

Good Journalism has its price

The Dangers of Media Distribution Without Pay Over the Internet

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1. Introduction

Newspapers go on-line all over the world. Some of them publish their full contents over the net, sometimes even hours before the printed version appears. But whereas nobody would mind to pay for the printed paper, access to the Internet version is always expected to be free of charge. What seems to be a nice opportunity to save on costs for the consumption of newspapers and magazines in the first place might sooner or later turn against independent journalism.

Good journalism has its price. So without any income out of the sale of the on-line papers, publishers have to look for advertisement to make their money. But media which relies fully on the goodwill of advertisers will never be free media. In this paper I will try to prove the damaging effect which the culture of non-payment has on Internet publications. For that purpose I will look at the Internet presentation of South African media. But first I will present a somehow similar experience from Germany.

2. No-pay-media in Germany

In Germany some ten to twenty years ago a new sort of local newspapers started to appear in several cities. Those papers cover mostly local events and sports and are distributed for free to every household. In most places they are weekly, but some of them are published twice a week or even daily. Their circulation is much higher than that of the traditional local papers. In most cases they contain suburb specific supplements with articles and advertisement covering only the part of the city where they are distributed.

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Usually those papers tend to mix ordinary news articles with features, especially written to accompany advertisement. For example they present the ads of local hardware stores and put an article next to them which praises some new do-it-yourself trend and mentions all the necessary hardware equipment. Shop owners love that sort of „journalism“ and are most likely to repeat their advertisement.

Journalists working for those no-pay-papers have to cut on their professional pride. They are expected to write articles that suit the advertisers. And they should avoid everything which might interfere with their interests. The result is a newspaper which loves nice pictures, easy stories, human touch and avoids politics and conflict in society. The whole product tends to be more like a nice corporate presentation than a usual newspaper.

3. So what?

Why shouldn't publishers and staff make their living out of this type of media? This is what most journalists thought of the upcoming papers. They didn't regard them as real competition in their own serious field of reporting. But today we can see how the pure existence of no-pay-media changed the face also of the traditional local papers. And this is mostly for two reasons.

3.1 Advertisers become demanding

Advertisement contributes by 70 to 85 per cent to the revenue of usual newspaper publishers in Germany and also in South Africa. Especially the local advertisers - shops, chainstores, cinemas etc. - had no choice but to put their ads into the local newspaper. No other media could meet such a big portion of their potential market. Since advertisers had no choice, they couldn't put too much pressure onto the publishers. Although local papers depended highly on the income out of advertisement they still remained quite independent from advertisers wishes.

This changed after the establishment of the no-pay-papers. Suddenly advertisers had an option to reach even more local households. And the journalistic work in the no-pay-papers was very friendly towards advertisement. There the essential division between the people in the newsroom and in the marketing department did not exist

any more. Once they smelled their opportunities, advertisers started to demand the same sort of nice presentation of their ads from the traditional papers. And under the pressure of the new competitors these had little choice but to respond. This was the time when most local papers invented so-called „advertising features“, articles which look like usual journalistic work but actually are nothing else but eye-catchers for ads.

3.2 Devaluation of journalistic culture

To write those articles was not without effect on the journalists. They had to learn to once in a while put their journalistic pride aside, close their eyes and write what the marketing department had asked for. Sometimes this helped to introduce consumer-friendly reporting into local newspapers. But at the same time it devalued the journalistic culture of reporting independently and only looking after the interests of the readers. Sooner or later the changed attitude of journalists spread over all parts of their paper. Investigative journalism sometimes comes to an end when it starts to interfere with advertisers interests. And the easy story which can compete with the big letter eye-catcher of the no-pay-paper is nowadays more likely to make it to the front page even of the traditional local newspaper.

3.3 The coexistence of pay and no-pay-media

Although the invention of no-pay-media has changed the landscape of local journalism in Germany there is no doubt that the traditional local newspaper will survive. Many of the big local publishers have successfully incorporated the new no-pay-media into their business strategy. Today they produce pay and non-pay media at the same time. Sometimes they even use their journalists parallel for both sorts of media. This does even more damage to their journalistic ethos.

Moreover you find another very strong reason for the survival of pay-media. There is hardly any control over the use of a product which is distributed free of charge to everybody. Otherwise someone who gives his money for a newspaper is a lot more likely to really read it. And only whilst reading he will have a closer look at the ads. Advertisers know that and keep on putting their advertisement into traditional local newspapers - even if the price per circulated issue is higher.

