

Skills up, quality down?

01/01/2009

Today's journalist is a highly skilled individual. They can write the story, shoot the film, record the interview, edit it all up, sub it and then squirt it down the various tubes that make up today's multimedia newsroom. The burning question is, says Martin Cloake, can they do any of it particularly well?

When the Sunday Times polled world leaders to find the most outstanding figure of the Millennium, Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of the moveable type press, topped the list. Within just thirty years, the technology had spread throughout Europe, prompting enormous cultural and political changes. Few inventions have had such a far-reaching effect in such a rapid time.

Mark Twain called Gutenberg's invention "the incomparably greatest event in the history of the world". Understanding the significance of Gutenberg's invention requires not just a knowledge of how the press worked, but of what it was used for. As brilliant as the technology was, it was the uses to which it was put that made it so significant.

Over 500 years on from the publication of Gutenberg's Bible, it seems much of the media industry still does not really understand this. We tend to discuss technology in

terms of what it will make us do, or what it will change, rather than how we can use it to achieve new and better outcomes. We forget it is people who control technology, and so we let technology dictate practice. And we are in danger of losing the chance to move our media on because this narrow vision threatens to reduce the very opportunities the latest technologies present.

Media commentator Roy Greenslade caused a storm in July last year when he argued that "sub-editors will struggle to survive in a digital age". His argument, in summation, was that because writers can now file copy ready for publication, cut to fit and with headlines written, there was no need for dedicated production staff.

It's a view that has been gleefully embraced by media companies looking to cut costs. Of course, the cost of producing media must be considered – especially in these recessionary times. But any organisation that wants to thrive in the long term needs to think very carefully about how to maintain the qualities that will enable it to do so. For media organisations, a key consideration will be how best to embrace the opportunities offered by new media platforms.

Convergence

The current buzzword, in an industry that loves its buzzwords, is convergence. What that means is still the

subject of much debate in editorial offices and on media courses around the world. But what is clear is that people who work in the media can no longer think simply in terms of print or broadcast. Content is consumed in a variety of ways via a variety of platforms – each of which offers different opportunities. Few would disagree, but the debate kicks in over who should or could produce content.

At the London College of Communication, where I teach as an associate lecturer for two days a week, a new Production for Media Convergence course aims to provide students with an awareness of how to tell stories in print, online and in audio and video formats. Telling the story is still at the heart of the course, but on the course we try to get students to think about what is most suited to a particular format, what opportunities those formats offer, and how each platform complements the other. Doing this while also teaching more traditional sub-editing skills is a delicate balancing act and, like media organisations, we are still feeling our way.

This was highlighted when the BBC's Simon Ward came to speak to the students. Ward has been very involved in the development of the Corporation's multimedia newsroom and, after his talk, one student asked: "Do you feel you are spending more time processing news than actually gathering it?" Ward replied that this was exactly the discussion going on at the BBC, and hinted that the emphasis was shifting from processing to gathering as the

MNR bedded down. "We have to be sure we are striking a balance between the process of getting content on air and the journalism and storytelling that has to go into that content," he said.

Quality issues

It's not always easy to do this. The quality of video content on local newspaper sites, for example, has been the subject of much criticism, but often such material is obtained by giving a reporter a video camera and asking them to do a piece for camera as well as write a piece for the paper and re-purpose it for the website. There is a world of difference between being aware of the demands of different platforms and being able to deliver high quality work to them. Too many employers assume the person who writes the story can also present a video item and maybe even edit a sound piece. In the high-pressure environment of football match reporting, for example, asking reporters to file copy for multiple platforms is unlikely to lead to anything other than a reduction in quality across the board.

Pete Picton, editor of the Sun Online, says: "Too many people think that you can put the same story on multiple platforms. What's being forgotten is that each platform suits a different form of storytelling." This is not an argument against sharing stories or resources, simply a recognition that context and presentation are as important as the story itself.

Process rationalisation

At a recent BBC conference, head of multimedia Peter Horrocks was asked similar questions by staff concerned that the sharing of resources was in fact leading to homogenised news across the BBC's platforms, rather than in-depth, expert coverage. Horrocks responded to the charge that there was an obsession with process by saying that he preferred to talk about "reducing unnecessary processes so that we maximise value". In this way, he argued, it would be possible to devote greater resources to storygathering by using the savings found in processing.

All of which brings us back to production journalism. As someone who worked on the first Apple Mac Classics using a rudimentary form of Pagemaker to create a college magazine, I need no convincing of how great a change desktop publishing was from stone-subbing – a skill I learned when I started in the trade press. And I need still less convincing of how much more complex, and yet accessible, today's publishing technologies are. Anyone can buy a Mac or PC off the shelf and immediately use software to achieve results we could only dream about in the days when the Mac Classic was cutting edge. DIY culture is now more likely to take the shape of a website or an uploaded YouTube video than a Xeroxed fanzine. It's easy to be dazzled by the process, to see presentation as the arena in which possibility can genuinely thrive. Easy, but

wrong.

Production journalists

In the end, it's the quality of the story that matters. No matter how skilled the presentation; something cannot be made out of nothing. Although the media industry has a good try! It's why we need both the traditional subbing skills, and why we need what could perhaps more usefully be described as a new generation of production journalists. Facts still need checking, assumptions questioned, a second pair of eyes can always bring something to a story. But the production journalist of the new age can use these traditional skills to inform a more effective application of the latest technology.

James Anslow, a lecturer in journalism at City University London and former chief production editor of the News of the World, says: "Just as printers' typographical and proofreading skills remained in the hands of subs, sub-editing skills will remain in the hands of 21st Century do-it-all journalists who know how to blog effectively, write for the web, take photos and knock up a simple three-minute self-edited video clip to accompany, where appropriate, their words and headlines. But, of course, no one is pretending that is broadcast journalism."

There's no doubt the journalist of the future will need a basic level of multimedia literacy. But it's important to

ensure they also have the skill in a particular area to best deliver a story. In *Convergence Journalism* (Focal Press), journalism professor Stephen Quinn interviews a number of people who follow this argument through. Voices from industry and media education alike agree that journalists need to be aware of how stories work across a variety of platforms but, as convergence tutor Professor Bob Papper argues: "The more skills a person has, the less likely they are to produce quality in all or any one area." Martha Stone, training director for the University of South Carolina's Newsplex says: "While some multimedia journalists can handle a variety of tasks... most will only deliver mediocre journalism."

We need journalists who can combine a basic multimedia literacy with an applied expertise in order to create a genuinely 'new' media. Too often we produce print on the web, take a linear approach to online storytelling, or believe that multimedia is just dropping a video or audio clip into a written report. We have yet to create a genuinely new media, even accounting for all the challenges and opportunities thrown up by user-generated content. Perhaps it will be today's student journalists who, through a combination of their own media consumption and learning about how media is produced, will cross that frontier.

I would argue that the process of producing media is just as important as it was when Gutenberg laid the foundations of bringing the printed word to the masses. We need more

emphasis on skilled production journalists who can work with tenacious and talented storygatherers, not the imposition of a process of multiskilling that many journalists view – not unreasonably – as deskilling and cost-cutting. At the moment, the latter model is being embraced by a short-sighted industry. In doing so, we are making all our futures less, not more, secure.