

Woodward of the wired world

My first day at WashingtonPost.com was a mixture of intense excitement, pride and profound humility. To walk through the lobby and sense that I belonged, officially, to this great institution was incredible. And of course, now I have to admit to enjoying – and missing – the ego-boosting aspect of being able to say, “I work for The Washington Post,” a response that demands and receives instant respect!

The ethos underlying The Post’s foundation in journalistic ethics and investigative reporting was established by Eugene Meyer more than a half-century after the paper’s founding – coinciding with the dawn of the Graham era. These ethics, embodied in tenets stressing the truth, the public good and the duty of the newspaper to its readers and the public at large, have permeated the company’s new media initiatives.

A year of conspicuous Post consumption proved that the paper is deserving of its reputation, and I was eager to discover first-hand the secrets underlying its success and whether these could be replicated online. No other paper can lay claim to scooping such significant stories as Watergate. And, with an unmatched market penetration, a daily circulation of 809 340 and more than 1.1 million buyers on a Sunday, the paper can claim success on many fronts.

It is more a case of morals by osmosis than by directive, a corporate culture that automatically demands credible sources and resources, fairness and an exhaustive examination of the “facts”. This type of rigour is particularly challenging in the online medium, where one

must delve deep and develop particular judgment to ascertain adequate source credibility and reliability. Ask me, one of my first tasks was to evaluate and add resource links for the 220-plus countries in our international reference guide.

A newspaper, like any other institution, is only as good as the synergistic sum of its – in this case – Pulitzer prize-winning parts, and their productive interaction with resources. A great paper does not automatically make a great website, but The Post’s practice is to take the strategic approach and ensure that resourcing is more than adequate. The paper alone employs about 550 people, many of whom are dedicated editorial staff, explaining how the paper offers the degree of insight and depth in its reporting it does. When was the last time you

read a local story that had half-a-dozen contributing reporters?

Digital Ink, the new media division, employed 128 full- and part-time staff during my tenure. These human resources translated into full blown graphics, content, marketing, technical and personnel departments, all with highly sophisticated divisions of labour. Despite these divisions, and in line with innovative management and the soul of the web, individuals aggregate naturally around projects which draw on their particular strengths and areas of expertise. For example, our coverage of the presidential inauguration was put together by a team headed by our weekend editor, and included individuals from Washington World (metro), international sections and me, at that time producer on the business and classifieds sections.

One of the most interesting observations was that newsrooms the world over resemble each other. There aren’t many distinguishing characteristics between the newsroom at The Post, at WashingtonPost.com and any other American or local newsroom I’ve seen. What was surprising was that, let alone being situated in a different building, the printed and online divisions are situated in different states! True, the trip from one to the other is a short Metro ride or a drive across the Potomac River, but the separation is quite tangible.

As a new venture into a new medium, in one sense it is good to be separate and unbound by the traditional conventions, but being removed from the newsroom presents its own problems. In situ sifting allows for far better co-ordination and mutually beneficial interaction. It can aid in combating the suspicion often encountered from print journalists, in dealing with questions of their being scooped by the online edition – do you break a story online or wait for the print edition to hit the streets? – and assist in the paradigm shift it takes for many to accept the new medium. Considering this state of affairs, I probably shouldn’t have been surprised at the minimal

interaction between the various divisions of the parent company, such as between The Washington Post in the newspaper fold and Newsweek from the magazine arm.

But despite the division, there is also a clear sense of cohesiveness, and always the opportunity of bumping into the legendary Ben Bradlee or Bob Kaiser in the elevator, or getting a chance to chat to Kay Graham at a “brown bag” lunch. One of my favourite anecdotes is about the time I found myself on the same executive e-mail list as Len Downey and Don Graham, and realising it wasn’t due to a computer glitch!

Strategically, The Washington Post is taking a sensible approach to its new media initiatives. The company views the costs as a tactical investment in the future and doesn’t envisage making mega-bucks from the venture – just yet. They have concentrated on building a phenomenal content base, a place where reading the entire print edition is an elemental component and where Washington users can track traffic, get advice on registering their dog or moan to the mayor about the appalling state of the roads. For those farther afield, the site offers extensive resources on visiting the capital, trading on any market in the world and five-day weather forecasts for more than 3 600 cities globally. The idea – when everything you need to know can be found in the world of The Washington Post, why go anywhere else?

TANYA ACCONE,
Internet Editor for
the Sunday Times,
was there when
the Washington
Post went online.
In awe of this
revered
newspaper she
tells what it was
like to attempt to
be a Woodward of
the wired world.

