11.3: From the Field- Addis Insight - A Niche Site for the Ethiopian Diaspora

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In January 2016, I started Addis Insight[^1] with the aim of becoming a leading digital media platform for Ethiopians across the world. Before starting Addis Insight, I had the opportunity to work as a Wikipedian In Residence and Google Student Ambassador, which gave me the opportunity to identify an area where I could express my passions. When I first started Addis Insight, I had two clear goals: 1) to improve the quality and quantity of content that is available online regarding Ethiopia and its far-flung citizens and 2) to allow the younger generation of Ethiopians to tell their story.

Six months after launching Addis Insight, I won a scholarship in media and communication to attend Ohio University in the Communication Development program. At the same time, I had to make a tough decision about Addis Insight. I was at a crossroads. I had to choose between incorporating Addis Insight as a company or letting it become a website that aggregates news from other news sources. That is when I met Rediat Belehu, a marketing graduate, who was willing to leave her high-paying job and join Addis Insight to run the company as chief executive officer and shareholder while I was out of the country for two years.

Despite having no background in media and communication, our team had the determination to build a media brand that will give our audience insight across several topic areas. To achieve our content goals, we started out by reaching out to subject matter experts in different professions. We believed that many professionals in Ethiopia has not been given a chance to share their expertise. In Ethiopian media, you rarely see an architect, doctor, banker, investor, engineer, or athlete sharing their insight on topics in which they have expertise. As a result, we started encouraging people to share their views on our platform even if they were not journalists or politicians.

Our revenue model was based on three strategies. The first was to target local companies to advertise on our website. Our approach is to show advertising customers that unlike radio, television and newspapers where they may advertise, we can provide them demographic details about the audience that visited and interacted with their ads. The second strategy was to partner with online ad publishers like Google AdSense and the Facebook Ads Network. Unfortunately, our website was flagged by Google AdSense after our website was spammed by Russian traffic. This resulted in the suspension of our ads for over a year. We are still trying to contact Google and fix the issue. The third income-generating model is to provide consulting through social media and digital marketing services for businesses and celebrities. This helped us to build strong relationships with people in the entertainment industry. Because of this effort, we have had more than 24 contributors from various fields and backgrounds, who have contributed a total of 170 articles. Ninety-five percent of our contributors are under 30, and 60 percent of them are women. The approach we used to attract experts to contribute to our website was to first identify a topic area, then research the social media profiles that are trending and driving engagement around it. For instance, we have a business section and for that we looked at people mainly on networks like LinkedIn and analyzed the type of content they share with their network and the engagement they drive. After that we approached influencers and pitched the idea that they could gain more readers and create more awareness of the issues they are writing about by becoming a contributor to our website. Even where there was no monetary compensation, we explained the benefits of growing their brand profile on digital platforms. Where applicable, we also offered them an internship and recommendation letter. This approach really solidified our brand recognition through social media, as our content was shared by contributors who are influencers in their social media sphere.

Political polarization between the government and opposition parties means that part of our society is excluded from getting stories that inspire them to become successful in Ethiopia. That is why we launched our "Made In Ethiopia" series. It features change makers in Ethiopia who are building the Ethiopian Dream against all odds. We also gave voice to the first generation of Ethiopian Americans to share their views about identity and their homeland. Some of the initiatives include the inspiring stories of the Yellow Movement, which supports and empowers girls by selling roses; the story of Hermella Wondimu, who built more than 27 water wells at age 28; the story of Abraham, who returned from Dubai and disrupted the car washing business in Ethiopia by using his car washing experience from Dubai. We also happily shared our platform to promote artists, creators, and technology entrepreneurs who wanted to gain the public’s vote during global competitions. Whenever tragedies broke, we did our best to tell a story that would lift our country folk and makes us stronger as a nation. Last year after a garbage landslide at Koshe took the life of 115 people, we did an exclusive interview with one of the survivors from Koshe titled The Koshe Dreamers and it was among our most visited posts.

Lack of experience in the field of media and limitation of resources didn’t stop us from pursuing our dream. In order to sustain, we pitched our ideas to people who we assumed could help in filling our gap. Our story and how young we are as a team inspires others to join our team. In order to solidify our credibility, we seek media partnerships with important brands that are not already partnered in Ethiopia. As a result we were able to forge media partnerships with YouTube, Music In Africa, and the Ethiopian Diaspora Fellowship. But above all we built credibility because we really valued our user experience and consistently improved our platforms and our visitors’ experience. We are the first media in Ethiopia to adopt Facebook Instant Articles and Google Accelerated Mobile Pages that significantly saved data cost for users. We avoided the temptations of clickbait and refrained from monetizing our content by misleading readers with headlines and sensationalized content that is full of gossip.
Just one month after I came to America, the Ethiopian government imposed a state of emergency[2] blocking all social media and restricting any form of public assembly. This was due to an ongoing protest at the time. The social media blockade lasted for 10 months, and the service disruption still occurs whenever there is any protest in the country. This directly affected our reader base in Ethiopia. Also, people were using Virtual Private Network (VPN)[3] to access our website and that distorted our demographic geodata as the readers were rerouted to access social media websites from different country gateways.

Our journey has never been easy, and we were able to sustain our business without making any profit for the past two years. We had to convince advertisers that digital media is the next big thing for Ethiopia even though we were not lucky to get clients as easily as we expected. We had to support our business by bootstrapping and funding from our school stipends and with the generosity of teammates who put in "sweat equity" and worked essentially for free when we couldn’t pay salaries on time. Even after living 16 months in the United States I didn’t adjust my sleeping hours because I had to operate in Ethiopia time (an eight-hour difference) to help my teammates. I may graduate with my master’s degree in media and communication without my friends, but I make sure to share my school materials and knowledge with my team so that we can all grow in my absence. Our dream is so powerful that we had people like Sergut Dejene, a marketing strategist who left the U.S. to join our team. When we hadn’t developed editorial guidelines for our contributors, people like Hadra Ahmed, a freelance journalist, extended a hand to help us. Full-time students and workers committed their weekends and nights to make sure we don’t lack well-researched and well-written content. We always took the criticism of our readers on our grammar and content as constructive, and responded positively and graciously. We even believe in collaborating with other media and we have learned a lot from people like Tsedale Lemma, who is the founder of Addis Standard, (Addis Standard was a monthly English newsmagazine print that suspended its publication due to challenges related to media law in Ethiopia). We get inspiration from her works and challenged ourselves to improve our content depth and journalistic professionalism.

Because of our team perseverance and our devoted readers, we’ve now surpassed 500,000 unique visitors with 1.5 million views in the past two years. Currently we get 30,000 visitors per month. Despite having a steady growth of visitors, advertisers are hesitant to publish ads on the website. Part of this is due to lack of awareness about the power of digital media. But when our stories are picked up by global media, it gives us a morale boost that very soon the interest from local advertisers will rise.

Finally, as we follow on our second anniversary, we have more than 120 people who have volunteered to become contributors on our website. Our next step will be to secure investment and a bank loan to invest in the human resources we need to operate efficiently. At the same time we are doubling our efforts to get local ads. Even with these milestones, two years in, we had to sell our furniture just to pay our office rent. But as I write this, we just secured our first website ads deal with a chocolate factory in Ethiopia. We are 100 percent confident that we will become the leading digital media platform in Ethiopia, and that is our New Year’s resolution for 2018.

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