

The Integrated Newsroom
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Good afternoon. Today, I'll briefly share with you my findings on The Integrated Newsroom. Earlier this year, I spent some time with The Straits Times Interactive and The Age Online. Both are pioneer online newspapers who have been around since 1995.

Scope of Presentation

- General overview of Singapore & Australia IT Climate
- The Straits Times Interactive
- The Age Online
- General newsroom trends
- Future

First lets look at some figures:

How long did it take to hit an audience of 50 million?

- It took Radio 38 years
- Television took 13 years to hit an audience of 50 million.
- The WWW surpassed this in just 4 years.

Today, there about 4,000 newspapers online.

There are about 80 million Internet users worldwide and this number is expected to keep increasing.

Now, let's look at the Singapore Information Technology Climate.

The Singapore One Network

S-One is basically a government driven project to wire every home, school and office with a high-speed, high capacity broadband network. It is capable of transmitting 622 megabits per second. Singapore has already laid the necessary fibre-optic cables. This infrastructure will allow a greater level of interactive, multimedia applications and services.

Working towards a knowledge-based economy & a wired society.

Singapore is moving towards becoming a knowledge-based society. The plan is to become a leader in research and development and to develop state of the art technologies. Tax deductions and incentive schemes have been set in place to attract top international companies to conduct R&D in Singapore.

Push for 'techno-preneurship'

The idea here is to cultivate and encourage young start-up companies to develop new products. Over the last year, the government has made it easier to register a company in Singapore and provides grants, incentive schemes and business advice to innovative companies with potential to make it big.

Kent Ridge Digital Labs

The Kent Ridge Digital Labs is a breeding ground of innovation. Based in the National University of Singapore, KRDL is a research lab that develops new products and is entirely market driven. Even before a product is developed, it has to have

commercial viability. A recent success story is BuzzCity - An Internet postman which alerts users when a website they specify is updated. It can be as specific as informing the user when perhaps there are new IT jobs at let's say, mycareer.com.au or specific news about Afghanistan on The Straits Times Interactive.

Private sector and government ties

There is a close alliance between the government and private industry. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology leads the direction. The Singapore One network has the support of large corporations like Creative Technology and other big guns.

Australia IT Climate

Because Australia is so huge, I will look specifically at Melbourne, home of The Age Online. A plan called 'A Strategic Framework for the Information Economy' has been set in place. The vision is to develop Australia as an information economy. The idea is to generate opportunities across all sectors. This is how Richard Alston sums it up:

"We are dealing with many issues, technologies, opportunities and challenges that simply didn't exist 10 or even five years ago. Information Technology is now one of the most crucial tools in building a robust economic and social national network. It is the DNA of Australia's future."

Multimedia Victoria

Multimedia Victoria is part of the Victorian government's IT and multimedia policy called Global Victoria. The aim is to set up Melbourne as a global centre of IT and communications excellence.

Melbourne IT

Melbourne IT is an incubator for young start-up companies. It provides advanced computing facilities and access to multimedia R&D expertise. So far they have taken in about 50 start-up companies who have developed innovative business solutions.

EMERGE Cooperative Multimedia Centre

There are 6 Cooperative Multimedia Centres in Australia. EMERGE is based in Melbourne and funded by the Federal government. CMCs are aimed at contributing to developing Australia's Internet and multimedia industry. Emerge has developed min. It stands for the multimedia industry network. Internet professionals exchange advice, circulate information and pick up Internet trends here.

Greenhill Enterprise Centre

The Greenhill Enterprise Centre is part of the University of Ballarat Technology Park. It is another incubator and the Telematic Starter Kit was developed there. For example if all Volvos are fitted with this device, through the Global Positioning system, Volvo can despatch assistance to the exact location of a breakdown or accident of any Volvo. This is an exciting value-added service that a car manufacturer can provide to its customers.

In this next section, I will highlight some general newsroom trends that I have picked up at The Straits Times Interactive and The Age Online.

Younger journalists

There are a significant number of younger journalists who have jobs because they have the relevant IT skills. They do not always have journalism skills but are given

training. I think this might be a temporary trend, in about 2 - 3 years, these journalists will move up to management level perhaps. And the new batch of younger journalists should have some basic Internet skills picked up from University. And older journalists will probably be re trained by the publisher.

Web Portals/Gateway of Information - Content is Key

News alone will not be sufficient to attract readers. Straits Times has AsiaOne and The Age has sports.com, It.com, mycareer.com. Because there is an abundance of information on the Net, these sites need to be a one-stop shop of information that interest readers. Sites need to have very good content in an organised fashion. The basics will no longer be enough. Surfing a website needs to be an enriching experience.

Production Automation

At the moment newsrooms are trying to automate the web publishing process. Desk top publishing for the print edition is different from the web system for the Internet. Once the two systems become transparent, it will free resources to focus on developing good original content. Right now, there is a separate Internet newsroom or department but once this technical process is solved. That's when we will have an integrated newsroom.

Branding/Credibility become important issues

Online newspapers need to quickly develop an accurate profile of their users and capture a loyal readership. Today it is very simple to publish on the Internet, so online papers need to develop a unique brand for themselves and convince readers that their information is credible.

Convergence

Convergence is the buzzword these days. As audiences get sophisticated and have access to high end technology. It will be standard for websites to have audio, video and interactive multimedia features.

Future Here are some possibilities in the near future:

Technological barriers need to be overcome

Once the current technological barriers are overcome for eg cable and fibre optics need to be accessible to everyone. Once the pipelines are broadened. Better quality images, audio and video can be pumped through.

Journalists will need to be multi-skilled

Journalists will most likely need to be able to write for print, radio and tv, and the current distinctions might diminish. They should be able to utilise the Internet and have the basic HTML and multimedia skills.

Linear Storytelling

When covering a story, the journo can no longer just go out, do an interview and come back with a story. He has to think of things like - what additional or background information do I need to provide? What sort of audio or video clips will be interesting? What's the story behind THIS story?

Public Journalism on the Net perhaps?

The Internet could be a useful tool to develop Public or civic journalism. It is an efficient medium of communication. Virtual communities will become very common.

Publishers need to have a stake in technology

Because infrastructure is so costly. It will probably be more economical for publishers to invest in this technology. What is currently happening is for eg The Singapore Press Holdings has a stake in the telecommunications scene, owns an ISP and a huge Internet venture. Fairfax as well has invested heavily in Internet ventures.

Internet will become a 4th medium

I don't think the Internet will replace print. The Net will become a fourth medium and the shape of the others simply change.

My last point, is this. On the Internet every news provider is on a level playing field. If you look at ABC Online, they have maximised the potential of the web with audio, video, transcripts.... It is easier I think for TV or radio broadcasters to transfer their information on the web... as its suited to the medium.

For more information, comments or questions, email author : nisar@keshvani.com

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