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Impact Of Computers On Newsroom Operations

By

Mustafa Jabbar
Impact of Computers on Newsroom Operations

Mustafa Jabbar

Today, when newspapers are going on-line and published simultaneously on paper and IT network, computers must be the most essential device for the smooth functioning of the newsroom. Newsroom is the heart of newspaper and the journalists are the heart of the newsroom. When the entire newspaper uses computer, journalists being the heart of the newsroom can not ignore it. Computer is the electronic innovation of the century. It has already made lot of changes to the world and still heading towards the age of information revolution to make changes which we might not imagine today. Though not known to us yet, feeling is that the IT revolution is certainly going to change the way of information distribution. Computer today in a newsroom is like pen in the hands of journalists. Once we used to say, “Pen is mightier than the sword.” By that phrase we used to indicate the pen of a journalist (or a writer) is more powerful than the strength of a sword (of a soldier). We still write our reports with a pen. However it is time for the journalists to replace pen with computers. They will not only write with the computers, it will be their all in one tool for the profession. It will be their communication centre and hopefully they probably will use it for many other purposes.

I feel that a journalist has to do few very important things to work in a newsroom.

1. A journalist has to collect information.
2. A journalist prepares & produces the information for the media.
3. A journalist has to get references on many matters.
4. A journalist has to maintain his own database of contact and manage his appointments.

1) Getting Info

Collection of information is very critical and vital for a journalist. Information is the product he makes. To be reach in that a journalist has to apply all ways and means. In today’s world collecting information through computer network is very important. Most of the international information sources are now computer based. Many of the libraries have gone on-line. Books, journals, periodicals are being published on the computer network. Many information’s are being published on CDs. There are trends that the books are being published on the network. Publishers like McGraw hill has already published few reference books on network. It is going to increase every day. Even photo services, photography, photo capture and all other graphics have become digital. Communications are no more Telegram, Telex and Fax based. We are now at the door step of E-Mail network and Video Conferencing era. In near future nobody is going to distribute information in any other means than a computer format.

At that perspective a journalist not equipped with appropriate tools, in my suggestion, a computer, can not collect or gather necessary information.

2) Preparation & production of News.

If not all, most of the newspapers today use computer based Pre press technology for producing the newspaper. Starting from the process of collecting news, data entry, correction, text and graphics processing, layouts, design, photo editing & color separation.
are done on computers. Except making multiple copies, where high speed printing devices are being used, the entire newspaper is the end-result of an integrated computer system. A journalist today, not capable of using computer system is definitely obsolete in terms of technology of this age.

Most of the newspaper should not accept news, reports, articles, editorials, photograph and art work on hard copies. A soft copy prepared on a computer should be the choice of today.

3. Reference

It is hardly impossible for a journalist to work without references. The trend today is that the references will be either available online or published on computer format devices like CD ROMs. It is therefore essential that a journalist should know about how to use online services and networks including libraries and publications.

Future of Newspaper and IT industry

Let me tell you a few words about what changes we are expecting in our newspaper industry in the IT revolution. Perhaps most of us can not even imagine what is going to shape up within a span of only 5/6 years from now. Firsts of all we can confirm that the life today and after 5 years are not going to be same in many ways. Many of us could not imagine the changes made by Cellular phones in communication and Satellite broadcast in entertainment. Perhaps we can not even imagine what more changes are coming in both the fields. Computers are going to speed up the process and add new dimension in all the areas of our life including the way of getting information and the way of expression. Today’s newspapers are mostly paper based. It uses paper media to communicate with the readers. In these circumstances a reader has to be satisfied with the fixed information provided by the printed media only. They do not get any chance to ask farther questions to the media. The scope is being very limited. But, I personally feel that at the end of the century, in the age of Information Revolution, readers will not remain satisfied with the stuff they get now in the printed media. They will be asking for more. They will try to interact with the newspaper and ask for many more information. They are to be provided with such facilities to interact with the media and structure of the information has to be changed too. A reader might ask the media for the background information or the impact of the information in future. They might ask for the side effects and related information too. They might also be asking for something like AV (Audio-Video) broadcast. I also feel that this information are to be managed in a different way we do now. If we look at some computer based newspaper like USA Today, we shall find that the information is being displayed on the basis of topics, not in pages. It publishes the information after classifying them in different categories like health, technology, entertainment, etc. It will be more in common and the information provided to the reader has to be kept in a database-multi-media-entertainment form.