4. South African media on the Internet

Today you find about a dozen South African newspapers on the Internet. To say that they are free in the sense of the German no-pay-papers is somehow misleading. Because accessing them costs quite a lot for the reader, and it will always do. Your internet provider wants a monthly fee, Telkom charges for your telephone line, you have to buy a computer and you need a printer, paper and ink if you want to read an article on the loo. Taking this into consideration even years ahead it will be more expensive to read a publication on-line than it is to get the hardcopy from the newsstand. However not one cent of all those on-line-costs ends up with the publisher. But he is the one who has to pay the journalists. So his only choice is to follow the same way the German no-pay-media took: He will squeeze as much advertisement as possible on the website. And he will keep his costs to a minimum. A strategy which is not conducive to good journalism as you find out when looking at South African media on the Internet.

4.1 Cheap is not beautiful

Obviously the small screen is not good for big advertisement. Space is scarce, on-line ads are small, and limited is therefore the revenue they provide for the publisher. Under those circumstances on-line publication has to be very cheap in order to be economically viable. And the cheapest way to get a newspaper on the Internet is to just automatically convert part of the printed text into html-code and present it, crude as it is, over the net. Actually most of the South African on-line papers are made just like that.

Such an on-line paper offers a lot less than the printed version. Photographs are missing or of bad quality, to get an overview of themes is difficult, loading times get onto your nerves. The only user of such an on-line paper will be the one outside the physical area of distribution of the printed version, for example the homesick East Londoner, who lives in Australia and wants to have a look at his old Daily Dispatch once in a while. For everybody else there is no attraction at all in these on-line publications. And don't be cheated when the publishers tell you how many million

page-views they attract to their boring sites. This is no serious data at all. On the Internet it is technically impossible to count readers and very easy to manipulate the number of hits on your site.

4.2 The happy user is a professional

All South African newspapers on the Internet boast a searchable archive. This is of great use for professionals, especially journalists. In South Africa we are even more lucky, because we have *Gogga*, the work of Rhodes University's New Media Lab which makes it extremely comfortable to search most on-line newspapers of this country in one single action. Freelance journalists and newsrooms can now save a lot of space and sweat by dropping their archive system and making easy use of the ever growing collection of newspaper articles on the Internet.

As nice as this opportunity is for professionals it does not suit the needs of usual newspaper readers. They don't want to do the journalists job. What they expect from their paper is a ready made comprehensible and entertaining presentation of the news, of their facets and backgrounds.

4.3 Missed opportunities

And on-line newspapers could offer exactly that. However not as a cheap copy or as substitute of the printed paper but only as its supplement. A weekly paper could present daily or even hourly updated news over the Internet. Additional photographs, video and audio clips could accompany every article. The on-line version of an already printed text could offer links to other related articles in archives or other relevant background information on the Internet. Not the sort of rubbish you get when you just put a few keywords into one of the search engines and receive thousands of hits, but proved information, carefully selected by qualified journalists. Articles which had to be shortened in order to fit into the limited space of the printed paper could be presented in its full length over the net where space is no problem. On-line publishers could offer a personalised newspaper where a reader chooses the sort of information he would like to receive on his computer every hour, every day, every week. All this would make real use of the

advantages of electronic publishing. But today you find almost nothing of that sort on the Internet sites of South African media.*

5. So what?

But is this really a matter of concern? If publishers want their Internet presentation cheap and useless, why shouldn't they? Because over the time it will spoil journalistic culture just as the invention of no-pay-papers spoiled the culture of local journalism in Germany.

Journalists who are forced to write and work in a way that does not look after the needs of readers will lose their professional pride. To keep it alive they need to fight for the right to make real use of all the opportunities the Internet could offer to serious journalism. But this will never be without cost. So journalists - as well as readers and even publishers - should look ahead and demand the introduction of mini-payments on the Internet. Only then will it be possible to find a realistic economic base for quality reporting over the Internet. And in the end even advertisers will like it. Because on-line readers who paid some cents to access a web site will look at it a lot more intensively. Good journalism has its price. And there will always be readers who are willing to pay it, if they receive quality information in return.

* The only exception to this general observation is the electronic Mail & Guardian. At least it offers a number of useful links for every article and it is updated a lot more often than the printed version.