

The Flip Side

by craig piechura



I wanted to write "I stubbed my toe on the way to the bathroom." But in the paper, it came out "I stubbed my toe on the way to the bathroom."

Paul Hart, the Observer & Eccentric's electronic whiz, explained to me that happened because the computer code for the "H" and the "O" are very similar. If the scanner is just a little off, it will read "O" for "H" and vice versa.

That satisfies me but try to explain all that to the people who read about "toe problems confronting Wayne County" instead of "the problems."

At this newspaper we are using an outdated computerized, printing process known as the optical character recognition (OCR) system. The system is on its way out.

We type our stories on typewriters equipped with an IBM Selectric ball that prints a super-market code underneath each letter. This is read by a computer scanner. Lately, that scanner doesn't know the difference between an "O" and an "H." And try to write a story without ohs or aitches.

But people don't realize all this fragile technology is responsible for typographical errors (called "typos"). They just figure the reporter had one too many 16-ounce Strohs when he sat down to write the story.

MY NAGGING problems with Os and Hs should be eliminated later this year when the company brings in new state-of-the-art video display terminals (VDTs) for us to type on. With a VDT, a reporter types stories that appear on a TV screen above the keyboard, and when he's finished he beams that story up to Scotty on the copy desk.

The job of the copy editor is to add something to the story that makes it easier to read but erroneous. (Only kidding guys, hah, heh).

From the standpoint of efficiency, you can't beat the VDTs—normally. If you write a lousy lead, you don't have to hit the carriage return, yank the paper out, crumple it up with a mumble and insert another sheet of paper. All you have to do is hit a key that zaps the line away forever and start all over.

However, I am not so naive to believe that the VDTs will eliminate typos, the bane of every reporter's existence.

As anyone who receives utility bills knows, computers can and do go awry. Often.

When I worked on a VDT at the Detroit News on a part-time basis, I was just putting the finishing touches on a story about the hot slag that terrorized the citizens of Delray when the VDT screen went blank.

THE COMPUTERS were down and so was I. With no raw copy to fall back on, I had to rethink and redo the entire story. Just as I was about to put the big "30" on the end of the story, the horizontal hold went berserk on the TV screen. Again, the story was lost.

To guard against this happening a third time, I typed out the story on an old Underwood and transcribed it to the computer. I earned my freelance rate that night.

Two weeks later I was called in to write a not-too-exciting account of a not-too-exciting regional school meeting. I rushed to the meeting without stopping to eat after I finished my full-time job driving a van.

Back at the News, hunger pangs got the best of me. I bought a cup of Campbell's soup sold in a vending machine on the ground floor of "the old gray lady down the street."

I'd write a few lines, take a sip. Write a few lines, take a sip of soup. Write a few lines, drop the hot soup all over the keyboard of the video display terminal and all down the front of my pants.

Broth was quickly seeping into the guts of the \$10,000 computer terminal, playing havoc with diodes and resistors.

AND THE IRONY of it all is the soup I spilled was alphabet soup. Talk about poetic justice.

Soft pieces of potatoes, noodles and carrots were lodged between the keys as I tried to discreetly sop up the broth with paper. The screen lit up with capital Zs in outrage.

But the amazing thing about the whole affair was that nobody in the newsroom noticed this catastrophe. They kept pecking away at their VDTs.

I put a legal size note pad in front of my crotch and told the night news editor I had to research the story further. He gave me a funny look.

When I returned, there was an out of order sign on the terminal and I acted like I was disappointed I couldn't use my favorite machine.

About a month later I saw a News repairman ungluing the top of another VDT in the office. A thick goop completely coated the circuitry.

Someone had spilled a jar of rubber cement inside the sophisticated machinery. The repairman shook his head back and forth like a man who lived to see Sodom and Gomorrah. He said it was the second instance of computer sabotage he'd seen in a month.

For some strange reason, I had a craving for alphabet soup.

Bottle caps save energy

Buy putting the aluminum caps back on empty bottles before returning them to the distributor, Michigan residents can help save energy.

Recently enacted container legislation restricts throw-away bottles in favor of returnable ones. But if the glass threads on returnable bottles are chipped or broken in transit, the bottles are useless. Then replacement

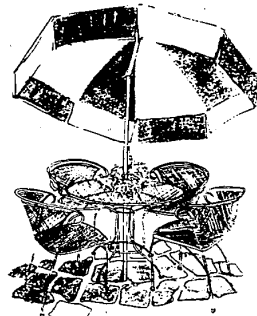
bottles must be manufactured, using a lot of additional energy.

Replacing the cap on an empty returnable bottle protects its threads until it can be washed and refilled, according to Alcoa, the leading producer of aluminum closures.

Recapping empty bottles and returning them to the distributor helps give every returnable soft drink bottle a long energy-saving career.

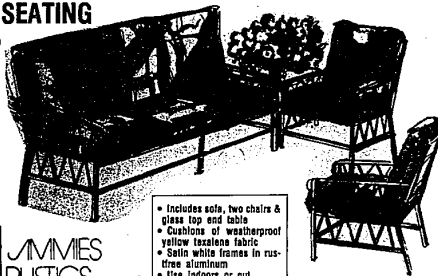
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File access approved by Senate

Workers would have a legal right to review their personnel records under a bill passed recently by the state Senate and returned to the House.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Perry Bullard (D-Ann Arbor) will ask the House to send the bill to conference committee so that a Senate amendment which would require employees to show a need for their record can be deleted. The House approved the bill, without the amendment, earlier this year.

The employees' right to know bill would entitle both private and public workers to review their personnel record twice a year. It would also allow workers to get copies of their file at cost, and to add a statement of their own position on material in the record with which they disagree.

"The bill," said Bullard, "would lift the veil of secrecy from management personnel files. Personnel file information is increasingly the only basis for decisions on promotions, raises and hiring by other employers. These records can have a vital impact on an employee's future, yet most workers have no idea what is in their own record."

The legislation would require employers to notify an employee when any derogatory information is sent to a third party. The employer could not send to a third party records of disciplinary action more than four years old, nor keep personnel records on an employee's political activities.

Law suit disclosures during the past two years have shown several cases where the Michigan State Police have shared information about a person's political activity with employers.

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