At the end of this century most people will like to see their information flow from the computer networks. They will be retrieving the necessary info from their own PC and the newspaper shall have to be an Information Bank. Readers might go for shopping with the commercial pages of the newspaper. They will be ordering products to the advertisers through Computer Networks right from their own desktop.

I shall not be surprised to see if the readers ask for an on-line link to the spot of reporting through Computer. If a war is being reported in the newspaper, the readers might ask for the updates of the war when the info reaches him. There has to be many more editions of the newspaper published in the Computer Network and has to be kept for period of time. Today we get USA Today as an on-line service and they keep all their published information in the network for 5 days. Most of the newspaper of the information age will have to that.

Perhaps it is not necessary to mention here that the prospective will be global. There will be regional bulletin boards, where local information will be provided by the newspaper, but a global link will be the heart of our forthcoming IT Revolution. Just imagine, if you have to work in that circumstances, what changes you will have to bring in yourselves. It’s not too far. It’s a matter of 5/6 more Christmas only.

Newsroom: Today & Tomorrow.
I have already mentioned earlier that the forthcoming information Revolution will fully be depending on the digital technology. It will definitely be the computers and only computers in the newsroom of the information age. May be today some of us are being exposed to the preliminary stages of the computer technology. Some might have a look at the compose unit, data entry section, photo processing or graphics creation work of the computers. May be some of us use it for writing and preparing news. Perhaps some of us here have not even seen a PC. Am I right? Surprising!

So far I have tried to give you a brief idea about the changes that might take place concerning newspaper. I have drawn your attention to the few aspects of the newspaper of tomorrow. And now let me give you some idea about the newsroom of tomorrow. I shall also tell you about the way to adopt and prepare for it today.

1) Today most of us carry a pen, a tape recorder or a camera with us to capture information. We can easily replace the pen, camera and the tape recorder with a laptop PC that is capable of being a writing tool, an audio-video recording device and a communication station.

We can use the PC for our writing, recording and sending/receiving information to the newsroom. Today’s laptops can also be equipped with a device named modem that can connect to any computer equipped with a modem through normal telephone line. It can act as a Telex/Fax /Telephone station too.

In tomorrow’s world these laptops (May be there will be other devices like PDAs) will be able to use cellular networks and shall help us to communicate from any place of the world to any place of the world and shall send/receive text/graphics or both. The development of satellite communication technology and that of computer technology is making this happen.

2) Most of the newsroom workers today report to their Editor/News Editor/Chief Reporter physically. They sit at the newsroom, prepare the story and submit it to their editors. It can easily be done through computers. After collecting information a newsroom worker can prepare it and send it to the newsroom through wire. In future they will be able to do it right from the spot. In fact it can happen now. Those places where a telephone is available can be directly connected to the newsroom and other Computer Network with a PC equipped with a modem.

Any journalist can communicate not only with his/her office, colleagues, bosses through E-Mail, but also to the millions of people working with their computers and with on-line Information Services, News Services, Libraries, Universities and even Digital Publishers connected to the Computer Network. At present we interview people physically and present ourselves in front of the person. In future we shall be sending questions and get reply through computer. Opinion polls will be much easier and the correctness of the poll will be better. E-Mail in general and InterNet in particular is becoming the common word for the communication world.

