

**Identity and new platforms:
a guide for publishers**

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Part 1

How will moving to new digital platforms help shape the identity of your news brand? And, can you use them to engage a new audience and build trust in your content?

When BuzzFeed's editor-in-chief Ben Smith decided to publish an unverified dossier¹ detailing Donald Trump's relationship with Russia, it became news.

"Our job is not primarily to be gatekeepers, to decide what to suppress and keep from our audience, it's primarily to share with our audience what we've got"

BuzzFeed Editor-in-Chief
Ben Smith interview on CNN²

Whatever the political fallout, it could be viewed as an illuminating moment for publishers, journalists and audiences around the world. What Smith did was seemingly mark out a key part of BuzzFeed's brand – its identity. Brand typically refers to the sum of an organization's intangible attributes, such as identity, history and reputation.²

Applying this definition to publishing and broadcasting, this can include how you report, and how you converse with your audience.

While other news organizations had received the same dossier and were dutifully researching its authenticity, BuzzFeed went ahead and published it. As Smith asserted in his interview

with CNN, bringing it to people first and letting them make up their own minds was most important to BuzzFeed.

Thanks to the internet, mobile and a slew of social media and messaging platforms, huge audiences are now just a few clicks away for news desks across the globe. And it seems the existence of digital platforms (which give news publishers access to their audiences) is forcing publishers to establish, or reaffirm, their identities.



²Based on the recognized definition of a brand by David Ogilvy, founder, Ogilvy & Mather.



Part 2

Are you a brand that breaks news fast? Does your brand promise the most accurate and balanced reporting available? If your early stories are inaccurate, will your readers trust your longer format analysis?

Studies by Gallup³ and Ipsos Mori⁴ showed that trust in media and journalism hit an all time low in 2016. Are the digital platforms that publishers now compete on ultimately eroding credibility, something so integral to just about every news brand? Or, do they simply offer more opportunity?

³<http://www.gallup.com/poll/195542/americans-trust-mass-media-sinks-new-low.aspx>

⁴<https://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/Mumsnet-trust-report-FINAL.pdf>



Case study

Moving to mobile-first in India

How the Hindustan Times is reshaping its identity by embracing digital platforms

In India, where internet access and literacy are not universal, print circulations are still growing.⁵

Yet the Hindustan Times has been reshaping its identity by embracing digital platforms quicker than just about anyone else over the last three years. In doing so, it is building huge audiences, albeit in a country of 1.25 billion people.

Yusuf Omar is the Hindustan Times' mobile editor. Omar is excited to be shifting 750 English language journalists across 27 offices from a paper, or digital-first publishing mentality, to a mobile-first one.

Facebook Live, Snapchat, Instagram Stories and 360-degree VR reports are platforms and publishers that Hindustan Times is experimenting with. Immediacy is becoming part of the organization's identity.

"If we're doing a 360-degree video of Jama Mosque during Ramadan, (viewers) get to be there and play director and have all sides of the story," explains Omar.

⁵ <https://qz.com/643982/the-future-of-indias-newspapers-lies-in-the-hinterlands/>



“When we were covering education we asked six students to Snapchat the most stressful six weeks of their lives - getting into university. We created a show called Campus Calling, but they were the ones holding the cell phones. This gave a direct perspective into the lives of students and all sorts of intimate details. So in many respects our new platforms are giving you a more raw form of journalism than ever before.”

The mobile-first strategy is so much to the fore at the Hindustan Times that Editor-in-Chief Bobby Ghosh has predicted that the print front page will outlive the online homepage. In other words, for the Hindustan Times, the typical dotcom publishing model of using social to drive traffic to stories on the homepage is giving way to stories that live purely on the social platforms they’re using. The newspaper itself will continue to complement these channels, bringing the news together into one product.

To support this approach, rather than using dedicated video and social networking teams, Omar is teaching journalists how to tell stories using social media and messaging platforms. They’re empowered to shoot, edit, produce and in some cases publish the work themselves - direct to mobile.

“You don’t have reporters sending me a bunch of video that needs to be edited, but rather they do that within their units. You end up finding influencers, people who are particularly good at mobile journalism within the news team, within the business team, within the entertainment team, and so on,” says Omar.

