nigel bruce

Financial Mail editor **Nigel Bruce surveys past decades of newspaper journalism and looks ahead to the journalistic mind of the future**

THERE are few sub-editors working on newspapers today who remember the propriety, perspicuity, accuracy and style that characterised most sub-editors' rooms in our larger newspapers 30 years ago. Those admirable qualities coincided, however, with a technical facility that measured at best inadequately against today's standards of mechanical precision.

The process of change that made that precision possible is a manifestation of a much greater technical revolution that is having profound economic implications for both publishing and journalism. Along with more complex and diverse issues of the day, it is presenting journalists with more challenges and opportunities, but demanding greater discipline, insights, enterprise and judgment than before.

Those who are able to cast their minds back will recall that a great deal more synthesis of news reports was done in the subs rooms of those days, usually by men who, judged by the age levels in contemporary subs rooms, were borderline geriatrics – and not always amiable ones at that. Their tools were scissors, paste, copypaper and a shared typewriter. Given those constraints and deadlines that were no less pressing than they are now, their wordcraft was extremely good. It is a great pity that such a valuable literary resource could not be reconciled to advances in technology.

No more than a shot in the dark

Thirty years ago editing a report to appropriate length was no more than a shot in the dark. The rule-of-thumb was that four lines of typed copy on a Smith Corona was roughly equal to an inch of body type. So over-runs of several inches were the rule rather than the exception. And it was the task of the stone sub, standing across the stone on which the page was being made up in lead type by the compositor, to contrive to make the story fit into the prescribed layout.

And that was no easy task. Conventional wisdom was that the first paragraph should be 18 words, the next no more than 30 words and with each paragraph thereafter of diminishing importance. The stone sub had in theory simply to cut from the bottom. But theory and practice were more often than not at substantial odds.

Most compositors could read type upside down. So if the compositor in question was co-operative, the stone sub could ask him to read out relevant paragraphs and shorten them by dropping a subsidiary clause and having a comma turned conveniently into a fullstop by the compositors chipping off its tail – or by the use of some other composing trick. Alternatively, precision could be satisfied by thin strips of lead being dropped in between some lines of type, filling out a story that had fallen short to fit the space available.

About 25 years ago, I periodically had to take a turn at stone subbing at *The Natal Mercury,* a newspaper savoured for its eccentricities, if not its intellect. At the age of 22 my closest contemporary in the *Mercury* subs room was about 15 years my senior. The compositor with whom I had to work on the stone was Smithy, troglodytic, dirty and dark. He had a contempt for callow subs that stimulated his ripe vocabulary into voluble repetition.

I hated Smithy then because I was more often than not beholden to his fickle temper. For my responsibility and concern was for the content of each article about which he couldn't have given a damn. His responsibility was simply to get the job done as quickly as possible. I don't think Smithy ever read a newspaper in his life let alone a book – except perhaps on gardening, his one grand passion.

The subs room was the powerhouse

A man who loves a flower cannot be all bad. When I went to work in Fleet Street soon after I looked back on his impatient invective with affectionate nostalgia. He taught me a great deal – much of which I didn't want to know. Whatever anyone may say of Rupert Murdoch (and who doesn't?), I will always admire him for what he did to the journeymen of Fleet Street. They deserved worse.

In those days the subs room was the powerhouse of most newspapers. It was one of two paths to editorship. The other was via a correspondency in the Houses of Parliament. Many of the golden boys of the press gallery in the Sixties became editors. And more newspapers were closed under their stewardship in the Eighties than at any time in our history. Today, some are dead and others have been dying for a long time.

Of course, not only was technology very different then, so were the issues of the day. Apartheid was being rapidly extended, with grotesque social and legal consequences. It had not yet sufficiently solidified to the extent that it could harm the economy, which in any event was booming. Foreign capital was flowing into the new Free State gold fields and the country's economic growth rate was among the highest in the world.

So the order of journalism then was moral outrage and indignation over increasingly divisive social policies, wedged in with the flag issue and the national anthem. Journalists did not need to bother with the functioning of business undertakings and the dynamics of the economy was a closed book. But, of course, government at that stage had not begun to shed the economic orthodoxies that led to the inflationary surge of the Seventies, or begun the wasteful striving for self-sufficiency that apartheid demanded. Both are still with us in the Nineties.

The Seventies was a watershed decade for jour-

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nalism. The issues of the day began to change. By that time the economic degeneracy of apartheid was beginning to become evident. Business could not just go on as before, especially not in the newspaper industry. What became increasingly clear was that some editors with only a political background and some managers who had known only good times were inadequate to their tasks. The one lot blamed the other for loss of profitability. Neither was prepared to credit the dispositions of their customers, both advertisers and readers, with any need for fulfilment.

