

The lowdown on digital influence

 By [Leigh Andrews](#), issued by [Meltwater](#)

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Shh. 'Digital influence' is meant to be something mystical and vague. That's no longer the case, following the Meltwater African Brain Food event, where all aspects of digital influence were unpacked...

I attended the first ever African Brain Food event, hosted by Meltwater, at the 15 On Orange Hotel in Cape Town on 18 June.

It was dubbed as a new event series serving up "a tasty debate on fresh, hot marketing topics, followed by cocktails and canapés with marketing professionals and influencers in the region."



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The menu for this specific event was 'Digital Influence', focused on the challenges of getting it, guiding it and growing it in today's hyper connected world as it is one of the biggest issues facing marketing teams, especially as the rules of the game have changed.

On the night, Toby Shapshak: Editor and publisher of *Stuff* magazine, co-host of weekly *TechBusters* tech show on CNBC Africa, weekly columnist for the *Financial Mail* and writer and speaker on technology and innovation in Africa; as well as Claire Cobbledick: Head of Marketing for Gumtree South Africa and previously Managing Director at The Jupiter Drawing Room, Cape Town shared their views.

The event kicked off with [MD Jorn Lyseggen](#) saying he loves being in Cape Town and often asks himself why he's not here more often, especially as Meltwater has been in South Africa since 2007. It is a Norwegian start up, and in 2005 moved its headquarters to San Francisco. With more than 1,000 employees, it is now the largest online news and social monitoring/analytics company and even calls the Vatican a client, which is surprising when you factor in that it all started on second-hand computers back in 2001, in what Lyseggen calls "a shack". The company vision all along has been that when executives come to work in the morning, within seconds they have insight into what's being said about their company, which is too much work to do manually. They aspire to help executives make informed decisions, as well as informed technical solutions.

Turning your view from inside-out to outside-in for true benchmarking

Lyseggen added that social media is crucial in the mix as today's customer feedback is an indicator of how well you'll do in

future. We're also seeing a huge shift in the market, which has huge ramifications for the move from internal to external data. Lyseggen says internal data is lagging as it only talks about history. But when you look outside your company's four walls you see what's really happening in real-time; what's happening in the industry as whole. This lets you see the future road ahead and understand what's coming at you, which also serves as a warning to individuals and companies alike as we tend to forget that we leave digital breadcrumbs with everything we do online. If you connect the dots on all of this, you have incredible, powerful intelligence at your fingertips. As a consequence of this strategy, Lyseggen says that decision-making will change as we look to new external data, because decisions need to be faster and act on opportunities for real benchmarking, based on a number of strategic dimensions. As a result, he feels that a new 'large software' category will emerge, with its roots in the old news clipping rooted to the digital Google Alert, and now can incorporate social media. The third generation of this is 'big data analytics', incorporating a wide range of data types.

The consequence is hard-hitting: To run a company, you now need to look to external data, hence the name 'external insight' for the new Meltwater platform. Lyseggen also spoke of the 'unfair advantage of the future boardroom', as well as about what is coming next and the new reality for future executives. His three main propositions are that how we run a company, how strategic decisions are made and how the company board operates will all change as a result.

Next up was Toby Shapshak, editor of *Stuff* magazine, on the perspective of the digital influencer. He said we live in the future, where the internet can make you famous or infamous - think of the Kardashians, who are famous for being famous, and the selfie generation that's risen. On the even more negative side, just think of the Justine Sacco tweet ([click here](#) for a reminder).

Twitter as an in-joke and Facebook as a peer-to-peer recommendation platform

He cites [Death Star PR](#) as perfectly summing up what the marketing industry calls 'influencers', as people so desperate to be famous that they put their bums on the internet. To Shapshak, this is nothing: The people who matter are those who have actually done things.

As editor of *Stuff* magazine, he says he was asked to explain Twitter and found the best way to describe it was as "one big in-joke". Think about it, it's a case of saying: "I'm cool, at a party with a bunch of celebs and you're not."

But of course, there's worse to deal with when it comes to the today's super-connected communications realm. We live with such a deluge of information, some of us could easily spend the bulk of our workdays deleting and responding to email. Journalists are near the top of this list - not such a problem if the information we receive is relevant, but sadly the majority of it is not. And while journalists are not celebrities of sorts just because their names appear on the front page of publications, if you have a high-profile job of this sort you need to behave with dignity and respect.

Shapshak counts himself among these, easily spending his day deleting email after email, which is why he says to reach a journalist you need to communicate differently. Especially when you factor in that most people read email on their phones - a JPEG or PDF-format invitation doesn't display correctly. Facebook has also become a way of merely sending links and forms a peer-to-peer recommendation.

Who exactly IS the digital influencer?

Moving on to digital influence, Shapshak said that many disregard bloggers entirely as influencers as there's a sense that journalism is a profession and you need to behave according to a certain set of rules once you qualify, but sadly, lots of that is lacking. It's just so easy to create your own online blog, without any formal training on the ethics of reporting.

Next, Cobbledick expanded on influencer strategy as a hot topic, meaning that the nature of influence is constantly being redefined. She says influence = trust + reach. Trust without reach is word of mouth, like asking your dad what brand of car to buy as you trust his opinion. Reach alone then is merely advertising. Influence marries the two.

Cobbledick tracked the rise of the influencer to Ronald Reagan, famed as both a Hollywood star and US president. Then, at

the turn of the previous century, sport stars started adding their signatures to products they supposedly used themselves, as endorsement or celebrity strategy.

This has grown in attention and budget over the years, as the digital environment created an opportunity for trusted messages to be delivered by trusted spokespersons to explode in reach. But the converse is also true, as a message delivered by one non-trusted or dishonest person also has the potential to reach exponential proportions. These days, whenever you post something you need to be "prepared for interrogation from the social universe".

Therefore, it's important to do all you can to protect a brand through firm relationships, with people willing to stand up and vouch for the brand in times of crisis. Many seemingly get excited about the potential of reach or advertising alone, but forget about the need for the strong relationship to amplify this, otherwise it just becomes noise or talk.

The key element is time, as relationships are built over time. [Click here](#) for a reminder of my interview with Lyseggen.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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