

# Hindustan Times

## Mobile, social and data as drivers for reinventing the news operation

India is currently witnessing an explosion in digital communication and newspapers are beginning to embrace it as an ally, not shun it as an enemy as was once done in the West. One such paper is the Hindustan Times, the second-largest English-language newspaper in the country and flagship paper of HT Media, the second-largest media group.

India has a very strong print industry that is still growing, although not in the 18-20% year-on-year range that some newspapers experienced between 2002 and 2012. Digital has been a little slower to catch on and the shift in audience and advertiser habits has taken longer to filter through.

However in the past two to three years, there has been substantial growth in internet access, fuelled primarily by smartphone adoption as well as by India's very enthusiastic approach to social media – it will be the largest Facebook market in the world by mid-2017 at the latest.

India leap-frogged certain steps that the West went through with regard to the introduction of internet access and speed. It has gone pretty much from low levels of access to more and more widespread broadband and mobile.

It is currently going from a situation in which only urban and mostly English-speaking people in the upper-income brackets had access to the internet to a situation where practically everyone will have access in some form.

### A real mobile revolution

Right now, around one-third of the population of more than 1.325 billion has access, but as smartphone

penetration deepens, it will very soon rocket to over 700 million people. "India really is the land of eyeballs," said Nic Dawes, Chief Editorial and Content Officer at the Hindustan Times, "there is an amazing digital communication explosion happening."

Two years ago, people in lower-income professions or in rural areas would have only had a feature phone. Now people who are employed are generally getting smartphones. Next will be smartphones in rural areas. The recent introduction into the market of the world's cheapest smart-

phone could change the game again. Nic notes that there is estimated to be around 300 million smartphones by end 2016 and that will double that over the next three years. Although India is currently still experiencing lag with getting full mobile broadband coverage across the country, there are a number of 4G roll outs in major cities.

Some newspapers are taking advantage of this huge shift in media and considering how to maximise the power of print and rapidly grow digital and mobile.



*Morning meeting at the newsdesk of Hindustan Times*

## The newsroom transformation

One thing unique about the newsroom integration and transformation project at the Hindustan Times is that it was headed by two journalists: Executive Editor Rajesh Mahapatra was Project Leader. He has been with the paper since 2008 and in on the talk of change from the beginning.

Also spearheading the project was Nic Dawes, who left his position as Editor in Chief at the Mail & Guardian in South Africa to join HT in September 2013.

For Nic, living and working in India is a very different and challenging environment and moving was a big cultural change even though South Africa is also an emerging market country that faces some similar challenges as India, albeit on a smaller



*"Mobile audiences are really at the centre of our thinking, of our product development, our emerging and evolving editorial approach. But that doesn't mean that we are certainly satisfied with the answers that we have in that regard at all."*

Nic Dawes,  
Chief Editorial and Content Officer

scale. "South Africa is also a relatively young country. It is not a matured democracy, but it is a democracy, a very vibrant and lively one. It has

severe inequality, just as India does. It has a legacy of colonialism, which it is trying to overcome. Gandhi spent some of his formative years in South Africa before he returned to India and was at the centre of India's liberation movement. (Ed.: the Hindustan Times was founded in 1924 with roots in the Indian independence movement. Mahatma Gandhi's son Devdas was an editor of the paper.) So there are connections, there are some shared histories and some shared memories. But of course, it is a very different place at the same time."

India's scale makes many things function in a way that is non-linear by comparison with anywhere else. In a country of more than 1.3 billion people with each of its 29 states the size of a large country, with environments that range from the high Himalayas to the tropical beaches of the south, with a very complex ethnic and religious mix, India finds itself a country of cross currents, a place with a lot of social and cultural and political sensitivities that are extremely finely tuned and can be febrile at times.

The level of public debate is incredibly intense and high. "I always used to think that Indian newspapers had far too many stories on page one," Nick commented, "but once I'd been here for a week or two, I realised that it was pretty hard not to have 7 or 8 stories on page one because there were usually 7 or 8 huge things going on in a place like this, which is what makes it one of the great media markets of the world."

