers, or compromising integrity and focus to generate revenues through advertorial. There’s also not much point in anyone trying to save a singular business model that is relentlessly winding down (albeit unevenly internationally).

But much else could be cause for (common) action:

It is futile to try and monetise content hitherto offered free online to consumers (from a range of options), although there is still potential in the business model described by Chris Anderson as “freemium”. And bundled as audiences, consumers can still be delivered to advertisers if the service is reinvented (for example, linked to content tags a la Google) – without, that is, compromising editorial integrity.

All actors in the industry could co-operate in exploring the potential in supply-side resourcing of journalism. For instance, these are mechanisms like public subsidies (like tax breaks for media companies), and donor-underwritten journalism (foundations or sponsors for coverage like courts, councils or environmental issues).

There’s potential in incorporating a level of volunteer correspondents on the model of community radio. The *Huffington Post*’s “Off The Bus” coverage of the US elections involved 12 000 people in generating grassroots copy. Other professional-amateur collaborations could help save money as well as enrich journalism, rationalising coverage areas through pruning where there’s little unique value-add, and exploiting niche and other strengths. Jarvis advises media institutions to “do what you do best, and link to the rest”.

The bottom line of all this is two-fold if journalism is to survive and thrive in the next decade:

Firstly, journalists must focus on high value-added (beneficiated) information and new forms of story-telling. If we also recognise the value of public interaction and responsiveness, this could help to construct a new credibility and public support for journalism.

Secondly, on the institutional side, journalists can contribute appropriately to new business models, such as alternative services to advertisers, supply-side resourcing, pro-am collaborations and ditching areas of journalism where others can do better.

All that’s a lot to do, and it’s hard to envisage current media cultures taking these steps. Don’t expect much from risk-averse managers or defensive nose-to-the-grindstone reporters and editors.

Instead, initiative will fall to individuals across the board who are passionate about journalism ... and, crucially, people who are also open to encouraging its evolution. That in turn means people who are open to experimenting.

One venture might be a nimble and niched multi-platform news operation, perhaps in isiXhosa, with only a handful of staff to pay. Could this kind of animal, akin to what happened in historical extinction events, be part of the creatures who get through into the next era, in contrast to lumbering larger entities that require too many resources for their reproduction?

Experiments can also have valuable unforeseen results, as with Twitter. The service’s 140-character limit was initially designed to accord with content being sent or received by SMS. Today, most Twitter use is online rather than SMS, but it’s the very truncation of the messages that has made the service the centre where busy people can scan their information sources.

According to the network’s co-founder Jack Dempsey, the name of the service comes from one dictionary definition of twitter: “a short burst of inconsequential information”. Instead, for its users, Twitter serves up what’s relevant (that is, what’s consequential) to them.

It’s a far easier reference (often with

high-value hyperlinks) than having to religiously visit scores of favoured web destinations or continuously emailing friends and family.

The point is that Twitter’s success as the most useful gateway network on the internet is through unintended outcomes. Maybe in South Africa, someone should experiment with a novel partnership with a cellphone company to cover a particular event across various platforms. Maybe this could end up with a dues-contributing fan club with longer-term duration, or perhaps it could generate a phone app that people pay to download just as they do with ringtones.

Who are the people who can do these things to take journalism forward? They’re the folk who are currently tweeting their journalism and listening carefully to other songs on the network. They’re the ones who are ready to make institutional pigs airborne if that’s what it’s going to take to keep telling stories in the public interest.

They’re also people like you, interested enough to read a long-form article about a critical topic, and who want to see new and better journalism emerge from media transition. They don’t want “bird flu” to kill off journalism, and they see ways in which it could even strengthen this special kind of communication.

THE FUTURE DEPENDS ON WHAT STRATEGIES WORK IN TRYING TO SECURE THE INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES TO SUSTAIN JOURNALISM AS A POWERFUL AND SPECIALIST FORM OF COMMUNICATION