

A Mobile First Strategy at The Wall Street Journal: Interview with Matt Murray, Editor-in-chief



Though more and more people prefer to get their news by mobile, the experience is often less than satisfying, says Matt Murray, the Editor-in-chief of the Wall Street Journal, which is two years into an ambitious mobile-first newsroom transformation.

Murray, who was appointed Editor-in-chief in June, says increasing reader satisfaction on the preferred format of mobile is one of the goals of the new strategy. With advice from the Institute for Media Strategies, the Wall Street Journal has undertaken a profound transformation of its newsroom, involving all aspects of operations including audience, content, workflow, people and technology.

In an interview with the Institute for Media Strategies, Murray discusses the project, known as WSJ 2020, and talks about what is working, what still needs to be done, the state of journalism and what the future might hold in an evolving media environment.

The interview has been edited for length.

IFMS: *Its been about two years since you started WSJ 2020. Can you briefly summarize what have been the results of that process so far?*

Murray: I think the fundamental conception was to galvanize us around some new ideas about our business model. The biggest one was to try to build a mobile first newsroom, meaning a first class mobile product and stories and news flow aimed at the mobile reader. Because that's where our growth is right now.

We have a large print presence still, we have the largest print paper in the United States and print is and will remain important for us for the foreseeable future. The Journal has a large desktop audience relative to others, primarily because a lot of people use us in the workplace. But mobile is where we are seeing the growth.

And frankly, when we started the project, mobile was where we were lagging the most. Our products were poor, our readers survey showed they were the least satisfying products we had. Mobile isn't just about the stories, it's about the story formats, news alerts, and the way people interact with the phone, sort of restlessly, compared with the way they read the paper, which can be a little more measured, concentrated experience.

To deal with all that meant thinking through everything from the data we have and how we use it, to our content mix, to how we recruit and train, to the products themselves and the technology. We reorganized our editing structures quite a bit, we changed our expectations in our bureaus about when to file and when to publish.

A small example is, we were built to publish on a print news cycle. So early in 2017, our top publishing hour of the day was 7 to 8 pm, which of course coincides with the time our first edition goes to bed. That happens to be one of the lowest readership hours of the day online, and our peak moment for reading online is around 10:30 in the morning. So we were not delivering very much news, or new stuff, to readers when they wanted it. We moved much more publishing to the morning, which resulted in clear traffic and engagement gains on that end.

We completely rebuilt and rebooted our mobile products. We eliminated a bunch of products that nobody was using anymore and upgraded our product portfolio. So, for instance, we never had a newsletter editor, even though we had a bunch of newsletters. We killed many of them, we upgraded others and got our portfolio of newsletters in shape.

We built an operations department to help manage the entire staff. I mean newsroom operations like recruiting and training. We overhauled our leadership structure very dramatically. We created a print desk that focuses on making the print paper excellent and producing it every day. This also had the effect of taking print out of the workflow of most of our production and editing staff so they could focus on digital.

And we built an audience data team that brings audience data into our decisions. Our ultimate goal is that all of our content creators and editors, our reporters and visual and video, have audience data at their fingertips, and incorporate it into their thinking.

IFMS: *You've just described some profound changes in your newsroom. For a legacy newspaper, how do you address the training issues that are involved with that kind of change? And also from the audience perspective, are the changes something that the audience perceives and, if so, what do they think of it?*

Murray: On the training issues, I think we're learning as we go, we've hired our first-ever, full-time senior training editor and have asked him to build out an entire curriculum.

We are a very large, very disparate newsroom, we have about 1,250 people or so in 60 offices around the world. So simply communicating and getting everyone on the same page is a challenge in and of itself.

In some areas we've instituted some mandatory training and understanding. We've established a much more robust schedule, a few mandatory trainings but a lot of voluntary trainings. Some of them are basic things like reminding people how to source more deeply, training for managers and writing seminars.

We put our editors through training of things like SEO practice, and what I find heartening is that most people are hungry for that. Even many of the veteran editors here recognize, through their own consumption habits and the world around them, that journalism is going through profound change. They'd rather be engaged with that change, and meeting it and shaping it, than we put our head in the sand.

I think on the reader end, it's a mixed reaction. We're seeing readership growth digitally we were not seeing before. Some of that is undoubtedly just because reader transition is accelerating, but I hope that some of it is because we've improved the product.

But I'm not sure all the readers necessarily register the changes, and part of the goal is to make that seamless so it registers that they're still getting their Wall Street Journal. So I think that readers not reacting to it more is kind of a good thing, they're just kind of taking it on board.

