Lessons from a converging newsroom

by Andrew Trench

The Daily Dispatch, the Eastern Cape newspaper where I work, is experiencing a revolution: our newsroom is transforming, our jobs are morphing, our workflows are changing and, best of all, ideas are blossoming. And it’s all thanks to this thing we call newsroom convergence.

Over the last 18 months we have begun changing from being a print and ink, single edition, six-day-a-week publication to becoming a 24/7, cross-platform operation that sees staff shooting video, recording audio, blogging and reporting for web and print. Our new website, launched six months ago, is a lively buzz of community interaction, breaking stories and innovation and has found an audience of some 100,000 unique browsers a month.

I’d like to say we have some grand blueprint that we’re working off but we don’t and maybe that’s why it’s working for us. We’re making it up as we go along but that also makes us nimble and able to change and innovate daily.

I’ve learned some lessons along the way about how to bring an editorial team along for this exciting ride with us, as we know, can be met with suspicion and downright resistance.

Lead from the top

Such fundamental change in a traditional newsroom must be led from the top by someone who understands the traditional audience and the dynamics of the newsroom and who has the clout to make decisions and see them get implemented. In our case, besides being the deputy editor and who has the clout to make decisions and see they get implemented. In our case, besides being the deputy editor of the paper I am also the online editor and it helps ensure things happen.

Lead by example

Find strong role models within the newsroom and win them over to the new ways of working. For example, I was the first staffer to begin blogging and engaging our audience and next up was Eddie Botha, our veteran investigations editor who is over 60 and who makes no bones about being a technophobe. His enthusiastic blogging sent a powerful message: if Eddie could do it, anyone could! We have over a dozen staff blogs now.

Sort out your environment

Shortly after launching our new website and blogs we underwent a physical redesign of the newsroom. The design is based on the UK’s The Telegraph’s which incorporates a central hub of editors with reporters, photographers and so on, seated in spokes radiating out of the hub. The design encourages collaboration and rapid decision-making. Our online news editor is located here and can quickly pick up stories coming out of the newsroom and brief reporters on online requirements at the same time as the print news editors brief for the paper.

Don’t force change down people’s throats

We have tried to implement change by infecting staff with our own enthusiasm. Not everyone has embraced the new way and that is fine with us. There are a small number of staff who have been swept away and who are happy to blog, shoot video and record audio. In particular, several photographers have really thrown themselves at it and we’ve equipped them with small, cheap video cameras with which they are producing great web footage. As time goes on we will bring everybody into the converged fold.

Sell the benefits

We have been able to show print reporters how rapidly online reporting can produce leads and story sources. When we had a flash flood in East London at the beginning of the year we were able to direct reporting teams to scenes of damage and drama thanks to reader contributions coming in on our breaking news blog. We were also flooded with eyewitness accounts and pictures which we have had to due to the realities of our operation and it has worked for us.

Some of what we put out there on the web can be a bit rough but we’re yet to encounter any serious complaints from our readers who appear to appreciate the immediacy of our news offering and the chance to be a part of the action.

Finally, we still have a lot to learn and a lot to get right but a lot of what we are doing is working for us.

The big lesson I have learned so far in our converging newsroom – besides the fact that this new world of journalism is the most fun I’ve ever had – is also a simple one: stop talking about it and just do it!