Written by Martin Veitch

White paper

The IT newsroom has changed, for better and worse

Martin Veitch reflects on the best part of two decades at the virtual coalface that is technology journalism

Martin Veitch started his IT journalism career at PC Week in 1990. He joined Ziff-Davis UK in 1992 and helped launch PC Direct, rising to become Deputy Editor before leaving in 1996 to set up ZDNet News. Martin joined IT Week as Executive News Editor when the magazine started in 1998 and was appointed Editor in May 1999. In January 2001 he stepped down to become Executive Editor, and in 2008 joined IDG as Editor In Chief of CIO. Martin's other published work includes appearances in The Wall Street Journal Europe, BBC News Online, CFO magazine and The Guardian. He is also a regular speaker at conferences and follows Newcastle United FC when he wants a break from his relentless optimism.

Every generation likes to think that their early life was the time when God was in his Heaven and all was well with the world. It was always cocktail time and the sun shone every day. Later, as we slip into our dotage, our perception changes and we see the world around us in terms of The Time It All Went Horribly Wrong, when missteps were made and people lost track of the important things in life. Core values were dropped and all of a sudden we arrived at a fin de siècle stage of desuetude, as Brian Sewell might say. Any pub bore if they are approaching codger stage (say 43 for the sake of argument) will tell you that football today isn't what it was back in the Seventies; that Margaret Thatcher/Harold Wilson presided over a golden era; that television was better when there were only four channels; and music wasn't just noise. In those halcyon days, the beer was cheap and plentiful, romance was always in the air, hats were worn at a jaunty angle, all was for the best in that best of all possible worlds.

To all of which, the appropriate answer is 'bollocks'.

It's no coincidence that many of us form a rosy world view of the time when we had hair, a functioning love life and really didn't give a flying about the credit crunch. For me, starting out in technology journalism at PC Week in 1990, life

was good. Our starting time was 10 o'clock, a bit of a stretch when you've only recently graduated but just about do-able. It was a bit difficult getting to know the vagaries of the IT industry with its talk of 'vendors' 'end-users', the 'channel' and never-ending supply of acronyms and abbreviations but it didn't take long to realise that I wasn't the only one winging it.

Also, I had a good editor to guide me through. From my first day on the job I was writing four or five news stories a day when not filling in buyers' guides on £1199 laser

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printers (pity the poor readers), knocking out features on 'the death of the mainframe' (wrong), or doing grunt work such as cutting and pasting (that's the old style of cutting and pasting with scissors and glue) pieces from the US magazine we took on a licence basis.

Anybody under 30 today would be shocked at the primitive state of the office of 1990. There was no DTP so we printed out copy that was subbed on paper and then

taken away to be rekeyed. Proofs were sent back by fax on thermal printer that made the work of final proofing akin to interpreting lost languages on ancient parchment scrolls. As the new kid in the office, I did not even have access to a PC for the first few months so I composed my timeless prose on a manual Brother typewriter I had bought for about £50 and made a carbon copy of each document. I graduated to an 8MHz 286-based Victor PC (with 12MHz 'Turbo' button) but output still involved taking a 5.25-inch floppy over to the editorial assistant's desk and

interrupting her work to connect up a dot-matrix printer. The cable sat between two desks creating a health-and-safety risk and requiring either limbo skills or Michael Jordan-class standing leaps.

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Later, having learned the art of cadging kit that was common practice at the time, I gained access to an AST 386 PC with 1MB of RAM and 20MB hard drive, swapping WordStar on DOS (CTRL-KD for 'save' and .ls2 for double line spacing are still imprinted on my brain) for Word and Windows 3.0.

Journalism back then was certainly very different. With no internet to fall back on, access to primary sources was largely limited to getting on the blower or on face-to-face meetings. Several dozen press releases arrived by post every day and a few by fax, although collecting them meant a trip in the lift to the ground floor. Courier bikes arrived through the day bearing transparencies and photographs for scanning. For research we went to an ancient library and consulted mountains of back issues or – more bleeding edge – used a CompuServe online account (another 'review' item) that helped prop up our creaking office infrastructure.

Conditions weren't tip-top. Everybody in our office smoked as if filming an episode of Life On Mars and one editor used to set up a tower of four packs of Rothmans as a statement of intent at the beginning of each day. The same person was famously able to calibrate his drinking by counting the number of lemon slices in his glass. There was no air-con and the only fan had shed its guard. We could open the office windows but there was heavy construction outside creating swirls of dust so mostly we preferred to sit in our carcinogenic fug. There were lots of arguments, plenty of creative swearing and a pervasive sense of hangover, aggression but also fun.

