



BURNING ISSUE

Storytelling a challenge for news providers these days

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Most of us in the news industry know that not only is readership in print media declining, but the Net is also in a crisis as people nowadays, especially the young generation, rely on smartphones or the so-called second screen for updates.

These mobile-centric consumers of news were the highlight in a News Lab Summit held by Google in Tokyo late last month.

In light of these trends and seeing how news is being consumed nowadays, Jayant Bhargava, a Dubai-based partner at PwC's Strategy&, concluded in his presentation that "Mobile First" was essential for all news providers.

Richard Gingras, chief of Google News who has long experience in digital business, said there will be more than 2.5 million smartphones in use by the end of this year. Also, he pointed out, there are far more ads on mobiles and more content is being created than ever before.

Held for a second time, this summit brought together senior editors from newsrooms across Asia-Pacific along with C-level executives and innovators from the region's news industry to discuss global innovations and explore opportunities and challenges presented by the smartphone.

Attending the all-day discussion on the subject, I realised that media providers across the world were struggling with the same problem and everybody is looking for the best solution.

Many editors explained they had adopted a new form of storytelling, opting for platforms such as Progressive Web Applications (PWA), which uses modern Internet abilities to deliver an app-like experience to users. It evolves from pages in browser tabs to immersive, top-level apps maintaining low friction on the Web at all moments.

Faizan Siddiqi, managing director of Pakistan's Jang Group of Newspapers, which has adopted the PWA, declared that this platform was the future. The Washington Post has also recently introduced the PWA to its audiences.

Another most-talked about platform for storytelling was video, with many participants agreeing that video was an important online tool to attract readers.

Like Bhargava pointed out, there are three ingredients that are essential in the mobile journey: large fonts, a more social and connected environment and a high focus on videos.

Daisuke Furuta from BuzzFeed Japan, which focuses on digital media and digital technology so it can provide "the most shareable breaking news, original reporting, entertainment, and video" agreed that video was important, though he believes some news is better conveyed in text and that the written word was not dead.

However, the Times of India had a different view. Gulshan Verma, chief revenue officer at Times Internet, which is part of the Times of India Group, said he disliked the idea of making someone watch a 30-second pre-roll ad before watching 40 seconds of news. Besides, he pointed out, the bandwidth in India was still low.

Verma admitted that he could double the revenue by adding a pre-roll to breaking news, but said he preferred not to.

Another platform that wowed the audiences at the event was Google VR or 360-degree video. However, some editors I spoke to later said they were daunted by the cost of production, and also audiences would have to buy the Google Cardboard for the best immersive experience, though it could still be watched on a smartphone.

VR view allows you to embed 360-degree virtual reality media into websites on the desktop and mobiles, as well as via native apps on Android and iOS. This technology allows app developers to enhance their creations with immersive content.

Late last year, the New York Times and Google launched a massive "cardboard" giveaway campaign, shipping a million disposable virtual reality headsets along with a new "NYT VR" app.

Despite this being a great platform, I still believe content is far more important and Berliner Morgenpost, a Berlin-based newspaper, is a great example. This year they decided to look for a new form of storytelling and eventually settled on the 360-degree video using Google VR to offer viewers a closer look at searing reality.

Max Boenke, a video editor at Morgenpost, explained that his paper used this technology to give people a closer look at the suffering of refugees seeking shelter in Berlin.

On the positive side, it was clear at the summit that media people still have high hopes and are ready to make adjustments to cope with new challenges. But finding a way to monetise these new forms of storytelling is still the greatest challenge.