

Neo Ntsoma

Baited by junk news

The reporting around the bail hearing for Oscar Pistorius following the tragic events in the small hours of 14 February really does highlight the rot that set in when the internet became the primary medium of news consumption.

By Brett Lock

CLICK ON THIS!

When I was involved with the Rhodes Journalism Department's New Media Laboratory in the mid 1990s we were quite starry-eyed about the possibilities of this new-fangled "internet" thing. Even when we pioneered the idea of news aggregation through our "Gogga" project, we were so focused on the brilliant possibilities that we failed to see the banal probabilities. I don't remember anyone theorising about what the effect of reporting would be in a post Google News world.

Now we know.

The issue is very simple. Newspapers no longer sell papers. They sell banner advertising on their web pages. They make their money from "clicks" and to get a user to click, you need to bait your hook. In the past, a newspaper only had to worry about the one or two competitors in its region publishing in the same language, and even this was tempered by social and political allegiances. People generally only read one paper out of habit, but all that has changed. Not only can you click

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through news on a variety of competing sites, but local, national and international news sources are mixed into a single stream all screaming for attention.

It wouldn't be so bad if this meant more variety and wider perspectives, but it doesn't. Like the big food chains have homogenised "junk food", so we now have "junk news". To keep us clicking, and reloading banner advertisements, news consumers must be turned into news gluttons.

If ever there was an example of supersizing the news, it is the Pistorius coverage. Let me say I have no opinion on the athlete's guilt or innocence. Firstly, because I am neither an investigator nor a juror; but secondly, it is my act of resistance against a mass media which desperately needs me to have a strong opinion to keep clicking, to keep commenting (this pointless but now-ubiquitous feature of online news inviting reader "opinion" below every story). Each click, each comment, each page refresh is another micro-payment from the advertiser, the life's blood of the modern "newspaper".

So, not only were details of the case exaggerated to generate bigger headlines, but peripheral issues suddenly took on elevated relevance to escalate the drama. Not only was Pistorius facing murder charges, but the lead detective in the case faced several cases of attempted murder himself. Even his brother was up for a homicide!

Where one might reasonably have relied on the press to provide clarity on the facts of the case, today's press wilfully obscures perspective and context to justify these headlines. So was it any surprise when the "several attempted murder charges" faced by the cop turned out to be a single incident in which he fired at fleeing suspects in a minibus, or when Carl Pistorius was acquitted of "manslaughter" charges relating to a traffic accident five years ago in which the other party was found to be at fault? Not that it matters. For a few days, the press got its "OMG!! WTF??" response from click-happy punters gagging for more drama.

Yes, as a reporter you can call people living half-a-kilometre away "neighbours" and technically get away with it, but you have to ask if your intention is to inform or excite: are you producing journalism or entertainment? When your readers tuck in, will they end up full but undernourished by McNews, or will they be better informed?

But the real issue is beyond mere concern for the intellectual nourishment of readers. We should be worried about how easily click-bait headlines skew the

news agenda. Who would have bothered reporting on a five-year-old traffic accident, much less framing it as a "culpable homicide" case, had the one party's more famous relative not been facing murder charges? Even the BBC covered the story with the dramatic headline: "Oscar Pistorius brother Carl also facing homicide trial." Note the sneaky use of the word "also".

Social media isn't helping either. Every newsroom these days needs a hack practised in scouring social media sites like Twitter and Facebook in search of a careless status update or picture which can be infused with dramatic significance following a scandal or tragedy. In the Pistorius case, a single tweet many months before expressing concern about an intruder was enough to generate a *Huffington Post* headline: "Olympian Joked About Killing Intruder On Twitter".

As I write this, headlines are popping up on Google News: "Leaked pictures show bloodied bathroom where Oscar Pistorius shot his lover Reeva Steenkamp on Valentine's Day." To start with "pictures" is an exaggeration. There is only one. The picture adds nothing to our understanding of the case. It is purely a salacious and grotesque baiting of a news hook, and it is carried in almost identical form in papers across the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and China. Why?

Well, that's the curse of news aggregation. In the mid-90s, my colleagues and I imagined a brave new media landscape facilitated by the internet, where greater understanding would follow from cross-cultural and trans-national news, all delivered with local perspectives. Instead we have blandly aggregated news courtesy of Google, Yahoo, MSN and other de facto internet concierges. The internet has become blander than cable-TV news, endlessly recycling the same top stories daily, hour after hour, desperately fishing for the one hook that might persuade you, pointlessly, to change channels only to see the same from a vaguely different angle. Disposable news.

One could put a positive spin on it and say it aids the notion that we're all living in the same world, with the same concerns, but that is PR gloss and we know it. In reality, we have the perfect armchair news: little of it is news we can use to change our local environments. Sure, we're angrier, more indignant, and more opinionated, but not about anything we can get up and do something about.

But that's the point. To keep clicking, we have to be sitting down. Junk news is making us emotionally obese.



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