

Five ways technology is changing the face of journalism



By [Styli Charalambous](#)

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From tablets to Twitter and smartphones to social media, the way we produce and consume news will never be the same. As with almost part of our lives, technology has interrupted and disrupted the way we used to do things, and journalism is no exception.

When the hairs on our head are a little greyer we will look back at this period and hold it alongside that of the time of the printing press, when a revolution took place. And even though the face of journalism is being radically altered, the internal organs - the principles that guide the production of news, remain the same. Here are five ways technology has changed the world of news publishing.

1. Consumption

Remember those days of black stained fingers, and the fight for the sport pages over breakfast? The news cycle in the publishing game was 24hrs, as mills and presses converted trees into pages of information between our fingers.

Now the news is constant, available anywhere at any time. All the time. We have laptops, tablets and smartphones that deliver a constant stream of never-ending updates and breaking stories. Pretty soon even our watches will be feeding our insatiable thirst for images and videos of Miley Cyrus' latest twerking sensation.

News organisations must now compete for relevance and speed to market, as the public turn to being informed and entertained in 140 characters, or less.

The latest DMA report for July shows a staggering 62% increase in the number of unique browsers accessing member sites, just over 22 million, which goes to show that even at the foot of the African continent, the digital revolution is inevitable. Of those 22 million browsers, 39% were accessed on some kind of mobile device, with smartphones making up the majority of those devices.

2. Marketing

In the bad old days, news outlets would have to rely on rather expensive broadcast media, if they were indeed granted marketing budgets. Nowadays, entire organisations have launched, relying almost exclusively on social media and other digital channels such as referral search traffic and newsletters.

Most news organisations rely heavily on their Twitter and Facebook activities to generate interest in a particular story,

another difference from bygone days when marketing an individual story was rarely possible. Now with the like of page, our feeds can be populated with interesting stories from almost any news publisher in the world.

At the Daily Maverick we rack up almost half our traffic from social media and search traffic. Mail & Guardian has 135,000 followers on Twitter and some EWN reporters have individual accounts with almost as many as that. Expect the marketing clout of journalists social media profiles to come up in the next annual wage discussions.

3. Deliverables

The days of journalists only being asked to deliver written copy are soon coming to an end. Pretty soon journalists will be Go Pro cameras strapped to their berets as they become required to turn in video and audio alongside their written copy.

The New York Times wowed the world with its interactive, multi-media and award-gobbling "Snow Fall" blockbuster. To call it a story would be an injustice, as it took 12 dedicated staffers a little over 6 months to produce this 17,000 word masterpiece, complete with video, audio and even interactive computer generated graphics.

As bandwidth becomes more accessible and affordable, the demand for visual news will only increase, although not as a replacement, but as a compliment to the written word. News organisations will no longer be able to call themselves publishers, but will have to evolve into media houses producing all types of content.

4. Barriers to entry

The last 10 years were supposed to herald the dawn of a new kind of journalism, one that prophets warned would render the traditional news houses obsolete. Citizens were supposed to rise up and replace professional hacks, cutting out the need to pay for our news.

But two things happened: Firstly, reading citizen journalist reports was akin to tasting home-brewed beer, not even close to tasting the real thing. I don't care if a blogger was schooled in the Queen's English by the lady herself, they will never be able to do the job of a seasoned, well-trained professional with a paid team of support staff. Secondly, news outlets are starting to give away their news for free anyway and the need for the citizen reporter faded as fast as the buzz word was coined.

Whilst the rise of citizen reporting never really took off, we did see a rise of another kind of news source that managed to take advantage of the lowered barriers to entry. In a room that measured no more than 15m square, and an apartheid era air-conditioner for company, Daily Maverick was born.

With a team of five full-time staffers and an internet connection, the organisation has grown in four short years to become a significant voice in the media landscape. Almost 70% of the running costs are allocated to editorial, made possible through technology.

5. Paywalls

For all the benefits that technology has brought, the major disadvantage has been the slow destruction of the traditional news business model. Giving content away for free only works if the advertising dollars are big enough to make up for it. But because the early foundations of digital publishing were left to those with propeller mounted caps, we live in an era when digital display advertising is lowly-traded commodity, viewed as the poor cousin in the world of advertising.

And because of this mess, publishers with digital offerings are seeing print revenues decline faster than digital ones can replace them, with new competitors like Google and Facebook eating their digital lunches. And with no viable solution in sight, publishers are justifying the move to guarding their digital articles behind a paywall of some sort.

Whether justified or not, there is a lot of noise being made by publisher associations around the world about the time to

start charging for access to content. There are so many challenges with adopting this method as the saviour of the news publishing business model, the biggest of which include having to change consumer behaviour as well as now having to compete with the biggest news houses in the world for a share of the subscription revenue pie.

Technology by its very nature is disruptive, in some instances for better and in the instance of the news publisher's business model, for worse. They will need to accept the way that they did business before it has a finite shelf-life, the expiry date looming large.

Survival will require a complete rethink of how to generate revenue, leveraging all the assets the business has at its disposal and not just advertising space. Those who embrace this will survive and those who don't will become another statistic of the great levelling force of technology.

ABOUT STYLI CHARALAMBOUS

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