

Is 2018 the year the robots come for us? (Spoiler alert: not likely)



By [Tyler Greer](#), issued by [VDX.tv](#)

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As a global strategist, I've spent a lot of January talking about the biggest trends in digital media and marketing for 2018.



Tyler Greer

From a global perspective we're going to see a big evolution in three key areas – artificial intelligence (AI); voice; and the structure of media agencies. However, despite increased globalisation there remain regional and local differences in the media ecosystem and I was curious to find out how these trends play out in South Africa.

So, I sat down with Carmen Murray, founder of Boo-Yah! an African Inspired Educational Marketing Service and Paul Berney, co-founder of The Connected Marketer Institute™ and global marketing expert who specialise in Africa, to discuss my global predictions and to find out if these resonate in South Africa.

AI

Globally, **AI** is the new buzzword in media and marketing and promises to be the go-to prediction for the next few years. The trick will be for marketers to separate the hope from the hyperbole. At best, it promises a unified and intelligent view on the customer journey and the ways in which we speak with them. At worse, we'll be tossed onto the employment slag-heap by (possibly malevolent) robots.

In reality, neither of these will be the case. However, AI will underwrite most digital pitches in the market, and buyers and marketers will need to bring good old fashioned human intelligence to their assessment of which claims can truly fulfil the promises made.

Carmen Murray agrees that AI is poised to have a big impact in South Africa noting, "It is a huge trend and everyone is talking about it. At Boo-Yah! we're introducing new courses on the subject as we believe there is a huge need for education around AI, machine learning and chatbots." Further Murray believes that the region will see home grown technologies like USSD eventually replaced by AI (specifically chatbots and virtual assistants). One thing is for sure, AI will play a vital role in multiple industries across Africa in the coming years.

Voice

On the global stage, **voice** is also a hot topic, although the buzz surrounding it has yet to be matched by its market penetration – nor is there a clear understanding of the applications and opportunities which brands may bring to the space.

Nevertheless, going forward it is clear that brands will have to establish a strong voice brand as well as a visual one. Voice will be a dominant conversation starter in market, though to get traction quickly will hinge on its ability to play functional, smoothly-operating roles within our lives, and being attached to an end supplier or service provider will greatly hasten adoption.

In the US, Amazon gets this. Should Amazon's Alexa become the entry point for shopping via voice technology, and voice its most functional portal to Amazon shopping, brands and retailers will have a fresh wave of challenges to grapple with – particularly as Amazon continues its global expansion.

But does any of this impact South Africa yet given the issues it faces with connectivity infrastructure, the cost of mobile data and the absence of a regional play for the big voice players (Amazon's Alexa and Google Home)?

According to Murray, it is too early to call out voice being a key trend in South Africa. This is due to the uneven distribution of smart devices, the ubiquity of internet access via mobile and the work needed to upgrade 2G to 3G technology and lay the cables for fibre. And beyond these issues, there's also the fact that South Africa has 11 official languages to grapple with. Further, as a mobile first nation, devices used for voice services and applications are also likely to skew differently in South Africa.

However, that being said, she believes that South African marketers can't ignore voice as it is coming to market and it will impact strategy over the medium term.

Paul Berney agrees that marketers in the region need to sit up and take notice of voice, "Brands will need to consider their voice strategy when it comes to search. What happens when I ask my device a general question about a product or service or a specific one about a named brand? Do you even know what happens when a consumer tries this today?"

Both experts urge South African marketers to keep a close track on global initiatives to avoid falling behind the curve when connectivity access and infrastructure begins to improve in the region.

Media agency models

The traditional **agency model** has been unstitching for a while, and 2018 will see the pace of this increase. Digital is the primary change agent, along with reduced fees and other factors, and means media agencies are trying to restructure on the fly, even if not all know exactly what the end point will look like. Some will get it right, many won't, but by the end of the year, South African media agencies will have to follow the rest of the world in trying to manage their way through the new digitally focussed landscape.

Berney and Murray wholeheartedly concur, with Berney noting, "media agencies face an existential crisis around their role and value add. In the programmatic or automated age, the value from media buying has been vastly reduced over time. Add to that, concerns about agency commercial models and transparency issues and you find a great number of agencies asking themselves 'how do we provide real value to our clients?'"

Questions about value are also top of Murray's mind as she told me "The rise of small agile startups means the retainer model is dying a slow death and I think the biggest challenge for the large media agencies, is the ability to be agile with projects and budgets." She also notes that the increase of the large consultancies like Accenture and Deloitte offering media services is also impacting the agency proposition.

2020 Vision

As we move towards the end of the decade, one thing that is certain; the next few years will be pivotal in terms of evolution and experimentation as new technologies and business models test the waters.

It will be interesting to see which gain trust and traction – and which fall by the wayside.

ABOUT TYLER GREER

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