

# PERFECT DIGITAL

Danish print publication *Ekstra Bladet* saw the writing on the proverbial digital wall 10 years ago and has repositioned to deliver news across four platforms in a complex web of traditional news values and digital delivery. How do you convert print journalists to making simple video content and allay their fear that their craft is being butchered?

Journalist and TV executive producer **Ivo Burum** who helped EB make the transition from print to online and web TV gives insight into the project which lays the foundations for a full-blown news channel



“ Things have changed so much, so quickly that in three years' time we won't earn any money from our newspaper". This chilling prediction by Poul Madsen, Editor in Chief of *Ekstra Bladet*, a Danish print and online tabloid and web TV producer, echoes print's slippery slide into oblivion. And while the paper edition of *Ekstra Bladet* still accounts for 70% of their revenue, a downward spiral in sales 10 years ago signalled the writing on the proverbial digital wall. Madsen believes that becoming early digital adopters was key to survival: "Sales of our newspaper dropped dramatically and we knew that our jobs depended on going digital". Finding the right model to "keep journalists, produce strong content and make money" is Madsen's primary focus.

Today *Ekstra Bladet* distributes news and other media across four platforms: print, free online, a paid section called EKSTRA and EBTv, their new web TV channel. It's a complex web of traditional news values and digital delivery modes that's making money, but not without cost. Recently 22 staff were let go to make way for digital

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development. And while the price of Danish newspapers means their print version still makes money, Madsen is betting that with up to 750,000 visitors to *Ekstra Bladet's* online site every day, the plan is working.

#### VIDEO FOR ONLINE

One of the key focus areas is coercing their editorial departments to produce video for online stories. Executive Producer for EBTv, Massimo Grillo, says it's "an ongoing psychological battle to convert print journalists to making simple video content". Grillo, a veteran anchorman, believes many print journalists are initially reluctant to make the digital "leap of faith" fearing it will result in shoddy journalism. "It's true we can live with the unfocused shot in a good story, we are web TV", but signalling "your work is not good, but we'll publish it anyway" is a red rag to journalists. Finding the balance between having enough content and maintaining standards "is a constant battle", said Grillo.

One method *Ekstra Bladet* uses to assuage journalists' fear that online journalism is a speedy sloppy misrepresentation of their excellence is through their new freemium site, EKSTRA. According to editor Lisbeth Langwadt,

EKSTRA plays to "our quality news traditions, in disclosures, detective journalism, crime investigation, critical consumer journalism, politics and sports". A small EKSTRA team works to refine stories from *Ekstra Bladet's* print version focusing on quality journalism that people are willing to pay almost 4 Euros a month for. "Almost every journalist at *Ekstra Bladet* takes part in the process to produce EKSTRA content", said Langwadt. The key focus being "converting existing users into paying customers so we can keep creating journalism that matters and of course, keep our print journalists". It's an EU trend that's recently seen *Bild* in Germany and the UK's *Sun* start charging for content.

#### FULL-BLOWN STATION

Like EKSTRA, which wraps video, audio, photos and graphics around text, Madsen's new web TV platform EBTv seeks to develop skills that enable journalists to transition from digital story to web TV formats. "I was hired to build on the commercial side and take the EB brand to a new level in TV and possibly to a full blown station by 2015, to give advertisers a strong alternative to current TV providers", said Thomas Stokholm,



the Director of EBTv.

Notwithstanding his commercial mandate, Stokholm sees one of EBTv's key roles as assisting print journalists to make the jump from articles to programmes. "Print has its own life" but "TV is a long haul that requires a shift of mindset from the 24 hour cycle to a 365 day operation, where planning is key".

One journalist who made this shift is Anders Berner, the producer and host of a new motoring format *Topfart*. "It's a big transition but not as big as I thought", said Berner who sees the willingness to learn as critical – "it's actually a nice feeling when you can evolve yourself and your skills". Jon Pagh, the journalist and host of weekly sports format *Football with Attitude* agrees but says enthusiasm is tempered by reality. "If you produce for the paper you talk to two or three sources on the phone and write your story. To produce a video segment you need appointments, you have to inform them before you go, organise the camera, shoot, edit, write the article, basically you are doing everything yourself and that's the big difference."

#### SHIFT IN MINDSET

It's a big shift that Stokholm believes requires "someone with a broadcast DNA that understands

the planning, how to work, when to shift to 6th gear".

According to Pagh, making the shift in an under-resourced unit can compromise "the quality of the story, the time you spend researching and the people you interview". The challenge for Pagh is "to find that balance where you can still make good stories". Grillo believes that extra staff and relevant training will help but what's needed is a change of culture. "It's about making TV first and not thinking we need to make the article first and then stick the pictures around it." This shift in mindset from article to programme becomes a consideration when a TV programme, which may have taken a week to produce, is relegated lower down the online site's front-page due to its perceived lack of news value. Imagine, said Grillo, if your TV programme was "pulled five minutes before the news cast and you were told you can run it between 9 and 10 pm...try saying that to a broadcaster. That's the hardest thing about making web TV on an internet news page".

This clash in priorities plays out at the various editorial meetings where assigning editors choose and shift stories up and down the front page depending on how they are trending. Because this page can be

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a metre and a half long stories can invariably get lost. Berner acknowledges that "EB is an old publishing house with news traditions". However, from a marketing perspective he feels "a 15 minute programme is a big investment" and needs more time to settle: "if we are only on the front page for 2 hours we'll only get 5% of our readers". Stokholm says indications are that people "are coming to *Ekstra Bladet* no matter what" and that suggests editors could "think of slowing (the front page) to let the people stay longer rather than read more articles".

While analysts still predict an uncertain future for the news business, Madsen is much more upbeat as he plots the move from the ageing notion of publication to platforms and workflows: "It's so easy to create a news channel now, you just do it, you need content and programmes." It's a two-year-vision that will see the eb.dk portal sitting alongside eb24 news and other channels. "We are combining great journalism with our tradition at EB and for me it's a great pleasure to be head of this organisation where we can combine doing it on different media, with mobile or mojo at the centre of it all. Yes, there's a plan that will give us a great future." ■

