

# RETOOLING

In *The Tin Men*, first published in 1965, playwright and novelist Michael Frayn describes an academic project, presided over by a computer engineer with intellectual pretensions called Dr Goldwasser, to automate journalism:

The soporific quiet which filled Goldwasser's laboratory in the Newspaper Department was disturbed only by the soft rustle of tired newsprint. Assistants bent over the component parts of the Department's united experiment, the demonstration that in theory a digital computer could be programmed to produce a perfectly satisfactory daily newspaper with all the variety and news sense of the old hand-made article... Once Goldwasser and his colleagues had proved the theory, commercial interests would no doubt swiftly put it into practice. The stylisation of the modern newspaper would be complete. Its last residual connection with the raw, messy, offendable real world would have been broken.

We haven't quite realised Goldwasser's dream, and we probably never will. But journalism production has changed since Frayn's day, and in ways he could not have imagined in 1965 (though that does not make *The Tin Men*, which rivals Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* as a satire on journalism, any less worth reading).

Picture this scene: It is 11am in one of the many committee rooms in the parliamentary complex in Cape Town, six or seven journalists are waiting for executives from Eskom to brief Parliament's energy committee on the parastatal's plans to ensure electricity supplies throughout the coming winter. Three of them have laptop computers open, with USB modems prominently visible. They are reporters for the three major news agencies, for whom this relatively mundane event holds more interest than for your average newspaper hack.

They are writing for investors whose livelihoods may depend on a reliable energy supply at an affordable cost, for traders who may buy the bonds Eskom plans to sell to finance its new power stations, for company executives who are deciding whether or not building a factory in South Africa is worth their money. Those readers pay a premium to receive fast, accurate and dependable news from the financial news agencies. In the financial markets, information is everything, and a split second in time or a small factual mistake can often mean the difference between making or losing money.

Since I started my career in financial journalism about 12 years ago, the tools of the trade have changed. Back in 2000, in the absence of ubiquitous broadband coverage, dictating a story over your cellphone to an editor in Johannesburg was about as technologically advanced as it got. These days, I can connect online to the

Bloomberg server and file directly from my laptop into an editing queue. What's more, I can flash headlines straight to the wire without the intermediation of an editor, thus saving precious seconds in the contest to get the news out first.

That does not make editors superfluous; far from it. Any story that runs on Bloomberg has to go through the hands of

two editors who not only edit for language and style, but also check facts and numbers rigorously. Even one- or two-paragraph "flash fills", which have to be on the wire within five minutes after flashing a headline, have to be back-read by at least one editor before publication.

To save time, reporters and editors work in a chat room, which can be accessed via laptop or smart phone and where editors can back-read urgent copy and suggest changes in a real-time interaction with the reporter. In this way, the technology enables as near to "live" coverage as any print journalism is ever likely to get. I can add value to stories by attaching an audio recording, a video clip or a graphic which readers can access by the click of a mouse.

But the technology not only provides a means of publishing stories faster and better. It also allows me to research facts or data while out in the field, as if I were at my desk. Eskom is planning a bond sale. Have we reported that before? Not sure how to spell the executive's name? How much have electricity prices increased in the past year? The information – including data that is not available on the web – is available at my fingertips to help me provide more relevant, contextualised and accurate news to my audience.

Without a doubt, digital technologies have helped us produce news faster, more accurately and more completely.

Of course, all of those tools are worth nothing in the hands of someone who can't do journalism. To be first with the story, you need more than the latest smart phone and fast thumb-typing skills. You need what Goldwasser terms "news sense": an ability to recognise what is significant and relevant for your audience. That is something that comes with knowledge of your subject, and of the needs of your particular audience. In addition you need to be able to construct and craft a news report that is informative and entertaining, that makes people want to read it. Those were the things that Goldwasser's computer couldn't do. So, have digital technologies changed the way we produced journalism? Yes. Have they made our job easier? Certainly. Have they changed the essence of journalism? No.

*Robert Brand writes in his personal capacity.*

## AND THE ESSENCE OF JOURNALISM