

MEDIA/PUBLISHING

## Media's vulnerability has incited innovation, experimentation

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Media's future calls for experimentation. Image credit: Saks Fifth Avenue

By JEN KING

NEW YORK To navigate the industry's choppy waters, media groups are no longer reactive to change, instead news outlets are becoming proactive and launching sustainable directives.

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During the "Innovations in Publishing" panel at Ad:tech 2017 Nov. 2, panelists agreed that the industry's innovations are exciting and have lighted up the newsroom as media groups work to transform its revenue and content businesses. The opportunities at hand often play on the industry's own vulnerabilities, leading to innovations that propel value and ensure that news brands stay intact for years to come.

"How do you transform a company that is rooted in 150 years of tradition? The simple answer is the possibility of death is very inspiring," said Sebastian Tomich, senior vice president of advertising and innovation at [The New York Times](#).

"If you look back 10-15 years, there was an ethos around traditional media that they were invincible and that a lot of these platforms were not going to threaten them and their brands would carry them through for all of time," he said. "Now what we've seen, is this vulnerability and I think it has inspired to think differently.

"For [New York Times], there's a lot of introspection."

Combat gear

Media is currently up against a lack of reader trust and accusations of fake news. To combat these challenges, media groups are investing in storytelling to put the consumer experience ethos back in the newsroom to help reach audiences more efficiently.

As the media business model transforms, news outlets have created varied ways not only to pay for their content, but also to ensure trusted news is brought to readers.

Subscription models are one method, with many consumers feeling that it is part of their civic duty to financially support trusted journalism. While consumers need to pay for Netflix, for instance, a news subscription supports a fundamental idea.

However, news outlets also must balance that responsibility with entertaining content that brings a moment of levity to a reader's day, especially with how many content producers are competing for attention.

Balanced with high-quality journalism, news outlets can forge bonds with readers by becoming a consistent, trusted source of information whether it is a political or lifestyle-centered topic.

Importantly, outlets must speak to topics their audiences are interested about as well as have a presence where people are consuming news.

"If you speak to any editorial director, at any news company, they are still doing what they have always been doing," said Jarrod Dicker, vice president of commercial product and innovation at [The Washington Post](#). "There's always been ambition, and ambition is journalism, and trusted journalism.

"This idea of fake news is not going to sway the strategies in terms of how you create content," he said. "How that content is delivered and where it lives comes down to the tech side.

"It is very important that we try to figure out where. Content isn't just consumed on HuffPost and Washington Post. Our domains are consumed on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and elsewhere. Things are shared and read on Reddit, all into this ethos that we suddenly don't have control of."



*Media delivery and reach has evolved thanks to digital. Image credit: Ralph Lauren*

For outlets that balance paid advertising and subscription, diversifying revenues have given room for experimentation.

At New York Times, for example, this includes testing ecommerce through its 2016 acquisition of Wirecutter, a product review hub.

A Wirecutter guide to smart home products, for example, links to Amazon or Home Depot ecommerce, and New York Times receives a share of the revenue of purchased goods discovered on the platform.

The Washington Post has taken a backend approach, organizing an in-house design team that works with brand partners as well as outside clients.

For the recently rebranded HuffPost, which relies on paid ads, audience outreach and a "backward" approach to journalism reinforces its bond with its readership.

Spearheaded by new editor in chief Lydia Polgreen, HuffPost organizes its coverage based on thousands of reader interviews around the country. HuffPost's editorial directive ensures its content is reflective of readers' interests and concerns.

"I had a boss once who said, 'There are no silver bullets in this industry, but there's a lot of shrapnel,'" said Julia Beizer, head of product at [HuffPost](#). "I think as publishers, we're looking at all of the different pieces of shrapnel we gather together and make a business out of."

"We are experimenting with tons of ways to make money," she said. "We're very lucky to be part of a larger corporate entity. That gives [HuffPost] the opportunity to experiment with affiliate businesses."

"I think it's really about gathering all different threads that you can weave together to make a business."

**Publisher as agency: A popular headline**

Media's evolution has also rewritten the relationship between brands, agencies and publishers.

The cause of this new relationship structure is native content, where a brand partner works with a publisher in an agency capacity to develop sponsored units.

Italian fashion label Gucci, for example, worked with Cond Nast men's magazine British GQ to investigate the influence a particular setting can have on a creator's vision.

Developed by Cond Nast Global Development, the native content campaign "The Performers" encompassed a series of five films that ran on both GQ and Gucci's digital channels from February 2017. Thinking outside the limits of a single post, a number of luxury brands have looked toward longer format content collaborations with publishers ([see story](#)).

During a panel at Luxury FirstLook 2017: Time for Luxury 2.0 Jan. 18, an executive from New York Times' T Brand Studio made a bold prediction, claiming there is a chance that traditional advertising studios will become obsolete in favor of in-house brand studios.

The content overload in today's market is causing native advertising to become increasingly important as a way for brands to connect with consumers. With the influx of publishers and media brands creating these in-house studios for brands to create truly native advertising, there could be a major shift in the industry ([see story](#)).

"You need the mind of a marketer and mind of a journalist," said HuffPost's Ms. Beizer. "That's a hybrid that I don't think existed in [the publishing] business a couple years ago."

"I came up a few years before that, and I had the mind of a journalist and the mind of a technologist, and that's something that didn't exist a few years ago," she said. "More of these hybrids we're seeing in [this] business has been very interesting."