

Keep mass production for cars

Truth doesn't roll off an assembly line

The concept was simple enough and hardly revolutionary: To increase quality and productivity stockpile well-machined parts for repeated assembly.

Heck, Henry Ford figured that out years ago.

Only in this case the product discussed at a 2003 conference I attended in Hanover wasn't cars. The group of educators was discussing the development of a new curriculum for teaching science journalism in Germany.

The product: A news story.

The idea promoted by a German professor was to create an Internet depot for expert quotes and well-vetted facts. Reporters would dip into this quote and fact bank for the parts needed to assemble multiple stories. Parts could be reused in different configurations.

The accuracy and the quantity of science stories would improve dramatically, the professor said. His audience was mostly stunned.

"That's exactly how I teach my students not to write," another American educator whispered to me.

Whether assembly line journalism catches on is uncertain. At least I hope it is. But I worry that the information technology that excites so many of us will erode journalists' greatest assets: The ability to arrest attention with compelling story-telling, and the skill to write authoritatively about subjects that readers didn't know they were interested in.

Nowhere are these assets more important than when writing about the environment. The issues are immense and complex. It takes a skilled writer not to overwhelm or bore readers. And the environment is too important of a story to risk losing readers by alienating them.

Technology has meant that traditional journalists have lost their influence in the information market. Some of that is good. Nowadays anyone with a blog can produce a virtual newspaper. And good bloggers have made some mainstream media look silly, unearthing such stupidity as the basis for the *CBS News* report on President Bush's military record.

But it's not all good news.

Consider Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), the online encyclopedia written and re-written by, well, by everybody. Readers edit entries written by others. As Sam Williams reports in *IPJ Global Journalist*, "Those who deliberately court antagonism run the risk of seeing their work erased altogether."

Set aside the challenges of writing a graceful entry with multiple fingers in the pie. What does this communal effort mean to trust? How can readers believe articles that can change daily, depending on who—expert or otherwise—sticks an oar in?

Wiki is not without value. Williams, a technology reporter, finds Wiki summaries and links to primary sources helpful when launching his own research.

Perhaps more disturbing is the Museum of Media History's look at the near future of journalism. It's told with new media techniques at www.broom.org/epic.

Here is a grim vision of a technology that sorts the news you get based on your likes and dislikes. News robots strip sentences and facts from all sources—reliable and otherwise—and reassembles them for you: "The computer writes a new story for every reader."

Everyone is both contributor to and consumer of shallow, narrow and sensational news.



Photo courtesy of Getty Images

Engines roll off an assembly line. The production method revolutionized the auto industry, but doesn't bode well for journalism.

I'm torn about information technology. I worry about how multitudes of voices dilute the trust in journalists' ability to sort things out and tell readers, as best they can, about the state of the world.

Yet it is hard to argue that traditional journalists have the corner on truth.

I worry much more about news robots tailoring stories to my interests. That's a diet that feeds a narrow view of the world. I have paged through encyclopedias precisely to stumble over things that I otherwise wouldn't know enough to be interested in.

My mainstream daily, despite the diminishing news hole, does much the same.

A newsbot can't deliver that. What's more, it can't create compelling prose.

The human touch is essential to storytelling. There will always be a market for journalists who can grab eyeballs and make readers sit up and listen.

At least, that's what I choose to believe.

Henry Ford once joked about his cars that you could have any color you want, as long as it was black.

We should keep automated assembly lines for hard goods like cars. Putting them to work in journalism will let us get any kind of news story that we want.

As long as it's bland. 🙄

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