The Seventies coincided, too, with a major change in newspaper technology. The introduction of computerised wordprocessors to replace typewriters and computerised typesetting introduced speed and a technical precision that had not been seen before in the newspaper industry. It removed entirely the need for mechanical typesetters and typographical compositors. Photo-typesetting replaced the need for lead.

The impact on the subs room was to be profound. The stone sub as we had known him went, along with the compositor, into redundancy. The geriatric subs, or 'Black Friars' as they were known on *The Times*, had to become computer literate. The upshot was that within 10 years most had retired and were replaced by yuppie technicians who manipulated the new technology with great facility and the English language with prosaic indifference.

Costs are going to be even lower

But the importance of the computer revolution for our industry is not just that it has provided greater speed and technical precision – although at the expense of sub-editorial experience and judgment. Apart from forcing writers themselves to adopt more of the disciplines of the older generation of sub-editors, it is part of a process that is transforming the newspaper or publishing industry from what economists call a capital intensive industry, into one which is not constrained by high entry costs. Instead it has become an industry capable of producing publications at consistently reducing cost. And the latest trends in technology indicate that costs are going to be spectacularly lower in the years ahead.

For example, according to the eminent economist Sir Douglas Hague (of Hague and Stonier), not only is there going to be a further explosion in the development of information technology in the coming years, but if you bought one million pounds sterling of computer power in 1990, the same power (with greater sophistication) will cost one hundred thousand pounds in 1995 and only ten thousand pounds in the year 2000.

Were it not for the computer revolution of the Seventies, the pamphleteering we have seen in recent years – better known as the "alternative" press – would have been extremely expensive, probably beyond the means of the Swedes and others who paid for it then and are baulking at paying for it now. Publications that like to call themselves "alternative" would simply not have existed without the reduction in the unit cost of production that computers have brought to the newspaper and publishing industry.

There is another factor that is likely to help reduce the unit cost of newspaper production. It is that paper manufacturers worldwide are slowly becoming more innovative as excess manufacturing capacity stimulates competition and as universal trade liberalisation reduces high levels of tariff protection. New, cheaper and better quality papers are bound to become more easily available.

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The alternative press is floundering

Those new low-cost entrants to our industry who are successful will very quickly make inroads into the markets which now appear to be dominated by the large press groups and where an unusual concentration of ownership has attracted some ill-informed and adverse criticism. I won't argue this issue here, except to say that work done by Joss Gerson of the University of Cape Town and arguments put forward by Professor Brian Kantor suggest that there may be more advantage to this concentration than critics will readily admit.

This concentration came about because of nearly 30 years of exchange controls and for political reasons, chief among them being efforts to prevent English language journals falling into government hands. Much of the concentration occurred at the time of the emergence of *The Citizen*, a newspaper secretly financed by government. In the new political circumstances of this country, my guess is that spontaneous unbundling is not far away.

The question that inevitably arises when concentration is discussed is why the small alternative journals have not been commercially successful and the conventional conclusion is invariably that it is because of the opposition of the established commercial press. Nothing could be further from the truth.

On a number of occasions, more than one of these journals has approached Times Media Ltd for commercial advice and help. This has been generously given, only to be rejected when the extent of the orientation and harshness of commercial disciplines became evident. Some have received help elsewhere. Twice the Anglo American Corporation (AAC) has given support to the *Weekly Mail*, which exists, moreover, because of the generosity of its printers, who are associated with AAC, and because companies like Shell constantly place in it advertisements that are patently not there for commercial purposes.

But all that is really beside my point. The alternative press is floundering and causing consternation at least

at one large trust which has hitherto provided substantial backing because it is not providing what sufficient readers want, or what advertisers judge they want. The answer to my mind is simple. In their haste to provide the political rhetoric which they have judged necessary for the struggle, they have not identified viable markets nor adhered to standards of journalism calculated to enhance their credibility and ultimately commercial viability.

When the editor of *Fortune*, Marshall Loeb, visited this country two years ago he was asked at a *Financial Mail* function if, in his view, politics sold newspapers. He replied categorically that it did not. Experience thoughout the free world is that daily newspapers flourish best when they identify and meet community needs and aspirations. Large national newspapers are in decline almost everywhere in the face of competition from the electronic media.

Today the urgency of international, and to a large extent national, news is the preserve of television and radio. But the buoyancy of provincial and community newspapers, especially free sheets, suggests that there are sufficient readers, who want either local news or to be able to reflect on events of the day, to support a flourishing newspaper industry. After all, in many parts of the world, fortunes are still being made from newspapers. And I have no doubt that they will continue to be made by the enterprising and skilful.

