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The Electronic Newsroom: Reporting And Editing In The Electronic Age

By

Bob Howarth
The Electronic Newsroom: Reporting and Editing in the Electronic Age.

By BOB HOWARTH*, Editorial Technology Manager, South China Morning Post, Hong Kong.

The introduction of the electronic newsroom in many small and large newspapers in the United States, Australia, Europe and more recently Asia has not been without its fair share of "bugs". Text-processing computer systems have been in use for more than a decade now in most major newspapers and in that time second and even third generation systems have been introduced. The good news though is that newspapers changing from traditional "hot metal" production methods these days are in for much less trauma and disruption than what they would have faced 10 years ago.

Let me give you a personal example. In October 1978 I became the first metropolitan daily newspaper journalist in Australia to use a video display terminal (VDT) connected to a large computer system to produce typeset copy that was actually printed. At the time I was Production Editor of The Sydney Morning Herald which literally could not handle the volume of classified ads it was generating for its Saturday edition. The Herald at the time had a hot metal floor with more than 140 linotype machines and up to 150 men working side by side on the comp room floor every Friday night. From the editorial side Fridays were a nightmare because after all the ads were run into the pages, the production manager would sometimes ring the chief sub-editor and tell him he had another nine columns to fill because the ad estimate had fallen short -- and he had 30 minutes to sub and fill that space! The only way the production department could get an estimate at the time of how many ads they had so they could tell the machine room what size paper to gear up for was to use a long piece of string. I'm not exaggerating. At about 8 pm a red light would be turned on and no galleys of type were allowed to move from the lino machines or from the proofing area to the page make-up area. Two senior comps used to walk around the room with a long length of twine which had a knot for every column length. One comp measured all the type lying around and the second added up the columns. On some nights they would be accurate to within a column on 1,200 columns. When they were up to 10 columns out in their measure they blamed the humidity at the time, saying it made the string stretch! Obviously this was hardly the best way of working out how big a newspaper should be. Like many other big papers in the USA and Australia, the publishers of The Sydney Morning Herald shopped around the world for a computer system that first and foremost had to make money by processing and typesetting huge volumes of ads. The editorial side was a secondary consideration. Unfortunately for Fairfax, the publishers of the SMH, their first foray into the electronic newspaper world was a complete and absolute disaster. The management at the time decided on a system called Asycom and manufactured by a Dutch company. And to reach this stage Fairfax went through a long and bitter confrontation with the Printing and Kindred Industries Union (PKIU), the Australian print union. Fairfax won the battle but their change to the Dutch system was very expensive in terms of production costs and staff relations. And to this day Australian print unions as well as the journalists' union, the AJA, have a negative attitude to the new technology. In the case of the journalists the experience with the Fairfax system was understandable. The system crashed daily. Copy was lost, training became a nightmare and amid all of this the management pretended there was nothing wrong while the journalists' union was run by people with no production experience. To this day many union leaders still have had no real hands-on experience of computer systems but still run campaigns for greater pay and allowances for skills they personally do not possess. I left The Sydney Morning Herald in 1980 to help another major Australian newspaper, the Brisbane Courier-Mail go on line with a well-established American classified and advertising system manufactured by DEC. It still has the system but the management of Queensland Newspapers which publishes the Courier-Mail have paid out millions of dollars in disability allowances to their journalistic staff that could have been avoided had different steps been taken in the introduction of the electronic newsroom. For example, the company cut corners by buying a cheaper and much more difficult-to-use terminals for reporters compared to the terminals supplied for sub-editors. In Fairfax's case, their first choice of system was a full-scale disaster. Their staff also claimed and was awarded special allowances for using the original Dutch system. Fairfax then scrapped the entire project and bought the well-established American system SII. The allowances, however, are still being paid.

From my own observations, smaller newsrooms have found it much easier to change from old production methods to direct-input computer systems. However in Hong Kong we have had a very successful and rewarding change of systems in the past 10 years. In 1977 the South China Morning Post became one of the first Asian newspapers to go "on line" with an American-made Talstar system. This system, which is still in use in many newspapers throughout the world, is no longer manufactured. It is the "T-model Ford" of editorial and classified systems. I was recruited by the South China Morning Post in 1984 as Production Editor to play a role in the replacement of the Talstar system with something bigger and more sophisticated. After a long selection process the Post eventually decided on the latest Atex system which is manufactured by the big American Kodak corporation's computer subsidiary. To prepare for the change, 10 senior editorial staff were taken off regular duties to be trained on the new system and thus become the trainers of all other news staff. Of the original 10 (including myself) only two remain to play an active role in system training and management.
SELECTING A SYSTEM:

For a newspaper changing to a system for the first time, the introduction of computer terminals can be overwhelming if the change is too sudden and without proper planning. Most people are scared of change in their daily routines and journalists are no different. It is vital that senior editorial staff who are involved directly in production, such as the chief sub-editor, production editor and layout subs, be involved in the introduction of a system. They must be consulted on the system selection because they are the ones who will make it work. Management should also have sound reasons for making this change. In most cases it has been that the old methods can no longer handle the volume of copy required. Therefore a system must be selected which does the job of producing a newspaper efficiently, more cheaply and with less effort. At this point I would urge any management involved in a selection process to do three things:

(1) Lay down clear and precise specifications of what you want your system to do and stick by them.
(2) When the vendors arrive and dump on your desk the glossy brochures, slick videos and glowing accounts of what they can do for you, ask to see a working system of a similar size to your needs and question the users at length about the system's advantages and disadvantages. Then keep in touch with the working system's managers in case they develop "bugs".
(3) Select your system managers before you start on your project and ensure enough time for training.
(4) Forget about the "bells and whistles". Every system salesman is just another glorified car salesman. If you want a basic system to do a basic job, don't be distracted by features or equipment that your staff may never use.

