

Disrupting the Mobile Publishing

As a university lecturer who teaches new media in the remote city of Shantou in China, the Internet serves as the biggest conduit of information for me and my colleagues where we used cloud – based tools to search and communicate with the rest of the world, sans Facebook and Twitter, that is, and our lives were tethered to the wall, in a manner of speaking.

It was when China Mobile and Unicom began their head-on war on providing the best 3G and/or mobile Internet services that changed the landscape a little bit: our reliance on wifi-enabled devices have switched to smartphones and tablets, Mashable, Flipboard and other RSS aggregators became our tool to collect news and information.

These are third party aggregator mobile apps that “collects feeds” from multiple news outlets and display them in one pleasing, tablet-friendly format, the shortcoming of allowing contents to be shared in this manner is that the original content owner has little means to monetize the content.

Cost-effective solutions

During my rounds of lectures in media organisations around Asia, I have realised many of the old-school brick-and-mortar publishers are looking for a solution to their digital needs; how do they cross over to the click-and-motar model without sacrificing sales and revenue? The fact that they have lost money in expensive experiments makes it even harder to convince their bosses that there are cost-effective solutions across the horizon.

With that in mind, my team started work on building a platform that is both easy to maintain and even easier to operate — a system built by journalists for journalists — a platform that makes app-based publishing as simple as blogging. Conventional magazine apps are basically bookstores that allows you to download or purchase monthly publications in the form of HTML5, ePub or PDF documents, these apps are mostly similar in structure, but do not come with the option to cater for breaking news updates, the periodical apps can simply not meet the needs of a news agency.

I designed software architecture, or a system structure, with a server infrastructure that hosts all contents, a Content Management System (CMS) that works as the primary publishing platform, a mobile app for writers and editors

to upload and submit stories, and a reader app that has five major components; the news feeds, the bookstore, the video viewport, the social sharing and the end-user notification system.

My colleagues then parsed the design and started work on the UI render engines that can read encrypted feeds in pure text format and displays the content in a predetermined template.

Unlike most app-based magazine publishing services that basically pushes PDFs and or ePubs onto a static mobile app, our platform allows users to publish real-time articles and build a bookstore to sell ebooks. In essence we are going to build a news app with ecommerce capabilities built right in and there is no need to search for third-party services with real-time news feeds as well as online bookstore for subscription and one-off purchases of books, articles or periodicals.

Simply known as “blook”, this platform will provide small and independent publishers an extra avenue to publish onto mobile devices at a very low cost, the publisher do not need to bear the burden of maintaining a technical team, they will also no longer need to worry about hardware costs and all the nitty-gritty issues surrounding the upkeep and maintenance of cloud-based infrastructure including data backup, storage and security.

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Platform.

Obstacles to overcome

Armed with a working prototype, I approached a magazine publisher in Malaysia to adopt our platform; but life wouldn't be so interesting if there aren't any obstacles to overcome; to cut a very long story short, the magazine publisher pulled out on the day we were supposed to launch the service, and what we had on hand, was a product we firmly believe that can disrupt the mobile publishing platform with no contents to publish.

I then decided to create our own content, which means, we will have to build an editorial team to produce contents for a magazine that will showcase the elegance of the system and somehow look for other publishers to adopt the platform.

Publishing a magazine is not as simple as it seems – we have decided from the beginning that the magazine shall carry 80% original contents and 20% of the contents sourced from our blogger community – our hurdle was funding, since this project was totally self-funded, the team worked hard to produce original stories for the magazine.

That was in March 2013, one year and 12 issues later, we have published over 300 articles covering Malaysian General Election issues in 2013, tour and travel tips for visitors to Japan, Tibet, India, Taiwan and Thailand. We used social networks such as Facebook and Weibo to promote the articles and the app, in about a year, we have totaled over 8,000 user install base and readers in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan, as well as Japan, hackers ripped our app and made it available to “jailbroken” iPhones. The magazine served as a showcase for me to sell to interested publishers and hopefully, sponsors and future clients; we now serve a few publishers in China and Japan.



To offer a full-fledged service

Come March 29, 2014, Taiwanese science and technology news portal PanSci (<http://pansci.tw>) will launch its iOS app powered by our platform, following which, in April, we will be finalising the iOS app for high-end camera blog NewsShooter (<http://newsshooter.com/>), these early adopters can help us stress-test the robustness of the system. By the end of 2014, we hope to launch the platform to a selected public for a wide-area multiple client stress test.



Our team is also working hard to fine tune the app's user experience – we need to balance the ever-horrific ease-of-use factor with aesthetics and layout flexibility. On the back end, we will also build a separate app for editors and writers to submit stories remotely, making it possible to compose a quick-and-dirty multimedia news story with audio, video, still images as well as text elements on the fly so readers can read first hand stories with ease. The prototype of this workflow has passed our proof of viability test.

Our plan is to slowly scale the system to a point where we can offer a full-fledge service to the independent publishing industry and then later make this platform available to the masses, where anyone with content can register a free account with us, and create a mobile publishing app for the iOS and Android platform, there will no longer be technical issues, since everything is cloud-based, and upkeep and maintenance is performed remotely, stories and files are archived and backed up by the server automatically — publishers can finally do what they do best — publishing, and leave the technology to the technologists who understand what they need, and best of all, the platform will be free for all to use, just like blogspot.com and wordpress.com.

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