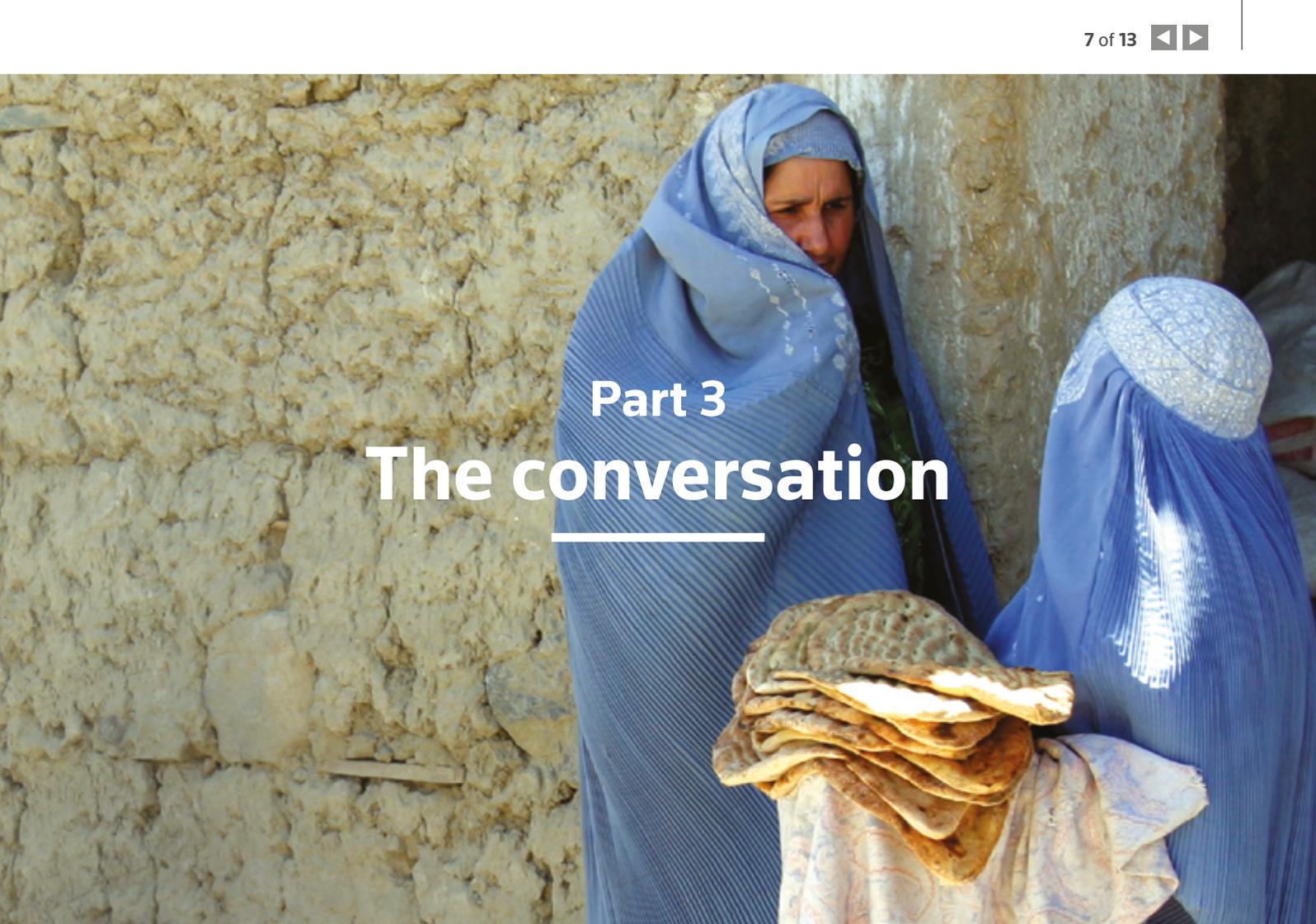
Internally, the move to digital has seen the reorganization of the company’s offices and news teams, with technology installed and seating plans adjusted. To the outside world, what was once a fairly traditional newspaper, inclined to report on business and politics, now has a far more varied readership. Bollywood, cricket and right-wing politics have proven to be its most viral topics, according to Omar. The paper has 17 different Facebook pages, and Omar admits that they cater to quite a fragmented audience.

According to Omar, the paper’s reputation for quality journalism is the constant but the voice, tone and format differs from platform to platform.

The impact on the organization’s overall identity and the level of trust it enjoys are hard to ascertain, but the Hindustan Times is certainly focused on bringing people closer to the stories.

“Platforms are one thing, but I think the other is creating the culture of engagement,” says Omar. “When I arrived, people in editorial meetings were looking at the who, what, when, where, why and how – the tenets of journalism. **We’re now encouraging them to spend 50 per cent of their time on engagement,** on ‘where are you sharing this story, in which Facebook groups, in which WhatsApp groups, what conversations are you starting?’”

