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The Face of Print in the 21st Century
Cyril D Pereira, Asia Magazine

The proliferation of digitised communication channels in Cyberspace is exciting. We are now able to access news, entertainment and education through TV screens and the PC at home. This ease of knowledge distribution at the touch of a few buttons, is the very reason the masters of the print medium will become even more powerful than they are now.

It is fashionable now to talk of print as one of many “distribution channels”. It is much more than a distribution channel, it is the storehouse of the world’s collective knowledge and history.

The owners of new digitised “distribution channels” are quickly discovering that without content creation infrastructure and the skills of intelligent editing, they are sitting on empty pipelines and bandwidths. Computer manufacturers, Telecommunications companies and Internet Service Providers, have all discovered the worthlessness of their assets without content partners.

Who owns content, rules

The two key resources of strong print media organisations are:

(i) information-gathering infrastructure and ownership of vast content that can be accessed and shaped to different needs, and

(ii) knowledge-based editors and well-honed editing methodology, serving readers with value-added comment and analysis.

These two factors, not the mere physical multiplication of their work through printing presses, are the core strength of the major print companies. They have accumulated that experience over 500-years since Gutenberg invented movable type. That revolution was inspired and lead by Church and Court as learning came down the socio-economic pyramid.

Today’s new technology revolution, is led by nerds and electronic monkeys. They make distribution of content faster, easier and free from physical boundaries. They do not make content.
What lessons have been learnt about today’s print consumers?

Newspapers are rated the most credible medium by upscale consumers

Studies in different countries have consistently confirmed the credibility factor of the quality national press against TV. Quality national press, from an advertising media choice, seems to be a subset of the rich elite, against the poorer mass audiences for TV.

Internet news and feature choices offered by the internationally acclaimed newspaper mastheads, enjoy the same credibility factor. Strong mastheads can now project their brands internationally through the Internet.

The daily newspaper is an addictive ritual

Like morning coffee, life begins with the morning read. It is addictive. There is no more intimate media relationship than the home-subscribed morning newspaper. This media power is unmatched by any other form of communication.

Too many editors and publishers forget to recognise the moral obligations and responsibilities that imposes on them. Someday, like the cigarette companies being sued by consumers for ruining their physical health, consumers might sue newspapers that have abused their trust.

Making sense of a confusing world: Analyse and show the way

Value-added editing and analysis is the unique contribution that consumers want from their national newspaper.

The confusion of national and international impressions and imagery that assaults the average consumer, drives him to rely upon the “editing for meaning” that his daily newspaper provides. Newspapers increasingly have to add-value and meaning to news and features, not just confirm an event.
Therefore, far from new technologies being a threat to print organisations, my perspective is that the content-rich newspapers, magazines and educational publishers, can exploit new technology to enlarge their franchises and target audiences, through a variety of multi-media distribution choices. New technologies should be intelligently exploited to make content fulfil and serve mass, niche and one-on-one communication.

Print media has supremacy of content. Leadership is needed to multi-skill the organisation.

By re-defining the core business competence as information-gathering and editing, print organisations can re-invent themselves beyond ink-on-paper merchanting.

It means bringing new-media expertise in-house, converting content from one medium into several versions for multi-channel distribution to different classes of media consumers, local and international. It means creative thinking in revenue-generating services, advertisement sales and sponsorship packages for CD-Roms, WWW sites, Fax Bulletins, Interactive Classifieds, Voice mail etc. The newspaper library, re-indexed for electronic browsing, can be searched by and sold to, anyone, anywhere on the globe.

The newspaper medium supports broad-based brand value development and mass awareness-building. Magazines niche readerships into common interest groups. The Internet enables interactive one-on-one commercial transactions and chat-rooms without borders.

How much more comprehensive and powerful can content-owners get?

Too many print-based companies are wasting time and squandering opportunities, by pointless worry about how young readers prefer PC-screens to daily newspapers.

Go boldly where the new readers are, in forms that appeal to them! Fixation to ink-on-paper delivery, is irrelevant to the core resource of the media business. Information & knowledge in all its forms, is the business.
The newspaper has to provide fast summaries, graphic displays

The competition for the consumer's discretionary time, forces newspapers to adopt concise reporting, clear analysis and effective graphic communication. It is a much more "visually-oriented" readership demand. They will not plough through grey text.

Newspapers have to remain time-efficient and useful within increasingly compressed consumer time-allocations for the daily newspaper.

Consumers become their own editors

Newspapers have to cater to a wide diversity of interests. Sectionalising of the product and changing feature focus throughout the week, are techniques adopted successfully to serve the range of consumer needs.

The availability of Internet versions of the newspaper resource, allows consumers to become their own editors. The more media-interactive consumer of tomorrow will be forced, by time-efficiency needs, to decide his own media consumption patterns.

CONCLUSION

+ Content creation & ownership is the goldmine of print media organisations, not the physical form of delivery to consumers.

+ Strong and credible mastheads have a brand loyalty factor that is powerful and can be extended to all forms of content delivery, new and old.

+ Building on their content supremacy, print media organisations have to incorporate new delivery technologies as legitimate vehicles, not fear them as competition.

+ New technologies allow the print strength to shift from one-way to two-way interactivity. This is at its most interesting in Internet polling on current issues, where the newspaper introduces the debate and invites its readers to respond via its Web site.
Strong newspapers, employing new technologies intelligently, allow their loyal readers, young and old, to decide their own media consumption patterns.

ENDS