To cover all those stories and provide local content for the 23 English-language editions of the Hindustan Times and the 146 editions of their sister Indian publication, the Hindustan, HT Media employ some 800 journalists – 600 at the headquarters in New Delhi alone.

## Obstacles at the outset

When the company first started thinking about a modern newsroom some five to six years ago, they could never make any real progress because they could not figure out what to do with the number of journalists working there, how to negotiate with them, tell them they would have to be taken somewhere else for a couple of years' time in order to build a new newsroom.

*"Audiences were shifting to digital. We had very little time on our side and needed to move fairly aggressively."*

Rajesh Mahapatra,  
Executive Editor

"That fear of negotiation with the journalists is what kept us from advancing," said Rajesh. "Not that we didn't have the money or didn't want to build a modern newsroom.

It was that and the fact that, despite being the country's second-largest media group, we did not have a content management system for our journalists to work with. We worked using e-mails, something that is not only very inefficient, but gets in the way of establishing accountability, of harnessing efficiency in the newsroom and of establishing collaborations – we were getting desperate. Each edition was on its own. There was a lot of duplication of work and a whole lot of inefficiency in the system."

Then, in 2013, growth in the newspaper industry started slowing down for the first time to single-digit numbers and that is when the real concern for HT Media began. At that point IFMS was called in, to help get things moving and to design and support this complex change process.

"Audiences were shifting to digital. We had very little time on our side and needed to move fairly aggressively," said Rajesh. "That's when we started discussing and negotiating and designing the direction we wanted to go. The first decision we took was the philosophy that we outlined: we are a print operation spread out all over the country with

some 800 journalists and maybe half that number as 'off-road' journalists. That's one of our strengths. And we have a 92-year-old news brand that is highly credible."

## The starting point

How was HT to leverage their print strength to grow digital? A transformation was necessary: one that would radically alter the way they worked, the way they were organised and thus transform their command structure. Some of the key aspects were changing technology, architecture, communication and improving staffs' skills.

These key aspects were vital for laying the ground for their prime objective of better print and digital first. Rajesh said the question was how to address print to grow digital and how to use a digital-first approach to get better in print with regard to quality of content, efficiency of production, timeliness of production.

The answer, in part, was to go for a recognised, tried-and-trusted, well-developed CMS that catered to the need that they have for print and which also would solve their objective to win in the digital domain.

Another of the core principles of the new newsroom is that the architectural design enables and supports creativity, integrated processes,

transparency and easy communication, making it a great place to work.

There had been no change or renovation to the HT newsroom in almost 25 years, although working practices had changed during that time. New departments had been added, more people had joined the staff. A block was built here, one there, resulting in a complex, inefficient, highly siloed newsroom design.

Now the workplace is absolutely transformed, dramatically different from the previous one. IFMS created with Iztok Lemajic from its partner company IDFL from Slovenia the newsroom design with the goal that everyone is accessible and communication is much more open between different desks.

*"In digital as a journalist, I am the content generator and I am also my circulation manager."*

Rajesh Mahapatra,  
Executive Editor

The newsroom also looks inviting – it is light and bright with powerful pictures from the HT archives blown up on the walls. It feels like a professional, modern,

vibrant space. "Our journalists work hard. Both our news environment and the general environment are tough," said Nic. "Having a great workspace to come to for making great news products out of all that is a big advantage."

It takes more than just a beautiful new newsroom, though, to change the mindset of journalists whose only

world thus far has been that of print. Communication and training are what are needed to get everyone actively on board to face the digital future.

HT learned from the lessons of others not to tell their people, "Look, you have to go this way, otherwise you lose your job," said Rajesh. "The language we used consistently was 'You are our best assets – each one of you is a stakeholder in this.'"

HT indulged in a great deal of individual discussions and group discussions, over and over again. People became open. They agreed to disagree and have moved along quite well. Rajesh said that they are now starting to see much more active participation in the newsroom.

As for training, Nic said that so little had been done at HT in the past that in the beginning people perhaps felt that they already knew everything they needed to know and did not require much in the way of training.

## The training program

IFMS created and executed a bespoke programme for the newsroom management and leaders in order to get them on track first. Once they got started and once they confronted the challenge and got their hands on some of the tools, their initial reluctance quickly melted away.

