

So long and thanks for all the awards



By Gill Moodie: @grubstreetSA

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What's in an award then? Is winning a journalism award an end in itself or is it a valuable means to brand extension? Do the readers care? Maybe it's just a load of phony baloney that encourages journalists to write for other journalists rather than for their readers?



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Any award-winning journalist will tell you it feels great to get recognition from your peers through awards. And in today's sometimes ruthless corporatised newspaper world, where the boss can be slow to say a simple "thank you" or "well done", that counts for a lot.

Future of news now past tense

And so it was with enormous disappointment that I heard that the country's most award-winning online journalism team - that of the Avusa-owned *Daily Dispatch* newspaper in East London - has been dismantled because of a lack of revenue and little prospect of future revenue. What media expert Professor Anton Harber once called "[the future](#)" of news is now past tense.

[Disclosure: My husband Andrew Trench is the former editor and online editor of the Dispatch (although he [left Avusa](#) earlier this year) and I have worked at the newspaper on two separate occasions - most recently till about two years ago as a middle manager. Which is how I know what it's like to work in a converged newsroom and of which I wrote in [last week's column](#).]

Avusa has been planning a paywall for some time for the websites its two Eastern Cape newspaper, the *Dispatch* and *The Herald* in Port Elizabeth, as online revenue for the two has pretty much been non-existent. (Here's a [previous column](#) on the paywall plans and interview with Avusa Media LIVE GM, Elan Lohmann). The paywall goes up on 1 December 2010 and users will be charged about half the current print-subscription rate to go behind the wall where the main feature, it appears, will be a PDF version of the print publication.

This is clever in the sense that subscriptions to online replicas of print titles are counted as audited sales in [official ABC circulation figures](#). However, one has to question how many users - who up to now have been getting the [lively Dispatch website](#), complete with special online reports, a breaking-news blog and fun features such as an innovative swap shop - are going to cough up to get behind the paywall when the offering is reduced.

A tad premature?

I also wonder if this isn't all a tad premature, considering that online revenue is on the up throughout the world - even in SA - and that Avusa has recently [hired Habari](#), the specialist digital-media sales firm, to sell advertising to "Cape-based" clients for all its websites. (This includes Times LIVE and the [recently revamped](#) Sowetan website.)

Lohmann told Bizcommunity that he didn't want to comment on the paywall plans "not because there is anything to hide - but because we have a strategy to communicate the changes to the market in place and I do not want to prematurely undermine this."

He did say that the 1 December launch will be supported by a PR and media campaign for Eastern Cape readers and that there is also internal communication on the changes.

"Referring to this as a 'demise' is not correct. Things will simply work differently," Lohmann said. "The newsrooms will continue aggressively with a convergence strategy - in fact more aggressively since they now own the online destination - so that [they] and the pursuit of special reports, etc, will not be lost. Community content should in fact increase on the sites.

"Reabsorbed back into print"

"The only real change is digital resources being reabsorbed back into print and the print content not being available for free anymore. The new commercials make far more sense to the benefit of everyone. We are also using the term 'e-edition' rather than PDF because the product is quite intelligent and feature-rich."

Well, you can spin it how you like but the small *Dispatch* online team of four or five people has essentially been reduced to one person - of the rest, one took retrenchment, two now have different jobs in the newsroom and one (who wasn't technically online but did a lot of work with them) has resigned. I really can't see that the *Dispatch* will now have the capacity to do the kind of groundbreaking online journalism that has won them awards such as [Vodacom](#) and [CNN Multichoice Africa](#) journalism awards.

Harber praised the team's path-finding online exposé, ["Broken Homes"](#) that revealed mismanagement of RDP housing in small towns throughout the Eastern Cape and led to immediate action from human settlements minister Tokyo Sexwale. But there has been more:

- ["Failed futures"](#), an investigation on what is wrong with rural schools in a far-flung part of the Transkei;
- ["Slumlords"](#), an investigation into the growing slum-lord problem in East London's downtown area; and
- ["Dying to live"](#), an investigation into the isolated and fearful lives of Somali immigrants in the Eastern Cape and how criminals target them because they are foreigners.

Online was the complete package

What these have in common is that the online offerings were the complete investigative packages (the print versions were abridged) and - with visuals such as maps, time lines, videos and audio clips - they were so much more rich and engaging than the print versions.

Another online package, ["The struggle continues"](#), was only online and done in conjunction with Rhodes University's new-media students about the lives of marginalised people in East London, from street children to the people who scavenge

through suburban rubbish bags.

There was much to be learned from the *Dispatch's* brand of online journalism, which was a product of a truly converged newsroom. The online staff also worked for the print product and vice versa, which is why one of the saddest consequences of all this is the incalculable affect on morale of the *Dispatch* staff. (*The Herald* and *Dispatch* online operations used to fall under the titles but this year all online operations were [consolidated](#) under the Joburg-based Avusa Media LIVE digital division. It appears, though, that the two Eastern Cape titles have recently clawed back some control.)

After going through a painful round of voluntary retrenchments early last year, the *Dispatch* soldiered on through the recession, many people doing two jobs as a result of the staff cuts and they did good: the Saturday paper, which seemed to have gone into terminal circulation decline since changing from broadsheet to tabloid format, was on an upwards trajectory, the *Dispatch* was one of the better performing units in the company and the editorial team punched way above its weight by bringing home the awards.

Dismay and anger

So when I last visited my friends and former colleagues in the *Dispatch* newsroom about a month ago (on official business to interview the newly appointed Avusa Eastern Cape GM), the mood was one of dismay and anger as everyone watched their buddies in online face possible retrenchment. "Obviously awards count for f*#@ all," said one disillusioned staff member.

This is the kind of thing that causes people to move on, which is something the *Dispatch* can ill afford in the critical skills shortage that is the Eastern Cape. As online path finders, the *Dispatch* was also an attractive place for the young graduates of Rhodes University's new-media programme to start off at. Well, that's probably at an end now.

It's not far-fetched to say the *Dispatch's* online team was a centre of excellence producing differentiating content amid the increasingly commoditised world of online news.

If it ain't broke don't fix it, they say, although it's also quite possible that when a new *Dispatch* editor is appointed, he or she might be relieved that there's only print to worry about. Do newspapers really need an online presence if they cannot pay for themselves? Maybe not but in the world of journalism, it's not - as even a newspaper sales executive remarked to me recently - all about the money.

If you go into the business of journalism - online or otherwise - it's about giving a voice to the little people and holding the powerful to account. It's about apprehending trends and capturing moods but, above all, it's about telling stories. Which is what the spunky little online *Dispatch* team did in a really interesting, engaging manner. So just in case no one else said it to them amid this process, I'm going to: "Thank you Shadley and Sino, Tegan and Jan and Rudi. You did a great job. Well done and, most of all, I'm really sorry".

For more:

- Fin24: [Publisher: Sowetan not shutting down](#)
- The New Age: [Avusa retrenches 11 journalists](#)
- IOL: [Eleven Avusa staffers face retrenchment](#)

For more links updated at 11.29am on 18 November 2010.

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