

Getting the Lead Out

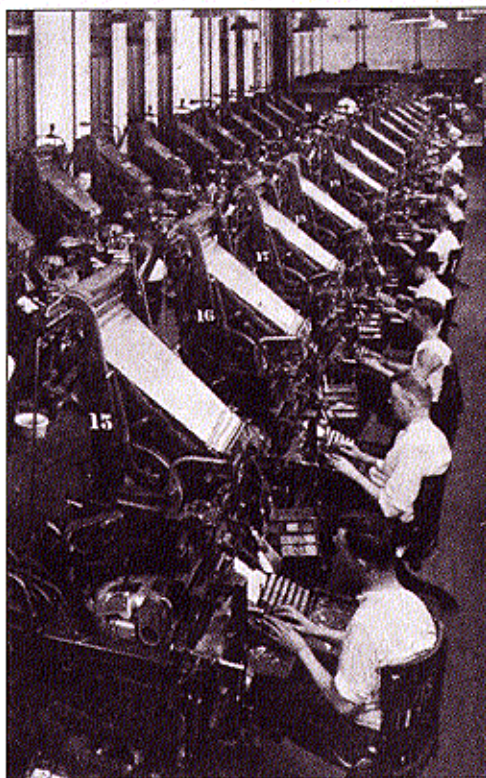
Stray words formed connections as I flipped through the recently published *Webster's New World Dictionary of Media and Communications*. First, I realized the *Wall Street Journal* has been a motherlode of newspaper jargon.

Author Richard Weiner attributes the word *walkup*—meaning a story published before an anticipated event—to the only paper in the world that's guaranteed to snub a *photo op* (attributed to the Nixon administration). Then there's *nut graf*, the informative kernel below a lead that contains the theme of a feature article. There's also the *to-be-sure graf*, which is self-explanatory (but which I'd personally define as the cover-your-ass graf). But just to be doubly sure, *WSJ* editors don't put a potentially troublesome story to bed until it has been *lawyered*, though that's hardly necessary with a *pantsfolder* (or "how-to" story, as in "How To Fold Your Pants in Luggage").

But the *WSJ* coinage that really led me into free association was *Roche box*, which is simply a refer box set in the middle of text. It's named after Kevin Roche, the *Journal* editor who devised the computer codes that allow the insert. That got me to thinking about Washington I. Ludlow and Ottmar Mergenthaler, heroes of an era of composition when inventors' names adorned contraptions instead of codes, and when *dingbats* and *flubdubs* were stored in dusty cases and didn't lurk beneath every reporter's supershift-shift keys.

It wasn't that long ago, actually, when a makeup editor who presumed to breathe too closely on a *live galley* might immediately find the type *pied* on the floor ("sorry, pally, it slipped"), ready for the *hellbox*. A copyboy's first trip to the composing room was his indoctrination into the fine crafts of wheedling and compromise. Those journalists who've never had to respond to the call of "by hand to makeup" are generally a more arrogant bunch, it seems to me, having never been taught humility by the *copy cutter*.

The composing room was a noisy place. The keyboards didn't click, they clacked. Matrices dropped from the magazine to the casting mechanism, levers were



pulled, plungers descended, cogs ground, metal arms creaked, cast lines dropped. The *Pictured Encyclopedia of the World's Greatest Newspaper* described the clatter of the *Chicago Tribune's* 64 linotypes in 1928 as "one of the opening movements in the 'Song of the Newspaper,' a symphony which reaches its full climax in the roaring crescendo from the mighty array of presses."

It's easy to over-romanticize at such a safe distance from the roar, however. It's no accident that many composers were deaf.

I imagine that the old-timers who saw linotypes first appearing a century ago bemoaned the death of handsetting. A visitor to the placid composing room of Horace Greeley's *Tribune* in 1855 wrote: "No sound is heard but the click of the type, or the voice, now and then, of the foreman, or the noise of the copy box rattling up the wooden pipe from the editor's room. . . ."

And the compositors who were steadily employed at the *Tribune* were probably just as sentimental about their days as tramp printers. There was a time, *Inland Printer* magazine wrote, "when a printer was not a printer until he had circumnavigated the globe, or at least traveled over the English-speaking part of it." Wherever the tramps traveled, swearing, fighting, and abusive language were violations of chapel rules. If you didn't believe what a man said, you'd civilly bang the lower end of your composing stick against the edge of the lower typecase. Violations of chapel rules were met with *solaces*—a fine or a lashing—but the threat of *solaces* for gambling and drinking didn't actually stop printers from *jeffing* for beer at *elevens* (meaning they played craps with 14-pt. em quadrants to determine who'd pay for the traditional 11 a.m. tool). And though I've never actually heard em quads bouncing onto a stone, or the sound of a wood stick hitting a typecase, that music is no less real to me than the squeak of a chase being locked.



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