But look, one of the things we still wrestle with, I don't think we or any other legacy media organisation has hit on a fully emotionally, intellectually satisfying phone experience that quite matches the pleasures of the print experience.

I think there are storytelling platforms and even ways of organizing content, and ways of getting emotional completion you get with print, that have yet to develop properly on the phone. Right now, our app and other phone experiences are somewhat derived in their organization from print. I think journalism is like the movie business was in 1916, you know, before sound and before color and all the changes that transformed it. So I think there is still more to come.

IFMS: *What is it that is satisfying about the paper that is not translating into mobile? And how might you go about adding some of those things to increase the satisfaction of mobile?*

Murray: I still think a newspaper is essentially a great packaging mechanism, in the same way a book is. The format is clear. You know what to expect from different kinds of stories. You have the freedom to scan the page, there is a serendipity element, and you can see how stories connect, and you can see what's long, what's short, what grabs you.

There is a very clear demarcation between news and opinion content in print, there are visual clues and signals that tell you what's a feature and what's a news story, and you can complete it. With a good newspaper you can feel, if you've gone from the front to the back, that you know what you need to know today, which is a really, really great service.

I'm not the only person who can spend two hours on my phone, getting news stories and news content, and come away anxious that I've barely begun to scratch the surface, with the haunting fear there is some must read story that I missed out there. I think even the general jitteriness of the internet can stroke an anxiety. And print can be very satisfying that way emotionally, there is something instinctively emotional about that, you get a sense of completeness. I'm not quite sure what digital experience matches it, or could match it.

IFMS: *We've talked about training, but that's just one element of keeping staff on board with the ongoing changes. What steps did you take, in addition to training, to ensure that staff would embrace the new organisation?*

Murray: The important things are communication, and talking to people a lot and being out and available and explaining what you're doing and why. And matching the communication with a certain flexibility, as people want to reshape it. You have to be open to new ideas. If people come and say, 'I see what you're trying to do but here's a better way to do it,' or 'here's my suggestion of where to take that,' you have to be open to that flexibility so that people can feel an ownership stake in it.

At the same time, there are things that are inflexible, there are certain things where you have to say, this is where we are going. Hopefully to get to the decision you've included many members of the newsroom and given them a voice. But then they need the leaders to decide, here's what we're going to do and here's the direction. And you have to be ready for the fact that some people will not go along. And that's up to them, that's their decision to make.

In our case, some people didn't want to go along, they always knew they didn't want to go along. Our program started two years ago with a voluntary buyout. We hadn't had a voluntary buyout at the Wall Street Journal in 20 years and there was a lot of pent-up demand. We saw many colleagues leave, it was very tough to see many long-time people leave, it was a very rough period for morale. And we got that done first. And we strongly felt that, as much as we were sorry to see some much-beloved colleagues go, that the

people who stayed would really want to be a part of it and also have more opportunity to do things and shape things.

As we got past that, and as we rethought the leadership team and thought about new opportunities, it opened up a lot of windows for a lot of rising people to take on a bigger voice and bigger place in the newsroom. I think today, two years later, we have a much happier newsroom. Our leadership team is broadly younger, rising, much more diverse, with many more women in positions of leadership. People feel really good, and it turned out to be a great thing. But we had to be willing to do the tough stuff at the front end.

IFMS: *Has your experience with this led to structural changes to avoid the morale problems? Is there any specific thing that has changed because of that experience?*

Murray: Overhauling the leadership team, and with many more women ending up in positions of really running area of news, helped an enormous amount. We were underrepresented on the gender front and the newsroom was aware of it. And as we changed the leadership and evolved, and as we made the decision about who was taking jobs going forward, we definitely have much more of a 'no a**holes policy'.

The results have been much more positivity and much more of a team-oriented approach because many people in the roles are naturally collaborative. In this day and age, I think journalism is much more of a team sport than it was when I started out. To get journalism over the line these days, because of the speed required, there is more of a collaborative approach on the reporting end. I

It requires editors with judgment to move quickly, it requires visual people, it requires platform people, it requires print people to get it in print. Newsrooms are famously anti-social places with people who like being grumpy and difficult and curmudgeonly. And while I don't want to entirely lose that quality, it's really much harder to succeed as the misanthrope in the corner today.

