

Smart phones + social networks = social phones + smart networks?

 By Leigh Andrews

15 Nov 2016

Winning digital strategies for news publishers in the age of platforms were a hot topic at the first day of the INMA Media Summit Africa 2016. Here's what you need to keep in mind about the power of social platforms and mobile devices' effect on your publishing strategy.

Grzegorz 'Greg' Piechota, a Nieman fellow at Harvard University and director of Agora, Poland, has actually studied digital disruption, so was just the right digital mind to provide the rest of us with a good starting point, stating it is about how mobile and social work together. Mobile was here first and wasn't taking off that fast. It's the combination of smart phones and social networks that changed the way we view news.



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For publishers, social media can become a major discovery platform as well as a way to break news. But we need to be cautious as anyone can publish 'truth' due to the ubiquity of social media, but most users of social networks are not concerned about news sources, which brings in the question of veracity and reliability. This was made all the more pertinent when moderator Peter Ngoro pointed out that #INMAAfrica attendees' tweets trending on Twitter, and enterprising tweeters from elsewhere were latching onto the hashtag – even though the news they were tweeting had nothing to do with the summit.

Living through our mobiles

It's a generational shift, said Piechota, stating that everyone under the age of 45 online is there to learn news, while for the youngest set it is for social media. People use different media platforms for many things, but the fact that Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp are the top three platforms for news discovery means social media is replacing the traditional roles of legacy media. Think about it. We increasingly learn breaking news through social media as it is where we spend the bulk of our screen-distracted days. From the moment our mobile phones' alarms ring to when we blearily log into the internet to check news while still in bed, we're on our phones for the bulk of the day. Half of that mobile time is spent on social networks.

Piechota said what these platforms really do is organise the market. Its value grows with each new user due to 'network effects', as everyone on social media serves as both a creator and reader, amplifying overall engagement.

But just because you post something to your brand's social media account doesn't mean everyone in your intended audience will see it. Take Facebook for example. The information shared in the below video from six months ago is potentially already outdated.

That's because the platform is quite literally flooded with content, at any given time there are over 2,000 stories waiting for your attention, but you won't necessarily even see them as they use filtering algorithms to dwindle the pool down to about 100 stories and don't show one you've already seen. That's because research shows most clicks go to the first 10 stories shown, and very few scrolling down further than that in a single session. Piechota added that there's no universal ranking of stories either, but rather a score based on individual users' interests and demographics. This means the content you see isn't necessarily all your friends' latest updates but rather content that's engaging and doesn't send you out of Facebook to another site. The longer you stay on the platform, the longer you have to engage with ads, with the algorithm constantly updated.

Taking this insight back in history to what disrupted the newspaper business, Piechota said it was mainly classified ads. The difference is that the likes of Craigslist and Google were coming in to take that newspaper advertising money in the first wave of disruption that's still progressing. Now, social media is coming to take print media's audience.

We need to ask whether we're just creating content for other platforms...

Lots to think about there and a word of caution against simply 'digitising' what works for your legacy media to share online. All the presentations will be available from 2pm on 15 November on [INMA's website](#), and be sure to follow the [#INMAAfrica hashtag](#) for the latest updates.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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