"The important thing about the training," said Nic, "is to make people less afraid of change, to make them realise that it's OK to be challenged by it,



The old and new newsroom of Hindustan Times





*Almost the entire newsroom moved from desktop PCs to laptops to increase flexibility and collaboration*

that it's OK to ask questions. A lot of people are intimidated by technology at the outset, but once they realise it is actually the easy part, that what it really is all about is making journalism sing and thinking about the audience and different formats – that's where the challenge lies, a fun and engaging challenge."

One of the major components of any integrated newsroom is storytelling on all platforms. At HT, storytelling to the Indian community, the audience they have started consciously to address, has changed in a number of ways. One is that HT are emphasising explanation and context in a way they did not do before. "We are finding a huge amount of traction among Indian audiences for journalism which helps people to make sense of the news," said Nic. "I think our journalism suffered a lot from assuming that everyone knew and understood everything in the past. Now we are putting a lot of priority on unpicking the complexities, making arguments with facts and giving readers a handle on what is a very complex news and social environment here in India."

How is HT branding itself in the digital world? Rajesh explained that no matter what you do – if you don't give

the reader great content, if the reader does not talk about your paper, if your newspaper doesn't make any impact, then no matter how much you try to build a brand, the brand will not get big. A great brand can only follow a great product.

"Unlike with print, where it is all about delivery of your product, in digital media it's about discovery of your product," said Rajesh. "Unlike in print where somebody else goes and sells my paper – as a journalist I just write the content. I don't even print the paper myself – in digital as a

journalist, I am the content generator and I am also my circulation manager. How smartly I write my headlines, how smartly my story is ranked by Google or how smartly I push it on my social media will determine how widely my story gets read or shared or noticed. The training of our people will now prove critical."

## **The impact of social media and data**

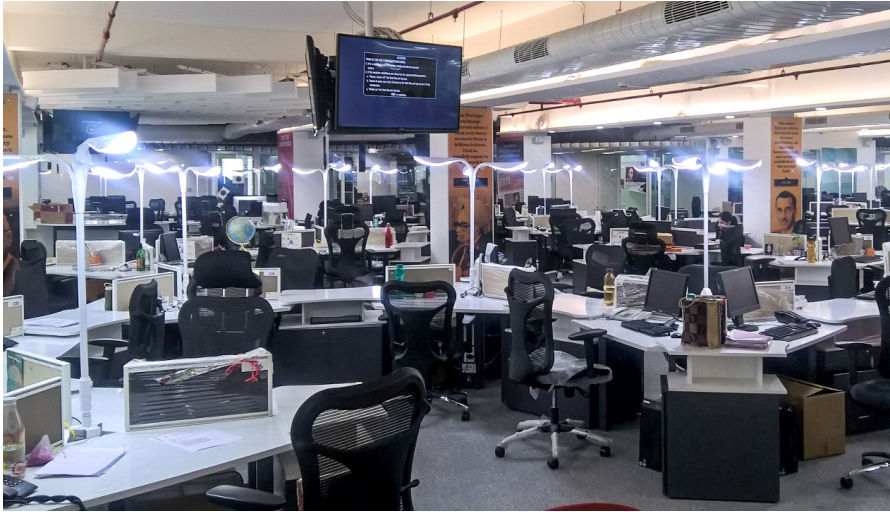
HT has a desk that concerns itself with real-time, customer engagement analytics. They have already seen evidence of being more engaged with their community through the response that they are getting from their focus on explanation and context. They see that those stories are being read and shared more. There has also been an absolute explosion in their social audience.

At the beginning of 2014, they probably had a Facebook community in the region of 500,000 and now it is around 4.5 million. Their Twitter community at that time was around 200,000. It is now about 2.8 million. "The number of people talking with us, talking to us and sharing, following our stories is in an order of magnitude much larger than it used to be," Nic said.

