MEDIA IN TRANSITION: A BATTLE FOR TALENT AND AUDIENCE

The media landscape has transformed drastically over the past decade, evolving in technology, platforms, and storytelling. But how have these changes shaped audience expectations and habits? How can media companies stay ahead and attract the talent necessary for innovation? An enlightening talk show on Kanaal Z recently delved into these issues. Read on for the key takeaways.

Participants in the debate

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How do we consume media?

To understand the current transition and technological evolutions, we must comprehend how media is consumed. According to imec's annual Digimeter report (March 2024), online media is now the primary consumption method for most, encompassing viewing, reading, and listening.

Lieven De Marez, Head of Media, Innovation and Communication Technologies at UGent, highlights an optimistic trend for Flemish media: "despite the dominance of international streamers, local platforms like **VRTMax**, **VTMGo**, **GoPlay** and **Streamz**, are nearly equal in reach and quickly catching up in engagement."

The shift online is paralleled by an increase in mobile use, especially younger demographics now average three hours daily on mobile devices. Each Flemish platform records an average usage of 15 minutes per person per day on their respective apps.

Social media continues to revolutionise viewer engagement, with platforms like TikTok capturing up to 80 minutes of daily attention from 65% of young users. However, TikTok's influence appears limited to younger demographics, with only one in five Flemish people using it daily. Yet, among young viewers, it has become a critical gatekeeper for all types of content. Lieven De Marez notes: "the era of watching tv content at a time dictated by the broadcaster is essentially over. Particularly young people are already DJs of their own video experiences."

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> Lieven De Marez – Head of Media, Innovation and Communication Technologies at UGent

How does this challenge media and production companies?

According to Jonathan Van de Velde of MediaNet Vlaanderen, a network organisation representing the Flemish media sector, interpreting these findings is the initial challenge: "understanding what, where, when, and how people consume media is critical, but also the duration and nature of the content, and how it's discovered. The challenge is ensuring that quality content adapts to changing habits, potentially using social media as a strategic tool."

How does the rapidly evolving gaming sector experience these shifts?

Natascha Rommens of Flanders Game Hub, a platform created to accelerate the development of this sector in Flanders, sees some interesting differences. While for other media young people are transforming the game, the gaming stereotypes are outdated: "surprisingly the average European gamer is 31,8 years old nowadays. The COVID-19 pandemic made a lot of parents pick up their old consoles, with or without their children."

Natascha thinks there's potential to integrate gaming data into the digimeter to better understand shifts in leisure activities. "Game makers are very data driven; they always start with player data. When they have a game idea, they will use that data to figure out on what platform those games are most popular, within what age group. There's an abundance of data available." Including that data would give an even broader view of how our media consumption changes.

Do these evolutions stimulate increasing and accelerated innovations?

The digital acceleration is undeniable in the media sector, says Lieven De Marez. "Innovations like VRTMax and GoPlay are significant, but a reaction to what bigger, international players have done. There's a pressing need for media companies to proactively differentiate. A common north star, perhaps aligned with emerging trends like AI and the metaverse, could prioritise a novel approach to innovation."

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How do the changing habits impact media companies?

Laurent Petit, Senior VP Markets & Business Alliances at EVS Broadcast Equipment, shares his insights. With over three decades of expertise in slow-motion replay technology, primarily familiar from sports broadcasting, EVS has witnessed significant reorganisations. "The production of content has diversified beyond traditional linear formats. Nowadays, every image counts, as viewers have access to multiple sources of content. Despite the increased availability, maintaining high quality remains crucial," explains Petit.

Is there cross-pollination between media companies and gaming developers?

