Prepare for the THIRD (technology) wave OR cut your hair and get

By Howard I. Finberg

Be prepared. While it once was the sole providence of the Boy Scouts, today's newsroom managers could do worse than to keep that motto in the front of their minds as they look toward the next century. However, knowing that the world is changing and being ready to adapt to the changes are two distinct activities. I understand that newsroom managers generally know that their world is changing, but I'm not sure that most have a clue as to how to fit those changes into their organizations. Many blame the rapidly changing newsroom structure on the introduction of "pagination." More production work, more coding, more responsibilities, less time, and so forth.

Unfortunately, those factors are leading many of us to look at pagination in the same way our grandfathers looked at the introduction of the automobile. Rather than see a new technology and understand its implications, the early automobiles were given the name of the technology it replaced — the horse and carriage was replaced by the horse-less carriage. The challenge for today's newsroom managers is to look at these new technologies and see how they might reshape the landscape of news and information gathering and how to make plans to adapt to those changes. It is time to get proactive and stop being so reactive to the changes that have affected and will continue to affect newspapers. Looking back at the tortured path of pagination, it's a wonder that the Luddites haven't called for a return to the days of the composing room and hot metal production.

The industry's attempts to modernize its backshop production can be divided into three waves:

- First wave — electronic paste-up
- Second wave — electronic composition
- Third wave — database publishing

The first wave of pagination technology was very much an extension of its predecessor — strips of cold type replacing galleys of hot type. Eventually, using complex coding, the techno-wizards were able to produce blocks of type. The impact of this technological change was subtle, although the increase in coding dumped upon copy editors was generally acknowledged. But publishers saw the first signs of savings with this modernization and most editors saw cold type as just another way of continuing the newspaper traditions they grew up with. We didn't look ahead and we didn't stop to ask what the future would look like without a composing room.

The second wave of pagination — the phase that most newspapers are using and many are still looking to join — is the creation of an electronic composing room. It doesn't matter whether the technology involves off-the-shelf software such as Quark Xpress or something created uniquely for the industry. The impact of this technology was anything but subtle. Composing rooms were closed, new departments created and new job descriptions written for those in charge of not only packaging and designing pages but also the production output of the newspaper. The most dramatic impact involved changes in the actual control the presentation. Fewer and fewer members of the newsroom were involved in assembling and creating of the presentation o the news. Designers replaced news editors and section editors as a new creative force within the newsroom. The side-effect of this second wave was "technology concentration.

Shooting for the big one

The third wave is an emerging phase involving the creation of complex and sophisticated database systems for storing, organizing and presenting information. This collection of information — text, photos and graphics — will be used to create more than the printed newspaper. That same information can be re-assembled for other purposes — special publications targeted to the non-newspaper reader, faxes or wireless products or online services. More important, however, is the fact that these emerging systems will run using standard, off-the-shelf hardware and standard network systems. Techno mumbo-jumbo aside, these systems allow the distribution of information throughout the entire newsroom and, if the

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publisher chooses, the entire newspaper.

Without getting into who should see the newspaper before it is printed, the entire company could benefit by being aware — if not involved — in the process of presenting meaningful information to the reader. The third wave of pagination will provide the means of sharing information throughout the newsroom and company. Reporters will have the ability to look at — and hopefully, comment about — page presentations. Editors will no longer be left in the dark as to how a presentation is being organized. And in this age of diminishing resources, the fewer times an organization needs to handle information, the more energy and effort can be put into the creation and presentation of that data.

However, to take full advantage of a database publication system, newspapers will need to invest not only in new computer equipment but also in the time and energy needed to rethink how information is distributed and controlled throughout the newspaper. And sharing information isn't enough. This new wave of pagination will bring new opportunities for others currently technologically removed from the processes of organizing the information. These employees will be able to contribute to forming and shaping the whole newspaper. That's risky business, especially for an industry that has evolved using an assembly-line process of production and a military-like management structure.

Where does that leave the journalist as specialist? My career advice is this — get new skills, learn new aspects of the business. This holds true whether you are a reporter or designer. In the future, newspapers will need more generalists, fewer priests guarding the gates of knowledge. These generalists will need the skills to deal with multiple forms of communication — the written word, the audio clip, still and video images. This new form of collaborative publishing will provide the potential of tapping a great number of people to assemble the news. And with more people involved, more and different ideas of how to inform, entertain and enlighten. That is the risk and reward of the third wave.
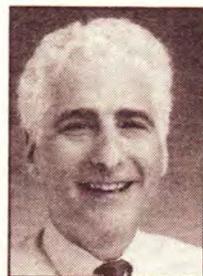
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