

From the print trenches to the digital forefront

By Leigh Andrews

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As part of Media24's recent changes to its digital publishing businesses, seasoned journalist Andrew Trench was appointed as News24 editor on 1 December. Trench tells us about multi-platform storytelling and taking his print tactics online...

Andrew Trench has a reputation for brave and tenacious journalism, having led the Media24 [investigations unit](#), which was at the forefront of breaking news coverage of major local stories like the textbook tender corruption scandal, the police secret intelligence fund and the Marikana massacre.



Most recently he was editor of *The Witness* in KwaZulu-Natal, so Trench's appointment involved much upheaval in his move to the Western Cape. Newly settled, he treated us to some insight into his career...

■ **List a few of your career highlights thus far.**

Trench: There have been many highlights but top among them must be having had the privilege to edit two of the most venerable newspapers in South Africa - the *Daily Dispatch* and *The Witness*. I had always wished for the opportunity to edit one newspaper and never imagined that fate would offer me two. Associated with that has been the thrill of building newsrooms and watching often young reporters surprise themselves by their ability to produce award-winning journalism, which they never imagined that they were capable of executing.

A daily career highlight is waking up and realising that after 25 years, someone is actually paying me to do what I love doing - finding and telling stories. A highlight is also, without doubt, the opportunity now offered to me.

■ **Sounds good! What are you most looking forward to in the new role?**

Trench: I'm looking forward to some steep learning. I have some experience in online, but nothing on the scope or scale of News24 with the kind of daily audience that it offers. Fortunately I'm going into an environment that includes some of the smartest talent in South Africa and that's going to be amazing.

I've long been fascinated about how the medium affects the message. Digital platforms provide opportunities for innovation in story-telling and I plan to immerse myself in this thinking and, hopefully, in some experimentation too.

■ **Describe some of the new and creative styles of journalistic story telling available and how newsrooms can make better use of them.**

Trench: We've seen the rise of interactives like *The New York Times'* superlative [Snow Fall package](#), which is the closest thing I've seen that approaches my own work-in-progress theory of '360 degrees' of story-telling. I think what's stunning about this example is how it used traditional long-form narrative writing as well as rich interactive elements, video and graphics. The challenge, of course, is to try and do work as ambitious as this with a constant deadline looming.

"Read this," one sign read in all capital letters. "Ski Area Boundary. Minimum of \$2000.00 rescue fee! Do you have a partner, beacon, probe and shovel? Explosives may be used in this area at any time. Continue at your own risk."

A smaller sign read: "Stop. Ski Area Boundary. No ski patrol or snow control beyond this point."

To the right was a gray steel box. It was labeled, "Avalanche Transceiver Check Station."



Reaching Tunnel Creek from Stevens Pass ski area requires taking two lifts, slipping through the boundary gate, which was closed temporarily after the avalanche, then hiking to the top of Cowboy Mountain. Left, Stevens Pass Ski Patrol; right, Chase Jones

The narrative style, while enjoying a brief moment in the spotlight in South Africa over the last decade, is a sadly neglected area of journalism, which has great potential in both print and digital.

The growth in popularity of data-driven journalism has been well documented and is a style of journalism, which I am an enthusiastic advocate of and which is still in its infancy in South Africa. It lends itself naturally to the digital environment in the form of interactive stories or as web applications allowing a single story to be "scaled" to tell many stories effectively. Tied to this is aggressive use of access to information law, which is gaining traction in South African newsrooms at last and which has wonderful potential to not only generate leads but also a trove of original material that can itself become part of the story-telling process.

There is also great potential to harnessing the power of the crowd in a focused way as a participant in the process of journalism, an area in which very little significant work has been done in South Africa.

■ ***On the topic of challenges, what do you think your most interesting challenge will be in moving from a print newsroom to a digital one?***

Trench: Understanding the always-on deadline environment and the work flow of digital is going to be a great challenge as well as understanding the kind of journalism that rocks readers' boats in digital. I'm wary of assuming that my experiences in print will necessarily translate directly into digital. I understand the power of the [listicle](#) and the [clickbait](#) headline, but there must also be scope for what I would regard as quality, impactful journalism that makes a difference.

■ ***What print news tactics do you think you can add to News24's digital news arena?***

Trench: Quality journalism moves a reader in some way - by delighting them, enlightening them, enraging them and more. Print journalism is strong in these traditions and I'd like to see more of this flavour finding its way into the digital experience. I also think the strong watchdog and revelatory approach of print journalism should have a place as a native style in digital rather than as extension of print, even if the story presentation differs. At the end of the day, scoops bring eyeballs and eyeballs bring influence regardless of the platform. Luckily for me, News24 already has eyeballs in abundance.



Andrew Trench

■ ***What excites you the most about digital news?***

Trench: The immediacy, the audience engagement, the measurability of impact and the constant innovation debate.

■ ***Lastly do you think that print is dying out or simply evolving?***

Trench: We can't avoid the reality that print has some real pressures facing it. The migration to digital is coming faster than expected and we're operating in a price-pressured economic environment. In truth, I think that you'd need a crystal ball to really know what will happen down the line.

Looking into my own crystal ball, I predict good things for Trench as it sounds like he's off to a good start - wishing him all the best for the future!

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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