

Reflecting on the Past

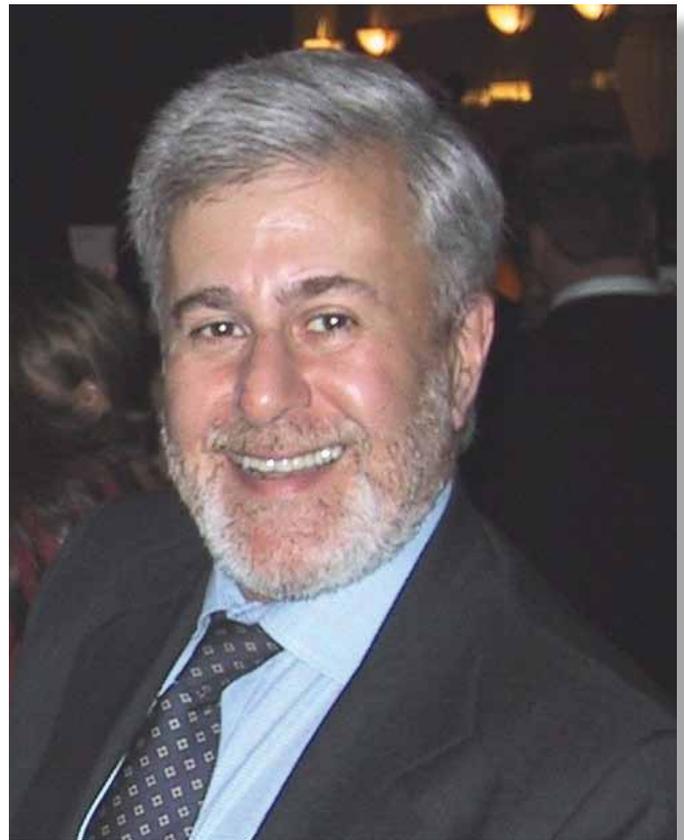
By Andrew S. Edson

With technological changes literally whirring by in the communications milieu – i.e. witness podcasts, Blogs – as newspaper circulation and classified advertising sinks 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, Tennessee, there were two daily papers – both “broadsheets” as opposed to “tabloids”. This was the industry standard and people tended to place more faith and credibility in the broadsheet (really the size of the paper and akin to The Wall Street Journal for comparison sake). After all, a tabloid still smacked of “yellow journalism” – no racial epithets here, but the manner in which the news was represented or 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 higher brow audience. But, we were also told and admonished if we didn't, to keep our opinions out of the copy. This 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.

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. And, before reaching this point, we tended to type – on a typewriter – copy in quintuplicate, which meant carbon paper. 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



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to simply say “c” or copy. Ditto for replacing “bc” over “bcc” – blind copy for those not in the know.

Back in those days, if you disagreed with something you saw in print, you may have dashed off a “letter to the editor” – by US mail or hand-delivered. This was, of course, before e-mail and the Internet, and the postal system worked. It was also before FedEx (nee Federal Express) changed the face and state of overnight delivery.

Letters were considered on a more egalitarian footing and received greater acceptance at the newspaper, and readers

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actually devoured them, which became the talk of the town. Think of it as an earlier day Blog, which it was and helped formulate “word of mouth” opinion.

Back then, if a company did not like what it read, it threatened – and did – to pull its advertising from the paper. 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 main product was printer’s ink. Given time, those companies meekly returned their advertising.

Public relations folks back then 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 pre-empts reporters and PR types from actually speaking. Then, too, e-mail has taken on a new aura. Yet, too many rely on spell checking, if at all, even where the words are being used are correctly spelled, but may be the wrong intended words.

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 or tablet. 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, 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 *slow* down a bit.

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 easier 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 why circulation is declining to a degree. There are a growing number of other outlets that enable us to get some comprehension about what is going on, including the ever-growing social media channels.

No matter what form this 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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