

“Important messages are lost in entertainment value or couched as false news. More than ever, we must heed the straight-shooting messages in *The DIY Newsroom*.”

**Craig Robertson, CEO, TAFE Directors Australia**

The new  
**SMART WAY**  
for business leaders  
and their teams to  
cut through the  
information  
overload

# THE **D.I.Y.** NEWSROOM

**5 STEPS TO POWERFUL AND STRATEGIC  
COMMUNICATIONS USING YOUR  
ORGANISATION'S OWN RESOURCES**



**STUART HOWIE**

## CHAPTER 11

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# CAPTURING THE ESSENCE OF A NEWSROOM

*“The real spiel I have for you is to have a good time while you are in your jobs. Have a good time. The newspaper will be great if you’re having a good time.”*

WASHINGTON POST EDITOR BEN BRADLEE TO GRADUATES  
FROM COLUMBIA SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM, 2007

### **What really makes a newsroom?**

A good workplace setup provides us with routine and a sense of community. So what happens when calamity strikes and destroys this? Literally.

Andrew Holden was Editor-in-Chief of *The Press* in Christchurch on 22 February 2011 when a 6.3 earthquake flattened the city. The quake killed 185 people, including a woman at *The Press* who worked on the top floor. The power of networked technology, the smartphone especially, kept Kiwis connected to what was happening at the disaster scene. The physical newsroom was unusable, yet staff quickly set up a DIY newsroom on the village green and later in makeshift facilities.

Here's what Andrew said about this:

**Stuart:** You lost your newsroom and you were working in the field by and large.

**Andrew:** On that first day we were, yes.

**Stuart:** And then you were established in makeshift premises.

**Andrew:** It was the printing plant which had a café for the printers and we worked out of it, and it had a couple of offices and we worked out of that and gradually, as more and more people returned to the business, we filled up that space quickly, because the company flew in laptops and computers and so we built a porta-cabin complex in the car park of the printing plant which housed, in the end, around 200 people.

**Stuart:** When we think of newsrooms, we think of buildings, structure, infrastructure. What did your experience following the earthquake tell you?

**Andrew:** It was cathartic. You don't need any of that stuff.

**Stuart:** What do you need?

**Andrew:** There was a famous photograph of us, of the makeshift newsroom in one of the parks on the edge of Christchurch, where our digital editor had grabbed his laptop [just after the quake]. It was the only laptop that we had. Reporters took turns to sit at it, covered in dust, and drops of blood from one of the senior reporters because he'd been wounded in the head – and they took turns to write their stories and send them via email off to the Wellington newsroom. So, a newsroom is a patch of grass and a laptop. But it's a phone as well, you can text it if you must. That porta-cabin there, we had two porta-cabins for the editorial team, the main newsroom had 30, 35 people in it, side-by-side. You put your elbow out, you hit the next person. It got smelly in winter. I used to hold news conferences out around the picnic table next to the barbed-wire fence looking out towards the airport. You can do it anywhere. You don't need the fancy stuff.

One of the things I most admire about the Kiwis is their no-nonsense approach in the most difficult of circumstances. Technology enabled them to continue to do their job. But what stood out was that, other than the bare essentials to file their stories, they did not need the accoutrements we associate with a physical environment. It was the deeper aspects – the systematic way of working, the passion and the camaraderie – that counted in the end. It was the X-factor, the human dimension that allowed them to continue to do their job. Their response to the earthquake left many seasoned journos around the world in awe, and will be talked about within the industry for generations.

## **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Newsrooms**

This demonstrates that there are Seven Habits of Highly Effective Newsrooms which are more important than the physical environment. How many of these can you tick off in your business?

The seven habits are:

1. Newsrooms are expert storytellers.
2. Newsrooms are organised for chaos.
3. Newsrooms have a sense of urgency.
4. Newsrooms are idea factories.
5. Newsrooms are team-driven and collaborative.
6. Newsrooms change the world.
7. Newsrooms are fun.

Let's consider each of these, and what you can learn from these habits to help your comms team.

### **Newsrooms are expert storytellers**

Data and market research guide the news agenda today. But successful news operations also know intuitively what constitutes a story – they have a nose for news. Even better, they know how to tell the

story. Today, a story can be words, video, audio – different media methods that hit different senses.

The lesson for comms teams? Don't rely only on data and market research. Look for the *story*.

### **Newsrooms are organised for chaos**

Newspapers are superb at this. Most of them have spent decades refining the process – systemising the gathering, creating, production and distribution of information. Journalists thrive on the big news, and you never know when something is going to land that requires immediate attention. But it doesn't all come together without a set way of working.

The lesson for comms teams? Be a strategically driven operation where great decisions can be made under pressure. Reflect on a recent epic fail. What let you down? Probably preparation.

### **Newsrooms have a sense of urgency**

Sort of the bleeding obvious, but those in a non-media environment could benefit from instilling a deadline-driven environment. Sure, big projects need time to be formed and delivered. But consider a multi-speed approach, with one layer about getting well-targeted bites of content to specific audiences when it is most beneficial.

The lesson for comms teams? Deliver quick daily wins.

### **Newsrooms are idea factories**

Amazing ideas can come from anywhere – and no one person or one process produces all of them. Believe me, I've been to, or even worse run, news conferences where idea creation was suffocated because the boss thought they knew best. (One of my best front pages was conceived by a photographer in a toilet.) We want our people to be open-minded and see the possibility in a story, not the obstacles.

Similarly, communication teams should scout for the thinking and creativity required.

### **Newsrooms are team-driven and collaborative**

Usually. They can also be competitive in an unhealthy way, and I have seen many a verbal stoush between reporters marking their territory on a story. But they will still defend each other and journalism to the hilt. Senior reporters' generosity to cub reporters knows no bounds as they share tips on interviewing, writing and crafting compelling content. Journalists love kicking the ball around on a good yarn – and when it is published they are the first to congratulate their colleagues. It is worth bottling.

The lesson for comms teams? Always work together and support each other. Intense debates are fine as long as they are not personal and everybody knows you are just trying to hash out the best result.

### **Newsrooms change the world**

Most journalists I know got into the craft to make a difference. And sometimes they can make a big difference with a story. Other times the changes they effect are community based. But good newsrooms have a strong social purpose and a reason for being.

Many brands and companies are looking to make a positive difference too – and they can and should. If your comms messaging can make a heartfelt and authentic connection between your brand and its audiences, magic happens.

### **Newsrooms are fun**

When I walk into a newsroom, it does not take long to work out if it's a happy and healthy one. The best newsrooms are lively, engaged and lack pretension. They are creative and collegial. People are animated and interested in their work. They are not daunted by change but embrace it – because they are accustomed to every day being different. They treat each other as equals.

The lesson for comms teams? A happy, engaged team will lead to great work.

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For all these reasons, newsrooms are intoxicating places to work. Which of these habits would you want to bring to your workplace?