

1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Saludo, R., New tech old skills: Reworking conventional journalism instruction, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 2, 1997, 60-65.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss2/6>

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New Tech Old Skills: Reworking Conventional Journalism Instruction

High-tech has made the age-old skills of checking the facts, setting the context and organizing the story ever more necessary. With the Internet, journalism educators will all still have jobs teaching the next generation of hacks how to write clearly, organize their ideas and information, go for the right color and work as a team. Journalism education must develop that capacity in future graduates, as well as the management skills needed to knit together a group of people and bring the best out of each one. That is the only way to allow the full development of each individual's potential in specific skills while ensuring that the end-product makes full use of high-tech media's capabilities.

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Case 1: A story is reported by a correspondent in Manila and sent via the Internet to a writer in Bangkok, who does the article and transmits it by modem to an editor in Hong Kong. The editor cleans it up and fits it into a page. The page is sent to both writer and correspondent through the magazine's electronic mail system, which both regularly log on to through the day. They send corrections and suggestions via e-mail and the editor makes the necessary changes. These notes appear on the margin of the page layout, with colors indicating who made each comment. A next-to-final version is sent and after further corrections, the page is signed off and output into a film or a plate to be used for printing.

Case 2: Pictures by agency photographers using film are developed into slides or pictures, digitized by a scanner and transmitted by modem to a central computer, which contains text, data, graphics and digitized pictures. Those using digital cameras send images from camera straight to the machine, which is linked to the Internet. Also connected to the news agency's data bank, its clients see small versions of digitized pictures just hours after

they are taken. Clicking on the images would enlarge them for viewing and, if desired, download them in high-resolution digital versions for cropping and insertion straight into page layouts. At no point does the newspaper or magazine see a paper print or a slide of any photo.

Case 3: The *Asiaweek* 1000 ranks the largest corporations in the region in 40 pages containing 24 columns of data on each entry. What if a company were inadvertently excluded and the films for the list had to be sent to the printers within hours? Inserting the missing firm would mean resetting the entire 40 pages of information. No problem: the spreadsheet containing the 1000 data is linked to the page layouts, so that any change in the spreadsheet is reproduced on every page. The insertion and re-ranking can be done in an hour, and new films of the revised pages output for the press.

Case 4: A correspondent in Southeast Asia sends a message to the magazine's e-mail conference folder, which can be read by staffers across the region. He says NGOs have become in effect his country's main opposition group, since regular opposition parties are either co-opted or suppressed. Other correspondents elsewhere in the region as well as writers and editors at the desk reply with their own NGO experiences and thoughts. Someone comes up with an idea: Why not do a story on the power of NGOs? Another notes that NGOs are gearing up for major action at APEC. In the span of half a day, the outlines for an NGO cover story is drawn. In a couple of days, correspondents have offered bits and pieces that they can contribute, and an editor has assigned length and deadlines for reports. As with the photo transmission case, no paper was ever used in the electronic discussion. And hardly anyone had to see others face to face.

Case 5: It is part of a researcher's job to confirm as much of a story as possible using other sources. But that was a tough assignment for a story about the growth of civil society in China, on which there is hardly anything published. The correspondent's report is full of little-known situations in the mainland. Most villages, he reports, elect their officials. There are some 2,000 nationwide organizations of business people, professionals, farmers or other sectors -- all independent of the government. The researcher logs onto the Internet to look for material containing the words "democracy" and "China." Among the hundreds listed is an unpublished lecture delivered by a China-born Princeton professor. The 1994 piece details the same conditions reported by the Beijing correspondent.

These are some experiences of how technology has enhanced the work we do at *Asiaweek*. These stories underline the seminal impact that technology has had on media operations.

A media organization can be in two places at the same time. Of course, publications and news agencies have always had staff in diverse locations. But it is only with today's instant telecommunications that what people in different places see, discover and think can be shared with such speed as to virtually create a single mind that is the organization's collective awareness.

