When editorial meets IT

Journalists are all too aware that news waits for no one. In the news environment, the pace is set with urgency and driven with the necessity to be ahead at all times. Decisions must be made and results turned around in a blink of an eye. However, when editorial meets IT, this frenetic momentum is often times jarred.

by Tegan Bedser

If a big story breaks, such as a natural disaster, after the first wave of reports the newsroom cannot afford to wait to publish a special online treatment if there isn't an appropriate layout template or feature available. A solution must be found quickly and the workflow cannot come to a stop because IT will have to develop it first.

Editorial and IT need to work together for many reasons that range from technical requests regarding newsroom systems to large projects which require new solutions and workflows and yet, there is a disconnect between them. This is not only experienced within the traditional media of print and broadcast. It carries over into the online media space too.

This disconnect can be attributed to a lack of understanding of how the two worlds work as well as lack of vocabulary (and even misinterpretation of vocabulary) on both sides.

Disconnect between IT and editorial is commonplace and sees frustration on both sides. Editorial doesn't understand why it should take so long to do anything, while IT can get frustrated with trying to explain the rationale behind their work and the time it takes to do it as well as answer the same questions posed by editorial on a regular basis. These

include the basic (and very popular), "Are you sure you switched it on?" to answers of more complex requests such as, "That would make for a really cool feature on the new website, but it's not in the current business rules spec document. We'll have to include it in phase two... which may take a bit longer." The lack of understanding is self-evident.

Editorial works on tight deadlines and if they want a new feature (small or large) or projects to be implemented, it must happen immediately. There is a fear, that by the time IT's part is deployed and delivered, that the newsroom will be left behind by its competitors... who are already onto the next new thing. On the other hand, IT has to follow certain processes with any work that they do, and have their own constraints and resource issues.

Although some journalists are nervous of anything technical, others find solutions by upskilling themselves or find workarounds to be independent and less-reliant on IT. To ensure career longevity in journalism, it is essential to be equipped with digital production and online skills. It will stand one in excellent stead to have even a basic understanding – which goes a long way when dealing with one's IT counterparts. You will understand them and they will in turn understand you.

We are living in an era where tasks that were typically handled by IT can now be done by editorial. For instance, if a database had to be built, the IT specialist would have been the go-to person. Now, editorial can create it themselves by using something like Google fusion tables. There are readily available tools now that make complex tasks easier to achieve. This is the type of thing that digital media specialists in a newsroom must be able to do.

Bridging the gap

At the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), I am one of two digital media specialists in the SABC Digital Newsroom. My colleague Siya Africa and I form the core of an innovation team and depending on the projects that we are working on, we involve others in our digital, TV and radio newsrooms too. In this way, skills are broadened and not locked into one place.

Our role is quite broad in scope and we work across, and with, editorial, production and IT environments. The main purposes of the role are content development, content optimisation and production for the SABC News website, other online services and broadcast platforms, and guiding development of new online services and features.

We act as web development liaisons between editorial and IT, which has proven to be advantageous.

We have to know how to do all online newsroom tasks and understand broadcast and online production processes, equipment, products, services and tools. We are also involved in research and development where we not only contribute to strategies, but also follow through on their implementation. Coaching and mentoring plays a large role in our work too. We're also involved in content, platform and product design and development for the web and mobile. In addition, we track and compile web traffic stats and do online reputation management.

In short, the really fun stuff.

Our work in the digital newsroom and with radio and TV news teams helps SABC News to work towards a collaborative and converged environment.

With news convergence, it is crucial to look at ways to help journalists work across platforms, to make digital options part of radio and TV outputs and introduce digital production and online tools for journalists to work smarter across platforms. For example, getting online content on-air and getting journalists to do more social media so that audiences can follow stories from social media to the web to radio and to TV. Moving traditional radio and TV news material into the digital space also gives audiences a second chance to view and engage with content.

Some of the cross-platform work has resulted in providing radio and TV news desks the ability to manage and distribute content online, whether or not it was aired. Examples of this include a provincial news service initiative where our Eastern Cape, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal regional bureaus publish local content on dedicated social media pages and accounts; as well as an African language pilot project called SABC iindaba. SABC iindaba (@SABCiindaba and http://www.facebook.com/SABCiindaba) is a collaboration between the SABC1 TV News and Umhlobo Wenene FM news teams. They publish news in isiXhosa on the SABC iindaba Facebook page and Twitter account, ensuring that audiences get reports from both platforms in a shared space.

Another recent example is of a collaboration with SAfm Current Affairs where broadcast technology met digital production in order to livestream a Forum@8 interview with Khaya Dlanga on the SABC News YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/sabcnews). The response from listeners was positive, with many requests for it to reoccur on a regular basis.

Impact

The SABC News website, www.sabc.co.za/news, has been growing steadily. Its digital presence has seen rapid growth and development since its re-launch in 2011, when the old new media unit was transformed into SABC Digital News with an expanded mandate

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to establish a strong online news presence alongside SABC radio and TV news services.

The news website has since then grown into the SABC's flagship website, providing a selection of SABC online, radio and TV, multimedia, special reports, exclusive event coverage and breaking news. Together with the SABC News social media platforms, YouTube channel and podcasting service, the SABC News online portfolio of services compare favourably with competitors in the SA news industry.

In a converged media organisation, online works hand-in-hand with television and radio coverage. SABC Digital News content is used daily on multiple platforms at the SABC – through publishing and featuring tweets on a TV bulletin, multimedia packages produced by the online team offered to Radio and TV or through involvement in cross-platform social media projects, experimentation with online tools as well as mobile news coverage.

The SABC News online presence and footprint extends beyond the website by using innovative ways of keeping users informed through social media, YouTube and podcasting services. In this way, SABC Digital News integrates its various online accounts and platforms.

With digital innovation, we are trying to make our content eco-system work – from web, multimedia and livestreaming to radio and TV. The goal is to make our news content at SABC omnipresent.

Other newsrooms have implemented similar initiatives or interventions to drive digital innovation in different ways, such as stationing developers in the editorial space. It depends on the needs of the newsroom. Sometimes there are formal units that are created. Other times, whether staff know it or not, it is done informally where there are individuals who

are identified as champions of new technologies or those who are quick to experiment and inspire others to do the same. There is great online work happening in our newsrooms and it doesn't always come from the large newsrooms. There are smaller newsrooms, with fewer resources, that are highly innovative and can show the bigger ones a thing or two.

However, while it is great to have digital enthusiasts in our newsrooms, if one is serious about making progress in the digital space, digital innovation programmes and specialists must be embedded and become part of the newsroom operations in order to exploit and realise digital opportunities fully.

One such example is the launch of our Mandela Diaries widget (www.sabc.co.za/mandela) in support of the international Make Every Day a Mandela Day campaign. It is essentially a "today in history" display of the life and times of Mandela each day, utilising SABC archive material published on a special SABC News YouTube playlist. It wouldn't have been possible without the collaboration of IT and Digital News.

Going forward, the SABC digital newsroom will continue experimenting with digital storytelling techniques, media products, online tools and more. If it works, we employ them. If it doesn't, we learn from the lesson and do something else the next time.

First try and use digital tools and online services, and if that does not work, involve IT in newsroom projects. If they gain a better understanding of editorial needs, it will assist them in coming up with more agile solutions.

Journalists are naturally curious and lifelong learners. Learn IT's language. You will not be disappointed.

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