With my fat salary of £11,500 per annum, I could not well afford to

fund the extravagant lifestyle encouraged by my new environment. There were no dinner parties around in those days and I was at an age when I really didn't care about house prices, children or the environment, but there were plenty of press parties and trips that provided unfettered access to 5-star hotels and local, fashionable haunts of the time such as the Groucho Club, the impossibly

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glamorous L'Escargot, or Quo Vadis – all, amazingly enough, still trading.

The job was all about working hard and playing hard and -- after a week where I survived on free-vend office coffee, conference sandwiches and fare-avoidance because I was, quite literally, penniless -- I was ready to throw myself into a strange new world. Getting a scoop depended on currying favours and off-the-record comments from old soaks of the industry keen to pass the afternoon in Soho pubs. PRs would help out with scurrilous, potentially libellous information about rivals to their clients. Our paper was famous for its gossip column that made Private Eye read like The Independent. Making an uncertain trek back to the office to knock out stories after after-hours 'networking' was what it was all about and we weren't too proud to 'write the story big' if short of decent copy for the front page. Many of the stories consisted largely of marketing departments of

vendors trading insults, but the pages got filled somehow or other and the already-large black-and-white photography could always be stretched a bit more.

A typical working day would be delivering about 1700 words of copy, coming up with images and sticking around to answer questions. One interesting point is that while today little copy is

rejected because 'we can always shove it online', the concept of the spiked story was very important. We worked at breakneck speed, stories moved about and they couldn't all make it in, even though there were only a few of us to knock out a 40- or 50-page issue every week. Then it would be down the pub to drink and discuss.

Fast-forward to today and what is striking is that there are still some similarities. In print at least, IT publishing still often operates on a wing and prayer, and once-proud titles can run on a skeleton staff with just one or two grizzled veterans among the tyros. But the culture is very different. Drinking is much reduced and smoking has been taken outside the building.

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There is a far greater acceptance of the commercial model that underlies publishing, too. Advertorials were often angrily rejected by editors in the old days but now they, together with sponsored supplements and much else that is questionable, blur the lines between editorial and sales, sacred and profane. Newsrooms today are more aware of the big, global picture and it's easier to know what is going on in Silicon Valley, India and other technology centres but this comes, perhaps, at the expense of local expertise. Driven on by publishers, editors are also far more aware of advertisers' demands for novelty. Where words were once the currency of business-to-business journalism, today podcasts and video are widely seen as essential ingredients.

Is public relations better than it was? Not at all. As the tentacles of the IT industry have stretched to touch all of us, so the number of media outlets has multiplied and PR approaches are all too often spam attacks that waste everybody's time. What was once a cosy club of specialists is now a broad church that packs in amateur bloggers, expert contributors and even celebrities such as Stephen Fry. The need for more focused approaches is more acute than ever but any newsroom in the technology sector will be replete with short conversations confirming the receipt of press releases and damning indictments after the phone has been hung up. PR firms need to be sharper, anticipate needs and attune themselves to the requirements of publications but all too often a one-size-fits-all position is assumed.

Even the full-time journalists, beset by requirements to film, record, write and opine, rarely have enough downtime to figure out their priorities. Editors often want to be publishers or industry spokesmen and a great many journalists are leaving the game for more lucrative professions in analyst firms or at vendors or PR firms, or setting up their own web businesses.

Some things are better though. The web has made it possible to publish stores in real time and the world knows if you have pulled off a scoop (back then we would zealously hide exclusives until print publication dates). The sheer hassle of making pages fit, laying out,

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proofing and correcting is going the way of all flesh and many of us will say good riddance to bad rubbish. It is much easier now to understand who is reading stories, why and where. On the other hand, the business of generating news has been hijacked by theories of search engine optimisation, tagging, aggregators, social bookmarking and social networking sites. This has made it easier for publishers to pander to the common reader rather than the specialist audience and to impress advertising agencies with larger numbers rather than providing specialist knowledge. Whatever SEO offers, it surely has little to do with journalism and appropriate use of language.

Back then it was the best of times and the worst of times and you could probably say much the same today. There is still a voracious appetite for news and there will always be people who want to provide it, so long as they can be promised a bit of fun in exchange for the modest stipend and occasional humiliations of the job.

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