However the development of IT in SAARC countries is not so bright compared to the developed countries. Except India most of the countries have not even entered the IT world. My discussion might seem to be a dream today. But the pattern and urge of the growth of IT industry is gaining momentum in our countries. More people are concerned about the growth of computer industry. Govt. and private sectors are eager to have IT in their fold. We might see at the turn of the century that the countries of this region have also entered the IT age. I hope most of the educated people will have a computer system and shall be able to operate it. Schools and colleges will be more aggressive in computer education and computer based education. Offices will be depending on the Information Technology. By that time we shall be able to send our questionnaire to the target audience and make an opinion poll by seating in our table. Things should be more and more easier, it should be more accurate and processing should be much faster.

Today newsroom management is being done manually. Oral and written notices are being used for assignments. Duty roasters are being maintained on registers. Even now we can do it in a computerized system. A database system can keep track of everybody's work and successfully CO-ordinate and create reports. In future when E-Mail will be more common, newsroom people will be able to get details of his/her assignments through their computers.

Today, all newsrooms are virtually islands. It is being cut off its surroundings. Now it can be linked not only internally, but it can gain access to the accounts, administration, production and all the components of the newspaper. In tomorrow’s world newsroom will virtually be a
workstation in the entire process of information flowchart. There will be graphics, videos, advertisements and other materials flowing through different workstations of the computer networks and making a newspaper will be integrated process of many people working together. Of course they will not be seating together.

Are we ready?
Let us ask ourselves, are we ready for the changes? If any of us has made appropriate changes in technology to produce the newspaper and adapted computer in the main focus perhaps we are being set to the changes coming up. May be some of us have adapted it in the Pre-Press stage, administration finance & circulation. I feel they are more and more concern about the changes coming up. If anyone has adapted it in the newspaper has definitely done the right thing. If someone has integrated the different part of the newspaper through Computer Network including the newsroom, they are perfectly on track.

My feeling is that most of us here have not seen, used or adapted computer technology in our work the way it should be. My experience regarding some of the SAARC countries is that most of the newspaper use computer for composing only. I know about some newspaper in India who use computer technology for their entire pre-press job. They are definitely ahead of many of us towards IT revolution.

Considering the experience of Bangladesh I can say that the journalists are being generally scared of computers. Their feeling can be described as follows:
1) One concept is that the journalists do not use computer as they might be termed as DTP operators. They still feel that the composing part of the newspaper lies with the DTP operators.
2) Many journalist feel that working with computer is hazardous.
3) Most journalist think computers are complicated and can not be learned easily.
4) Some journalists think that working with computer means working in a different atmosphere.

To address all the problems together and thinking of our journalists I like to assure you that the computers are not devil's boxes.

At the beginning stage of the introduction of computer, it was the Mainframes and Miniframes. Computers meant programmers and especially skilled people to work with that. They had to learn computer languages, write codes and then create programs for their own work to be done.

But PC developed on Microprocessors and marketed since 1976 has crossed about 18 years of vigorous development and tremendous efforts of millions of people who spent millions of hours to make a PC useable by average people. They have given all out effort to make our life easier, comfortable and friendly. Operating systems has been being developed to match and adjust with average person's knowledge.

It has become a friendlier machine and it can now being categorized as an everyday consumers electronic goods to be used by persons like us. Anybody spending few hours and using his/her common sense can use a PC. Thousand of applications for the PC are being developed to help all of us do all our jobs. No one should feel that he/she will have to learn computer syntax and commands in a way we are not familiar. I like to assure you that its like any other electronic devices.

Impact
If I am being allowed to describe the impact of computer in a newsroom in a line, I shall say that it is going to change your life. Computers are making your life easier in a sense that you can increase your efficiency. It is going to make your life difficult because you have to do many things that you are not doing today. Today you might just emphasis your work on writing the news. You do not have to worry about the typography, layout, design or the makeup of the news. But in tomorrow's world you have to do typesetting of your story. You should note that the speed of technology changes is faster than our learning speed. If I have talk to you yesterday that computers can not handle speech, I might be telling today that it can translate your speech into typeset documents.

The last line of this discussion should be that a computer now offer what it will be able to offer into the newspaper in a just a few years.