

Taking over the news: digital future doesn't mean death of paper

 By [Toby Shapshak](#)

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The old and the new sat side by side last week and probably didn't even know it. In one wing of the Cape Town International Convention Centre was AfricaCom, the big cellphone-industry conference, and in another was the [MPASA Media Summit](#), looking at the future of magazines, organised by the Magazine Publishers Association of South Africa.

"In a quiet revolution"

"The first step of any revolution is to take over the communications infrastructure. We are in a revolution, a quiet revolution," says James Gaines, the former managing editor of *People*, *Time* and *Life* magazines.



Gaines, who founded a new-media company called FLYP [*now defunct - managing ed*], is talking about social media (mostly Facebook and Twitter, with the former providing more links to website stories than Google news, the last great threat to the newspaper publishing industry, says Mail & Guardian Online editor Chris Roper).

"The people formerly known as the audience have taken over the communication facilities, [even if] there's all this junk on the internet," Gaines says, using an oft-quoted phrase.

For many magazine people in that room last Thursday, 11 November 2010, there was a shocking demonstration of this new form of interactivity: Twitter feeds projected onto a big screen. But this is standard practise at technology conferences and events. It's become a new form of interaction, even for people not attending. Magazine attendees were amazed that industry heavyweights [Gisele Wertheim Aymes](#) and [Louise Marsland](#) both tweeted while, respectively, chairing and talking on panels. At tech conferences, you'd be considered a slacker if you didn't.

"Lean back" experience

Although the Internet has been an increasing first choice for news and information, it's the arrival of Apple's iPad which is being seen as a major disruptor to the magazine industry. Instead of using a laptop (which is often described as a "lean forward" way of interacting with technology), now you can use a lighter tablet and have the same "lean back" experience as watching TV or reading a book or magazine. It's a way to taking your laptop to the couch, as it were, without scorching your lap.

"That's not to say magazines are dead. I don't believe that. The South African magazine industry is wonderful evidence of that - it's just different," says Gaines.

I think magazines have a more vibrant future (and not just because I'm a magazine editor) than other media forms, including newspapers, which are at the nexus of the collision of old and new media.

Newspapers give you yesterday's news. They are put together and produced late into the night, then printed overnight and delivered to your doorstep the next morning. Internet news websites report today's news. They have taken over, in many ways, from other electronic media such as television and radio, for breaking news - something Twitter is particularly good at. Newspapers such as *The Times* offer readers a bouquet of services: online stories and multimedia, Twitter updates and a print edition. This kind of multiple channel, or platform, approach is what is emerging internationally.

Magazines remain relevant for weeks

Magazines take longer to put together, go to the printers weeks before they appear on shelf, and their stories remain relevant for weeks, sometimes two months, before the next issue appears.

They have a longevity that is rare and they live on in usefulness. In a country like ours, where a third of our population is unemployed and PC penetration is so low, a magazine has a long life cycle. It may not be a book, but it is readable and people learn from them.

"Most South Africans don't have access to the internet. Print is still important to them," says Virginia Hollis, joint MD at The MediaShop, which plans and buys ad placement.

Magazine content is evolving as the delivery mechanism changes. Once books were the medium then, as printing evolved, magazines emerged. The first magazine was *The Gentleman's Magazine*, launched in 1731.

The iPad is being widely hailed as the new delivery mechanism, and some international magazines such as *Wired*, *Time*, *Men's Health* and *Stuff* have impressive iPad editions [*disclaimer: Toby Shapshak is editor of the South African edition of Stuff magazine - managing ed*]. In South Africa, there are very few such tablet devices, which are still too expensive for mass uptake.

"Gutenberg moment?"

"I'm not sure if it's a Gutenberg moment," says Gaines. "We are the beginning, in the midst of a communication revolution that will have profound change on society."

We haven't mentioned quality, which is not always guaranteed with Internet publications. As always, it's a matter of the strength of the brand - for print and online, and on new devices.

But, says Chris Llewelyn from FIPP, the global industry body: "In the past competition for magazines came from other magazines, but the lines are blurring. It's like watching tyrannosaurus rex feeling good for beating up a brontosaurus. They are both going to die - as Darwin taught us, you adapt or die."

The infusion of broadband in South Africa, which has catapulted change in the developed world and been the major disruptor to the newspaper industry, is seen as a threat. "Broadband is manifest destiny. The potential of broadband is still over the horizon," says Gaines.

Stolen so much ad revenue

It was the arrival of always-on, superfast Internet access by way of broadband that so significantly affected the internet industry in the US, as well as that little search engine called Google, which has stolen so much advertising revenue from older, traditional media. (The elephant in the room, of course, is mobile, but that's an entirely different conversation altogether.)

Google's ad revenue has grown from US\$67 million in 2001 to US\$2 billion, that "comes from traditional advertising," says Llewelyn. To reach young men in the US, it costs US\$45 per thousand by magazine, but on the Internet it's just US\$2 per thousand, he adds.

"Everyone thinks the future is a digital future," says Llewelyn, but "launching magazines is still the lifeblood of our industry and where brand engagement begins."

Reinventing the industry catch phrase that "content is king," Sam Wilson, editor-in-chief of online portals Women24, Parent24 and Food24, says: "Content is not king; communities are kings". The media readers are consuming it, though it might be less important than the engagement they exhibit. You just see it immediately with website comments or retweets or Facebook "likes".

Take the impetus

Old media can take the impetus from new media to get better, much as the cinema upped its game when television debuted in the US in the '60s, and again with a new wave of 3D technology in the past two years in response to bigger television screens, home entertainment centres, and high-definition TV and Blu-ray players.

The future of media is clearly digital, but more likely a combination of print, online, mobile and social media. That doesn't mean the death of paper, mind. As Sappi's Graeme Futter succinctly put it: "We're going to have a paperless toilet before we have a paperless office."

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