

From Cave Painter to Twit: A Journalistic Journey

By Larry LaRue

One or two hundred years ago, the study of journalism I took up was, when viewed through the eyes of the profession today, the same as majoring in advanced cave painting.

An example?

While still in school, my first job in the field – as a 19-year-old sports editor – was with the Antelope Valley Press, in Palmdale, California.

We worked on manual typewriters, the black ones with the big round keys. We double-spaced our copy so we could edit with a pencil.

A pencil, I should probably explain, was like a stick with lead in it.

Today? Well, 40-plus years later, all my work is done on a lap top, and I carry a Verizon card so I can go online virtually anywhere. I blog. I Facebook. I Twitter.

The other day in the press box at Safeco Field in Seattle, I got a Tweet from an expatriot American now living in Japan, whose handle is MisterPigz.

He fired off a question to me and another writer, Larry Stone, a long-time baseball columnist who walked down the press box to where I was sitting and sighed.

“Did you ever think,” he asked, “that our careers would come to this – answering Tweets from someone named MisterPigz?”

No. I did not.

When I graduated college, back when the earth was still cooling, my first post-grad job was reporting with the Omaha World Herald. There was, far in the back of the newsroom, an old poop - Bill Bilotti - who rarely did anything but talk to other old poops and glare at the likes of me.

He was probably 60.

When the future came to the World Herald, Bilotti balked. We were thrown into training to transit from our manual typerwriters to intimidating IBM Selectrics.

An electric typewriter.

Bilotti refused to give up his jet black manual, and a few of the young lions in the newsroom got a laugh. I had no idea then, and would not find out for years, that Bilotti had been part of a World-Herald investigative team that was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize back in the '30s.

Not talking to him about that, missing an opportunity to learn from him, was a mistake I never committed in a newsroom again. It still weighs on me.

Now, of course, I am the one that the young Turks in our business look at and shake their heads. I have become Bilotti to them, without the Pulitzer nomination.

Over the decades, I have worked on five newspapers, a business journal and an entertainment magazine. I have covered plane crashes and murders, and written features on the African clawed frog and a \$5 million bus that couldn't turn right on city streets.

Along the way, computers entered the field.

My first had a screen about the size of a CD cover and was a tricky bastard. One day another writer with the same machine finished his story, hit the wrong key and watched as the cursor – starting from the final word – slowly but methodically backed up and character-by-character deleted everything he'd written.

There was another major computer transition when I worked in Long Beach at the Press-Telegram. The paper sent long-time newsman Bert Resnick to research computer systems and he settled on one, he told the staff, which had endless memory.

It also had keyword saves, so within days of our classes almost everyone threw keywords out into the news world and began collecting pertinent stories.

Two weeks after we started that, Resnick came racing into the newsroom.

“Purge,” he screamed. “Purge!”

We'd overwhelmed the memory of the new system in less than a 10 working days, and it was crashing. Cool.

And then there was the problem with quotation marks. The new keyboard we got with our new terminals didn't have any. The computer geniuses whom the paper had hired to set up the new system had neglected to include the quote marks. “Do you use a lot of those?” they asked.

And we shouldn't forget the time that the in-house committee charged with setting up a subsequent system deadlocked over whether to go with Macs or PCs. In the end they compromised. The reporters who wrote the stories got PCs, the news desk that edited them had Macs. By the time they figured out how to get the rival systems to talk to one another, both the PCs and Macs that had been stored in a back room were no longer state-of-the-art.

The issues today usually aren't the computers we use but the way the news world has tried to merge with the internet – a shotgun wedding that's had long-term effects.

Newspapers now often offer more to their online readers for free than the subscriber can get by paying for his daily paper. No paper yet has found a way to make enough money online to stay solvent.

And journalism majors today don't study cave painting. They emerge from college schooled in the art of blogging – how to upload video, link to YouTube and text-message-Tweets from a cell phone.

Their priorities may be absolutely spot on, but they're different.

Beat the world with a story today, it's not a scoop for the next day's paper. Editors want it up on the website where everyone – including the competition – can read it within minutes.

The hope is that such stories go viral, create millions of new website hits and grow the online product. We've been trying for years now, and the news industry has lost dozens of daily newspapers.

Occasionally, ethical questions trouble me. Can a beat writer, for instance, cover a story objectively, then blog thoughts on the same story – and Twitter something juicy enough to make readers head for the website?

And, while he does all this the day the story breaks, how is he serving the loyal subscriber who must pick up his morning paper and read what is already known by anyone with access to the web?

It's complicated. It's certainly not the journalism we cave-painting specialists remember.

Somewhere, Bill Bilotti is still disgusted with us kids.

Larry LaRue is a sports writer with the Tacoma News Tribune covering the Seattle Mariners. You can read his reportage and commentary on at <http://www.thenewstribune.com/sports/mariners/> and you can follow him and see his photography on Facebook at <facebook.com/kwlarue>, Twitter at [@LarryLaRue](https://twitter.com/LarryLaRue) and the News Tribune Mariners' blog at <http://blog.thenewstribune.com/mariners/> His book, Major League Encounters, is due out later this year.

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