TRAINING:

Allow plenty of time for training before you make the big change. It's better to go on line ahead of an easy schedule than force your staff to use a system when they are not ready. Getting on line ahead of schedule is also a good boost for morale. The South China Morning Post, for example, went completely "live" on its Atex system on December 28, 1985, after slowing changing various sections of the paper from the Talstar system over a four week period. Various sub-editors were rotated from the main sub-editor's desk to the features desk to allow them to use the Atex system in live production. The end result was the paper went off stone 20 minutes early on the big changeover night. Many people ask me how much time should be allowed for training. In Australia, for example, reporters must receive a minimum of two days if they have had no other systems experience while sub-editors must get a minimum of five days training. This I feel is inflexible. In the past 10 years I have trained more than 600 journalists on six different systems. Recently I had three newly-arrived sub-editors at the Post up and running after four hours only. I was able to do this by using programmable keys which automatically do several functions at a keystroke. For example one key will automatically call up a customised HELP menu while another will call up an option control file which will give the sub-editor all sorts of information ranging from the home telephone numbers of reporters to a list of instructions on how to send copy into the system from a portable terminal using a telephone modem link.

Retraining is also as important as initial training on any system. Many people forget things they have been taught and can develop bad habits, such as unnecessary HNJing (hyphenating and justifying) copy which eats up system resources. Others may call up newsagency wire directories when a special fast program may find the story they want without slowing down the system. The South China Morning Post now runs regular refresher courses for all staff. Our first campaign in this area last year resulted, by our estimates, in a 10 to 20 per cent improvement in system response. To put it in layman's terms it was like teaching a truck driver to use his gears properly and thus save on fuel and extend the truck engine's life.

GENERAL IMPACT ON THE NEWS ROOM AND SUB-EDITORS

I would challenge any reporter who has changed from a typewriter to the computer terminal on any well-designed system to not say that their job is much easier. The ease of correction, the ability to create duplicate copies, the ability to send "electronic mail" messages and even the ability to make the computer check their spelling against a master dictionary all make life easier for reporters. These days many reporters would be lost without portable terminals. No longer do they have to shout into telephones dictating copy. For the news desk there is now complete control over copy. The news editor call call up a directory (or menu or basket as it's called in some systems) and see all stories being written as well as the state of play - i.e. whether it's finished or not and whether there are pictures to go with the story.

The biggest impact of all has been on sub-editors. The early systems used by newspapers generally made life harder for subs. The formats (composition instructions contained in a single file that the computer typesetter "reads" before it sets phototype) were primitive and involved lots of keystroking.

Today the whole ball game has changed, as our American friends would say. I'll give you a typical example:

When reporters arrive at the South China Morning Post they are usually given a couple of hours training if they have not used a system before. If they have had other systems experience, they will usually pick up the system with about 40 minutes training. They are given a "logon" which identifies them to the system with their own secret password. This enables the system to record who did what or looked at what on any file. It also enables the system manager, on the advice of an editorial department head, to restrict access by the reporter to queues (or "menus" or "baskets") that they don't need. These "logon" specifications can be changed at any time by the system manager.
To write a story the reporter can sit at ANY terminal on the system, log on then create a new header file, fill in certain details and write his story. By hitting one key he or she can get an instant measurement of the story in standard single column setting measure. These days reporters know how much to write to fill 40 centimetres on Page 1.

Sub-editors training involves teaching them the basics of logging on, creating new files, editing text using their deletion and definition keys and copying and renaming files. Simple tricks such as transposing miss-typed characters with a single keystroke usually please old hands who have never used a computer keyboard before. To give sub-editors a better understanding of how the computer system works, we usually teach all sub-editors the basics of composition that many never needed to know in the days of hot metal production. Subs are taught how to read and understand formats (e.g. so they know which typeface a particular format sets in) and, most importantly, how to use programmable keys.

Programmable keys save subs many hours of repetitive work. As an example, I have written a key which saves the Post's layout sub-editor about an hour a day in marking up copy for subbing. For instance, the layout sub has to put in a header at the top of the copy on screen necessary information such as the publication, date of publication, section, page number and subbing orders like length, whether a caption is needed and the number of "decks" or lines of headline needed. The layout sub also puts the formats on the copy then sends it to a pickup queue used by the main subs' desk. Now one key will do all of this and thus save about two minutes' keystroking work on EVERY story handled by the general desk.

