



The Newspaper Of The Future

Any old-time printer walking through the new plant of Observer Newspapers on production day might sniff the air frequently wondering what it is besides the smell of newness that he finds so different.

His eyes would show him that the grime of the composing room of his day is gone, and at last he would realize that what also has disappeared is the unique odor of melting lead.

The newspaper business has experienced more technological changes in the past five years than in the previous 500, and the Observer Newspapers plant is a living laboratory of all that is new.

The "hot metal" processes used in older plants throughout the nation have changed little generation after generation, even though presses have whirled faster and faster to the point that just carting the finished papers out of the way has become a technique all its own.

But to step from the newspaper plant that still is tied to "hot lead" to the Observer is like switching from a propeller-driven aircraft into a sleek jetliner.

Or, like swapping an iron-bound, wood-burning stove for a gadget-loaded range that stirs a pot untended.

Such are the comparisons that might be drawn to indicate the giant stride in technology taken by Observer Newspapers to build a vigorous family of publications to serve one of the fastest growing areas of America.

Sure, we, too, used to have machines that poured molten lead over metal letters to form a line of type -- and we followed all the ancient procedures that tradition dictated to put a newspaper at the customer's door.

But now it's different. The age of the computer is here, but only the threshold has been crossed. The years may be expected to bring refinements that make today's miracles of publishing pale in comparison. ONI is ready.

Today, using photo-composition and offset in contrast to the hot and tedious processes of yore, a keyboard operator copies stories into perforated tape something like roller piano music. This tape is fed into a computer for re-processing.

Then it goes through a photo-composer machine that produces sheets of printed matter of the desired width.

They in turn are pasted onto a heavy paper the size of a newspaper page. The page is photographed and the negative is transferred to a photo-sensitive aluminum plate that goes on the press.

One obvious advantage of this procedure is speed -- for instance, a photo composer can produce five times faster than a tape-driven hot metal linecaster.

To tell it another way, the Observer's modern computers now can process more than 10,000 words per second. The computer also adjusts the words and spaces between them to fit the width of a newspaper column and then translates the commands into "language" readable by high speed phototypesetting machines which generate type at speeds undreamed of only a few years ago.

Johann Gutenberg (c. 1398-1468) could have been remembered by his friends only as a goldsmith who owned a well-stocked wine cellar and once was sued for breach of promise.

Instead, the world generally credits him with being the inventor of printing from movable type about 1440. Whether he actually was the true inventor has been questioned, but at least Gutenberg was the first to combine the necessary components of type production, ink manufacture, a press and paper into a workable system.

Gutenberg's amazement might know no bounds if he were to see today's automated, computerized ONI plant, certainly the most advanced newspaper production system in this area.

But he also might realize that nobody has yet invented a machine to replace the reporter or the advertising space salesman, nor are they likely to.

