The Future

Embracing change

◆

Howard Finberg

Director of Technology & Information Strategies, Central Newspapers, Inc.

It is Thursday, October 1, 2020 and Kate Oakley, an editor at The Arizona Republic, is about to start work. Kate, however, doesn't work in the office. She works at home.

Firing up her monitor with a verbal "log on" command, Kate gets ready for the daily meeting with her fellow editors and a managing editor at The Republic.

Almost instantly, her monitor is on the "virtual network" and eight images of her co-workers start to appear. Three are at home; two are at remote or shared offices. One is on the road with his team covering a live event. The rest are at the paper's headquarters building.

After discussing reports from the teams that worked the previous "info cycles" — each cycle is four hours and there are teams working around the clock — Kate and her fellow editors start the business of producing material for The Republic.

She doesn't have a computer in her house, only a 27-inch flat-screen that is about one inch thick and connected to The Network. Everything is on The Network: broadcast entertainment signals, written communications and voice messages.

As a senior editor, Kate's responsibilities are varied. She not only oversees the junior members of her team but also is responsible for part of the "info package" that will be created this news cycle.

Using only voice commands to open and access various collections of information, text, images, video, audio and references to other databases, she starts the process of assembling her "infopack." Because it is a relatively quiet "info day," there

wasn't much debate during the meeting as to what are the most significant stories. The artificial descriptions of hard or soft news have long since disappeared from the language of editors.

The most difficult part of Kate's day will be looking at the trend data from the previous info cycles to decide how much other information should be included in this package. Feedback from customers is almost instantaneous, regardless of the medium used to deliver the package.

Finally, with her content selection complete, she starts the process of editing, rewriting, refining and writing headlines for the material. Despite the improvements in The Network's contextual editing and fact-checking system, Kate still likes to fine-tune the package herself so it has a smoother flow that will be more interesting to her customers. She briefly thinks about the rumors that some part of her compensation soon will be tied to how well her packages "sell."

Fortunately, these are just rumors — for now.

While developing the infopack, Kate also has kept a watch for some of the visual elements she will use to entice customers. The Network formats much of the package to templates; this allows her lots of time to add these design touches.

Using a pen-like device and her handheld design pad, she sketches her concepts. As she touches the pen to screen, she creates a virtual layout. Instantly, elements flow into the places she is considering. If the package doesn't look right, a quick "erase" voice command allows her to start over. In the background, The Network keeps a watch on color schemes and adjusts background and accent colors. Of course, all the colors were pre-approved by the template design group.

Kate has a good sense of visual layout, but she isn't a "trained" designer or an artist. There are few of those visual journalists left at The Republic, and they are mostly in senior management. They "coach" editors like Kate in ways to present appealing packages of information. Although Kate was trained as a word or content journalist, she had to pass both a content-gathering test and a presentation test to graduate from the university.

Almost finished, she takes one more glance at her "alert screen," which has been running in the upper left-hand side of the monitor. The screen tracks the most recent news stories and other information that has entered the database. It is blank, so she releases the package to the network and to the managers at The Republic's HQ. The senior editors take a final look and, if they don't have suggestions for Kate, send the package to be "published."

Truth meets fiction

While this is a fanciful look at newspaper work in the not-too-distant future, the technologies are already being developed as part of a "third wave" of pagination systems:

◆ The speech recognition software is available today. It will only get better in the future.

◆ The flat-screen-display is available today. These screens will only get lighter, thinner and less expensive in the future.

◆ The "rules-based" software for automatic production is available today. It will only get faster, smarter and easier to set up and use.

◆ Even the more futuristic-sounding "context-editing software" exists today, and pieces are already being used to search databases for information. This new generation of software conducts searches based on phrases and ideas, not just words. Its results are brought back in manageable form.

The 'infopack'

Did you assume our fictional Kate was putting together a print or website package? Perhaps she was doing neither; perhaps both.

In my vision, packages of information will be delivered through a number of devices and technologies in the next 20 years. Some will be very familiar, such as totally recycled newsprint. Others seem nearly unimaginable, such as a device in the home that outputs material that looks and feels like paper, but which can be "erased" after it is read and used to print the next or latest edition. Some call this electronic paper.

