

Lessons from a converging newsroom

by Andrew Trench

The *Daily Dispatch*, the Eastern Cape newspaper where I work, is experiencing a revolution: our newsroom is transforming, our jobs are morphing, our workflows are changing and, best of all, ideas are blossoming. And it's all thanks to this thing we call newsroom convergence.

Over the last 18 months we have begun changing from being a print and ink, single edition, six-day-a-week publication to becoming a 24/7, cross-platform operation that sees staff shooting video, recording audio, blogging and reporting for web and print. Our new website, launched six months ago, is a lively buzz of community interaction, breaking stories and innovation and has found an audience of some 100 000 unique browsers a month.

I'd like to say we have some grand blueprint that we're working off but we don't and maybe that's why it's working for us. We're making it up as we go along but that also makes us nimble and able to change and innovate daily.

I've learned some lessons along the way about how to bring an editorial team along for this exciting ride which, as we know, can be met with suspicion and downright resistance.

Lead from the top

Such fundamental change in a traditional newsroom must be led from the top by someone who understands the traditional audience and the dynamics of the newsroom and who has the clout to make decisions and see they get implemented. In our case, besides being the deputy editor of the paper I am also the online editor and it helps ensure things happen.

Lead by example

Find strong role models within the newsroom and win them over to the new ways of working. For example, I was the first staffer to begin blogging and engaging our

audience and next up was Eddie Botha, our veteran investigations editor who is over 60 and who makes no bones about being a technophobe. His enthusiastic blogging sent a powerful message: if Eddie could do it, anyone could! We have over a dozen staff blogs now.

Sort out your environment

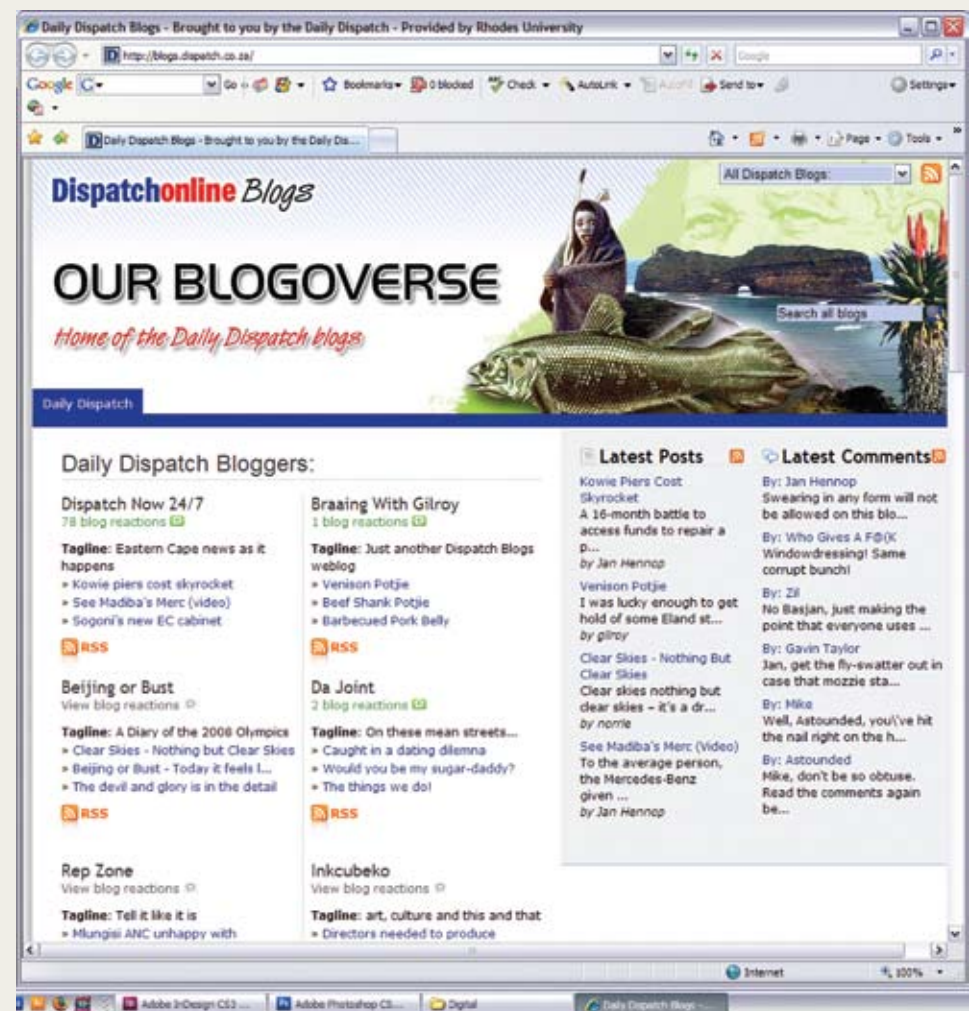
Shortly after launching our new website and blogs we underwent a physical redesign of the newsroom. The design is based on the UK's *The Telegraph's* which incorporates a central hub of editors with reporters, photographers and so on, seated in spokes radiating out of the hub. The design encourages communication and rapid decision-making. Our online news editor is located here and can quickly pick up on stories coming out of the newsroom and brief reporters on online requirements at the same time as the print news editors brief for the paper.

