

Reflecting on the Past

WITH TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES whirring by in the communications milieu — witness podcasts and blogs — and as newspaper circulation and classified advertising figures sink to new levels, perhaps it's time to reflect on some key moments that stand out in this evolutionary process.

When I started out as a newspaper reporter in Memphis, there were two daily papers, both broadsheets as opposed to tabloids. People tended to place more faith and credibility in the broadsheet (the size of the paper — akin to *The Wall Street Journal*, for comparison).

A tabloid still smacked of “yellow journalism” — the name was inspired by the wildly popular early comic strip, “The Yellow Kid,” published in a rather sensational newspaper, and reflects a kind of journalism in which the news is misrepresented or distorted.

My editors back then asked me to write at the level of an eighth-grade-educated reader. I wasn't working for *The New York Times*, and a perceived high-brow audience.

We were also told to keep our opinions out of the copy, and admonished if we didn't. Opinion was the purview of the editorial pages. We were to render detached opinion from all sides of the story and allow the reader to reach his or her own conclusion.

Fast forward to today, when practically every news account has an opinion injected in it. Perhaps this

will help explain why there is a credibility factor with reporters.

Lost Meaning

We met deadlines — strict ones, imposed by the need to convert copy to cold type and still get the paper out on time. When there was a breaking story, all hell broke loose in the composing room to revise, revamp or replace a story that was already set in type. Before reaching this point, we tended to type — on a typewriter — copy in quintuplicate, which meant using carbon paper.

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Today, most people use the term “cc” with their e-mails or letter and have no vague idea of what a “carbon copy” or carbon paper really is. In that regard, you may be better served to simply say “c” or copy. Ditto for replacing “bc” over “bcc” — blind carbon copy, for those not in the know.

Letter to the Editor

Back in those days, if you disagreed with something you saw in print, you may have dashed off a letter to the editor by United States mail or hand-delivered your missive.

This was, of course, before e-mail and the Internet, and the postal system worked. It was also before FedEx (néé Federal Express) changed the face and state of overnight delivery.

Letters to the editor were considered on a more egalitarian footing and received greater acceptance at the newspaper.

Readers devoured them and they often became the talk of the town.

Think of the “Letters to the Editor” column as an earlier-day blog, which it was — and it helped formulate word-of-mouth opinion.

Back then, if a company did not like what it read, it threatened to pull its advertising from the paper — and often did.

Corporate chieftains felt this would send a proper message to the paper: to be extra careful in reporting what the company did not like to see in print.

Perhaps no one told them that you cannot do battle with someone whose buys ink by the barrel. Given time, those companies meekly returned their advertising.

Public relations folks back then

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went out of their way to cultivate relationships and an understanding with reporters. This often meant breaking bread, returning telephone calls, rendering additional information when asked, etc. — a far cry from today, when voice mail prevents reporters and PR types from actually speaking.

Slower Pace

Then, too, e-mail has taken on a new aura. Yet too many rely on spell checking; even where the words being used are correctly spelled, they may not be the intended words.

If a letter is poorly written, or contains spelling or grammatical errors, would you want to do any business with that person?

Whatever happened to proofreading?

Did it go the way of the albatross?

Will it rise from the ashes like the phoenix?

It can and could if people sit back and take the time to proof letters before hitting the send key on the PC or laptop. Moreover, asking another to help proof also ensures it will be letter-perfect.

After all, if a letter received, whether by e-mail, post or FedEx, is poorly written, or contains spelling or grammatical errors, would you want to do any business with that person? I suspect not. And it only takes a few extra minutes to do it the right way.

We are rushing needlessly, and just need to s-l-o-w down a bit.

Say "Thank You"

While chivalry is relegated to the pages of Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* — remember this classic from grade school (an original version can be seen at the newly-revamped Morgan Library in midtown Manhattan along with the Gutenberg Bible, among other classics)? — it still does not hurt to say "thank you."

After an article appears, it's easy to e-mail a note of appreciation. The writer will like this. Yet most people don't take the time to do so.

The same holds true with reading a newspaper from stem to stern.

Perhaps this explains, to a degree, why circulation is declining. There are a growing number of other outlets that enable us to get some comprehension about what is going on in the world.

No matter what form it takes, it still remains important to communicate to your important publics. Use the technology to do so.

But if you are in need of some carbon paper, send me an e-mail and I will see if I can locate some for you. ■

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