

Innovation, embracing change key to surviving digital age

Innovation and embracing change were two keys to survival in the digital age, newspaper editors from around the world were told this week. Gathering on the last day of the 60th World Newspaper Congress in Cape Town, 1600 editors, managers and publishers from more than 100 countries pondered successful strategies for coping in the era of multimedia, digitisation and convergence.

GMG Regional Media CEO Mark Dodson told the fourth business session of the conference on 'Transformation for the future', that the innovative introduction of a part-free, part-paid model had catapulted the *Manchester Evening News* from a dying paper into the UK's largest regional title today.

The transformation had been necessitated by dwindling circulation figures and advertising revenue and the growing challenge from other media. Around the time the central business district of Manchester was destroyed by an Irish Republican Army bomb in 1996, Dodson said his company decided to take a bold leap into the new digital era.

Acted as catalyst

"The renaissance of Manchester acted as a catalyst for the wholesale diversification in the way we deliver products to Manchester," Dodson said.

Part of this was handing out free copies of the flagship *Manchester Evening News* in the city centre, while retaining paid-for subscriptions. The daring model proved hugely successful. Other strategies included "systematic diversification" such as the acquisition of a local TV licence and the growth of the resulting station, channel m, into one of the most successful in the UK, and heightened communication with stakeholders.

Ed Greenspon, editor-in-chief of Canada's *Globe and Mail*, spoke about how changing the culture of his organisation had been critical to its success in the new digital era.

"You've got to be willing to experiment: that's a culture you've got to create. You must be confident to take risks."

Examples of experimentation

Examples of this experimentation were bold and surprising front pages and a focus on "the whole reader", including their roles as individuals and family members, Greenspon told delegates. While the coverage of news events remained a vital function of newspapers, he added, there needed to be more emphasis on the question: 'What does it mean?'

This question represented the competitive advantage that newspapers had over other platforms.

Session chair Trevor Ncube, the chief executive of M&G and president of the Newspaper Association of South Africa told delegates: "One of the great things about this conference is hearing about things that work and that don't work."

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