

Local media can do more for society

 By [Victor Mberiane](#)

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The recent emergence of a new talk radio station in Gauteng, Power FM, triggered a mix bag of sobering and thought-provoking comments from all quarters. What this development exposes is the fact that radio is still a major influencer in society.

Another insight is that radio audiences are continually evolving, fragmenting with complex demands. They are also not easily pleased.

Disillusionment about the status quo is apparent as some audiences are desperately in search of an alternative. Will one radio station be able to rescue these openly frustrated souls?

Traditional media under pressure

It is not only radio under pressure but all traditional media including newspapers and television. The solution will therefore not be a one-size fits all. It will consist of a myriad of interventions informed by consumers. This is the era of the consumer and the industry needs to self correct.

It is not a secret that the traditional media companies are slow to innovate and laggards at adopting new technologies. It took several years for most newspapers to finally admit that readers were migrating online and being followed by advertising.

Instead of innovating immediately, most media executives defended their turfs. The results were catastrophic. Many titles went out of circulation while others downgraded and retrenched journalists. This is both a local and global problem. The radio and television industries are also facing a similar threat due to the emergence of online streaming, internet and mobile technologies. The reality is that content is in abundance, it is free and consumers are spoilt for choice.

Audiences and readers generally aspire for the media with a character that is able to mirror society and champion their interests. They also want more ownership. According to US studies people are searching for "more utility from the media".

Captivating content

The implications are that survival across the ecosystem will be dependant on capabilities able to advance consumer expectations. The competitive advantage in the media industry has for many years centred around dimensions focusing on getting "society to talk to itself" by packaging of quality content to inform, educate and entertain as well as championing the

truth.

As consumer consumption habits evolve a dimension focusing on the social purpose or what others call the social conscience will be necessary. This is collaborative partnership in which an organisation evaluates customer needs, defines a social role, selects strategic partners and proposes joint programmes to find solutions.

The collaborative aspect was first published by Harvard and Milan based academics Gary Pisano and Roberto Verganti insisting that organisations are able to "capture value" from it.

The approach takes a holistic view of the consumer including his day-to-day life experiences, challenges, aspirations and dreams. It is personalised and can become a major differentiator as it establishes an emotional connection with consumers.

Becoming more social

The social purpose dimension could also become a major game changer if implemented with genuine intentions to leverage the media platforms and trigger actions that would empower citizens. Imagine if we were to get some media to deploy their platforms in partnership with strategic partners to mobilise the unemployed youth, work with industries and other stakeholders to provide skills and create jobs.

What about a newspaper pioneering a healthy lifestyle programme with partners to reduce death rates and lifestyle diseases. An Identify and ATM anti-fraud programme could assist in reducing white collar crime. An entrepreneurial programme can help create more small businesses, employment and perhaps create a few millionaires. This dimension could further assist the media in establishing emotional connections with consumers and retaining customers.

Empowerment requires action, not just words. Traditional public relations inspired campaigns where airtime is donated to support social causes are not enough. They may get society to debate or "talk to itself" as Arthur Miller once observed, but fails to propel action and real solutions.

Anyway, customers are already enjoying this benefit through the social media. Social media entrepreneurs are creating outstanding platforms to provide society with self empowerment through personal and uninterrupted interactions. And the consumers love the new experience. This has liberated citizens and changed media consumption habits.

Radio and newspapers platforms could also be deployed strategically to rebuild society, advance the interests of ordinary men and women and get South Africa working.

Lacking action

The media is part of society and its narrow watchdog role doesn't have to translate to fence sitting and spectator syndrome. Development journalism exhorts the media to play a positive role in rebuilding society.

The local media has a good track record of providing its platforms for producing highly beneficial nation building content but still lacks action. By lacking action, the media continues to miss the golden opportunity to serve the "holistic needs of society" and becoming a strategic champion and part of the solutions.

The day the social purpose dimension becomes universal the media will be truly liberated. That is what some citizens may be searching for: Game changing ideas which will ultimately turn us into a society of both "talkers and doers". Of course, this is a national challenge which cannot be delivered by one provincial radio station alone.

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