Harnessing newsroom knowledge

The newsroom's 'memory base' is often in the form of tacit, unrecognised knowledge – which is then lost when clued-up employees move on to other jobs. **Guy Berger** *suggests that an appropriate content management system offers a solution.*

Nairobi's *Nation* newspaper has a sophisticated content management system (CMS); Grahamstown's *Grocott's Mail* has a patchwork of paper and computer tech. In Harare, the *Mirror* and the *Independent* newspapers fall somewhere in between.

But what all of them lack is a way to use information communication technologies for knowledge management.

So what difference does it make? This was the research challenge put to part-time masters students at Rhodes University's School of Journalism and Media Studies.

The theoretical answer is straightforward.
1. Media are vital to the Information Society.
2. Newspapers disseminate text and photographic information – on paper, or online.
3. To convert a mass of data into meaningful information on an ongoing regular basis, they make use of knowledge.
4. This knowledge and what it works on need to be managed.

What's critical, therefore, is the media "know-how" that operates on raw materials to produce news, analysis, comment, photojournalism.

Such knowledge tools include: news sense, judgement and ethics; awareness of media law, company style and editorial policy; finding sources (eg: phone numbers); understanding the where, how and why of research in physical and virtual archives.

Thus, the performance of a media enterprise has much to do with how it manages its knowledge tools and the associated raw materials – and what physical or electronic technologies it adopts in manufacturing the final products.

Linked to this framework of managing knowledge, there are a host of other management considerations:
•   workflow management
•   performance management
•   content management
•   asset management
•   digital rights management

Without optimum functioning of all these as systems, a news organisation will have a knowledge management system that limps along – at best.

It's worth noting that you can have a CMS – but this does not necessarily include a system for managing performance or assets. Likewise, you can have a workflow system that doesn't provide for content repurposing.

In other words, a media house can have isolated parts of all these management functionalities without the whole package. A total integrated system (sometimes called "enterprise content management") is still lacking in most media worldwide.

Yet knowledge management means exploiting all these management systems. And more.

It often includes – articulated with the other systems – technologies like an intranet which can host editorial policies, style guides or shared contact numbers.

Observes Rhodes MA researcher Brian Garman: "It is the intranet that converts a CMS from a glorified workflow system into a good knowledge management system."

An intranet requires effective capture, storage, retrieval and use of information in such a way that it can be used as knowledge to enrich the organisation. At root, this depends on a knowledge culture in the newsroom.

According to another MA researcher, Rashweat Mukundu: "All these issues border on policy, which should be preceded by consultation and research."

To assess the state-of-play in eight African case studies, with a view to making policy and ICT recommendations, the MA team has been out in the newsrooms doing research. So far they've surveyed *The Post* (Zambia), *Guardian* (Tanzania); *Monitor* (Uganda); *Grocotts Mail* (Grahamstown, SA); *Mirror*; *Independent* (Zimbabwe); *Nation* (Kenya) and *The Namibian* (Windhoek).

This activity, made possible by the FreeVoice Foundation, has found that from a knowledge management point of view, there is a vast store of unrealised value in many newsrooms. But old habits and technologies will need to be changed if knowledge management is to be exploited.

Here are some findings:

Journalistic practice
•   Hard copy knowledge resources like style guides are ignored in some newsrooms, and not even online editorial policies are being accessed. The intranet at one paper was found to be "a white elephant" by MA researcher Sizani Weza.
•   Journalists seem to make little use of libraries – hard copy or online.
•   Journalists are reluctant to pool contact details of some sources.
•   Knowledge transfer to new employees is tied to individual mentors, rather than to documented organisational knowledge.
•   However, journalists are very keen to see new systems that will improve the management and performance of their media houses.

Editorial origination and quality control
•   There are often insufficient computers for

> *"It's pure management to ensure that journalists use libraries and style guides."*

journalists to use, inhibiting the use of technology for knowledge management activities such as online communication and research.
•   Tools like electronic spellcheckers are not systematically used, and version tracking is often not available.
•   Co-ordination between advertising and editorial is often a delayed and paper-based business; with the result that story lengths are not pre-specified in terms of available space.
•   Time is then wasted in cutting stories that are too long for layout – although in some cases the longer versions do go online where they make for a website that is richer than the print product.

Storage and retrieval
•   Where there is no CMS, information is stored sans "meta-data" – ie: without the categorisations that make for easy retrieval or automated publishing to diverse platforms.
•   Some media do not have backup systems for electronically-saved information.
•   Electronic indexing of photographs is a problem.
•   The newsroom's "memory base" is often in the form of tacit, unrecognised knowledge – which is then lost when clued-up employees move on to other jobs.

Publishing
•   Some websites (if they exist at all) are done by hand, through cut-and-paste and via floppy disk transfer. Sometimes these sites have extra information (in that stories are often shortened for the print paper); but there is no sign of pre-planning for special depth or volume treatments of dedicated content.
•   The notion that information and images are assets that can be sold online is not being developed.

Of the newsrooms studied, the *Nation* is by far the most elaborated in terms of systems and technologies. But even here, as researcher Aamera Jiwaji notes: "A knowledge management system would build on the current CMS, increase convergence between print and other media outlets, and improve efficiency in the newspaper."

Doing knowledge management is complicated stuff. Consider this definition by PK Ahmed (*Learning through Knowledge Management*, 2002), for whom the term means "the coming together of organisational processes, information processing technologies, organisational strategies and culture for the enhanced management and leverage of human knowledge and learning to the benefit of the company".

Apply that complexity to newsrooms, and to the related management systems which may also draw (at least in part) on technology and you have a hefty matrix to handle.

Meanwhile, the whole panoply is not a panacea for all problems. It's pure management – not specifically knowledge management – to ensure that journalists use libraries and style guides.

On the other hand, if media companies are going to harness the full power of ICTs, knowledge management is an issue whose time is coming as surely as tech up-take continues.

"So what?" – this is one story that needs to be anticipated. ∎

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Some definitions

Workflow management systems. The circuit of routines and technologies that move raw data (press releases, interview notes, reports, photo images, etc.) through stages of processing until they reach the target audience.
For example, there are software programmes and places for email, telephony, word-processing, image-editing, layout and design, circulation, web publishing.

Performance management systems. Questions covered here include: who misses deadlines; is the whole paper heading to be late; whose copy needs the most subbing; who forgets to spell-check their work; whose stories consistently score in excellence or make page one?

Content management systems (CMS). When all products are reduced to digital data, the result is generic "content" which can be converted from one format to another and/or automatically output to different platforms like web, cellphone, wire agency, print, etc.

Asset management. What can be valorised, ie: used for commercial transactions to generate money? Archives? Original full-length documents or interviews? Photographs? Syndicatable stories?

Digital rights management. This covers questions of intellectual property and copyright. Can agency copy been included on a website? Do freelancers get paid more for repurposed content?