

To disk or not to disk— what are the questions?

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Relocated from Sheffield to London, and reduced from a planned week-end to a single Saturday, this STAG seminar had a condensed programme, considering information technology use for authors. This was thought necessary as authors were regarded as both bemused by new technology and exploited by publishers in the matter of presentation of their manuscripts on disk.

Randall McMullan, word-processing adviser to the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*, gave his personal preferences and recommendations. He saw most systems as designed by sales managers, heavy to operate, and unpopular with the writer at the keyboard, Windows being particularly so. He considered wordprocessing difficult to learn, but nevertheless decried tuition courses. For the future, he foresaw extended use of graphics, and more automatic checking which he apparently held to be a good thing. Admitting that most publishers use Apple Mac, he still thought this not suitable for individual users, 90% of whom now buy IBM-compatible machines; but problems of compatibility should be taken into account when making the selection, as well as price, performance, and maintenance. For printers, he recommended only ink jets or lasers, despite high running costs.

Ken Moore from Longman Group detailed what publishers want from authors in the way of manuscripts on disk. The wish-list comprises: an agreed form of disk; an early sample disk; exact corresponding hard copy along with it; details of hardware and software supplied; clear labelling and filenames; the authors to keep a back-up disk. Moore outlined the various options for coding files. The simplest course for the author is to supply typed text only, in ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) form. This option involves more work for the typesetter, and delay in reaching the printed page. Secondly, authors may undertake more work to provide ASCII tag markup. Thirdly, there may be stylesheet markup in wordprocessing by the author, which is easier to insert, redefine and manipulate, and especially suitable for desktop publishing. Standard Generalized Markup Language is pronounced more difficult for all, but good for multiple or electronic products; or, most work of all for the author, he can provide the text in its final page form, perhaps by the use of TEX -- particularly suitable for specialist texts. With all provisos observed, provision of manuscripts on disks should enable easier, quicker, and more promotable publishing.

Industrial training for writers

Dag Smith, Director of Book House Training Centre, admitted that the new government initiative for establishing training and qualification in publishing had hitherto overlooked authors, but, seeing them as an important part of the publishing industry, he hastened to offer workshops in the mechanics of publishing and use of information technology for them. Boundaries between the roles of editors, authors and designers were becoming blurred in the new dispensation caused by IT, and he saw a danger of exploitation of authors through their helplessness and ignorance of these matters.

'You are authors, not layout experts', Dag Smith pointed out. 'Therefore, write the text only; leave it to the publisher to manipulate it.' Authors' coding of their own disks can cause more work for the publishers, undoing unfamiliar muddles and introducing delay in publication.

From the recent Society of Authors' survey of publishers he

drew the statistics: 90% of publishers make some use of freelance editors; 85% accept authors' disks; only 5% edit on screen. Consequently, Smith saw the lack of training for freelancers in working on screen as dangerous. The expected benefits of presenting manuscripts on disk had not yet accrued, but might be achieved and difficulties resolved if editors and publishers communicated more with the authors, and if a code of practice was established.

Book House has now produced courses in computer use, and established National Vocational Qualifications at levels III and IV for editors.

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Maggie Gee, a writer of fiction, recounted her experience of repetitive strain injury incurred by typing too long and too fast on her word processor. She saw the use of this writing-machine as addictive: to her: the copy looks better on screen, and the increased speed enables writing at the rate of reading, feeling the form of the whole, thus causing the adrenalin to flow. The resultant writing-high had led her to type for as much as ten hours a day, and the limited range of movement involved caused her to have to rest her hands completely for weeks. There were also VDU dangers from eye-strain, static, and radiation, with a synergistic effect worsened by wearing artificial fibres. The whole question of health and safety at the VDU she saw as under-recognized, although forthcoming EC legislation will help, establishing minimum standards applying, though, only to employers.

The tactile power of the pen

Daniel Chandler emphasized that writers are of many different types, and accordingly they work with different strategies, values and preferences. He outlined the findings of his survey of the use of different writing tools by academic writers at the University College of Wales. The largest proportion of frequent word-processor users was in the sciences; the smallest in the arts, where pen and pencil use predominated. He divided writing into two phenomenological orientations: 'discoverers write to discover what they want to say, planning minimally and revising extensively; planners write primarily to record or communicate their ideas'. Values in writing may be pragmatic or expressive. Composing strategies fall into four. The oil painting strategy involves minimal pre-planning, jotting down ideas as they occur and reworking the text repeatedly; the architectural strategy involves conscious planning and organization with only limited drafting and reviewing; the bricklaying strategy involves polishing each sentence before proceeding to the next; the watercolour strategy attempts to produce a complete version rapidly at the first attempt.

Changing writing tools can be paralysing, he told us: no one has to use a word processor! He waxed lyrical about plying pen on paper: charging a surface with new meaning, the power of the pen relating to the sense of self, a tactile, intimate, traditional medium for tentative thoughts. The slowness of hand-writing may be valuable, allowing full, careful consideration. Using a speedy word processor, one may feel under pressure, yet lose the satisfaction of seeing the whole product until the later process of printing out, fragmenting the

process; and the evolution of the work is lost for ever when first drafts and subsequent versions are deleted from the screen: the word processor is a fluid medium.

The limitations (imposed by the screen) to seeing the progress of one's work are also felt as constraints by many writers. Chandler pointed out the active, tactile nature of the vocabulary of thought and writing; groping for ideas, grasping them, comprehending (from 'to seize'). The pen may be felt as an extension of the fingers, touching the text; the keyboard is not experienced in that way.

Discussion at this point confirmed that many creative writers prefer to compose their first draft in longhand and correct by hand on later paper print-outs. Using word processors in school for children to express themselves without the delay of hand-writing brought a danger that hand-script might never be resorted to or mastered by them. And with no preserved corrected drafts, goodbye to literary archives, criticism based on the demonstrable evolution of a work, original manuscripts and historical evidence of authorship!

Technologicaltroublesahead

Lister Redman described how he had published and promoted for himself the GCSE physics course he had worked out as a teacher, sending out a series of direct mail shots to schools and ending up well in profit: discounting the cost of capital desktop-publishing equipment, he made a four-to-one markup. Asked to quantify his happiness at the result, he settled on 'deliriously happy', but as to whether he would rely on such operations for his livelihood: certainly not. Publishers require a markup of five to seven to succeed.

Storm Dunlop, astrophysicist and author, explained the

several types of computer communications available online: bulletin boards; networks; gateways; and particularly enthused over electronic mail, which can help to overcome authorial isolation as well as providing access to vast reference information sources, world-wide, at any hour.

Finally, **Stephen Boyd Davis** considered multimedia. This is computer-delivered information integrating text, pictures, sound, and moving images and interactive, manipulable by the user. Hypertext in particular is a non-linear medium (writing imposes a false structure on a mass of ideas, we learned), worked more in accordance with the associative process of thought. He suggested that authors should consider these media as a market for writing skills, and explained what qualities were needed to write for them; in particular, concept development and graphics management. These are post-literate media. Their uses are predominantly for entertainment, education and consultancy.

To send all attenders of the seminar home thoroughly disheartened, having already learned of the dangers of repetitive strain injury and the possible imminent end of literacy in education, the final discussion made the points: that books and hand-writing alike may be threatened by new technical developments; that we are entering a period of three-minute culture; that the new technology is non-democratic; that laser printers give off carcinogenic ozone fumes; and that only the monitor should be switched off more than once a day since if the computer with the hard disk is switched on and off frequently, all its data may eventually become inaccessible.

-- by Hazel K. Bell in *MicroIndexer* 15, April 1992,,
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