Absolutely, according to Natascha Rommens. "We've seen great partnerships, like between 'De Slimste Mens Ter Wereld' and 'Switch' and a gaming company, to develop a game based on a quiz show format. Opportunities for extending intellectual properties or entire programmes are plentiful, as demonstrated by 'The Last of Us', which transitioned from a successful game into a television series. Such collaborations offer diverse ways to generate and distribute content across various platforms," she observes, "I certainly hope to see more of that in the future."
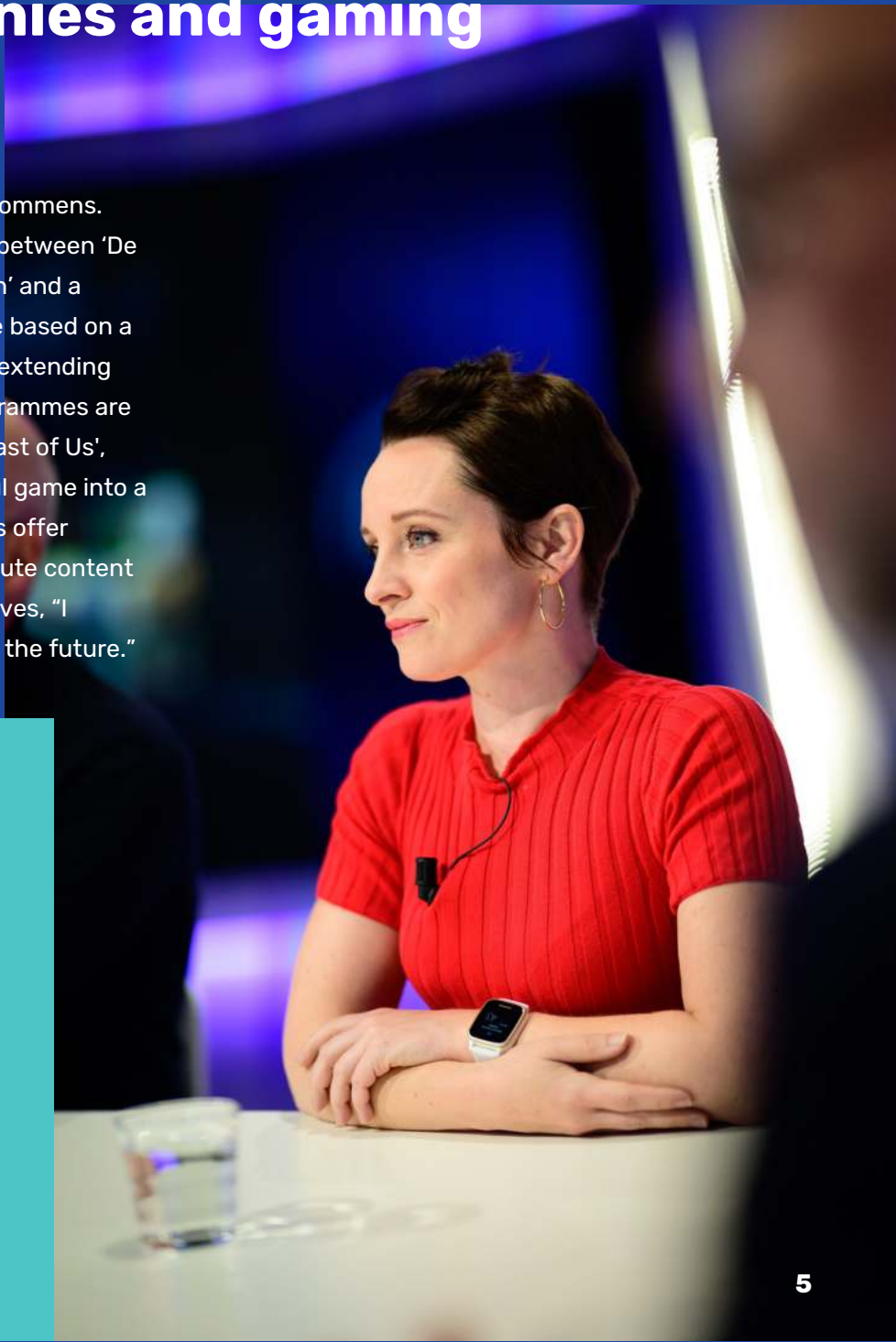
How can Flemish companies compete against foreign players and their budgets?

Jonathan Van de Velde highlights a possible strategy: "Formulating a pre-competitive strategy is crucial. By tackling common challenges such as AI integration and data flow optimisation together, we enhance our capabilities while preserving companies' unique content identities. Collaboration allows us to produce strong varied content, a hallmark of ours in Flanders, but produce and distribute it more efficiently," he explains.

Have any steps towards collaboration been taken?

Cue Future Media Hubs. Sarah Geeroms, who leads the initiative, sheds light on their collaborative efforts: "We are a global network of over 50 media companies, exchanging ideas and spearheading projects on innovative topics including startups, gaming, youth, news, and cutting-edge technologies." Future Media Hubs believes that European media companies must join forces to foster growth and innovation, ensuring the sector remains relevant and globally competitive. International anchors like Globo from South America and ABC from Australia, the world's largest television networks, are also members.

The network facilitates monthly virtual meetings in thematic groups, where participants discuss challenges and share projects. A specific example of an innovative project is an experiment with the game Roblox, where different Roblox worlds from public broadcasters across Europe are connected. A Flemish child can enter the VRT-Roblox world, and then move through a portal to Finnish or Danish worlds for an integrated, secure gaming experience.

Laurent Petit mentions EVS' innovation network, which includes around 100 partners. "We've also recently developed MediaHub, a content exchange platform that enhances how media is stored and shared with rightsholders, directly involving clients like the Royal Belgian Football Association in its development," he notes.

What determines the success of such innovation networks?

"The horizon you aim for is important," explains Lieven De Marez. "While many corporate innovation efforts target immediate survival or short-term differentiation, initiatives like Future Media Hubs are praiseworthy for their forward-looking approach." Citing the Roblox example, Lieven notes, "If partners unify around the use of gaming elements as a unique selling point, this can form a solid objective and cornerstone, not for increasing innovation grants but directing them effectively."

