

Exploring Grocott's Mail's DIGITAL FUTURE

By Kayla Roux

This year, one of the biggest changes in the history of South Africa's oldest independent newspaper took place: *Grocott's Mail* packed up its 144-year-old editorial outfit and moved into the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies building.

Grocott's Mail is a weekly English-language community newspaper based in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape that has been under the ownership of Rhodes University for the past decade. The newspaper has been printing for more than 140 years, making it the oldest independent newspaper in South Africa.

The newspaper ran into financial difficulties in the 1990s, and it was bought by Rhodes University in 2003 to set up the David Rabkin Project for Experiential Journalism (DRPEJ) training. Now, the newspaper serves as an experiential learning platform for students to receive hands-on experience in a real live newsroom, working in rotation with a small permanent editorial body of production staff and reporters.

But to provide students with the kind of training they will need in the media landscape of the near future, *Grocott's Mail* is also faced with the challenge of incorporating new media and digital journalism and publishing into its daily news practices. Many of its audiences are moving online and its advertising revenues are declining, but above all, the DRPEJ teaching mandate necessitates a programme that will adequately prepare journalism students for work in digital newsrooms. Despite the small size of the newspaper staff and circulation and the number of people in Grahamstown without regular access to the internet, *Grocott's* needs to make strides into the digital era if it is to serve as an effective and useful experiential learning platform.

This is the unique and challenging position *Grocott's Mail* finds itself in today. Its dual mandate of serving the Grahamstown community and fulfilling its role as an experiential learning platform presents a number of challenges – all of this while trying to move successfully into the digital era.

A difficult courtship

Finding a way to incorporate experiential, real-world learning into the journalism curriculum at the School has proven a complicated process, with academic and editorial staff struggling to bring the demands of their respective projects in line with each other.

While the experiential learning process requires time, patient training, collaboration and communication, the demands of putting out a

weekly newspaper do not always allow for this kind of engagement – although it is ideal. In 2010, lecturer Anthea Garman described the first steps the school made towards incorporating the newsroom into their curriculum:

“In 2004 Rhodes teachers put their first batch of students into the *Grocott's* newsroom for ‘experiential journalism’ and discovered just how complicated an exercise it was to take over a newspaper with its ‘centuries’ of tradition and marry that to the educational desire to provide an excellent and nurturing space for apprentice journalists.” (Garman, 2010: 1)

Ex-editor Jonathan Ancer echoed her description of the problems of introducing students to the newsroom, pointing to the lack of continuity and follow-through in an interview I had with him last year: “We had two or three permanent reporters but we also had groups of students floating in and out the newsroom. We spent a lot of time introducing the students to the paper, explaining the vision and mission – and as soon as they ‘got it’ they would leave and the next crop of students would be coming in and we’d have to start the process all over again.”

The students who moved through the newsroom had varying degrees of engagement with digital technology and convergent practices on an individual basis. While some approached me to work with them on multimedia projects like audio slideshows or online videos and made an effort to promote their stories on social media platforms, others chose not to. Ex-editor Steven Lang gave the experiential learning process that took place up to 2013 a mixed review: while it was stimulating to have fresh, enthusiastic students moving through the newsroom and many produced fantastic stories and pictures, individual initiative still ruled engagement and those who did not want to work did very little.

Toward a digital future

Audiences – including those in Grahamstown – have evolved along with the technologies they use. They demand more from their media: they want it to be exciting, immediate, interactive and – most of all – free. They want it tailored to their interests, and they want it from the comfort of their own homes. It’s a fact that newspapers have felt acutely, many (if not all of them) struggling to come up with viable business models as advertising often lags behind in the digital migration – or finds its own way. Social media and free, easily programmable internet domains have allowed businesses to market themselves and do business at little or no cost.

While *Grocott's Mail* has been slow on the digital

Audiences – including those in Grahamstown – have evolved along with the technologies they use. They demand more from their media: they want it to be exciting, immediate, interactive, and most of all – free.

uptake, a number of changes have indeed been implemented, and revisiting them can show us just how far the paper has come – and how far it still needs to go.