“Platforms are one thing, but I think the other is creating the culture of engagement”



Part 3

The conversation

Whether raw and immediate, or well researched and considered, news shared on new social platforms can reach huge audiences very quickly. Being shared by one user to their friends or followers may not legitimize the story, or its credibility, but it provides a metric with which to measure popularity.

Just as important is the potential to talk to the audience and bring readers and viewers into the news conversation. Nearly all of these platforms have been designed to encourage dialogue, and some suggest that media organizations can use that opportunity to build trust with their audiences. A key point in 'Creating a Trust Toolkit for journalism'⁶ by Josh Stearn is that **if people and their communities are more involved in the news process, trust will grow.**

⁶<https://firstdraftnews.com/creating-a-trust-toolkit-for-journalism/>



Facilitating one-to-one conversation with every reader isn't practical or economical for a news organization, and so enters the humble messaging app: born into the business of conversation, many news organizations use them to share stories.

Apps like Facebook Messenger and Kik were designed and built specifically for people to chat with their friends. Thanks to the development of chat bots – a form of artificial intelligence designed to offer a conversational interface, users can also have limited conversations with those news outlets via the apps. Usually the bot will send a selection of links to news stories relating to an enquiry.

The Quartz app relies on human editors to program it, and the seemingly effortless chat is snappy, informative and amusing. It was designed with SMS text and messenger app users in mind, and mainly delivers global business news.

“We wanted to create an app that’s true to people’s experience of how they actually use their mobile phones, and what we struck upon was the idea that messaging is something that’s very native to mobile,” says Adam Pasick, push news editor at Quartz. “What people really seem to like about the app is the voice, the tone that we’re using to tell the news to people. **And that includes using the same conversational conventions, the GIFs and emojis** that people use when they’re talking to each other.”

The stories are broken down to fit the text message format too.

Being smart and well designed are qualities that have shaped the app, and part of the Quartz brand identity, according to senior VP, Zach Seward.



Part 4

Define your identity

When offering news via new platforms, your identity becomes crucial.

It's not just a case of differentiating yourself from other news outlets. Some users identify with the platforms they use as media outlets, rather than the news organizations that post the stories.⁷ Therefore, **might distinguishing your news in the social feed environment be as important as setting it apart from other news sources?**

According to Darren Bowles, executive creative director at Moving Brands, the identity agency that worked with the BBC to update its Newsbeat service, one of the first decisions was how to approach news and the voice the new-look service would have.

Newsbeat – aimed at 16 to 24 year-olds – had a homepage within the main website and a presence on BBC radio, but it wasn't quite performing as the corporation expected. Its positioning means it competes with digital publishers and aggregators like BuzzFeed, the Huffington Post, Vice and Reddit.

"Each of those news outlets would have a much more noticeable point of view. There's character, there's wit, they're funny, they're able to say a lot more sometimes, more like churnalism - stuff that isn't necessarily verified but they'll put it into the world," says Bowles.

⁷http://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/facebook-media-news-pew.php

The editorial team at Newsbeat, and Moving Brands, decided to take an 'off-the-beat', unconventional approach to news. Lots of short, entertaining and strange pieces, as well as coverage of the big stories but from a different angle.

The Oscar Pistorius trial dominated the headlines in the early stages of the project, providing an opportunity to test the latter approach. While most outlets focused on the athlete and the trial, Newsbeat focused on Reeva Steenkamp, the victim. More recently, most news coverage of Donald Trump's inauguration has focused on what he might be like as president. Newsbeat ran features about what his young voters expect from him.

Newsbeat's dynamic logo and slightly unbalanced visual elements match with the 'off-the-beat' news style. "It's a bit of disruption for the BBC, a bit of personality that takes it away from the main BBC identity," says Bowles. It's the small nuances, character and behaviour that give it personality.

To help make sure Newsbeat would be identified as the source of stories when material was shared on Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and other channels, Moving Brands created ActionScripts (a programming language) that split the images into blocks and distort them. "It's simple for the editorial team to feed in an image and it will automatically disrupt it. It's kind of dynamic manipulation of the image," says Bowles.

