

FAIRFAX EDITOR: WHY PRS NEED THE TARDIS TO JOIN THE DIGITAL CENTURY



Recently I had coffee with the Editor-in-Chief of Fairfax's *WAToday*, Allen Newton, and chatted through the ins and outs of the brave new world of digital journalism. Starting as a cadet with the long defunct *Sunday Independent* in Perth during the 1970s, Allen has had a stellar four-decade media career including some stints in PR. His authority to discuss all things digital media is enhanced by his experience as the founding editor of News Limited's *Perth Now*.

WAToday is now seven years old, boasts a monthly unique readership of around 500,000, and its brethren include the *SMH*, *Age*, *Brisbane Times* and *Canberra Times*.

Here is a review of our time over two flat whites in the winter sun at East Perth's *Cravings Café*.

Times are unimaginable from earlier eras; the change is rapid and accelerating

Newton says that a journey in the Tardis from the offices of the *Sunday Independent* to his present *WAToday* office would have been an almost unimaginable experience. From an office where the most elaborate item of technology was a Telex and where journalists slaved away fastidiously over each story and then fed it up through a chain of sub-editors, proof-readers and editors; to journalism today, at the speed of light.

Interestingly, he says that change is only accelerating. The last 12 months in particular has seen a "massive traffic transition from PC to mobile". The foray of several media outlets into subscription tablet apps generally speaking hasn't worked, but mobile consumption is soaring.

Digital journalism has unique critical ingredients

Newton believes that journalists either get "it" (digital only) or don't and that many print journalists still in circulation would never successfully convert to a pure digital model.

Here are his critical ingredients to quality digital journalism:

1. Speed is uber-crucial. While it's better to be accurate than fast, speed with digital journalism is very important. Crucial in fact. You need to get the SEO advantage from being the first mover with a breaking story, and also to claim the "social seed", even if you just have to go with a headline and one paragraph, building the story as more comes to hand. Fairfax has a team of SEO specialists in Sydney who drill every key story for SEO optimisation, particularly the headlines. Google and Facebook are critical traffic drivers.
2. There is still scope for news in-depth if it's done well. Newton says that there is now a lot more long copy journalism online, and well-crafted stories with big scopes are becoming more prevalent. The digital tool kit includes images, infographics and video which when integrated with a good depth story can make for a great result.
3. Social is critical. Newton expands this: bloggers are not the enemy; they can be good traffic drivers. Twitter is a fabulous news gathering tool but is a modest driver of traffic, Instagram (*WAToday* is new to Instagram) is great for branding purposes, but Facebook is the unequivocal king of traffic generation and engagement. 'Shares' and 'Likes' are elemental to a story's success.
4. Multi-skill news gathering is at a premium. Speed and the effective use of technology are the foundations of success. For example, most images are crowd sourced or sourced from social media. Journalists are expected to be able to grab images or videos on their phones; most publications don't employ a regular photographer and only have one video journalist. *WAToday* keeps its team lean and journalists cover all areas, with no traditional "rounds".
5. Success is not anecdotal; analytics and metrics bring a new level of accountability and can't be ducked or spun. Not all journalists are natural bedfellows with this world of real-time data, dashboards and analysis. Simply, they are judged on traffic and engagement – increasingly more on engagement using metrics such as time on site, time on story, social shares etc. "Chartbeat" is the *Fairfax* real-time analytics software that allows for an editor to move and alter the homepage content based on instantaneous performance data.
6. Finally, Newton also believes that good Opinion translates well online. *WAToday* has some impressive journalists in this area including Larry Graham, Ray Sparvell, Gail Williams and Derek Reilly, all of whom have a loyal following.

PRs still often want print trophies, while media buyers are starting to get it

Newton says that they are, if anything, under-pitched by PRs. He believes that whilst many PRs understand the scale of digital and the speed of the shift from print, they are still beholden to the tangibility of a "print trophy" for their clients. With a CV that includes a credentialed PR career as well as decades across print and digital journalism, it is worth noting that Newton believes that to reach, engage with and ultimately influence an audience, digital wins the war with print hands-down.

Interestingly, while effective monetisation of digital remains a challenge, he reports that the sales team are having increasing success. In particular, pre-rolls (video) are generally sold out.

That being said, PRs should definitely note that events work very well for *WAToday*, with recent successes including the *Swan River Run* and the *Night Noodle Markets*. Indeed, it strikes me that the more things change the more they remain the same. Publishing-by-the-minute means that it is even more critical to engage effectively and regularly with journalists during the life of a news story. Speed and the ability to prepare information which projects credible key messages during the life of a story are more than ever the stock in trade for PR in the digital news world.

Wrap-Up

Somehow in an hour we touched upon all of the above, and much more (which has hit the cutting room floor, for now). Allen Newton is a veritable fountain of digital media knowledge, and it was a compelling conversation. WAToday.com.au – always worth a read.

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