

Bad news and two myths

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NEWSPAPERS in Singapore have so far managed to avoid the sorry fate faced by their counterparts in the West: A dramatic decline in circulation and profits.

Still, executives at both newspaper giant Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) as well as MediaCorp, which co-owns this paper with SPH, must be wondering how long this will last.

Their actions reveal more nervousness than confidence. In recent years, for instance, SPH has launched a number of free newspapers as pre-emptive defensive moves against the rise of the free daily *Today*, which is a long term threat to its cash cow, *The Straits Times*.

But rival publications are not the only foes of newspapers. SPH's multiple forays online — from the straight digital versions of its print papers to its "citizen journalism" venture STOMP and the new Razor TV — are all initiatives to stave off a more serious challenge: The Internet.

As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong noted recently in his National Day Rally speech, young people are now reading newspapers less in preference over the Internet.

The older generation also use the Internet, now indispensable for work. But they are what have been termed "digital immigrants", not born into the world of the Internet. They still prefer getting their daily dose of current affairs from an old-style paper with their morning shot of kopi-O.

In contrast, today's generation are "digital natives", growing up with a keyboard at their fingertips. If they read news at all, it is usually online in dribs and drabs over the course of a day while doing half a dozen other things on their screen over a latte.

Sometimes, they don't even get their news via articles. Research in the United States shows that young people are increasingly getting information about current affairs from, would you believe it, comedy talk shows.

The evidence is that people are less and less interested in consuming news: They just have too many other things to do. Thus the enemy of newspapers, indeed of any news organisation, is not one another or even TV, but the lack of time.

There is a standard list of prescriptions for the struggling newspapers in the West: Try to “reconnect” with alienated readers, zoom in on local coverage, get school-going children used to reading a print paper, be more interactive by using forums or via citizen journalism, give more depth to news coverage, provide more “news you can use” information on lifestyle and entertainment.

These have been tried by newspapers here — but the digital natives are not settling down, leaving the media executives still biting their nails. No one knows how it will all work out in the long run.

Amid the bad news, newspapers like to hold on to a few myths about themselves.

quality myth

First is the quality myth. This states that people will still prefer newspapers because they are more credible than online sources. Yes, newspapers are more reliable because they have to be more accountable to the government, shareholders and local laws, but it does not mean that people will prefer it over lower quality content. Besides, one can get a lot of credible news online — and for free — from digital versions of print newspapers. Just look at America which has many highly-respected online sources.

The only bright spot for news companies here is that licensing laws have limited traditional sources of Singapore news to a very few. In cyberspace, competition will be fierce and uncontrollable.

Another side of this quality myth is that people want the greater depth of coverage that newspapers offer. But readership surveys show that most prefer news in short, snappy bits. A minority find depth compelling, but they will not sustain the circulations of the glory days.

eyeball myth

Second is the eyeball myth. This states that if you get people to read the online version of your newspaper, then you are out of the woods. But the hard economic fact is that each pair of eyeballs

online pulls in much less advertising revenue than the same pair scanning a printed paper. Also, whatever revenue that digital papers could have earned are often creamed off by search engines such as Google as this is the most frequent way that articles are accessed.

Newspapers will eventually become as peripheral as movie rental shops, CD shops or public telephones. All have been hit because there are better ways of watching a movie, getting a song and making a call. Of course, these remnants of an age past will not die completely. But the business on which they are built will no longer be the money-spinners they used to be. Print newspapers will still exist. But they will cease to be such a part of life as they are today.

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