The second impact is speed. CNN, of course, is the best-known example of how fast media can deliver news. But instantaneous information poses its own challenges. The media are now under pressure to get in more late-breaking items. Work gets pushed closer and closer to deadline. The staff could wind up dead from exhaustion, if not dead wrong with a last-minute news flash rushed into print or broadcast.

One of my friends in TV related an incident at a major international news channel. When George Bush, who was U.S. president at the time, got sick at a state banquet in Tokyo, an agency alert quoting his physician said Bush had died. Normally such news advisories would be checked before being relayed. But an overzealous producer at the broadcast station dashed off some copy based on the report and slipped it in front of the anchor in the middle of a newscast. Just after the reader had intoned, "I'm afraid we have some bad news," someone off camera shouted "Stop!" and prevented what Mark Twain might have called an exaggerated report about President Bush.

Speed also refers to the rapid innovation of information technology which pushes media organizations and practitioners to continually upgrade their products and services to utilize the latest hardware and software. Adding to the pressure is the falling cost of computing and telecommunications power, which gives new entities a chance to match or surpass the installed capability of established players. No leader in media can take its position for granted. And every media practitioner will need to keep abreast of technological developments. Certainly, students of communication need to be given the know-how and experience to be comfortable with and adaptable to the new technology.

Volume is the fourth effect of technology. Media can now access and deliver much more information than before. I used a search engine to look for materials on the Web containing the names of ASEAN heads of government. Here are what I found: Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, 102; Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, 200; Goh Chok Tong and Vo Van Kiet, 300 each; Mahathir Mohamad and Fidel Ramos, 500 each; and Suharto, 900.

All these searches, completed in seconds, include materials on the Web. There is even more material in the rest of the Net and in the electronic databases of commercial news services. Reporters can file immense amounts of copy at minimal cost through the

Net, light-years away from the time they had to make every word count to keep telex or cable costs down.

That flood of information sounds mind-blowing. But what is even more mind-blowing in a mental-health sense is the work of actually sifting -- or, I should say, shoveling -- through all that to find what is useful, valid and interesting. One could go crazy trying to decide what to put in a story. In an age of information overload, the concise, incisive mind that gets right to the essence of a subject, cutting out the dross -- that kind of media person will be increasingly in demand.

The other valuable skill is the ability to organize information into a logical, meaningful, reader-friendly product. This is particularly crucial as technology unifies all media into multimedia. The computer is able to take various information -- text, data image, sound, graphics and motion -- and stitch them into a whole. Our NGO cover melded an illustration of a raised fist with a picture of Indonesian protesters. You may remember another cover we did that combined the face of Chinese President Jiang Zemin with a Beijing opera performer's body. Television regularly combines moving pictures, the reader's voice, text and charts to deliver massive amounts of information in seconds.

Multimedia demands that media practitioners be familiar with a diverse range of information processing and presentation modes. Many newspaper people need to get out of text-dominated thinking and constantly think how pictures and graphics can enhance their stories. As more publications launch their Web sites, journalists will have to explore motion and interactivity as well. Broadcast journalists will have to make more use of image manipulation technology as well as the insertion of text and data graphics in telecasts. The traditional respect accorded to the hot shot journalist with sources and insights will need to be extended to colleagues who are adept in manipulating and combining text, image, sound and motion into an audience-friendly product.

Media work is becoming more and more collaborative, harnessing people with different areas of expertise. The key is for everyone to look beyond his or her skills area and actively seek the enhancement that colleagues with other abilities can contribute to the media product. Teamwork, then, is a hallmark of the information business that is increasing due to new technology. Communications education must develop that capacity in future graduates, as well as the management skills needed to knit together a group of people and bring the best out of each one. That is the only way to allow the full development of each individual's potential in specific skills while ensuring that the end-product

Reality
Through
Multimedia

makes full use of high-tech media's capabilities.