By 2020, flat-screen monitors the size of books, with the ability to display type and images with the clarity of ink on paper, will be widespread. One will always have the latest information available because this device will always be connected to The Network.

All these devices will need the infopacks, which will be prepared by the editors from reliable sources of news and information. Reliable information sources on The Network will be valued commodities in the next century. Our editor, Kate, actually will prepare one type of package and The Network will adjust and adapt her work to fit the delivery device mode her customers need to access her infopack through their choice of information delivery device. In the future, news and information companies will build upon their ability to gather, edit and put into context events and activities for their time-starved customer.

That pesky Information Age

Although many traditional companies are coming to grips with the challenges facing them in a world that is less dependent upon newspapers, a larger number just wish this whole "Information Age" thing would go away. I had a conversation with a publisher of a large newspaper in February 1999. The publisher, whose newspaper is not paginated, was on a road trip to learn more about technology and pagination.

What are the challenges, I asked her:
◆ Money?
No, she will have capital funding for the project.
◆ Technology?
No, there are several very good solutions for a paper her size.

The challenge, it seems, is the newsroom. Her editors aren't sure they want to install pagination, because they fear it will change their culture.

Damn right it will, I said — and it should.

While her editors' fears need to be addressed, their continued unwillingness to embrace change is probably the most important reason why she should push pagination along as fast as possible. As an industry, we have little time left to change an isolationist newsroom culture and deploy our resources of time, people, and money to cope with the challenges ahead. Without a system to manage its assets — the words, pictures, knowledge of the newsroom — how will these editors ensure the survival of their newspapers? If the world is changing how it accesses information at an increasing rate, newspaper companies must change even faster.

Riding the 'third wave'

Now, what about this "third wave" of pagination?

I do not believe that we will see much in the way of pagination system improvements during the next five years. What we will see is an increased awareness of the need to develop databases of information that are "delivery neutral." That means the content is separate from the instructions needed to display the information. Whether these systems use XML or NMT or some other "alphabyte" soup designation does not matter. In the foreseeable future, what the information looks like at the point of delivery to our customers print, Web, pager headline will be separate from the information itself.

The importance of such database/data delivery systems can already be seen as newspapers try to take their printed material, with all of its typesetting instructions, and display it on their websites. For most, this is a major programming task. As new technology on the Web develops, these programmers must scramble to adapt and modify their code.

Searching for smarter, not necessarily newer

Over the longer term, I see a very bright future for those organizations willing to adopt new ways of getting reliable and valuable information to their customers. Most importantly, by the second decade of the 21st century, the newspaper industry — if it still is called that — finally will have stopped talking and writing about "pagination." Pagination will be a word relegated to history's dusty corners, much like "paste-up" and "hot metal." The industry's "Holy Grail" of pagination will have been captured, and we will focus on things that are really important: content and retaining our readers and finding new ones.

As an industry, we have been obsessed with finding a technological solution to a production process that, in the long run, means little in terms of improving our companies so we can survive the challenges of the information age. Instead of looking for new technical methods to do the same old processes, we need to be pushing for smarter and more flexible systems and redoing how we organize our workforce.

New ways of producing our news and information will give us an opportunity to make other organizational changes because we no longer will be trying to replicate the paste-up process of the previous century. It will allow newspapers to evolve into stronger information and community-building organizations.

Some of my bolder, out-on-a-limb predictions:

◆ Design as a unique job function in newspapers will slowly dissolve into other editing responsibilities.

◆ Editing will encompass more than the technical aspects of copy editing and take on more responsibilities for the entire infopacks.

◆ Computers will automatically handle most of the routine production responsibilities, freeing editors to do just what we have always wanted them to do — make journalistic choices on behalf of their readers and the community.

◆ Most, if not all, maps and charts will be produced by software. There will be fewer artists at newspapers doing "art work."

◆ The presentation of information will be of such importance for the organization that the senior editor with such responsibilities will report to the publisher.

Newspapers are on the verge of freeing themselves from the limitations of their production equipment. While I would not predict the end of newsprint as we know it, the era of print-centric delivery is coming to an end. We need to look beyond technology to find the solutions to organize and motivate our workforce for the new millennium. If we are successful, this is the last pagination book you will ever read.

◆

Notes