

'Growing your own timber' in today's news industry

 By [Chris Roper](#)

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The appointment of Nic Dawes to the helm of South Africa's flagship investigative weekly, the *Mail & Guardian*, is an important marker for those of us who would love to see South African print newspapers survive and flourish in an online age.



The biographical gumpf, in the press release coinciding with Dawes' appointment, relates part of the journey he took to arrive at his lofty destination of editor-in-chief of the *Mail & Guardian*. The appointment of Dawes, and new deputy editor-in-chief Rapule Tabane, is described as "a direct result of the paper's efforts to 'grow its own timber'." [The emphasis is the *M&G's*.]

Prescient metaphor

On one level, you could read this as a (perhaps unconscious) joke about the rapid decline of the paper-based news industry here and, even more rapidly, in developed countries. But on another, the allusion to "growing its own timber" can be seen as a prescient metaphor for how the means of production of the raw material of news at the *Mail & Guardian* (paper and bytes) is about to undergo a rapid transformation.

Because while the press release tells us that Dawes "joined the *Mail & Guardian* as associate editor in 2004 from *ThisDay* newspaper", it doesn't tell us where Dawes worked before that, which was as news editor for Tiscali World Online, an online only news product.

I'm sticking my neck out here, but I can't think of any editors of major South African newspapers who started out online, and ended up in print. In fact, I can't think of an international example, although I'm sure readers will enlighten me on this.

Different strokes

When Ferial Haffajee was appointed the *Mail & Guardian's* editor in 2004, she said the following: "The key areas will remain strong investigative journalism, and to reclaim our place as the home of cutting-edge features and photojournalism."

When Dawes was appointed, he said this: "I am grateful to Trevor Ncube and the board for entrusting me with the job of continuing to building a fine newspaper and website". And according to *The Media Online*, "he intends to converge the newsrooms of the print and on-line titles. 'I plan to move the news desks into the same physical space, so they can work together more closely. This will result in strong positions for both products in the media sphere'."

Notice the difference? From photojournalism to websites, in five very short years. I might be reading too much into this appointment, but if any newspaper in South Africa is going to emulate the *Financial Times*' "web ready" model of creating news on the web, and only then disseminating it to print, it would be the *Mail & Guardian*.

As hidebound

In part, this would be because the newspaper has a long history of being online, as www.mg.co.za was our first local news site. But in truth, this can be a double-edged light sabre, as the interweb geeks are wont to say. Websites can become as hidebound as print products, and especially ones that exist as offshoots of successful brands that resist cannibalisation.

Students of the bloody revolution, that is the transition from print to online, will say that moving two newsrooms together isn't going far enough. There should only be one newsroom, and one product that is platform-agnostic (if I might be allowed the use of a crude neologism), even if the content is differentiated according to the device on which it is accessed (newspaper, iPhone, mobile, website, and so on).

But the real reason why the *M&G*'s current marriage of print and online could eventually result in giving birth to the Siamese twins that is the ideal 21st Century news product, is that a weekly newspaper has a much more compelling editorial reason to move to a daily publishing schedule.

Breaking news online

I'm almost tempted to suggest that our daily newspapers should consider adopting a model which transfers the breaking news onus online, and which entails moving to a weekly publishing schedule for the print product.

This would only make sense if the revenue generated by the online component (in which I include mobile), plus the savings on production costs, and plus the advertising revenue that can be made by a weekly flagship edition, equals or betters the revenue created by a daily plus a half-hearted attempt at a website.

But leaving the numbers out of it, there's also this point of view: your dailies, we're told, are doomed anyway. You could delay the inevitable, or you could embrace the new opportunities. People will probably always want a print product; they just won't want it as often. Here's the chance to own both parts of the market, with the revenue burden shifted.

Will this be where the *Mail & Guardian* is headed? Only time will tell, as they say in the classics. But, in the same way that those classics are now available for free download, the concept of time has also changed.

Time online is faster than the vegetal growth that print is used to, and I suspect we'll see an *M&G 2.0* sooner rather than later.

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ABOUT CHRIS ROPER

Chris Roper is the editor-in-chief of www.24.com. Read his blog at <http://chrisroper.co.za> and follow his tweets at @ChrisRoperZA.

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