

‘They are resistant’

SHIFTING NEWSROOM CULTURES IN A SEA OF UNCERTAINTY

Six years ago David Ryfe took on an ethnographic study of *The Daily Times*, “a mid-sized American corporately-owned newsroom”, in order to track the response of its existing staff to the arrival of a new editor who self-identified as a “change agent”. The ailing newspaper needed rescuing and the editor, seizing the challenge, set about the changes he saw as necessary for the newspaper’s revival, and, ultimately, its survival. The staff though, was less than accommodating. Of the journalists who remained after a flurry of resignations within a two-year period, most simply ignored the changes brought about by the “change agent” leading to his premature departure. Observing the newspaper during this difficult time, Ryfe concluded of its journalists: “They are resistant”.

By Dinesh Balliah

As many others have written or said, journalism by its very nature is change resistant. As a craft journalism relies on tried and tested practices and rituals which ultimately, and collectively, coalesce to provide a set of characteristics to which its practitioners cling for their self-identity. To bring change to a newsroom, especially that of the disruptive, technological type is to upset the apple cart, so to speak. Ryfe’s study is an exemplar of how change can be sabotaged by individuals set in their ways, so a more careful approach would seem more prudent. In the newsroom, I would argue, it is a cultural shift, rather than a structural one which is likely to have more of an impact in reshaping how journalists do journalism.

Change is the one constant that characterises the last 10 years or more in journalism. Declining print sales, loss of advertising revenues, new ways of newsgathering, the introduction of social media, new workflows, disruptive technologies, and a new role for the audience as participants in the making of news, has shaken the foundations of journalism.

These changes, taken together, have fundamentally challenged the roles, practices and rituals of the journalist. But while newsrooms grapple with these changes, there is a slow dismantling of the idea of what the journalist is and

more importantly, what it is that they do. But debates on this issue are clear, the practice of the journalism of old is now a luxury, replaced instead by a fast-moving, quick-reacting journalism that has little time for sentimentality.

But shifts in journalism practice have moved above and beyond changing or reshaping how established practices are carried out; digital media has fundamentally altered what it is that journalists are expected to do. From simply writing a story in the past, a journalist is now expected to produce images or videos for their piece, think about and execute ways to “push” that piece on social media, they’re expected to respond to comments that sometimes come in thick and fast; they’re expected to think through issues of layout, engagement and multi-platform publishing for one story.

Mobile journalism now is less about the technology and more about the people who can do it at any time and in whatever form necessary.

Basically, the journalist of today is expected to perform some part of the roles of so many others in the production process of old, all with little training and certainly no increase in salaries.

The money issue, of course, is the white elephant in any discussion about change in newsrooms. Many argue against this multi-skilling of the new journalist which demands much more with no real material benefit to the organisation or the individual. What’s the point of producing a video if production takes longer with more effort than a short written piece if the organisation cannot make any money from it. The point of doing it, and more importantly, encouraging journalists to do it, is that the mere exercise of producing a video offering self-training opportunities along with the space to explore an individual’s creativity. These opportunities and spaces don’t come about by themselves though. It seems imperative to me that a change agent at the highest levels of the newsroom is necessary, one that focuses on their people rather than on the technologies at hand.

The Wits Vuvuzela newsroom at Wits Journalism is something of a microcosm of a community newsroom. For the past five years, the organisation has focused on shifting its thinking and practices away from the print newspaper exclusively and towards multi-platform publishing. It remains a curiosity though, that despite the high levels of engagement, the extensive reach of online articles and the better the circulation on digital than in print, student journalists still value getting published in

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print the highest. And these are the students who confess to never having paid money for a newspaper themselves.

The challenge in a space such as this is to shift the mindsets of young journalists such that they not only embrace new ways of storytelling but also that they realise that journalism is not a skill learned over a fixed period of time. These students need to walk away from this newsroom understanding that their skill sets will continue to change through their course of their careers. They need to accept that what they will be expected to do will change from year to year if not within months. The young journalist of today needs to embrace the idea that it is change that will ultimately come to characterise their profession.

One of the fundamental roles an editor has to fulfil in the newsroom today is to be a seed of change. Editors have the space to encourage a culture of change by encouraging innovation, creativity and new ways of storytelling through the work produced by their staff. This approach does not force change but makes change less contrived and more organic. This cultural shift in the ways of thinking about how journalism is done plays its part in shaping attitudes about change and produces journalists adept at dealing with upheaval and uncertainty so typical of the journalism space today.



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