

Primedia Online, Maroela forging into changing media landscape



By Gill Moodie: [@grubstreetSA](#)

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In the great democratisation of news, who will win and who will lose? It's so hard to predict what will happen as the big traditional-media houses vie for audience with small online-only outfits that are unhampered by traditional cost structures.

Certainly, many a media luvvie shuddered last week - including myself - at the [brutal news](#) from the Australian Fairfax group (owners of *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*) that it was cutting 1900 jobs as part of a wider move into the digital age. Rupert Murdoch's News Ltd, owners of *The Australian*, followed this by saying it would also be cutting jobs but didn't specify the number.

It is clear that traditional media houses no longer own the production of news content because there are all sorts of smaller players who can do news faster and cheaper. In South Africa we have the Daily Maverick, Moneyweb, Techcentral and Bizcommunity to name a few and, recently, I came across two new operations that really got me thinking about this content mash-up, how we produce it and how we consume it.

New busy ou on the block

First up, is the Centurion-based [Maroela Media](#) started by [Solidarity](#), the Afrikaans trade union, in July last year with the aim of creating an internet community for Afrikaans-speaking people.

This is no dull trade-union mouthpiece but a busy little site with a funky design - more like a magazine in feel, with lifestyle-orientated sections such as music, books and food.

It was never intended as a news site, says Maroela's manager, Susan Lombaard, but producing news for the site has grown because of demand from the audience. At the moment, the news pages get the most traffic and in less than a year, Maroela has grown to 32 000 unique visitors and 103 000 page impressions per month. About 10% of visitors are from overseas and the site even gets some English-language readers, who come back frequently.

Maroela has about six full-time people - one full-time journalist and three others who do news among their other work.

People are liking 'the alternative'

"The feedback we're getting at the moment is that people are enjoying getting alternative news to the traditional media houses," says Lombaard, a journalist herself. "I think that the other thing that is working for Maroela is that we offer quite a

wide variety of information, not only news. There is news AND literature AND health AND a lot of other stuff. We're starting a finance and business section one of these days and we're working on a technology section.

"People like the alternative look. It is something different and that's why they come back. We can get away with it (the fun design) because we're not a traditional media house. We're a place where people should feel at home and spend a lot of time."

The challenge for online-only operations, says Lombaard, is generating income - and to this end Maroela is working on a radio-production house to generate news for community stations and sell advertising space for the news programmes.

Funded by Solidarity, Maroela does seek out advertising and sponsorships as the trade union would like it to become self-funding as soon as possible, she says.

If an Afrikaans trade union seems an unlikely player in the news space, their growth in the monied Afrikaans niche will not have gone unnoticed by Media24, the publishers of SA's Afrikaans newspapers such as *Rapport*, *Beeld* and *Die Burger*.

New source for digital content

On the other hand, I noticed with great interest that [Primedia Online](#) - which is part of [Primedia](#), the owner of radio stations such as Highveld and 702 as well as Ster-Kinekor and outdoor advertising units - is starting an innovative new business unit that will produce bespoke digital content for brands and publishers.

Owners of the [iafrica.com](#) web portal, Primedia Online has done syndicated content in the past but on an ad-hoc basis, says Primedia Online CEO Tanja Lategan. For example, for advertising clients such as Vodacom's Super15 website. (Primedia Online also has [365 Digital](#), an online agency and advertiser, plus [Dash of Lime](#), an online sales house.)

Primedia Online already has journalists on board in the iafrica.com newsroom but staff will be hired to do the bespoke content. Lategan says she will be offering some innovative payment schemes for freelancers such as the pay-per-read model and there are also plans to source content from other parts of Primedia's business and partners abroad and sell it on.

'There's a need for content out there'

"Basically, when a client comes to us - and it could be anybody: from the advertisers we're used to working with or publishers setting up additional sites or projects - then we will come up with a content strategy using the various sources.

"It's a natural development for us because of the clients and advertisers we have access to on the one side and the journalists and expertise we have on the other side... This content division is basically sitting right in the middle and crossing over to both sides of the business... There is a gap. There is a need for content out there."

Probably not the kind of stuff that's going to do away with news agencies such as [Sapa](#) but it's a savvy move that turns a couple of traditional models on its head. Most traditional media houses would sooner die than syndicate their own content in their own markets. Unique content is their greatest USP so they hold it dear and some - such as the *Sunday Times* - have gone the paywall route on their websites, with *Business Day* to follow next month. (Maybe, with their content protected behind paywalls, they will syndicate?)

Lategan says a challenge for the new business unit will be to make sure that the syndicated content isn't spread too widely and thinly so that its value is diminished.

Nevertheless, she says: "You have to stay on top of how the landscape is changing. If you just apply the traditional model, you will be left behind because it doesn't apply anymore in the digital space."

And that's true for the big guys and the small!

For more:

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- *The Atlantic*: [Learning to Love the \(Shallow, Divisive, Unreliable\) New Media](#), April 2011
- *Bizcommunity*: [More sense than rands: SA online journ comes into own](#), July 2010

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