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Rob Wijnberg

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He used to be Editor-in-Chief of the Dutch newspaper nrc.next, a job he was forced to resign from because his ideas were too controversial. Today he has his own journalistic platform: de Correspondent, online journalism that “aims to put certain issues into context and show its readers what the world really looks like”. How did Rob Wijnberg break the shackles of journalism? And what will the news industry look like in 20 years time?

At age 32, Rob Wijnberg seems in a hurry. He speaks fast, one thought often moving on to the next, but always returning to the point he wanted to make. With his dark hair and dressed all in black, he is exceptionally clear about his views and intentions. He is a man with a mission. “Newspapers are all the same. They all look the same and write about the same issues. These days magazines look just like newspapers and vice versa. Even TV talk shows base their information on what they read in the papers.” Being the same as everyone else is not what Wijnberg is about. Yet, as is increasingly commonplace, large, traditional organisations are not places that encourage or can even accommodate radical innovation. So, forced out of his job, he decided to set up De Correspondent.

Keeping away from greedy investors

“We started the platform using crowd funding which turned out to be the ideal method for several reasons. First of all, collecting a large number of subscribers before the product even existed showed us there was enough interest for a paid online journalism platform. Secondly, it allowed us to set up our business the way we wanted to, which was quite important, because our aim was to organise our company as immaculately as possible, without it being contaminated by greedy investors or banks demanding a return on investment.” This approach seemed to work.

Even before launch, the venture had already gathered 20,000 subscribers. Now, almost a year later, 12,000 more have been added. Realising that the technology platform was as important as the journalism content, Wijnberg decided to set up in full partnership with the developers at Momkai, a digital creative agency. “It’s a more expensive way to start a business and many advised against it. People said to me, ‘why don’t you just start with some cheap programmers? Start small, somewhere in an attic or garage, develop a beta-version and grow it from there’. But in the long run it has turned out better this way; now it is also in Momkai’s interests to continue developing the platform.”

During the setup, apart from the enthusiasm of supporters, Wijnberg also learned how to deal with negative feedback to his innovative plan. “Sometimes you can become overwhelmed by the comments, people say that what you want isn’t possible and you start having doubts, you start wondering whether you are on the right track. When I reached that point, I remembered what Joris Luyendijk (a well-known Dutch journalist and Guardian columnist) once said to me: ‘Exactly the right people are angry. They wouldn’t bother if they thought it was a bad idea.’”

How we see the World

“If I ask you: ‘what’s going on in the world?’ it really depends on how you see it and what your world is like. But if you believe the newspapers and TV, it looks as though everyone agrees about what’s going on in the world and which subjects are most important. I find that odd.” Wijnberg explains how you can get people more engaged in how the world works by translating major issues or developments into a story close to people’s everyday lives. “These days, most news seems to be about evoking an emotion: ‘oh, how terrible’ or ‘what a scandal’, but our intention is to provide insight into how the world works. If you want to explain the privacy dangers of the internet, for example, you can write an abstract article about the subject, but then people might ignore the story because they don’t understand how the issue relates to them. A more effective way would be to illustrate the situation by bringing it close to someone’s personal life. So, one of our journalists went to a bar, logged on to the Wi-Fi network and checked what information he could collect from all the people currently on that network. He turned an abstract problem into something people do every day. The next time one of our readers logson to a Wi-Fi network, he or she will think about that story.”

Sharing knowledge

Reader engagement is another significant element that Wijnberg believes brings greater meaning to how the world works. “Traditional newspapers have a great many subscribers with an interesting repository of know-how and experience, but there is no way for them to contribute to the medium that informs them. That is also quite strange really. We don’t just collect reader’s tweets and add them to our articles or let subscribers leave their comments at the bottom of an article and never do anything with those comments. We ask our readers to share their expertise and we integrate their voice in our published items.

After all, 100 teachers know more than one education journalist. When this approach works widely, you change the news, and change the information that people get. That's our goal."

Wijnberg seems to draw on many sources for his inspiration. "Inspiration can come from anything around me, I unconsciously pick up impressions and thoughts, ranging from the people who started Facebook and grew it to become a complete global network, to small start-ups that think of something clever." Other sources of inspiration he mentions are comedians like John Stewart of The Daily Show and Bill Higgs, an American comedian popular in the 1990s. These comedians use humour to tell us something fundamental about the world we live in, is how Wijnberg sees it. "Stewart adds another layer, making the programme not only hilarious but relevant too. And visiting Bill Higg's show wasn't just an evening of laughter and that was that. No, on the way home, you would think: 'Jesus, I'm screwing up the earth and I have to do something about it!' They both have a funny and light-hearted way of conveying serious messages that stay with you. In my work too, I look for the ideal way to combine being serious and connecting to people's worlds."

The future of journalism and the importance of experimenting

"Stagnation means decline. I find the idea that something is good because we've always done it that way, a bizarre notion." Ordering an espresso and his legs fidgeting impatiently under the table, he seems eager to expand his plan and break down the boundaries of journalism. "To me, experimenting is the basis of everything we do here. And to the people working here. They all left their well-paid jobs because they had the desire to create something totally new. The idea that the world will still look the same a 100 years from now seems terrible to me." Wijnberg has strong ideas about what good journalism is, but he is far from prescriptive about appropriate new approaches – and certainly does not believe that his way is the only way.

"There's no one right way to bring the world into focus. My ideal would be that instead of all the media shifting towards each other, they would all move apart, creating more and more different sources, websites and forums for journalism, all with their own scope. With more diversity, readers have more options." How can companies get there?

“When it comes to encouraging an innovative mentality in your company, I like the quote from John Welch, the former boss of General Electric. He said to his Research & Development department: ‘I have one task for you: kill General Electric. Don’t come up with something that saves us, but think of what will destroy us. Because if we don’t, somebody else will.’ That’s a mentality more companies should have; don’t think of ten new ways in which we can sell, market or package our product, but come up with the product that will replace us.”

Mr Wijnberg was talking to Carlijn Vis and Ron Soonieus of Camunico

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