Merging Media To Lead A Print Evolution

When Amit Radia, founder and CEO of Atlas Group, saw the advent of internet and digital applications coming for the printing industry, he set about exploring new paths. Today he is merging technology with print to create whole new media solutions.

While the business world transitions to adopt the latest in technology into its background systems, there is a much more visible evolution taking place in the way consumers engage with media. For news, entertainment and insight, people these days are much more likely to turn to their handheld devices and desktops than approach a magazine or newspaper stand—even less likely if they are required to pay. As consumers now expect to access news online for free, rumors of the impending death of print media abound. And yet, print media continues.

Amit Radia, founder and CEO of Atlas Group—one of the largest printers and the largest digital publisher in the Middle East—has had a front-row seat to this phenomenon. "The argument rages on: is print dead?" he muses. "It isn't, and it never will be. However, we are in a state of flux at the moment. Digital media today is not a viable revenue stream. You can't do without print, you can't do without the internet—how do you merge the two?"

Radia—a third generation Kenyan—set up Atlas in Dubai in 1994, nearly 25 years ago. At the time it was a basic traditional printing house. As Dubai grew, so did the company, making large investments in equipment to print ever more thousands of local and international magazine and newspaper titles as they flooded into the emirates. Atlas has equipment today capable of producing more than 15,000 books and magazines an hour, with its digital-printing arm capable of producing up to half a kilometer of variable data in full color in just one minute. "Commercial printing was booming; real estate was booming. It was good times," Radia remembers.

Then, in the mid-nineties, the internet hit the world. "I realized in the early 2000s that we better start looking at this because it will be a threat in the long term, and it was," admits Radia. "We had to take a step forward to understand what is threatening our business and how we incorporate that."

As a result, over the last seven years, as the demands of its customers change and local publishers reduce their print magazine and newspaper titles, Atlas Group has reinvented itself to be much more than a printer. The key now is not to approach media as ink on paper, but to offer hybrid solutions incorporating digital print, apps and even augmented reality. "We do not classify ourselves as a printing company anymore; we classify ourselves as a media production house," Radia reveals.

With teams of programmers, printers, designers and editors in Dubai, India and Africa, Atlas Group has expanded to encompass three distinct branches. Atlas Print incorporates magazine and commercial printing. Atlas International publishes African titles to the African market—something that is being evolved to being entirely app-based. And Atlas Media—the largest branch, launched in the early 2000s—embodies airline and inflight print,

newspapers, variable print and content for educational institutes, and it's here where much of the innovation is concentrated.

"We didn't want to reinvent the wheel and become a software company," says Edgar Theodore, director of operations at Atlas Group. "What we wanted to do is integrate with our legacy systems and processes to give the customer a totally unique experience." This unique experience is non-more-obvious than when looking at how Atlas create materials for schools and banks.

Certified to print examination papers for education leaders Pearson in the UK, ACER in Australia and the Abu Dhabi Education Council, Atlas Media is able to use its software to tailor exam papers, not just for each individual school, but for each individual student depending on their strengths and requirements. Amalgamating databases from nearly 400 schools in Abu Dhabi—containing information on grades, classes and what level each student is studying at—Atlas can receive instructions on what types of questions should go to which level of student, and print a unique question paper for each pupil, with their name, details, questions and visuals. To date they have printed over 500,000 unique booklets.

The same concept within variable printing is used to create variable data advertising on statements for banks and credit card companies. With many consumers still choosing to receive paper statements, Atlas can create and print statements that have advertising features specific to a particular customer profile, using customer information provided by the financial organization—including gender, age, salary and address. The next step is to incorporate a customer's buying profile, so for example if they like to shop in New York or play golf in Thailand, specific ads are shown to them from relevant advertisers. "Each ad can be tailored to that profile, to the point that it's extremely relevant and targeted," says Radia "It's already happening on YouTube and Amazon. What we're doing is similar."

Looking ahead and the blend of technology and print is becoming even more pronounced, with Atlas now exploring how to integrate augmented reality within print products. "We're disrupting the market," says Anand Krishnan, division head of Atlas Print Management. "We've got the machines, we've got the capabilities. We feel there is a lot of potential here."

Augmented reality (AR) is often something thought of as synonymous with digital equipment, not paper. However, Atlas has found a way to merge the two. "If you think about real estate, furniture brands or automakers, for example, the customer hates to be inundated with print-heavy brochures," says Krishnan. The answer is AR.

By downloading the Somilar app from any app store, consumers can scan codes on print—whether that's a personalized invite, a welcome kit, a poster—to bring up 3D-images and videos to their phones.

"Seeing something in motion brings the whole thing to life to give the story of what the product is about," says Krishnan. "I could show you your would-be future five-bedroom villa and what the view looks like from the master bedroom." Another example comes in the form of a 3D elephant and supporting video that pops up on the table as he waves his phone over a zoo pamphlet. "There's still a long way to go," says Radia. "But it's the future."

Atlas are now also stepping up the printing value model altogether to produce mobile

applications, with two currently up and running and one under development.

In August 2017, the Group launched their magazine app, Magazeti, in Kenya. Taking the three East African print titles that it owns there— Healthy Woman, Healthy Child and MALE—and making them available through the app for free, Atlas has now stopped producing the titles in print altogether. Also focusing on providing free news and entertainment is the News Stream app.

"We allow corporates to give News Stream to their clients for free, but then the advertising they give is tailored," explains Radia. The aggregator app catalogues content from news portals and online magazines across the world and brings them together into one place. Anyone can download the app for free, however, if an Atlas client, such as a hospitality group, gives customers a code to use when logging in, Atlas software recognizes the code and ensures that specific ads are made available to that user. In future they plan to also have a Facebook and Twitter login so that even your social media news feeds are incorporated into the one-stop app.

The Group's third app, currently being developed by the team in India and due to be launched in Q1 2019, will allow consumers to make small orders of personalized products such as invites, brochures or picture albums using the app to access and download photos from Facebook, Instagram or their photos library. The app will even automatically pick up pictures from a specified date or person and drop them in.

By using technology to make content and paper products more tailored, more effective and more fun, Atlas Group may be keeping print media alive for a little while longer.

"All we're doing is integrating software with our traditional products to give customers a better solution," says Radia. "We are creating the bridge to give the best of both worlds."

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