Perhaps the Post's best example of how some new procedures save time and money is with the business section's stocks and shares listing. When Hongkong's two stock exchanges joined together, the newspaper was able to use a standard personal IBM computer (PC) to dial into an electronic mailbox through the telephone network and pickup all the closing stock prices at the end of trading. This information is then run through a "spreadsheet" PC program which does all the necessary calculations on dividend yields etc that previously done with a pencil and paper by a junior details sub-editor. The program also automatically inserts all typesetting formats. The stocks list is then re-transmitted over another data network from the PC into the main computer system where it is HNJed then typeset. The whole operation takes about 40 minutes for one junior sub-editor. Previously it took up to six hours of tedious work. That sub-editor has now been freed for more satisfying and productive duties.

In the area of handling newsagency wire copy there have been great advances. Earlier this year I addressed Reuters Asian editorial conference on the needs of an advanced electronic newspaper. My main plea was for high speed transmission of copy by the newsagency and adoption of the American newsagency standards of specific header information which lets us sort automatically incoming copy. For example sports stories which have tabular matter can be handled with speed and ease if we know it is sports copy with tables. Every section of the paper can call up a wire "menu" which allows them to select one of the nine wires that run into our system, the category (e.g. features, sport, entertainment, international news) and specific keywords (e.g. stories which have the words THATCHER, VANCOUVER and SANCTION in the first line of text). This saves system resources and sub-editor's time. If anyone has ever experienced the loneliness of being a late-stop sub they'll know what it's like to miss a big story that arrived on one wire and was ignored on the other wire services. Now our late-stop sub-editor has a single command which enables him or her to call up ALL wires on the one screen in chronological order. Perhaps the biggest advantage of all in a modern system is a good spell checking function. Now there is no excuse at all for literals or typing errors in print. The Post has a SPELLCHECK key on all terminals which makes the computer check every word in a story against a master dictionary. The system also has a secondary dictionary which I have added about 2,000 local words to, including all Asian place names, cabinet ministers and even current TV and film stars. The original dictionary was a standard American Webster's Dictionary and was of little use to a newspaper using "English" English, rather than "American" English. For example, the use of the word "automobile" is not house style ("car" instead). If it was used as a verb ("automobilized") as in the original dictionary, most of our fastidious readers would go into a letter-writing frenzy.

Two other features of a good system also make life easier for reporters and sub-editors. One is the use of exchange programs. These are programs that do multiple search and change functions on words in certain categories. The Post has an exchange program called YANK which searches for and replaces 128 different Americanisms or American spellings with "English" English style words. All a reporter or sub has to do is type OPT YANK in their command field, fill in the name of the file and hit the execute key. The system does the changes on a 1,000 word story in about 60 seconds. We also have an OPT STYLE which looks for incorrect local place name spellings and changes them. It also looks for the most mis-spelled word ACCOMODATION and changes it to ACCOMMODATION as well. The other function is a good audit-tracking system. During the inevitable "witch-hunts" that take place when a bad error is published, the news editor and editor can recall all versions of a story and see who caused the error and who let it pass as well. Such a system is a good safety net for sub-editors who make a complete mess of subbing a story. Now they can recall a previous version, take a copy of it and work on the earlier version after ditching the messed-up version.
THE FUTURE:

FULL page make-up is already installed in several newspaper throughout the world. This allows a sub-editor to place stories on a screen which the dummy page displayed then lock the story into position in the electronic layout. However full pagination is still a long way off for most newspapers. It's a slow process from the editorial side and lacks the flexibility or working with a skilled paste-up compositor.

Reuters newsagency has a picture-editing terminal which the South China Morning Post will be assessing in the next couple of months. I have tried using the terminal at Reuters Hongkong headquarters. It is simple to use and allows the editor to view several pictures on the one screen then crop and display the picture before printing them out for use. However the current leasing cost would put it out of the range of most Asian newspapers. The picture terminal will obviously become an integral part of any full pagination system.

I believe the greatest potential benefit to any newspaper’s editorial staff is the ability to communicate between personal computers at home or in the field and the main host system at the office. In our next system upgrade due later this year we will be able to communicate between any PC with the correct logon access and the main system. The editor will now be able to dial into the system when he gets home and night and read on his PC in his study any story in the main system. If necessary he can edit the copy then send it back to the main system and send a message to the night editor with further instructions. In my own case I can dial in from home if there’s a system problem and see what is causing it. The implications of such two-way communication are endless.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of all the new innovations in newspaper systems is that journalists can get back to concentrating on the quality of their reporting and editing — and not worry about the mechanics of using a keyboard and a blinking computer screen because the new technology is no longer something to be feared. If you embrace the new technology with enthusiasm and a good deal of careful planning and research, you’ll find it rewarding in more ways than one.

*Bob Howarth has worked as a journalist and news executive on several leading newspapers after starting as a cadet journalist in Australia in 1962. They include The Australian, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Times of London and the Brisbane Courier-Mail. He was appointed Editorial Technology Manager of the South China Morning Post two years ago.*