Moving the newspaper's editorial activities to the School of Journalism and Media Studies opens up the opportunity for much-needed institutional change in two ways: firstly, in terms of the practical experience students gain by putting together real media products and interacting with real audiences, and secondly, a move towards a more integrated new media education. The former is quite straight forward, and had already taken place for a number of years to some degree with small groups of students spending a term or semester working in the newsroom at 40 High Street. Now, students and academic staff from different specialisations or mediums (such as television, photojournalism, radio and new media) are working towards teaching and learning using *Grocott's Mail* as an experiential platform that is integrated into their curriculums – and their building.

But training multi-skilled, multi-platform journalists – while pedagogically assessing and engaging with their outputs – will require changes in *Grocott's Mail's* current newsroom structure, editorial practices and digital publishing processes.

The print editing process has clearly been streamlined since lecturer Brian Garman took the newsroom's temperature in 2006, when a file explorer-based Windows folder system ruled a chaotic newsroom workflow. Wrong versions of stories were often picked up or edited twice because all the revisions were kept in the same undifferentiated folders. A new content management system called Nika was implemented in 2007, which orders stories in what has turned into a comprehensive story database for the Makana region dating back seven years. Nika allows writers, editors, and designers access to stories at different times, and it lets journalists attach pictures with captions to their stories. At the end of the line, it pushes content through to a moderation queue for publication on the internet. Compiled pages are now saved onto the server, creating an easily accessible digital archive (Garman 2006: 102). Some of the problems Garman identified in the print and digital processes are still proving challenging today, while others have been tackled with great success.

As Lang explained, "Nika was robust and reasonably quick. But then, the developers stopped working on the program [due to a lack of funding] and it became impossible to change anything anymore. On the downside, it is clumsy with photographs: you can't search for pictures, [format text], and it doesn't accommodate videos or sound. It's just clunky: not very elegant and sophisticated at all."

Many of the organisational problems Garman identified in the print process are echoed in the relatively young digital publishing work flow and have yet to be smoothed over. In 2006, the *Grocott's Mail Online* website was not even functional. It contained a number of broken links, and there was no agreed policy on its use – let alone social media platforms. Today, the website has undergone two complete

Web publishing forms a small part of the daily diary meeting, and reporters are required to produce web-first and web-only content for specific kinds of news like breaking stories or content that will have passed its sell-by date by publication day.

overhauls. The current website has many more interactive aspects and far fewer broken links. The newspaper even "used the latest [device-responsive] technology so the site adapts to whatever device you're reading on. Perfect for desktop. Fantastic for tablet. And brilliant for cellphone" (*Grocott's Mail*, 2013: 1b).

When the newspaper started publishing only once a week instead of bi-weekly, *Grocott's Mail* staff used the opportunity to start using its website more proactively in keeping its audiences informed about breaking news and cross-promoting digital and print content. Shifting attention online has proved to be even more beneficial than this: social media interactions keep the audience engaged and these very people often inform the newspaper about stories and add value to the reporting with eyewitness accounts, tip-offs, pictures and stories.

Now, web publishing forms a small part of the daily diary meeting, and reporters are required to produce web-first and web-only content for specific kinds of news like breaking stories or content that will have passed its sell-by date by publication day. Although this symbolises an important shift in the editorial mindset, the clearest problems hindering convergence in the *Grocott's Mail* newsroom is the lack of dedicated, web-oriented staff working on the organisation's digital operations, and a lack of engagement on the part of the tiny, already over-stretched staff body.

This means the newspaper has not been able to explore the digital configurations available to it in terms of different newsrooms, different content, different platforms and different audiences.

In order to tackle this seemingly gargantuan task, a critical reflection on *Grocott's Mail's* short digital history, its current practices and what needs to be done to survive and thrive as an education media organisation is needed. What is needed is the development of a multi-skilled, dynamic editorial group with the interests of all platforms in mind, who are responsible for providing the same information and multimedia content in different forms to different channels.

References

- Garman, A. 2010. When 140 years of small-town newspapering meets journalism education. *Rhodes Journalism Review* 30 July 2010: 58-60.
- Garman, B. 2006. *Grocott's Mail*, South Africa. In Berger, G and Sibanda, MS. 2006. *What the newsroom knows*. Grahamstown: Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies.
- Grocott's Mail. 2013. Get ready for a new online experience. <http://www.grocotts.co.za/content/get-ready-new-online-experience-13-06-2013>

Kayla Roux is the online administrator for *Grocott's Mail* and a new media teaching assistant at the Rhodes University School of Journalism and Media Studies. She majored in journalism and media studies, philosophy and economics and is now studying towards her MA in media studies.