IFMS: *In this transformation process, what are three things that worked out well, and three things that did not work out so well?*

Murray: We definitely overhauled our product suite from our newsletter to our mobile apps in a very good way, and got them up to a level of proficiency that we were sorely lacking. We made tremendous strides in digital publishing and workflow and a newsroom that is really focused around digital publishing while creating a separate print desk that has kept print strong.

And the third thing is having a different dynamic leadership team with a more logical structure, with an exciting group of people on the rise, who are talented and skilled. We're on the road to having a properly diverse force of people and leadership.

I think there is a lot of work still to do on the content front, to really think harder about what kinds of content readers want and when and be able to produce it. Although we've

made a lot of progress, we are still overly dependent on the newspaper story format. We're not doing that great a job on when you, as a reader, might want short, quick market hits in the morning to get you ready for the markets, and when you might want the longer, deeper enterprise work on the weekends, when you have time to read. So trying to think about how digital should change the format of what we do, we have work to do on that.

We still have a lot of technology work to do, to build out our engineers and our team to incorporate technology in the newsroom on an ongoing basis. And we are still, even with the changes we've made, too bureaucratic and slow moving and have too many editors cutting into too many stories in too many places. Particularly with our younger staff, it makes them absolutely crazy. So they are always saying, if we are so digital and so modern, why are we so cumbersome? And they have a point.

IFMS: Where do you see the news media industry in five years, and where do you see the Journal in five years?

I think the next five years will bring a little more turmoil and tumult than the last five did. I'm not a good predictor, and I think predictions are something of a fool's errand in journalism, but I think it's hard not to see the financial pressures that have shrunk a number of papers continuing, perhaps accelerating. If we were to have an economic downturn in the next five years, I'm pretty confident that we would see a lot more shakeout on that front. So I think there is more pain ahead there.

I think that, hopefully, there is a lot more technological developments and change to come, in some cases full of opportunity, and in some cases full of worry. When you talk about fake news, technology is going to bring us the ability to create audio tape that is completely false, that sounds like Barack Obama and Donald Trump. It is going to challenge journalists to be greater and deeper authenticators, and create a greater need for us to do that, but also further muddy the waters of what is truth and what is fiction. We're going to have to be extraordinarily rigorous. If we are, I hope there is opportunity for us, but I fear there is peril for us as well, particularly in this speedy social media age.

Also, as technology develops and AI develops, you can look around the corner and talk about a post-screen world. We've talked a lot about mobile, but what comes after mobile? Will people be getting their news headlines in 10 or 15 years on their eyeglasses, and how does the Wall Street Journal get to the corner of your eye frame? What's the expectation, or will audio be a bigger thing? So I don't know where and how those kinds of technology will develop, but we have to be ready for that, as the news experience continues to change and evolve. We've poured enormous efforts into the screen, but we may not have screens in the same way in five or ten or 15 years.

I think for the Journal, there is a great opportunity if we do it right, to build more audience with our exclusive content and our reporting and the kind of journalism we practice. Politics are a big driver for us right now, but we do a lot of things that are not about politics too, and I tell our people that economics, markets, business, these are the forces that shape our world, these are the products we love to use, these are the things that change our lives.

If we get that right, we are ahead of politics, we are writing about the currents and changes that are coming our way down the road. And I think people are hungry for knowledge and insight and understanding in the world as it gets more confusing.

I feel daunted but excited about our prospects to change. I still believe that there's a large group of people who want quality reported, fair, straight and accurate news and will seek it out. I feel good about where we stand.

Dietmar Schantin, Founder and CEO of the Institute, worked alongside Matt Murray and the Wall St Journal team in Project 2020 providing guidance and advice on how the overall transformation project strategy should be set up, planned and implemented. This entailed advising on the market and audience insight strategy and devising subsequent training programs, content strategy, the overall organisational structure and workflows as well as recruitment, training, change management, leadership coaching, technology and newsroom space design. Dietmar and the WSJ team continue to work on optimising and developing the newsroom further to stay ahead of the curve in quality journalism and digital media.

About the Institute

The Institute for Media Strategies develops and implements strategic solutions for digital, print and broadcast media houses. As an advisory, research, training and coaching organisation specialising in redesigning, optimizing and growing businesses in the media industry, we are engaged by future-minded organizations across the world.

We have worked with some of the biggest news organisation around the globe such as Dow Jones and the Wall Street Journal (USA/UK), GFR Media (Puerto Rico), Hindustan Times (India), or News Zealand Herald. We also work with a number of regional media companies such as Archant (UK) and CN-Group (UK), Västerbottens Kuriren (Sweden) and Kleine Zeitung (Austria).