Making a difference in a multi-platform environment: Income and Impact

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It is not perchance that virtually any media conference that one attends now is grappling with the issue of new media and its implications for the management, presentation and impact of news on its audiences. The reality is that new media has radically transformed the way content is manipulated and distributed. By freeing the audience from the necessity of receiving news at specific times, the new forms challenged news managers to rethink the traditional revenue streams and re-evaluate the principles of audience retention through different types of programming.

As there is no compulsion for audiences to cluster around their televisions screens at pre-ordained times to get their news or enjoy their favourite programmes, broadcast media managers must constantly ask themselves who is watching or listening at any given time, how they are listening or watching and then present them with appropriate programmes. A constant factor now is that the programming must be interesting and entertaining. Yes, even news.

In this era of mobile devices, internet connections on both desktops and laptops, IPODs competing with traditional radio and television programming, the challenge we have is how to harness all these options to deliver our content to that consumer who can, with the flick of a switch, shift to a competing station or move on to a completely different medium.

The choices available now and the huge advantage of mobility make the consumer the real king – they can choose what the want to listen to, where and how. The PVR and DVRs have made it possible for the consumer to skip some or all ads appearing around or within programmes; the DVD has made it possible for consumers to skip entire episodes of shows and watch them at their leisure. This comes with the added comfort of not worrying about the advertisements. One can download huge amounts of programming into iPODs and hard drives and enjoy it without paying a cent for it.

Throw in the fact that young audiences seem to be running away from regular televisions in droves and you have the ingredients of what many may consider a nightmare scenario for media content and distribution managers everywhere.

But that is an overly dim view inspired more by an inability to appreciate the inevitability of technological change and the positive and not-so-positive consequences that attend the process of change. This is arguably even truer for Africa that has only mildly felt the shock of new media on the traditional ways of doing business.

In the greater part of the continent, the versatility of PVR and DVRs, or the threat of the DVD on regular programming is not as acute as it is in the more developed media consuming countries of Europe, US and Asia. The penetration and use of these tools in vast areas of the continent is insignificant relative to the numbers of people that consume media, although even these are too few relative to the populations. However, this does not apply equally among the elite, socio-economic classes (ABC1), advertising consuming groups based in urban areas.

The fact that an increasing number of families in these classes can afford these gadgets means that potentially, advertisers are going to recognise their impact and seek to rationalise their spends to take advantage of possibilities the new technology. Unless advertisers are convinced to increase budgets, revenue to traditional media like television and radio will reduce proportionately as those to internet and mobile phone based media grow.

In the short term, internet and mobile phone based content delivery options will provide the greatest opportunity to impact on news delivery and revenue generation.

On Impact

Internet based content delivery options are characterised by brevity, immediacy and visual appeal, especially for on-line bulletins. The fact that broadband capacity now provides the opportunity to stream and even download full television programmes presents a profoundly altered news management scenario. It will be possible for non-TV companies to package news and programmes specifically meant for the internet. These will run in direct competition to the regular programming on TV but will have the distinct advantage that they can be viewed any where, at any time.

Again, traditional selling to advertisers that emphasises specific time slots in between or before and end of programmes must change to sell to consumers that are scattered everywhere at times that challenge the normal segmentation philosophy that currently underpins segmentation. The opportunity here is for start-up or existing media companies linking up with ISPs to set up a fully-fledged internet based news and programming services.

On radio we are already seeing this phenomenon on the sms news briefs and alerts used by media houses to pre-sale content on their main radio and television programming. I see these alerts taking on the character of full news bulletins on their own rights and there are opportunities here for revenue generation in this context. A one-or two minute news update on mobile phone is as good as anything for the harassed, multi-tasked modern-day consumer. This possibility provides a viable business model that links up a mobile phone company and a media company. Successfully executed, it will offer low-priced but high value advertising opportunities.

To paraphrase Rich Ross of Disney Channel Worldwide, the future of broadcast media will be driven by the need to translate and deliver content anytime, and anywhere consumer – and expecially the youth – want it.

For radio in particular, the mobile option could have profound impact among the millions of rural based potential consumers that so far are out of the media loop. There is about 1 phone for every 30 people in Africa 820 million people. A mobile-phone radio service will provide information that will have far-reaching effects on their world-views and perspectives. Entertainment and consumer news will open up new consumer markets and provide fresh opportunities for forward and backward linkages among the various players – manufacturers, media and consumers.

This is critical for Africa where media cannot yet enjoy the luxury of being almost purely entertainment. The challenges of under-development, poverty, illiteracy, poor infrastructure, poor governance, etc impose a heavy burden on media to continue being the source of information and also play the watchdog role over managers of public affairs. Traditional media – newspapers – have become expensive and the potential therefore to reach millions more through the relatively cheaper mobile technology is one that we need to take seriously.

There will be winners and losers in this shift. The main losers will be those media that have been unable to integrate modern technology, and especially the internet, into their operations. Those unable to appreciate the profound changes especially among the younger media consumers are in trouble for they will continue to lose listeners and viewers to those able to provide content that can be easily accessed and digested anywhere there is a computer connected to the internet or where there is a network that allows mobile telecommunications.

The greatest opportunity is for small, technology savvy companies that operate with knowledge that the new media technologies have shifted the paradigm from the old "dozens of markets of millions" to "millions of markets of dozens". The consumer market will be targeted groups of people who share a lot in common, have common aspirations, challenges and opportunities, and in Africa, perhaps even talk the same language.

This is a wonderful opportunity for the younger generation of entrepreneurs springing up across the continent. Of course the inadequate connectivity and poor communication infrastructure are challenges that may hinder the speedy and full exploitation of the opportunities. But that is challenge that affects the internet more than it does mobile phones. We should work with what is available now.

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