

The Future Was Yesterday

Remarks at University of Houston

March 28, 2001

New Media: With, for, or against the Old

Good Afternoon:

I have somehow acquired a reputation as a person who looks down the road and sees what's just around the bend. It is nice to be thought of as some kind of Techno-Seer, but the truth is that for 20 years, I've been trying to get out of the prognostication business. But nobody believes me and they keep asking me to discuss the future of technology and journalism and no matter what off-the-wall idea I come up with, it somehow seems to happen.

I even know when it started.

In 1980, I wrote a paper for the National Association of Broadcasters predicting that computer, satellite and microwave technology would fundamentally change local news coverage. The NAB's research director asked me to do a "blue sky thumb-sucker" about the future of broadcast journalism. Since he was offering really good money, I did it.

My contention was that these technologies would let local TV stations compete with the networks on big stories. The report was viewed by many as the ramblings of a harmless, faux-visionary who was out of touch with the real business of broadcast journalism. Critics also said it would take decades before any of it would happen.

But by the end of the 80's, there were virtually no newsrooms without computers. Access to satellites is ubiquitous and inexpensive. Consider the O.J. trial. At least one station in each of the top 25 markets sent a

reporter to Los Angeles to do live cut-ins. Need I remind anyone about the Gulf War or Kosovo?

Of course, I'm also the same person who thought that fax machines were a passing fad. But none of that explains my inability to stop predicting the future. I've thought about it long and hard and have come to the conclusion that the reason I always seem to be on the cutting edge is that I'm lazy. That's right, lazy.

I'm on my own quest for the Techno-Holy Grail. I keep searching for some technique or gadget that will let me win a [Pulitzer](#) with minimal effort on my part. I see no reason not to take advantage of technology to do a better job with less work. It's not that I can't do the work, I've been in the business for 30 years and have covered lots of stories with nothing more than a notebook, a pencil and enough money to bribe a telex operator. For those under 30 who have no idea what a [telex](#) is, see me afterward.

I'm trying to finish a book called "While Our Backs Were Turned: How Computers Changed Journalism." It's about how technology is constantly changing the way we do our jobs. The problem is that the technology is moving so fast that every time I finish a chapter I have to redo sections because something has dramatically changed.

Part of what I learned, while working on the book, supports my original thesis that we have entered another era where journalism has been fundamentally changed. Change can be scary. But as the theme of this conference attests, change happens.

You'll note that I said "another era" of change, because technological change has always been a part of journalism. Reporters are always the first to adopt the "Next New Thing" that gives a competitive edge. Reporters were among the first to start using the [telegraph](#) to file from remote locations. The transcontinental telegraph was completed in 1861. Does that explain why reports on [Civil War](#) battles appeared days instead of weeks after the event?

The typewriter was invented in 1875. By the turn of the century, it was hooked to a system that allowed typed messages to be sent to remote units around the world. This is the beginning of the [Teletype](#). When I was at [CBS News](#), we had a dozen Teletype machines to communicate with the foreign bureaus. To this day, I can cut a tape in my sleep. And because I worked the overnight for 5 years, I sometimes did. Again, for our younger colleagues, see me later and I'll explain about cutting tape.

I also remember, in the mid-70's, sending scripts back to New York over the Mojo Wire. We called it the Mojo Wire because it was magical. It was the size of a portable typewriter with a receptacle for a telephone handset. You could then dial a number and feed your script on to this rotating drum and copy would come out instantly at a duplicate unit in New York. Of course, we now know that the Mojo Wire was a Type I facsimile transceiver sending at the blazing speed of 150 bits per second. As a means of comparison, the modem in my laptop operates at 56,000 bits per second.

[Alexander Graham Bell](#) patented the telephone in 1876. Can any of us imagine trying to do our jobs without a telephone? I would have loved to be in a newsroom when the first young reporter called city hall and was bawled out by his city editor for not going downtown and asking the mayor a rude question in person.

There used to be an edict at [The Times](#) that we had to tell our readers when an interview was done by telephone. It took decades to change the policy. When I joined the Times ten years ago, I was one of the first to routinely do e-mail interviews. The earliest reference I could find in the paper of an interview conducted by electronic mail was in 1991 in a piece by Peter Lewis. I was required to inform readers of an email interview twice that same year. By February of 1992 the policy had changed. Change happens more quickly. Of course, we have policies about verification of email identities but the use

of email is so widespread, that we don't think it necessary to tell the readers every time we use it.

I did my first online interview in 1982 when I was a freelancer. I had been trying to reach Andrew Tobias to do an interview about his Managing Your Money software. His PR people were keeping me at bay. I had just gotten on to this thing called CompuServe. Tobias was running a forum about his program and there was his e-mail address. I sent him a note asking for an interview. He called my twenty minutes later. He was in the middle of something and asked if I would send him the questions at his Compuserve account and he'd answer them when his meeting was over. That evening, I got 1500 words from him.

I thought it was great, not because I had done anything special or broken new ground, but that I wouldn't have to try and read my illegible handwriting. And I wouldn't have to type his quotes -- just cut and paste them into my story. And, he couldn't accuse me of misquoting him because he wrote the quotes. Shortly thereafter, I discovered that an exchange of emails created its own electronic paper trail and even provided an instant transcript. For those, like me, who are prone to slothfulness, this was really good news. Hit the reply and send key a few times, and you get typing and transcription done for you. For a poor freelancer, it was also incredibly cheap.

In 1993 I went to the first [NICAR](#) convention in Raleigh. At that time, Computer Assisted Reporting was difficult to do because the technology was primitive compared to today's CAR tools. [Nine Track Express](#) was the big breakthrough that allowed mass amounts of data to be moved from mainframes to PC's. I was in awe of those who could manipulate giant databases, but for me, it was too much like work.

I went looking for something easier that would still give me sound journalistic results. I found it on-line. I started

trolling on-line databases and found a wealth of pre-digested facts and figures that I could use without all the heavy lifting of my more accomplished colleagues. A side benefit was that it helped me get past my math anxiety. I now teach other math-challenged journalists how to figure percent change.

While I'm all for change, some things shouldn't. While I'm all for pushing the technological envelope, I am also firmly rooted in the old values of journalism. I feel a keen need to be protective of those ethical and professional standards that I grew up embracing. Technology and good journalism are not mutually exclusive. You don't have to make a pact with the Devil to use the [new tools](#). I firmly believe that when used properly, the tools will make you a better journalist.

Being a good journalist is what change is all about and while embracing the technological future let us not forget that in the case of our [ethical](#) and professional standards, the future was yesterday.