

Deadline Sunday Times

By AMEEN IZZADEEN

We live in an era in which the gap between news and history hardly exists, so much so that one who delays reading an sms news alert even by so short a period as half a minute reads a piece of history – not news. News becomes history faster than little sparks become ash.

With webcasts and web journalism becoming popular modes of news dissemination, the distance to news fast disappears. Picture sharing, video sharing and streaming events live via social media have broken the barriers within which the traditional media had operated.

Yet in this hi-tech era, the newspaper has still not – and perhaps never will – become a museum piece. It survives because the printed word is still a force to be reckoned with. But this

force alone does not guarantee its survival. Newspapers that had power to make or break governments have wound up. Their demise was largely due to their failure to change with technology.

I am glad to say, I work for a newspaper that has not only understood its responsibility as a medium through which the cry for social justice resonates but also has realized the importance of technology and change.

As your favourite newspaper, the Sunday Times, celebrates its 25th anniversary with you, we are glad to say it comes to your doorstep as a newspaper – not a history paper. Its history, however, has become a source of inspiration or a force of

motivation to propel the newspaper to greater heights.

As we celebrate our silver jubilee, we share a part of that history with you – that of the march of technology.

When the Sunday Times was reborn on June 7, 1987 as an ambitious project of a never-say-die personality whose newspaper empire – Lake House – was robbed by the then government in 1973, the inaugural issue caught the eye of Sri Lanka's reading public. The clarity of the printed letter, the neatness in the page layout and the colour, together with the content and the bold approach to journalism made it an instant hit among Sri Lankan newspaper readers.

When I took up my appointment as a sub editor 25 years ago, months after the paper was launched, I felt I had come into a modern newspaper office. The feeling was that of a man who had gone to sleep in the Stone Age and woken up in the Iron Age.

Yes, at the Sun newspaper, where I worked before I joined the Sunday Times, the pages were done on hot metal and the stone – a term used for the table on which lead slugs from the Linotype machine were arranged inside a frame according to the layout instructions or dummy given by a sub-editor.

In the Sunday Times, there were no lead slugs. Instead, there were wax and bromides. The bromide was a glossy paper-like product that rolled out from a machine as huge as two 1000-litre water tanks. The bromide machine was connected to the computers just as today's hp LaserJet printers are. The bromide paper that carried the printed words in columns was waxed, cut and pasted on a cardboard dummy sheet.

The Typesetting Department's computers were in an air-conditioned room. No one but operators and sub-editors had access to the room. It was like a shrine room; we had to remove our footwear before entering it. Among those operators who typed our manually subbed (edited) copies in Linotype and VariType computers were Chandana Dassanayake, J. Gunathilaka and Gamini Perera. All of them have climbed the ladder within

the company hierarchy. So was their typesetting department which is now known as the Desktop Publishing Department. Then there is Victor Perera, the ever vigilant proof reader, who like Chandana, Gune and Gamini, carries within himself the early pages of the Sunday Times' history book.

The man who liaised between the editorial and the computer room was the affable Rohan David. He is today the Assistant General Manager Production.

The technology that the Sunday Times had 25 years ago baffled me. To create a reverse headline – white letters on black background – it took us more than three hours at my previous workplace. But in the Sunday Times office, it took only half an hour, because the bromide machine to which the chemicals – developers and fixers – were fed needed time to process the print.

In those early days, I was also thrilled to see the use of one week-old photographs on the world news page of the Sunday Times. At my previous workplace, the foreign news pictures were usually a month or several weeks old. Yet, the editorial office was no different from the Sun office. There were no computers – only type writers. One of them, an Olympia manual, adorns the shelf in my office and often draws queries from puzzled young visitors.

But what was encouraging at the Sunday Times office was that the march of technology was not marked with dormancy or marred by resistance to change. The march was progressive with an enthusiastic staff prodding an ever cooperative management for it. The combined effort helped the Sunday Times catch up with the rest of the world in technology.

The editorial office saw a gradual computerization (see box story). The bromide-paste-up era gave way to desktop publishing. Editorial computer systems and new printing machines began to arrive piecemeal. While the word professionalism found greater meaning at the editorial, quality became a watchword in printing. The days of photographers spending hours at colour labs are history. Photographs sent from any part of

The Apple of four eyes

At the Pearly Gates, when Steve Jobs introduced himself as the Apple co-founder, the winged official said: "Last time an apple caused so much excitement involved Adam, Eve and a snake."

Yes Jobs' Apple computer made history at the Sunday Times also. The newspaper's journey on the digital path began with an Apple Classic, a box-shaped computer with the monitor built into the Central Processing Unit. It was around 1991. Almost at the same time, Reuters news agency installed an IBM-compatible computer at the Sub-Editors' Desk to receive

dot-matrix printer.

The two computers at the two-roomed subs desk in the upper floor of the pressroom caught us unawares. We the cubs in journalism then did not know how to look after these computers though we knew how to use them while some of the old timers were so apprehensive of the hi-tech beast that they would not even touch it. Dust and smoke were not good for computers. A no-smoking rule was imposed. The polythene cover that came with the packing was folded and kept carefully near the computers. When we left office after the

day's work, the computers were covered with the polythene covers. We simply adored our first computers and treated them with such veneration as though they were heavenly gifts.

We got our second Apple computer in 1992. It was a 475 model. Initially,



The Apple 475

we used the two Apple computers to type headlines and take printouts from our first laser jet printer. But later we found out it had other uses, especially playing games, which became a good stress buster along with the harmful cigarettes which some of us were addicted to then. The Apple 475 remained useful when the company launched a fully computerized midweek English tabloid – Midweek Mirror – in 1996. It was on this Apple computer that we learned our basics in many desktop publishing applications such as MacWrite, Apple Page Maker and Freehand.

Today, almost every Sunday Times journalist's desk has a computer with full internet access.



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