



Column / Don Newman

## The Innovation Catechism

**I**nnovate, adapt and change. That is today's mantra, as companies struggle to keep up with the latest technological changes in their field and countries look to adopt the policies and programs that will help them do it.

Re-tool for the 21st century. If you don't reinvent the way you do business, you soon will have no business to do. In fact, it is more than a mantra. It is a catechism for the innovation faith.

If that sounds cynical, like I'm against innovation, technology and change in general, well I am not. I am for it. But I have seen technology dramatically change the field in which I made my career. For many years, it changed it for the better. Now, I'm not so sure.

When I entered my first editorial office to begin my career as a newspaper reporter, I couldn't believe the noise. Typewriters, probably 35 of them, all clattering away as reporters filed their stories as the deadline approached.

And it wasn't just the reporters' typewriters that were making a noise. So were the typewriters of the people editing the stories, writing headlines, changing the wording of an article.

And when the editors had finished their handiwork, they shouted for a copy boy to pick up the finished product. The edited copy was placed in a plastic cylinder, the cylinder closed and put in a pneumatic tube that whisked it one floor up to the composing room.

There, a compositor retyped the story on a type-setting machine, setting it in type in a way that was ready to be put in a page frame. The noise in the composing room at deadline was as

loud as the sound in the newsroom. Putting out a paper was a very noisy business. And that is without taking into account the roar the presses made when they were printing the finished product.

But innovation was happening well before the current drive to innovate. And newspapers were some of the early adapters.

**T**hirty years ago, computers were becoming small enough that people could carry them around. Slightly bigger ones could be installed on desk tops. Suddenly, reporters could write their stories on computers, and editors could receive them on their computers. Gone from the newsroom was the clacking of typewriters that had been a staple for some 100 years. The semi-audible click of computer keys replaced it.

And not only was it people working in the same room. Now reporters in distant locations with access to a telephone line could have their computers connected to the ones in the home office. Gone were the days of finding a telegraph office to send your copy as a message into the paper's wire room. Just write the story and push send.

Not only did technology change the newsroom, it made the composing room redundant. As innovation has taken hold, the production of newspapers has changed dramatically.

On the face of it, you would think that a good thing. But sadly, it is not. The same technology that streamlined the production of newspapers also created a whole new world of communication on the internet.

Blogs, Facebook, YouTube and so many other carriers of information

have sprung up across the web. But the totality of their impact has been to destroy both the readership and the advertising base of most newspapers.

Even world-famous papers like the New York Times and the Guardian in London are being economically hammered. To survive, each is trying to expand its brand beyond its national borders, seeking online subscribers anywhere in the world.

In many ways, both journalism and communications have never been better. But the people working at it are not compensated as they once were. And the future is so uncertain, I find it hard to recommend to any young person with a passion for policy, politics and truth to go into the career that provided me with so much satisfaction and fulfillment.

And I share the concern that without a vibrant media and press, democracy is under threat from the clowns who claim there are "fake news" and "alternative facts" available to take the place of any uncomfortable truths.

Should the innovation that has left one of the pillars of democracy wobbling not have happened? No, we cannot be Luddites, break up the machines and throw them into the sea.

But in the rush to innovate, we must be aware of all the consequences, the many positive but also the negative. In the end, a better society has to be the result. Not one that is diminished. **P**

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