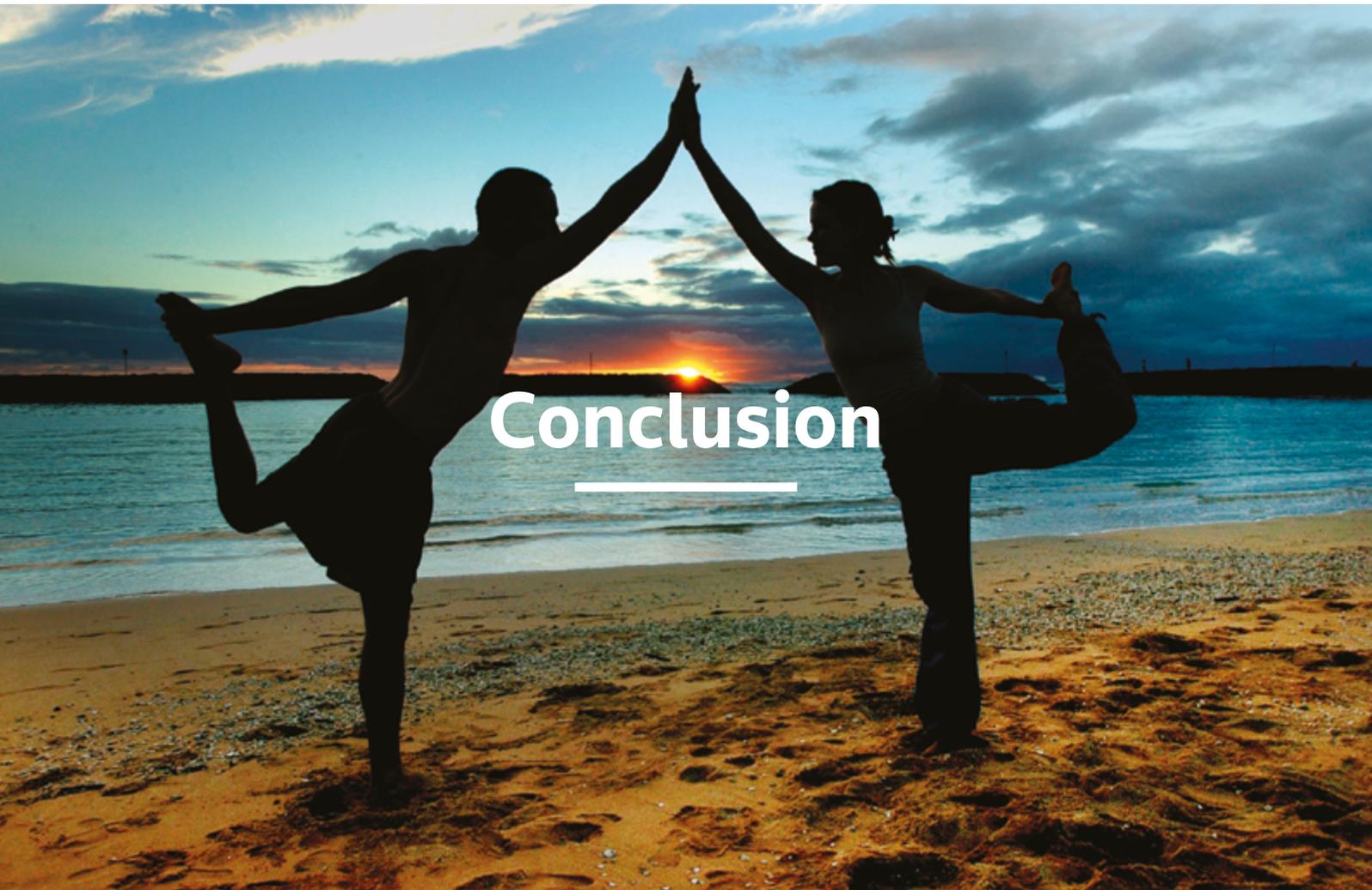


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Whether you are a new digital publisher, or an existing news brand moving to a new platform, Bowles shares this list of questions to help you define, or refine, your identity:

1. What do you stand for (your journalistic integrity) and does your brand identity communicate this?
2. Who are you trying to meet with your news?
3. What new platforms will help you connect with them?
4. Has your content been created to maximize the functionality and format of each channel?
5. What unique design signatures can you build into your owned platforms?
6. How shareable have you made the content?
7. When shared, how will a person know instantly that the content they're seeing is yours? Are there design signatures that follow the content?
8. Why would they come back?