Don't force change down people's throats

We have tried to implement change by infecting staff with our own enthusiasm. Not everyone has embraced the new way and that is fine with us. There are a small number of staffers who have been swept away and who are happy to blog, shoot video and record audio. In particular, several photographers have really thrown themselves at it and we've equipped them with small, cheap video cameras with which they are producing great web footage. As time goes on we will bring everybody into the converged fold.

Sell the benefits

We have been able to show print reporters how rapidly online reporting can produce leads and story sources. When we had a flash flood in East London at the beginning of the year we were able to direct reporting teams to scenes of damage and drama thanks to reader contributions coming in on our breaking news blog. We were also flooded with eyewitness accounts and pictures which would have taken days to locate otherwise.



Flatten decision-making

We have a small newspaper and a tiny online team with most of our content coming from traditional print reporters and photographers working in the field and providing information for the web on the fly. We have opened the door to our reporters to speak directly to our audience without mediation from editors and subs on many occasions. We have had to due to the realities of our operation and it has worked for us.

Some of what we put out there on the web can be a bit rough but we're yet to encounter any serious complaints from our readers who appear to appreciate the immediacy of our news offering and the chance to be a part of the action.

Finally, we still have a lot to learn and a lot to get right but a lot of what we are doing is working for us.

The big lesson I have learned so far in our converging newsroom – besides the fact that this new world of journalism is the most fun I've ever had – is also a simple one: stop talking about it and just do it!

SOUTHERN AFRICAN EXPERIMENTS

Elvira van Noort researched attempts at convergence in South African, Namibian, Botswanan and Mozambican newsrooms. Here she details different strategies and ongoing challenges.

The *Mail&Guardian*, Johannesburg: the main challenge this newsroom faced in integrating online (www.mg.co.za) and the newspaper was communication. This was particularly difficult because the paper has a weekly production cycle while the website is daily and ongoing. In 2007 there were no converged diary meetings; one of the online editors would sit in with the newspaper but have no input. Attitudes of journalists and editors at both online and print were positive towards convergence but implementing this into the daily routine was difficult. In 2008 newspaper

and website were redesigned and journalists are now blogging. But complete convergence, as Matthew Buckland (the former publisher of M&G Online) said in 2007, would take a while to achieve. The strategy anticipates a slow process towards convergence and an investment in training while keeping a close eye on high quality of content in the newspaper and online.

The daily newspaper *Die Burger* (News24) in Cape Town, has a different strategy towards convergence. They have already implemented an integrated environment consisting of a newspaper newsroom and a multimedia newsroom that has daily diary meetings. De Waal Steyn, the multimedia editor at www.dieburger.com, argues that the way forward is to have a budget to train journalists and editors on, for instance, writing for online and blogging.

The *Times* newspaper, Johannesburg, opened with a converged newsroom in 2007 where a desk with multimedia editors decides on which stories will be covered for which platform. This is another strategy again: the multimedia reporters are straight from university and are plunged into the publication with the idea of the ideal newsroom.

At the SOICO Media Group in Maputo, Mozambique, where a cross-media newsroom has recently been put in place, the television journalists are now successfully writing for the newspaper and online. They are investing in training for newspaper journalists to handle video cameras and to edit. The last barrier seems to be implementing one workflow system that incorporates all platforms.

Other private media companies like

Dikgang Publishing/Mmegi Newspaper in Gaborone, Botswana, and One Africa Television in Windhoek, Namibia are struggling with more basic needs. There is no website, journalists use private cellphones and convergence or the adding of additional platforms is not part of the company's short term strategy. For example, access to the Internet at Mmegi newspaper is an issue. It takes almost 10 minutes to download a one megabyte file. They also share one cellphone with 35 other office workers from the newsroom, advertising and administration. The land line phones on the desks of the journalists can't reach cellphones. Other challenges to multi-platform publishing in Botswana and Namibia include the lack of human resources, budget for ICTs and IT solutions that will cover all areas of the production to archiving of content.