What are examples of grants for media companies?

Jonathan highlights the substantial support from government grants for the media sector. "However, it's not enough for the government that individual companies innovate in isolation; forming consortia that set shared goals across multiple companies is essential." He points out that immersive technologies, once the domain of giants like Disney, are now more widely accessible. "We also need expertise from academic institutions conducting research. for instance, the digital transformation call was very well received within the industry," he adds.

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How significant is the interest in AI within the sector?

It's a major topic, confirms Laurent Petit, at EVS it's used for two purposes: the automation of workflows and enhancing the content. "AI will even be able to generate new images, more than were originally filmed, and people might not see the difference."

Jonathan agrees that AI is a hot topic: "the capability to create audiovisual material using words captures the imagination," but according to Jonathan, it's much broader than that: "AI technology allows becoming more efficient throughout the entire media production chain. From conceiving ideas, using ChatGPT for scripting, to capturing extra frames, to delivering the right content to the right person."

What should the media consider when using AI?

"They should tap into the potential of using AI for enhancing process efficiency," says Lieven. He cautions against chasing trends indiscriminately: "ChatGPT made a big splash, with one in five Flemish people already embracing it in their daily routines." But many people are more wary: "Seven out of ten Flemish people wonder how they can still distinguish between human and machine." Should AI be regulated according to Lieven? "You can try, but regulation is not a one-size-fits-all solution. We need to embrace AI in the right way."

VRT, the Flemish public broadcaster has certainly embraced it. Tatjana Vandenplas, Head of AI at VRT, explains : "We employ AI to streamline workflows and enhance content production and distribution. It's also pivotal in creative processes and operational tasks for the news teams such as fact-checking and data analysis." VRT uses multidisciplinary teams to tailor AI applications precisely, from automating subtitling to enhancing content relevance and accuracy. "Our teams are energised by AI's potential, which promises even more groundbreaking developments in media," says Tatjana.

Has the breakthrough of AI impacted companies that provide services to the media sector?

Robert van Beurden, Media & Broadcasting Expert at LCL Data Centers, notes they're early witnesses to the AI revolution. "Data centers, the backbone of the digital economy, now require adaptations for AI's demands, such as increased power capacity—from about 3kw up to 100kw per rack—and advanced cooling methods like liquid cooling," he explains. Thanks to innovative technology and new, more efficient chips, these facilities can become up to 25% more energy efficient. "NVIDIA, the world's largest AI chip company, has a partner program called 'NVIDIA DGX-Ready Colocation Data Centers', which LCL participates in. We need to be AI ready, and this program can help us and our customers with the right scalable platform", adds Robert.

What technological evolutions can we expect in the gaming sector?

Natascha Rommens comments on the ongoing integration of AI in gaming, enhancing efficiency and the immersive experience. "Extended Reality (XR) is expanding the boundaries of traditional VR, creating more immersive environments right in the user's space," she adds.

How are media companies investing in the immersive experience of viewers?

Jonathan points out that not just large corporations, but increasingly small to medium-sized companies should probably invest in multipurpose immersive studios. "These flexible spaces allow for quick set changes, from hosting a talk show one day to a completely different set-up the next, maximising efficiency," he observes. The challenge remains in sourcing skilled professionals who can manage these advanced technologies effectively.

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Natascha Rommens - Partnerships Manager, Flanders Game Hub

What new profiles do they need?

"The industry requires individuals who not only excel in traditional media roles but are also adept with new media technologies including AI," Jonathan notes. "We can find people who tell incredible stories, or know how to operate a camera, and that's great. But a news studio, for example, is not the same as it was years ago. They rely heavily on software, immersive technology,…
We need people who can work with those technologies." These profiles are more difficult to find and on top of that, in high demand abroad.

Meanwhile, Natascha highlights a similar trend in gaming, where companies often have to look abroad for experienced talent. "It sounds like a paradox, but we have an impressive talent pool in Flanders. The problem is that they are so highly skilled, they get cherrypicked by big studios abroad." That's why Flanders Game Hub is trying to nurture more local opportunities and startups, so these graduates will have a place to grow.

Laurent Petit adds that at EVS they mainly need hardware and software developers. "Data scientists are becoming more important because they know machine learning and how to develop AI algorithms. So far, we've been lucky to find the right people."

Conclusion

This debate underscored the profound changes in media due to technological advancements and shifting consumption habits. As digital and mobile media dominate, companies must innovate proactively, leveraging AI. Collaboration between media companies is also necessary to stay competitive. Success hinges on adapting content and operations, while also attracting the right talent, to meet evolving technological possibilities. As Robert van Beurden summarises: "There are many initiatives that can strengthen the ecosystem, so we need to encourage media companies to follow through. Talking is important, but acting is even more crucial."

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