

How to
immigrate
and leave
your
ego
at the
door

At the beginning of this year I finally crossed the line, putting more than two decades in the world of print behind me and became, if not a digital native, a digital immigrant.

There was no Statue of Liberty waiting for me on 2 January on the 5th floor at 11 Adderley Street in Cape Town as I started my job as Editor-in-Chief of News24, a network which speaks to some 2-million users a day. But the words of poet Emma Lazarus which adorn New York City's famous monument seemed oddly appropriate nevertheless.

"Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

My recent years in print – which have included editing two mainstream daily newspapers and running a national investigative reporting team – had, if I am honest, left me feeling "tired" and "huddled" and most certainly "yearning to breathe free".

My experience had been typical of every print editor working in the world today: gnawing frustration at trying to turn a curve of declining circulation faced with the headwinds of a massive shift in news consumption from print to digital, relentless cost-cutting and retrenchments, while trying to do something meaningful with the few courageous souls left standing.

It's enough to erode the will of even people like me, a starry-eyed eternal optimist in the thrilling craft of journalism.

But today I feel the headwinds are at my back and I am here to tell you a story of hope. All you ever believed journalism should be is still possible – and with bucket loads of potential to be more exciting than ever before.

My transition from print to digital journalism has been an interesting journey, a learning curve akin to climbing Mount Everest – and as exhilarating.

My arrival in Adderley Street in Cape Town also coincided with a watershed chapter in the News24 story. Not only would

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I be editor of the site but would also have to build, in short order, a national newsroom which would provide original journalism for the News24 audience and also for the News24Wire, established to fill the vacuum of the defunct South African Press Association.

This grand scheme saw a significant pivot in the News24 offering. Once known as a news machine sustained by Sapa and other wires and clever – and controversial – aggregation, it is rapidly morphing into a news platform built on original journalism by a nearly 20-strong newsroom spread across South Africa and with stringers across southern and the rest of Africa.

The news team sits at the heart of an editorial team of some 100-odd who manage and produce content for the network of sites which falls within the News24 umbrella in South Africa, in Nigeria, Kenya and elsewhere.

The experience has been fascinating as we meld more traditional reporting techniques and styles with what I like to call the “magic” that once, and often still does, conjure up content for the News24 platform.

News24 is arguably unique in the South African media space as a market-leading news website with no print legacy or asset to protect. It is not a child of a newspaper nor beholden to one and thus it is free to produce and publish at will without having to do the complex decision-making tap dance that many other publishers have to endure.

The pace in this environment is, to put it mildly, insane. I thought my time in the daily print news cycle had prepared me well but it really does not compare. The News24 network publishes on average around 10 000 stories each month, manages 9 000 user comments and takes in hundreds of pieces of user-generated content a day. It runs 24/7 and domestically generates over 10 million daily page

impressions across all its platforms and applications.

So what have I learned in my new digital home? A listicle seems appropriate!

Five things I learned moving from print to digital

1. The digital audience loves news – and has an insatiable appetite for it. No matter how much you publish they always want more.

Some critics argue this tendency leads news organisations down the rabbit hole of churning low-brow, low-value content to the detriment of quality reporting and there is no denying that this happens. But my time in digital has also shown that consumers have a predilection for solid, professional journalism. They will flock to a well-told story as readily – often more so – as they will to a lightweight listicle.

2. Leave your ego at the door. Story usage and news coverage decisions in non-digital newsrooms are often based on the “gut feeling” of experienced editors and journalists.

While experience and such judgment calls have an important place in digital journalism, they cannot replace the metrics which give digital platforms a killer edge over other operations.

Using tools like Chartbeat, Effective Measure and Google Analytics we have real time and deep insights into how audiences are engaging with content.

It can be depressing when you see a story which ticks all the boxes of “significance” go down like a lead sinker with your readers. In no other environment does the reader rule so supreme.

At News24, Chartbeat in particular plays a crucial role in our minute-by-minute news decision-making.

The good news is that digital readers love a human interest story, they love a political drama, they love a sensation and a scandal.

We can see as it happens how readers are flocking to a story. As an item rises up the ranks of published material we will make a call on our coverage, deploying journalists to work extra follow-up angles within the news cycle of interest in the story. I often have this mental image of a school of piranhas swarming over a story and then moving on for more to nourish them.

3. The good news is that digital readers love the stuff that has always been part of good journalism.

They love a human interest story, they love a political drama, they love a sensation and a scandal. Columnists like Max du Preez or Khaya Dlanga will often knock hard news off its “Most Read” perch, so they love opinion too.

But, quite amazingly, they will respond with passion to a heart-warming good news story too.

The latter observation has been among the most powerful for me in my new role. I think there is something about a digital platform which empowers readers’ responses to these kinds of stories.

Online stories tend to build communities around them as people rally and rapidly become participants and activists as they offer support, help and advice in real time.

A wonderful example of this was a story that we ran about an unemployed guy called Vusimuzi Mbatha who built a replica helicopter out of scrap metal and spare parts in his backyard in Rustenburg. His dream was to one day fly it.

Within a day the story had attracted hundreds of thousands of views – and a veritable movement aimed at making his dreams come true.

A trainee pilot from Cape Town started a Facebook page to raise money to get him the opportunity to fly. A security company stepped in and flew to his village home to pick him up for his first helicopter ride. There were offers to assist with his education and with finding him employment.

“My heart is content,” said Mbatha. That’s the kind of thing that has gotten me out of bed to be a journalist every morning for the last 25 years. It is great to know we can do this in digital too.

Journalists in print, radio or television can certainly point to any number of examples of how

they have helped to do similar things, but I have never witnessed readers becoming so rapidly and passionately a part of the story. They took it from us and owned it!

This phenomenon, I believe, is an untapped goldmine for digital journalism.

4. Be prepared to embrace many story forms. As the editor of the *Witness* I once wrote a scathing column about the rise of the listicle and how I would rather die than preside over such an abomination of journalism. Well, I don’t have more lives than a cat, so I clearly must have reconciled myself to the listicle’s place in our quiver of story options.

One of the hardest shifts for me has been to wrap my head around what story form might be right at any point.

When is a gallery better than 600 words? When is a 1500-word narrative better than a video? When is a video all you should do? A timeline? An infographic? A live report with embedded tweets and other social media mixed in with on-scene reporting? And yes, there is even place for a listicle (like this one).

There is also a place – and, indeed, a demand – for deep, investigative journalism. The challenge is the same as it is in print or anywhere else: stop making excuses and make time for it.

5. As an editor you cannot edit as you might in print. Decisions have to be delegated or your operation will fall on its face.

This was hard for me to wrap my head around in the beginning. I arrived, sat at my desk for a couple of weeks and tried to keep on top of everything that was going on like a good, old-fashioned print editor before I realised I was raging against the storm.

Digital newsrooms simply don’t and can’t work like that. It all became easier when I let go and trusted my colleagues to make to make instant decisions in all corners of the empire.

Now we have a daily content meeting when we agree on the important sign posts along the way of the day’s new cycle and then I leave them to it. Not everything is perfect, or at least as perfect as I would like it, but I’ve learned to live with it.



Andrew Trench is Editor-in-Chief of News24. He is also a previous editor of the Daily Dispatch in East London and of The Witness in Pietermaritzburg. He ran Media24’s national investigative reporting team between 2010 and 2013. andrew.trench@24.com