

## After The Fall: Content, Context and Co-Creation After the Decline of Print Media

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As black screens and keyboard buttons overtake our lives, the newspaper industry is scrambling to maintain relevance. The increased mobility and access to global news and events has changed the face of consumerism, with audiences taking charge and creating content. Despite the current anxiety surrounding the future of media organizations and journalists, Ralf Blomqvist says it's time to "*get rid of the idea that there is a industry needing to be saved.*" Ralf is a founding partner of Swedish management consultancy Main Dialog which focuses on customer strategy and communications development. He has over 20 years of experience with customer driven initiatives around the Nordic countries and has authored four academic books on customer related topics. While modern digital technologies have media organisations fretful about a declining industry in a new media landscape, Ralf is optimistic about the future. He sees the so-called "death of print media", as an opportunity for corporations to change their marketing strategies.

"Customers are like electricity, they go wherever there is less resistance," Ralf remarked during his lecture at the Hawke EU Centre's Annual Lecture Series held at the University of South Australia in October 2015. The presentation, titled "After the Fall: Content, Context and Co-Creation After the Decline of Print Media" sought to provide insight into the mind of a leading marketing professional. During the presentation Ralf provided a refreshing perspective using examples from leading EU media organisations that have successfully altered their business strategies by taking distinct customer based approaches. By understanding readers' lives, editors were able to reach them with relevant dialogue. Ralf suggests targeting a local news market, improving content without compromising integrity and attracting a younger audience. In doing so organisations should abandon traditional reliance on hits and thoroughly investigate the habits of readers and how they are engaging with the content. Ralf emphasizes, "*We need a relentless focus on understanding how customers are changing, willingness to experiment, new forms of collaboration, and a true sense of urgency in order to survive*"

In the Nordic countries, newspapers have to grapple with an annual drop in circulation of 4 to 10 % and a decrease in advertising income of 5 to 10% forcing many companies to make major cost reductions including job cuts of a large proportion of news media staff. With the rise and dominance of the internet, many news companies took to the web as their new revenue generating platform. But the same readers were able to obtain easy and free access to numerous platforms offering free and frequent news updates. Ralf believes digital growth does not necessarily offset print decline. The fundamental



problem with news and media is that it is rapidly becoming a free commodity. The phenomenon of citizen journalism allows the average citizen to not only access restricted events and information of media personnel but also create blogs dispersing information for the eyes of millions. Despite the angst driven by the changing platforms of news media, Ralf says *"There is a future for journalism, there is still a market for news, and there is certainly a need – and a willingness to pay – for “media consumption”.*

Media consumption is evolving, with people becoming hungrier for news updates and desiring new products and services. Digital may not save the industry, however, a focus on what customers *really* want may do the job. Ralf highlights the importance of engaging people who don't usually have connections to news media. A shift in mentality could provoke questions of how to solve customer problems by reaching them with relevant dialogue and analyzing what they do and how they behave. The industry must look at creative ways to "sell eye balls" to advertisers and form new collaborations that connect public service with commercial service.

We all enjoy the free things in life but Ralf does believe there is a way to encourage consumers to pay for news. He proposes redefining what it means to be a news consumer and for companies to consider, *"crowd funding, memberships, events, loyalty programmes and content marketing"*. Ralf explains the successful news companies in the EU, *"seem to be good at experimenting, and at times even stretching the boundaries of what used to constitute a 'newspaper' or the 'media industry'."* This is without losing the need for quality journalism but rather adopting a co-creative approach in developing content. *"We've seen numerous examples of great stories emerging from co-creative approaches, where customers participate in the making of “news”.* Swedish company Mitt Media, for instance, put data in the hands of the consumer and hired a dozen 18 to 20 year old youth to join their team in a bid to generate content pinpointing the needs of younger consumers. *"This does not eliminate the need for 'good journalism'. I see no contradiction here. Contemporary consumers are more and more into co-creation and co-production, and this is something that we need to enable and support",* Ralf emphasized.

So does handing part of the reigns to mean the life of Kardashian family member Kylie Jenner will take over our lives? Apparently not. Ralf argues although there is the widespread belief that consumers seem to prefer trashy news research proves otherwise. *"If you, for instance, look at statistics on what kind of news/articles people share on social media, the content mix by and large resembles what editors would have picked. Contrary to popular belief, it's not all about funny cat videos and celebrities!"* Ralf has faith in the *power of the people* and strongly refrains from the often-held belief that, *"journalists are clever, and audiences are lazy and dumb"*. Traditionally news organizations view customers as "target markets", but Ralf suggests this should become much more individualized. He states, *"focusing on customers does not make news or journalism more superficial"* but that *"quality will always be defined by the customer, like it or not"*.



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