What caused this surge in social media growth? "We started out with the old-school social media 'push'



*Training on multiplatform storytelling as key part of the transformation*



*Open design to encourage communication and collaboration*

approach: Here's our stuff – read it! Then we switched to a more engaging approach, more actively speaking back to the people, listening to them and paying a little more attention to the data. As a result, what we started to do became relevant more quickly. No specific campaign was needed, purely an editorial approach. You can either treat social media as a distribution channel or as an engagement platform. When we switched to the latter, we saw our community grow very, very quickly."

Using existing platforms made HT's social media operations easier, Nic admits. "We had not yet made the changes needed to our own technology, which was holding back our website.

So we grew disproportionately on social platforms at a time when it was harder to grow our own platform because of the technical constraints that we had."

When HT first implemented the changes on their own website, the numbers shrank a little because they had disappeared from the search engines, something that happens when a website is restructured and every-

thing is changed. Now they are again seeing very strong growth. While HT are doing a huge amount of work on search engine optimisation, there is still more to do.

Nic said that Google does not allow the playing around with the system that some people may think is possible. "It is increasingly being ruled by quality, speed, the performance of your site, so what we are trying to do is make sure that we optimise around

those things. That is a good thing – your users get the benefit and you move up in the search rankings."

With so many fans on Facebook, the way the Facebook algorithm treats news is also very important to HT.

Whenever changes are made to the algorithm, HT has to be able to respond to that as well. This requires careful daily monitoring of performance and quick response.

To cope with that and the ever increasing social media load, the capabilities of the team have to be sharpened. Initially small groups were trained at HT and used as catalysts to get things moving.

Having only a few people with social media skills is ultimately not enough, though. Eventually the entire newsroom will be trained to deal with HT's social and community work.

What insight has HT gained into their digital market? Although they are still building their digital market insight capability, their capacity in that area is evolving very rapidly. They are understanding their audience beyond their print audience a lot better than they could in the past. They are able to understand, for example, how consumption habits vary in time, something that is more difficult to do in print.

They also can tell through real data where people are interacting with them, which topics are animating the most concern and where. And they can see that they have audiences not just in the global Indian diaspora, but to their surprise, also in south India, where they have no print editions at all and which now forces them to think about how relevant their digital south Indian audience is to them.

All these types of things are now available in very granular detail and often in real time. "This digital transformation project has focused our attention on understanding all of that and in trying to get to a place where we are ready to build products off of it," said Nic.

## Next steps

HT's plans now are to finish the transition by completing the roll-out for the new workflows so that they get to the point where each section is responsible for 90% of their digital existence as well as for their print existence and that the online desk is focused on real-time news and aggregation, social and audience metrics, video and more advanced multimedia, rather than functioning as an online desk uploading material.

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Nic Dawes,  
Chief Editorial and Content Officer



A new website is also being built which will bring more life to all the efforts that have been undertaken and video capability will be strongly built up. A lot of training in more basic journalistic standards – quality of writing, ethics, sourcing, relevance – is also on the agenda for 2016.

“It would be very easy for HT Media to sit back and say, ‘Listen, we’re making lots of money in print and sure, we do a little bit in digital but we just dabble our toes in there, have a presence and leave it at that.’ Instead the decision has been made

to invest in getting ahead of what is clearly a very powerful trend. I think the fact that HT and other Indian publishers are investing from a position of strength before the hammer comes is a very fundamental difference from what happened in the West where people had to innovate out of fear and out of a position in which they were losing out,” said Nic. “Hopefully, we can keep up the pressure and keep up the optimism to prepare ourselves for a very different and very difficult market that we know is going to come here at a time while we are still strong.

That is the great advantage that we have.”

“One of the disadvantages is that this can lead to complacency, something that HT Media is fortunately over. We are the only newsroom in the country that is adopting a fully integrated approach, which is slower and harder and more complicated than you would expect, but we think it is much more sustainable. As this market matures and moves, we think it is going to make both journalistic and financial sense to have gone about it the way that we have,” Nic concludes.

As their digital transformation process gains ground, mobile becomes more of a priority at HT. Facing a rapidly growing and demanding audience means having to make priorities about where to focus.

We asked Nic Dawes five questions on how HT is going about the issue of maximising their mobile platform.

