

SA media's race against digital revolution

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Who would have believed that one day South African readers could access the contents of their favourite newspapers and magazines on their cellphones? Well, the mobizine revolution has finally arrived and has become the talk of the town. With *The Citizen* newspaper joining publications such as *Car* magazine and other titles, the SA media has taken a huge step in the race against the digital revolution.

An elated Greg Stewart, publisher of the *The Citizen*, told Bizcommunity.com that the time has come for enlightenment of an industry that has pretty much run on the same business principles for 300 years.

"The digital revolution has only just started in SA and it is vital that we as publishers embrace new technology and see these changes as opportunities not threats," Stewart said.

Added value

"The newspaper as we know it is here to stay, but the key to maintaining readers and growing the market lies in the added value brought about by technology. We are already sourcing the news for our newspaper, so it makes sense to use the same news for various other platforms," he added.

Many observers say this 'wonderful piece of technology' will somehow rehabilitate the credibility of the press and take it to greater heights.

However, Wendy Lucas, spokesperson for *Car* magazine - the first motoring publication to launch a mobizine in SA in mid-September 2006 - said the industry was still facing huge challenges in conducting this almost 'foreign' operation. "I would say that the major challenge was educating our readers and advertisers about the technology.

Unheard of

"Because it was unheard of at the time, even our colleagues looked at us with blank stares when we told them about it. But now that there are more and more titles launching mobizines, it is becoming more well known and understood," Lucas told Bizcommunity.com.

Nevertheless, despite these advances, experts believe that 'technically' African media is still lagging far behind, compared to its European and US counterparts. Stewart fairly acknowledges these shortages. "I think that we are somewhat crippled by a shortage of relevant skills and experience. The industry needs to urgently develop and attract more quality people," he

said.

"We also need to equip our staff with new skills, and prepare them for the future. Editorial staff for instance will need to be multi-skilled and be able to work across different media formats. Sales staff will need to be informed enough on technology to be able to sell across these various platforms."

For now though, the mobizine are seen as a coup de grace for the SA print media industry, but the challenge is to market it aggressively so that consumers can get used to it and make it part of their normal lives.

Overwhelming response

Sterwart said that the number of *The Citizen's* mobile subscribers is climbing steadily due to an overwhelming response from the readers. "Currently, there are over 60 000 mobizine users in SA and at the current growth, it is projected to be over 200 000 by the end of 2007," he concluded.

Car mobizine allows instant access to new Car launches, motorsport updates, driving impressions and a preview of the latest issue of Car magazine.

Initially, The Citizen offered digital format news to its readers via podcasting - free, digital audio recordings downloadable on PCs or MP3 players. Both podcasts and mobizines offer summaries of the newspaper's print editions.

ABOUT ISSA SIKITI DA SILVA

Issa Sikiti da Silva is a winner of the 2010 SADC Media Awards (print category). He freelances for various media outlets, local and foreign, and has travelled extensively across Africa. His work has been published both in French and English. He used to contribute to Bizcommunity.com as a senior news writer.

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