

# NEW SKILLS FOR OLD JOURNOS OR...

By Toby Shapshak

When I started out as a journalist last century, the two essential skills you needed were shorthand and touch typing. I never learnt the former, and the latter is now a pre-requisite life skill you learn in primary school.

I can't remember the last time I actually wrote down what someone said to me. I was typing notes before I had a laptop (on a Palm with a clever foldout keyboard) and for a long time was the only journo at press conferences or events who used a laptop. It made such sense: why transcribe your notes when you can just type them in the first place?

Journalism has evolved since last millennium when it was all about print and print skills, with a healthy dose of surviving anti-apartheid police thrown in. Now it's internet skills first, followed by social media networking skills, Google search skills, then maybe news-gathering and, if you're lucky, a sense of newsworthiness.

You might even, as a young journalist, get to work on the antiquated beast known as a newspaper. It's unlikely that you'll only write one story for the print edition, having taken pictures and written an online piece and perhaps updated your blog too.

## Or so the theory goes

Ray Hartley, the brave editor of both the print *The Times* and its very multimedia-driven website, says they have returned to using a journalist and photographer on stories because – as everyone suspected – the jack of many trades is a master of few – especially when on a tight deadline. (Disclaimer: I am a columnist for *The Times*.)

"I think that the new generation of journalists – we have some of them in our newsroom already – is capable of working across platforms without breaking a sweat," Hartley says. "But it would be a mistake to have the same expectations of old school print journalists. They are hired for their contacts and their ability to provide cutting edge news. They should be expected to write for the web as this is an extension of their existing skills, but you must accept that they are not going to shoot video and edit it while doing this. Such stories do need to be enriched with multimedia so you need specialist skills to back up the print journalists."

The next generation of journalists come pre-equipped with much of the technology and internet skills that it took my generation years to learn.

Writer Douglas Rushkoff, the internet visionary who wrote for the technology section I edited for the *Mail&Guardian* way back in the 1990s, coined the concept of the "digital native" – youngsters who use technology with greater ease than us old folk. I call them the digital born frees.

However, what I've realised is that while these kids have great technology skills, they lack other essential life skills. They can find things easier on Google but they lack the resourcefulness to pick up a phone and just call someone. I've watched young reporters spend half an hour searching for a phone number online, instead of taking two minutes to look through the phone book.

Senior producers at the SABC and e.News have lamented about another habit that can drive older journos nuts: Sending emails to make contact with people not picking up the phone. Or, worse still, waiting for a reply.

As the great Peta Thornycroft told me when I was a young reporter at the *Mail&Guardian*, journalists never wait for someone to call them back. I was taught to call repeatedly until I get hold of them. It's simple logic: it's important to me to contact them, not necessarily important for them to call me back.

These are some of the simple skills of journalism that youngsters don't observe.

When I went to Sapa, Peter Wellman, the first journalist to be imprisoned under Section 205 of the Criminal Procedures Act, taught me simple, pragmatic writing skills: always re-read your copy. Overnight if you can, or after making a cup of tea and taking a break if you can't.

I'm always amazed that young journalists don't do this. Over the years copy has been filed to me that contains the most basic typos and grammatical errors. One re-read would've picked them up.

Sapa, in those days had cruddy offices in the Carlton Centre, had a mainframe-driven copy system that had no spell checker. You had to know how to spell. We're not talking big words in English essays, we're talking hard news story language. You had to read your own copy and make sure the obvious errors weren't there. It taught you to pay attention to your own copy, because there was no backstop.

I'm horrified at how many young journalists don't see these in their own copy. A part of the reason, I suspect, is the over-reliance on technology – in this case Microsoft Word, which underlines misspelt words, but doesn't know how to tell "there" from "their".

New technology always changes the way any industry works, it's a given of the process that started with the industrial revolution.

But while the means of production are improved, the quality of its output – the tenets of journalism, the fact-checking, the accountability, the dogmatic attempt to be impartial, objective and balanced – should never be lost.

## INTVU BY TWITTER

*The Times* editor Ray Hartley once commissioned me to write an article via Facebook and I was asked by Anne Taylor to write this via Twitter. To try it out, Hartley suggested I interview him by Twitter. This is the result:

**@shapshak: How has internet changed print media in SA? Is it really more interactive? Do you break stories online?**

**@hartleyr:** The default switch has been reset to online. You set up to break all stories online unless there's an intervention.

**@shapshak: With such poor bandwidth and so few users, when do you think SA will adopt online news culture like States? How will it differ? ie less video.**

**@hartleyr:** South Africans are quick tech adopters if its affordable – just look at cellphones. The push could come from cellphones. At present we get more hits out of podcasts and slideshows than video because of bandwidth.

**@shapshak: How does something like Twitter change the online news space? Is it really the Holy Grail/CNN of new media? See #IranElections**

**@hartleyr:** Twitter is a very powerful hybrid of social interaction and news. It answers the question: Who do you trust? The stronger the torrent of information becomes, the more important navigation becomes. Twitter offers navigation.

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