## **IFMS: Which audiences are you prioritising for mobile?**

*With our English speaking audience, we have principally focused on urban smartphone users. Within that broad demographic, for us, that means that, on the one hand, we serve the smaller segment which is slightly older, slightly upper-end market with more expensive devices with more access to data. They are very price conscious and will use desktop instead of mobile to access content at work, but will be back on mobile before and outside of the office.*

*On the other hand we have the larger and younger and very important audience who use lower-end devices and have more constrained use of data packages and probably won’t have access to a desktop at home or in the office.*

*We don’t have ‘all you can eat’ data packages here in India. People monitor very carefully which sites suck their data and people are very particular about which sites give them the most effective reading experience. That is the case both with our English and Hindi speaking markets.*

## **IFMS: What kind of mobile content and access are you prioritising?**

*For us the explosive growth in messaging is a priority. We are seeing figures like 80 plus million on Whatsapp. Facebook continues to expand, becoming the biggest user interface and we are seeing staggering growth with homegrown messaging platforms like Hike Messenger. We have seen some brilliant success in terms of reach and revenue with*

*Facebook Instant Articles. Because we are seeing how vast amounts of audiences are coming purely from these kind of platforms, we are really prioritising these areas. And we’re not the only ones, of course. You will see other publishers trying to play much better in that space.*

*Currently there is ad hoc unorganised sharing and this will improve with easier sharing, better integration and we are looking very closely at how best to use bots that provide ask-and-answer services, combined with our well-known and curated content. Finally regardless of the bandwidth challenges India is facing and just because of the scale of demand, there will be more much native mobile video.*

*I believe we may end up operating at two ends of the spectrum – short and pithy, quick overview and then long form, more connected content, essentially being a time companion for the user. We have invested in a tool that quickly summarises content which addresses one need our mobile users have – it gives them a quick sense of whether or not it is worth them investing more of their time and day in scrolling down their story. Asking editorial how can they put what is needed directly into the face of the audience. It’s not rocket science but it the kind of thing we are trying.*

## **IFMS: Did you change anything in your editorial structure to facilitate mobile?**

*We haven’t until recently introduced a mobile editor because we didn’t want to ghettoise mobile in the newsroom. But for us that was probably wrong.*

*Now we have someone just about to start who will be involved in product and content as well as training.*

*But this is not just mobile as the platform but ultimately anything that is portable. At the start he will work chiefly on mobile platform and content strategy, to ensure the staff have the tools and training they need to produce portable content.*

*Mobile tools are very much part of our journalists' lives already. Giving them more consistency, sharpening their skills would be great, particularly in the local city sphere.*

*The aim: Bringing together mobile reporting and mobile news products into news collections that are in a format which is born on a phone and therefore easier to give its full expression on the phone.*

## **IFMS: What's been your experience with the HT app?**

*We're not very bullish on apps. We think that there is a shift back to the mobile browser happening particularly on Android, which matters very much for us.*

*Many Indian users are very conservative about which apps and the numbers of apps they install. De-installation rates are generally very high here. But that said, for the audience that you can get on the app they are very loyal and are very high value and they are worth doing it well for. Today our app is really a holding area for content. We haven't optimised the user experience for their behaviour. We allowed*

*too much web-like thinking to seep into our app, instead we should have been more radical to conceive it for a mobile audience. It's too complicated and there are things on there that people don't look at.*

*We also haven't prioritised enough between their rhythm of very short and easily accessible content and the need for something long to read. We should have made bolder choices in line with people's behaviour on the app. We will go much further away from a scheme that presents everything we have on the site.*

## **IFMS: What three pieces of advice would you give to other publishers on mobile?**

*Firstly try and force people in your editorial and business to only use their mobile. They should access your site only on mobile for a substantial period on a regular basis. It's so tempting to design something on a 27-inch monitor and a simulator which is not the same as really using, living the product through the handset.*

*Secondly, we were not nearly bold enough in shifting our design, editorial and user experience thinking towards something much more radical.*

*Finally people really care about speed and pageflow. Tech, editorial and commercial have to sing together on that. Bad ad tech as well as editorial tech can really hinder the experience. That's something to prioritise and pull together.*

Text: IFMS

Pictures: Hindustan Times