

PDMSA's media data hard to find

 By [Anton Harber](#)

3 Oct 2013

It was telling that one struggled to get a copy of last week's report of the Print and Digital Media Transformation Task Team (PDMTT). There was nothing online, and no mention of it on the website of the parent body, Print and Digital Media SA (PDMSA). Even Google was stumped. I had to find someone on the team to email an individual copy.

As one editor put it to me, "Putting a D in your name (as the PMSA did to become the PDMSA), does not make you digital."

The report, though, shed light on the battles of the industry to both become digital and transformed. It was one of two such documents in the last week which highlighted - and offered some facts about - the state of our media.

Until now the transformation debate has been loose and woolly, with some wild figures thrown around, the most notorious being a consistent but always dubious claim that there was only 14% black ownership in the print industry.

Few surprises, but a thorough overview

The PDMTT report contained few surprises, but it did take a thorough and nuanced look at the situation and point to where there had been progress, and which areas could do with more attention. Avoiding the broad-brush generalisations that often hamper media debate, it highlighted where there had been some change (newsroom demographics and, most recently, ownership), where there had not been enough (all the boardrooms, gender representation in senior ranks) and which companies lagged (all of them in some areas, some of them in many areas).

The most valuable recommendation was one that forces a greater transparency on these companies: they should set three-year targets in for change, have a board committee responsible for monitoring and reporting progress and PDMSA should collate and report on industry transformation annually. Smart, effective, realistic proposal, I think, encouraging greater accountability and openness from an industry that demands it of others.

Let's just hope that the industry body masters digital distribution of its regular reports in the near future.

Where more work is needed

On other areas - such as the barriers to entry for the community media, and the lack of print and digital media in most of our official languages - the task team contributed broad and vague ideas, such as provincial governments contributing to community media, and supporting print co-ops for smaller media. More work and ideas are needed here.

The team put a great deal of faith in digitalisation to deliver greater media access and change the game. But they paid little attention to arguments that with expensive broadband and paywalls going up on many information sites, the digital divide might get even wider.

Here comes the SoN

The second report, State of the Newsroom 2013 (SoN), came from my own university department. SoN is a pilot project to provide research and stimulate discussion around the massive changes taking place in our news operations, and we hope to do it annually.

This report dealt partly with transformation, examining the changing race and gender demographics of newsrooms, but focussed attention on the digital disruption taking place, and the difficulties most operations are having in moving to new platforms, and finding new revenue streams. These twin storms, along with recent threats to media freedom, account for the description of our news media as a leaky ship, sailing into extreme headwinds of change, but with an adventurous spirit.

One gets a taste of how this is affecting those at the coalface. Working journalists tell of dealing with the relentless demands of social media and how they often view transformation differently from the way their bosses do. Retrenchments and newsroom mergers in most groups makes these challenging times.

Some of the surprises: that older journalists sometimes find it easier to adapt than the younger ones; the SABC editor who said he was troubled by the absence of whites in the newsroom; that editors were encouraging their teams to use social media, but only one newsroom had a set of guidelines around it; that the ANC and SACP complain a lot about the media, but seldom make use of the Ombudsman; that there are far more Code of Conduct complaints in the broadcast industry than in print.

This report, I should hastily say, is available online (www.journalism.co.za).

ABOUT ANTON HARBER

Anton Harber, Wits University Caxton Professor of Journalism and chair of the Freedom of Expression Institute, was a Weekly Mail (now Mail & Guardian) founding editor and a Kagiso Media executive director. He wrote Diepsloot (Jonathan Ball, 2011), Recht Malan Prize winner, and co-edited the first two editions of The A-Z of South African Politics (Penguin, 1994/5), What is Left Unsaid: Reporting the South African HIV Epidemic (Jacana, 2010) and Troublemakers: The best of SA's investigative journalism (Jacana, 2010).

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