

Computerized age turns news troops into electronic marvels

Perhaps you've noticed that later-breaking news seems to be appearing off the front pages of this newspaper.

If you have, it's made possible by the electronic newsroom concept being introduced into the Observer & Eccentric newspapers.

In an electronic newsroom, typewriters and pastepots are replaced by television screens and computers.

The first stage of the conversion to an electronic newsroom began in July when all copy editing was done on video display terminals ("TV screens" with typewriter keyboards) connected to a computer. The computer stores all the stories until they are ready to be set.

The terminals speak directly with the main computer, a DEC PDP 11/70. It is perhaps the finest newspaper computer manufactured.

Because the terminals speak with the computer, last-minute changes can be made quickly. The old system required changes to go through many people and many steps. And because it was old — for electronic equipment — it was more likely to break down.

The present system allows one person to make any changes. And that person can look at the story as it will be set in type as soon as the story is completed.

The next step is to replace the typewriters with video display terminals connected with smaller computers. The Livonia, Redford, Westland and Garden

City papers are partially written on these terminals.

The O&E has ordered 36 video display terminals from the firm that pioneered the use of terminals by wire services. These terminals allow a reporter to write a story at his office, then send it electronically to the main computer in Livonia.

Using such a terminal, a reporter seemingly types on a TV screen. Typing on video display terminal is easier than using a typewriter. If a reporter types something wrong, he just goes back and types over the mistake. No erasing is involved.

By using these terminals, a writer in Rochester, Canton or any other office can transmit a story to the central copy desk in Livonia in seconds. Presently, all stories and pictures are driven to the plant in Livonia, which takes 1 1/4 hours from Rochester — in good weather.

The Birmingham office has just installed 13 terminals. These are connected to small computers, which store anything written in that office. Stored material then can be sent via telephone from the small computer in the office to the main computer in Livonia. The transmission is at the rate of 120 characters per second.

Although the writer's video display terminals are similar to those used by suburban bureaus of daily newspapers, the O&E has made several improvements, adapting them to the needs of community journalism.

These improvements include an increase in storage capacity and indexing system so an editor can sort stories by the type of news and get an estimation of the story's length.

Inter-office communication is yet to be installed. Using interoffice communication, someone in Canton can get his own copy of a story Troy plans to run immediately after a Troy reporter completes the story.

Classified advertising also is receiving new electronic terminals. Right now, the ad takers are replacing their typewriters with terminals. Both the ad taker and the customer benefit from the use of a terminal.

Using our present system, the ad taker must make a guess at the cost of an ad. She does not see the exact size of the ad.

Using a terminal tied in with the new computer, the ad taker will be able to look at the ad as it will appear in print and tell the customer the exact price of most ads — while the customer is on the telephone.

In addition, questions about ads to appear in the next issue, or which appeared in the last issue, can be answered while the customer is on the phone. Presently, the ad taker has to dig out a back issue of the paper to find ads that have already appeared.

The ad will be in the computer and can be called to the ad taker's screen with a few keystrokes.

The new classified system should be in operation by the end of March.

Display advertising, too, has been updated with the introduction of large-screen video display terminals. These will allow people making up ads to work with full-size ads, rather than small sketches. Once the ad is completed, a computer will store the ad. When the ad is set, it will appear exactly as it did on the screen.

Using the ad makeup terminals, the person designing the ad can have it set exactly as he saw it. Instead of being a collection of pieces of paper — as are most newspaper ads — the ad is a single sheet of paper. Only the artwork, such as pictures or drawings, need be attached to the ad.

This should reduce the number of corrections needed once an ad is assembled.

Unfortunately, there will be — and have been — problems. These problems were expected, but they are still a nuisance.

But the only way to learn is to print the paper using the computer-reporter terminal-advertising terminal system.

Just as a football team can practice to perfection, then find weaknesses in its first game, so can anyone using any new system. A computer can seem perfect in practice, only to show idiosyncrasies "in the real world."

And our reporters, editors, advertising artists and production personnel must learn new systems to put out a better newspaper more efficiently.

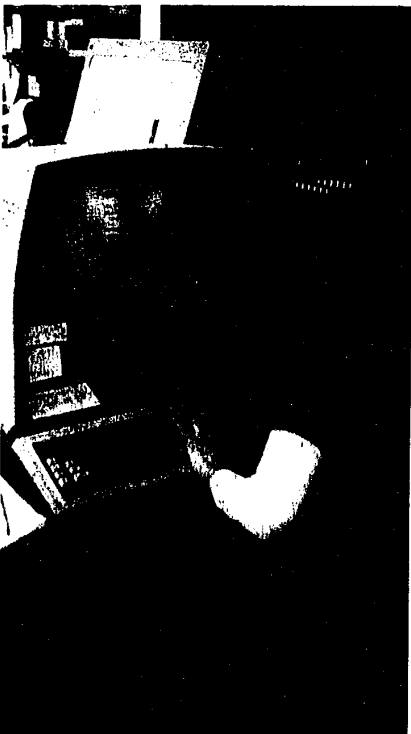
We're learning and improving as we go.



Copy Editor Barry Jensen uses VT71



Reporter Maurie Walker at terminal



Barbara Paculnyk operates Raytheon ad terminal

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