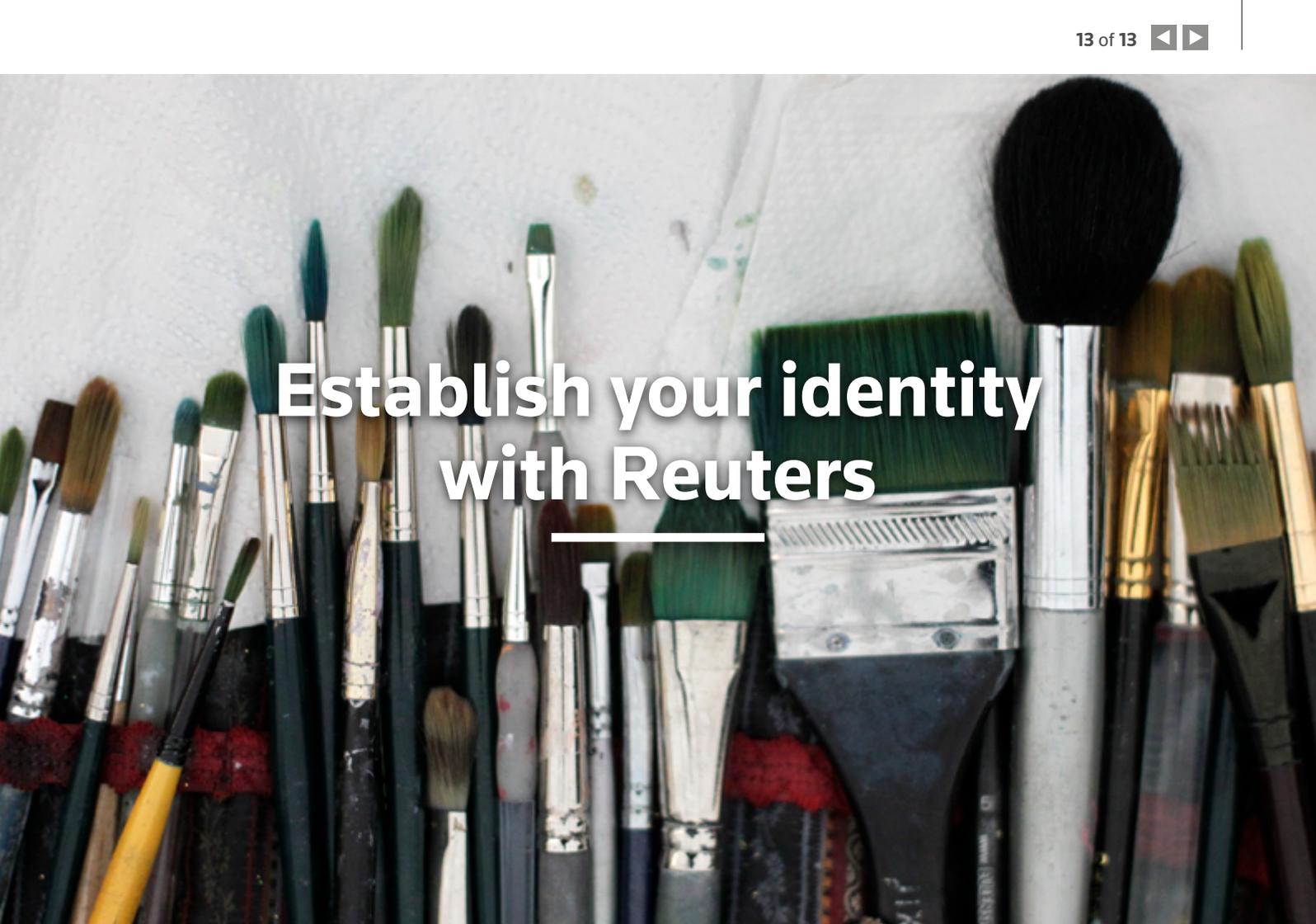


Developing your news organization's identity in the fast-changing digital era is a complex challenge, full of choices. However, fresh platforms allow for new and different means of reaching audiences - including those who simply no longer engage with print and broadcast media, or never have.

These platforms enable fast access to vast numbers of people - great for organizations which aim to break news quickly and have made that part of their identities.

Yet a strong identity can be established digitally, whether or not your aim is to be the fastest. It isn't necessarily about being first on a platform any more than it's about being first with a story. It's about choosing the right platform and using it well. Visual nuances, style of reporting and presentation are some of the areas in which digital publishers can distinguish themselves.

New platforms allow you to converse with your audience in multiple ways - a huge opportunity for news organizations wanting to build their identity and gain trust with the audience. The Hindustan Times and other organizations are proving that mobile-first and social-first strategies mean that news stories can live in new places. Yes, your audience might become fragmented by using numerous digital channels. But having a clear identity, one with engagement built in, will be critical for news organizations throughout 2017 and beyond.



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