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New Technology And Changing Directions
In Print Media Operations

by

Cyril D Pereira
AMIC Conference, 25-27 June, 1993
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

New technology and changing directions in print media operations

The three key elements in the topic given to me by AMIC for this Conference are: new technology, changing directions and print media.

My focus today, will not be on pure technology. Most of us are familiar with the front-end, pre-press and press technologies that have swept through the newspaper industry. We now witness the cumbersome attempts to electronically integrate full pagination, colour processing and advertising material. We are into local and remote networks to receive and transmit images and text.

In short, the newspaper industry is doing the same old things with a lot of new computers. In the vast majority of cases, that is the sum total of benefits that the newspaper business and its readers have so far derived. The focus remains internal: speed, efficiency, more news and advertising colour.

My basic premise is this: The communications revolution and the mass availability of affordable personal computers, gives print media a wonderful new opportunity to redefine its role to its various publics.

Redefine the newspaper resource: value-added editing

The traditional information-provider role of the newspaper is better and more efficiently executed through radio and TV broadcasts. The daily morning newspaper is no longer fresh news. It does not have the speed and immediacy of broadcast media. Anything of national or regional importance, has already been seen or heard the night before.

Intelligent readers have no use for information redundancy. Newspapers have to recognise that the delivery time-lag of the medium can be converted to an advantage: make sense of what is happening, for the reader. Provide meaning to events. Comment. Analyse. Research. Simplify complex issues. Spell out implications of government policies. Value-added editing.

We are all victims of information overload. We are dumped on by news machines every minute of the day. The terror of noise without meaning is upon us with a vengeance.

It is not colorification of newsprint that readers need. Not more pages of news agency material. Unlike passive assimilation of broadcast information, the printed word requires effort. Make that reader effort worthwhile. Walk the reader through national and international issues. Become his trusted guide and reliable friend, through the valley of multi-media overkill.
The newspaper library: re-package information for target subscribers

We have the technology to select, index and file the daily news output electronically. The electronic library frees subscribers from the need to visit the morgue. On-line access can be extended to commercial, government and educational institutions, on a fee-for-access and pay-by-use basis.

The vast library resource now begins to be a commercially active entity. More user-friendly technology will generate a wider audience of subscribers.

If this store of information is then re-organised into periodically updated information booklets, as an add-on service to subscribers, the commercial possibilities are further extended.

These info-packs can also be sold through bookstores to generate revenue and extend the masthead value of the newspaper. It can build and reinforce relationships with its readers and institutional subscribers, profitably.

The newspaper begins to re-define its service functions, using the technology available, to add value to its products.

Allocate editorial resources to mine the library

Editorial talent is the key resource of newspapers.

Given the will and the necessary organisational structure, a specialist team can be permanently reworking the information store for commercial application.

Can we not have the annual national budget analysed, comparative trends for the past five years tabled, key statistical indicators tracked and highlights of the finance minister's speech edited, to follow budget day?

What about industry sector reports? Company profiles? Updated biographies of business and political leaders? The scope for re-packaging information is immense. It is limited only by the imagination of the editor-in-chief. Or his nominee for that function.

And the best part about all this is that there is no need to re-keyboard text. Just access, download, edit and store! It's all there in the library.

Probably the best impetus to energising this initiative, is to select a senior editor with commercial savvy (are there such people, or is it a contradiction in terms?) and to give him the manpower and commercial infrastructure, to run the operation as a subsidiary company or profit-centre.
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The world information disorder: establish editorial computer links to facilitate real-time news exchange across borders

News agencies routinely steal locally and sell abroad, the commodity they trade in. Everyone knows that. The very newspapers that pay monthly charges to these agencies, are the targets of this grand larceny.

But that does not seem to be what the argument about information flows is about. It is the lack of local understanding and shallowness of reporting, that seems to dominate debate about the control of global information, vested in the power of the major agencies.

I am not about to enter this minefield of polemic. Only to point out that the technology for news exchange in real-time, is possible between co-operating newspapers, anywhere on earth. You can get across your story, before the foreign correspondent wakes up to it the next morning.

The electronic banks of newspapers are capable of interactive communication via modem. This exchange is well established internationally between the Murdoch newspapers in the UK, Australia and Hong Kong. In our region, the New Straits Times, South China Morning Post and SPH groups already have established on-line transmissions of requested news stories, on a routine basis. Much more in-depth local perspective is gained, than can be expected over the news wires.

Perhaps the national (credible?) newspapers in Asia, should consciously set out to harness their computerised newsroom investments, for formalised news exchanges on important national issues. Paper-to-paper exchanges also give the reading public relief from the irritating experience of seeing the same reports, word-for-word, in three rival newspapers, on the same day. It can become a telling competitive edge.
What are the Implications for recruitment, training and structures for this new journalism?

Newsrooms planning for the "new journalism" of overlaying news events and issues with meaning and analysis, in real time, have to review the mix of expertise they can marshal for this daily function.

Experts (not necessarily academics) in business, economics, investment, government fiscal and monetary policies, state and national political issues, regional and international geopolitics...etc. are difficult to find and to recruit.

Remote terminals and modem transmission via telephone lines, make it easier to maintain a register of specialists, located locally or regionally. The assembling of expertise in specialist areas, need not require physical employment in the newspaper building. It does need astute financial incentives and workable contractual terms, to keep rival papers from pinching experts you cultivate.

Reshaping the newspaper organisation for the 21st Century

Projecting forward a highly personalised vision, of the directions the newspaper industry would be well advised to take, I see the following scenario:

1. Emphasise news interpretation as the key contribution of the newspaper.

2. Build up graphical and illustrative skills within the newsroom, to quickly reduce complex events or issues, to visual images that can be instantly grasped by the reader.

3. Maintain a carefully selected and nurtured range of specialist commentators on tap, via remote links to the editorial system, on national and international issues.

4. Convert the vast library resource into a proactive information re-packaging factory, to repeatedly derive commercial value from existing material. Build on-line subscriptions. Produce info-packs regularly. Enable users to select info-packs from a menu of choices on screen.

5. Form strategic alliances with newspapers across borders, in countries that are particularly significant for your product, so that you can give readers valuable local perspective, beyond the bland uniformity of news agency copy.

6. The technology now available, allows us to do all of the above easily.