The large numbers of black South Africans whose literacy levels are rising and are likely to escalate in the years ahead are going to provide an increasingly attractive market to enterprising journalists. But those who succeed will have to accept that it is unlikely to provide a national readership in the immediate future.

If the economic potential of this economy is only partly reached, we are likely to have increasingly materialistic black readers more immediately concerned with stability, education and the aspirations and depredations of those of standing in their community than with the liberation struggle. Sport and entertainment and those aspects of life that enhance rising expections and a desire for improvement will provide the preoccupations that build newspaper readership.

No shortage of opportunity

Of course, politics has a role to play in newspapers, especially in helping readers formulate and articulate their own views. But politics has seldom played consistently a central role in the daily press. And politics without the enabling aspect of economics is itself an aether of pure moral principle high above the practicalities of everyday life. And in the debate that is likely to take place about the press in this country, we should not allow our peculiar political circumstances to give a false perspective.

In most parts of the world newspapers and news organisations are reducing staff. One large American publication has not taken on a new journalist since 1986. The reason is that after the surge of technological advance, the publishing industry is maturing into a new era of increasing competition and rising productivity.

Increasingly, therefore, young journalists will find themselves seeking their training and their fortunes in community newspapers or specialist journals. The change in technological circumstances has simplified the economics for those who themselves might wish to become journalistic entrepreneurs. There is neither a chronic shortage of opportunity nor of money for those with sufficient skills and daring to meet the challenges that rapidly reducing production costs and emerging markets are beginning to offer. It is a situation neither destitute of hope nor devoid of pleasure.

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A propensity to bore

These are not opportunities that the large newspaper groups can easily exploit because, by and large, the size of their publications and supporting structures require them to concentrate on the national advertising market and to compete with the high-cost electronic media. Increasingly, too, these large organisations are becoming vulnerable to competition, if only because their size and success draws them ineluctably towards sloth.

Very few large newspapers began as sizeable undertakings. Most have grown from small beginnings. All the great press lords of the last century and this one started off in humble circumstances. They combined journalistic endeavour with enterprise and flair in predominantly free enterprise societies. Their felicitous outcome had more to do with the challenge of competition than the early acquisition of market dominance.

The growth and prosperity of so many knock-and-drop community newspapers is some testimony to the points I am making. Many of these journals, much despised by grand practitioners of national journalism, have improved their journalistic standards and enhanced their integrity, thereby becoming indispensible to local communities. And, moreover, they are still at an early stage of their development. Their potential should not be regarded lightly.

There are rich and successful journalists about today. They are not in my view likely to diminish in number or shrink in fortune. But commercial success will be the reward not of moral superiority, but the identification and exploitation of market opportunity along with enhanced journalism skills and greater technical facility.

Among new generations of journalists there will be a rising awareness that the reason politics doesn't sell is that too often political reporting and comment

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decline into moral indignation and self-righteous diatribe. That invariably happens when the idealist rather than the journalist, who is usually given to some detachment, is in editorial control and more often than not it replaces careful analysis and accuracy with harangue. And that heightens the risk of the greatest crime of journalism – a propensity to bore rather than inform, stimulate and entertain.

The issues that are facing journalists today are becoming far more complex and taxing than anything confronted by the golden gallery correspondents of the Sixties. These issues have to do with the economic consequences of unstable prices, the creation of economic opportunity and employment, the allocation of scarce resources by an intricate system of market determined prices (among communities as well as for differing social needs) and the broad dynamics of economic growth.

The national budget in future will be at the cutting edge of political controversy as increasingly it is used as the instrument of wealth distribution, possibly to the detriment of wealth accumulation.

The investment of the surpluses created by private enterprise will be the focus of trade union scrutiny. New policies on health, education and welfare will have to be formulated in the light of the widespread recognition now of the finite resources of government.

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This in turn will create moral dilemmas especially as earlier ideas of equity prove to be unsustainable and issues such as personal privacy emerge more strongly.

The journalistic mind of the future is going to have to grapple with a depth of understanding and versatility of interest far in excess of anything that was believed to be necessary or indeed desirable 30 years ago. At the same time it will have to absorb advances in information technologies as yet undiscovered, while providing the creative endeavour necessary to hold the interest of an increasingly discerning readership.

All this is a far cry from Smithy with his foul mouth and cavalier attitude to journalism. He won't be missed. For the opportunities that new technologies, the removal of apartheid and the triumph of free enterprise internationally offer now to young journalists are as exciting as they are extensive. But opportunities have to be recognised and sought out. To find them will require insights and enterprise not usually found in abundance in the newspaper offices of this country, where too often conceit passes for wisdom, parody substitutes for inspiration and commerce is considered socially undesirable.

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