Piling on the skills

When many of us broke into journalism, knowing something about liberal arts, how to ask moderately intelligent questions, and how to type with at least two fingers were sufficient.

Today, whole new layers of must-have-to-survive-in-the-profession skills have been piled on. Those layers have serious consequences for training in the newsroom and classroom.

I posed a message on the Internet asking professionals and journalism educators "What individual skills or pieces of knowledge must journalists know today that simply didn't exist in the profession 10 years ago?"

Here are some of the responses:

- What is a "file extension"?
- What is a "batch" file?
- What is a printer driver?
- What is a modem?
- How to use command line to test yourself about Unix and DOS.
- How to import ASCII data into a spreadsheet or database.
- The Go-to command in a spreadsheet.
- How to "log" or "capture" a file.
- How to read an URL address and knowing what to do with it.
- The difference between a number in a spreadsheet used as a label and those used as data.
- How to "defrag" a hard drive.
- How to back up a hard drive.
- Block operations in a word processor and/or spreadsheet.
- Margins of error.
- Statistical significance.
- Keyboard shortcuts ("The mouse is not efficient for many word processing functions.").
- Boolean search commands and strategy.
- Creating and analyzing databases.
- Understanding and using databases.
- How to apply FOIA to electronic records.
- Using a cellular telephone.
- Using electronic imaging.
- Cross-platform transfers.
- Using legislative databases during sessions.
- Getting a laptop to transmit from a distant rotary point.
- Automating assignments.
- Electronic ROCX files.
- Setting up internal computer codes to assign stories.
- Selecting, using, and keeping costs down for on-line services: training fellow staffers in using such resources.
- Accepting rejection gracefully after asking for laptops from the boss.
- Trying to explain the Net to newsroom Luddites.
- E-mail.
- On-line searching of Lexis and Dialog without bankrupting the company.
- Installing and maintaining library systems for floppy disk dumpl (archiving—it's not just for newspapers anymore).
- Trying not to get pissed when the boss turns up with a laptop and no clue on what he could use it for.
- How to edit audio by cutting and pasting wave patterns.
- Database design and terminology.
- Installing software and mastering the nuances of Windows "*.ini files.
- Navigating CIS, Delphi, Genie, MCI mail, Onyx Notes, and the Internet.
- Convincing editors that on-line interviews are a valid form of reporting.
- Difference between a serial and parallel plug.
- The four parameters that must be set in any telecom program.
- Ability to run page layout software.
- Bill Gates' real E-mail address.

-J.T. Johnson

Who to call

<< The Society of Professional Journalists offers workshops on just about everything. A short list for 1995 includes several opportunities to learn computer-assisted reporting; panels on new media; and advanced writing and editing workshops. (317) 653-3333. 
<< The National Institute for Advanced Reporting and SPJ sponsored the annual Conference on Computer-Assisted Journalism, March 17-19 in Indianapolis. Heavy hands-on computer training ranging from basic introductory courses to advanced statistical work with SPSS. (317) 214-2774.
<< Investigative Reporters & Editors offers a series of conferences around the country on computer-assisted reporting and other advanced skills, including the annual CARTek extravaganza. (314) 882-2042.
<< The Poynter Institute for Media Studies offers seminars in computer-assisted reporting, desktop publishing and design, advanced research techniques, and almost everything else you can imagine. (813) 821-9494.
<< The Society of Newspaper Design offers seminars on desktop publishing and design. (703) 620-1083.
<< The National Press Photographers Association offers several hands-on workshops on digital photography, electronic imaging, desktop and electronic publishing, and Photoshop. (919) 383-7246.

ital photo software is going to have a tough time in the '90s job market, Cole says.

"Whether you have a specific skill in Adobe Photoshop or AP Leaf Picture Desk or Apple PhotoFlash is icing on the cake," Cole says.

"Daily newspapers expect photographers to be able to scan and do preliminary corrections on all photos."

Perhaps it is appropriate that the last word be given to Nona Paul, who directs programs for new librarians and new research at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies. Paul has been one of the leading voices in favor of new skills such as computer-assisted reporting.

"I think you need computer-assisted reporting skills to be competitive in the job market. All other things being equal, if two applicants have pretty much the same portfolio, and one guy can look at data and the other can't, the guy who can look at data will have edge in getting that job," Paul says.

Perhaps more importantly, she says, your skills can tell a prospective employer how dedicated you are to your profession.

"Newspapers are also looking for people who have some sense of enthusiasm about their profession, and that means people who are heads up about computers," Paul says. "Anybody who has no knowledge of computers is clearly not someone who is staying current in our profession."

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