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Extinction or Resurrection: Surf Mags and Media Substitution Theory

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It has been a little over a week since the announcement of the closure of Surfer magazine and all the keyboard warriors have made their predictable proclamations of the death of print. In this article I use media substitution theory to suggest a way forward for the beleaguered but still vitally important printed surf mag.

Extinction or Resurrection: The future of Surf Mags through the lens of Media Substitution Theory

If Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' principle is a suitable analogy for the way in which surf print media must respond to its changing environment then media substitution theory is a suitable lens through which the avoidance of extinction can be analysed.

Media substitution theory emerges from the functionalist approach to communication studies and is grounded in uses and gratifications theory which assumes media users actively make media choices to satisfy psychosocial needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, 1984). Media substitution theory asserts that when a new media technology such as the internet is introduced, audiences redistribute the allocation of their time between the available media options and new patterns of media consumption emerge (Kaye & Johnson, 2003). Under these circumstances, Nossek, Adoni and Nimrod (2015) advance three possible outcomes relating to the extent to which one media option is substituted for another: (1) Displacement, which occurs as a result of the new medium being 'functionally equivalent', creating conditions that could cause the incumbent to become either displaced or rendered obsolete; (2) Co-Existence, which results from a process of 'functional differentiation' whereby the incumbent makes adjustments that allow it to realise a functional point of difference and re-establish its unique nature; and, (3) Convergence, which is a 'functional synthesis' of the two media sources resulting in a new medium that simultaneously utilises the functionality of both.

These three scenarios provide a useful framework for strategic responses by an established media source to the arrival of a potential disruptor, and this framework is worth exploring in light of the questions being asked of surf print media following the closure of two giants of American surf culture; Surfer and Surfing magazines. In my opinion, the apparent failure of surf print media has little to do with the innate utility of the medium. Instead, we surf mag publishers have failed ourselves through ineffective adaptation to the new environment. Using media substitution theory, there is evidence of Displacement and Convergence, but few attempts at Co-Existence. Some publishers have barely evolved their product, assuming there is functional equivalence, and believing the consumer will simply divide their time between their magazine and digital alternatives. Studies have shown, however, that even if they are functionally similar, audience attention will favour the new-comer, and if the new-comer is perceived to be superior in content, cost or convenience, then displacement is inevitable (Lin, 2001). Others have opted for Convergence, incorporating digital services into their content offering at a comparatively poor cost-to-revenue ratio, mostly at the behest of Millennial brand managers who have only ever known a digital world, and demand an "integrated" advertising platform. The option of Co-Existence, however, has been a path less followed. This form of adaptation requires the surf magazine to functionally differentiate itself following a frank and rigorous analysis of the surf media ecosystem, and print's role within it. At its most basic level this involves identifying, then capitalising on print's strengths, especially those strengths that address digital's weaknesses. This process will surface print's innate utility, and become the foundation of the surf

magazine's resurrection. Letting go of the past in order to reimagine a better future requires bold creativity and experimentation. It may indeed result in a product that is significantly different to its traditional format, and purpose.

In Darwinian terms, surf magazines are a critically endangered species in a fragile surf industry ecosystem. Looking through the lens of media substitution theory, the closure of *Surfing* and *Surfer* magazines are a clear indication that Displacement of the surf magazine is well underway. Attempts at Convergence by becoming more digital, is a flawed strategy because it only decreases its point of difference, makes it less specialised, and less viable. This leaves the option of Co-Existence by adapting the product to establish a distinguishable value proposition that can serve the market uniquely alongside the ongoing deluge of digital media services.

Author notes: Through my doctoral research project, which investigates the future of surf print media, I have recently produced two reports summarising some of the findings from a national survey, completed by over 1,300 Australian surfers. These findings aim to answer three research questions, namely: (1) what is the research group's surf content preferences, (2) where they go to source this content and (3) what motivates them to make those media source choices. The result of this study, and a subsequent qualitative study, will continue to inform my thoughts on the beleaguered but still vitally important printed surf mag.

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