There is a temptation of trying to weave too many diverse threads into a fabric that ends up being torn apart by disparate pieces tugging in all directions. Readers or viewers become confused or simply give up and turn the page or change the channel. Even multimedia must have the virtues of focus and clarity. Its creation should always ask: What are we trying to say? Do all the things on the page or the screen contribute to that message? Whatever doesn't should be dropped or modified. Hence, every media enterprise will demand some guiding intelligence, whether in one person or in a group, that is able to choose and organize information into a cohesive, meaningful whole. There is then a need to develop in media students a sense of logic, coherence and aesthetics as applied to mass communications. That sense will help them avoid mixing words, pictures, information and views that do not work together -- and possibly distorting the truth by creating the wrong context. All images and ideas can only be understood in a given context or world of meaning. That synthesized picture of Jiang Zemin would have been ridiculous without the cover line that said: "*HIGH DRAMA -- As Deng Ails, Jiang Fights to Secure the Kingdom.*"

In creating complex constraints of disparate information, context is important because technology is making media more and more global. Events, trends and ideas from across the world get into the morning paper and the evening news. And through marketing, telecommunications and the Internet, media produced for a certain audience can reach other readers and viewers. That creates enormous opportunities for misunderstanding as words, situations, events and images are presented out of context and perceived by eyes and minds unfamiliar with the country or region giving life and meaning to such media. Hence, high-tech makes it doubly important that the media be sensitive to context and to deliver both the big news and the context essential for its proper understanding.

A classic case of news with the wrong context occurred during the coverage of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and crackdown. Many of you may recall that globally televised meeting between the student leaders and the prime minister, Li Peng. At that highly charged event, one of the hunger strikers, Wu'er Kaixi, lambasted Premier Li on national TV. For Western news organizations and their audiences, it was a triumph of democratic expression over authoritarian power. Yet for many Chinese and probably other Asians as well, that outburst showed a lack of respect for elders and of political sophistication on the part of the students.

The government had climbed down from its pedestal to

seek common ground with the protesters. Reformers within the communist leadership, like party chief Zhao Ziyang, had put themselves on the line in arguing that the meeting would help resolve the crisis. But what the government got was a slap in the face instead. In the Western context Wu'er Kaixi's angry words marked a democratic triumph; in an Asian one it was an affront to authority and a political miscalculation. Which view is correct isn't the point here, but rather how different contexts created disparate meanings. Aspiring media practitioners would need a grounding in history and culture, both of one's age and nation and those of others, in order to anticipate how contexts can shape perceptions.

As a final example of how crucial context is, let me conjure a hypothetical case. What if CNN had access to satellite imaging technology with a resolution of one meter -- that is, anything measuring a meter or larger could be seen well enough for people to tell what it is. A battle tank could be distinguished from a bulldozer, a herd of cattle from a crowd of demonstrators.

Now let's say that CNN received a satellite image of uniformed men burning a village somewhere in a Palestinian area of the West Bank. What do you think would happen if CNN broadcast the video, stating only the location of the event, which would be the only thing that could be known from the satellite feed? Everyone will of course fill in the missing details, with predictable effects on public order and international relations. There is now a bill going through the U.S. Congress that would allow American satellite companies to offer imaging services with a resolution of one meter. So if you're planning to kill someone, make sure it's a cloudy day.

Clearly, the media can be much more versatile, potent and responsive, thanks to new technology. But high-tech has also made the age-old skills of checking the facts, setting the context and organizing the story even more necessary. In the multimedia, instant-news, Internet future, journalism educators will all still have jobs teaching the next generation of hacks how to write clearly, organize their ideas and information, go for the right color and work as a team. And of course, get the facts straight. ■

RICARDO SALUDO is assistant editor of Asiaweek, Hong Kong. This commentary is based on a paper presented at the ASEAN Communication Educators' Forum: Re-tooling For Emerging Cybercommunity" in Manila, Dec. 2-6, 1996.
