

should lie in the structure of the union. Each side was unwilling to see its time-honoured beliefs and habits violated. Such is the complexity of this kind of negotiation that the breakdown of talks is not really surprising. More curious, in a way, is that they were taking place at all. What is it that is prompting such contrasted trade unions to take the radical and risky step of merging their identities and interests? One cause is falling membership. But the keenest spur has been organisational and technological change within the industry.

Not so long ago (and the past still lives on in some Fleet Street offices) a newspaper was produced by the cooperation of a series of distinct trades. You had the NGA pressman in charge of the thundering presses down in the basement. His assistant most likely belonged to NATSOPA (Machine Branch). The curved printing plates were cast in molten alloy by the vulcans of the foundry: the stereotypers. At the far end of the press, as the newspapers rolled off the cylinders, SOGAT members carted them off to the waiting vans. In the NGA composing chapel, upstairs, the *literati* of the crafts, the operators and stone hands set and imposed the lead type. NGA members also did the proof reading. NATSOPA untouchables had the job of sweeping up the filings. SLADE artists did the design work. Up in the office, members of NATSOPA (Clerical) took down adverts over the phone, typed the mail and kept the files. Other Natties made the tea. The journalists tapped their stories on manual typewriters and the editors took their red biros to them. (Either group may or may not have belonged to the NUJ.) The printing crafts were the archetypes of the pre-entry closed shop, separated from each other's sphere of interest by boldly drawn demarcation lines. The reward of all this self-organisation was of course labour scarcity, relatively high pay and, to their employers, a highly irritating control over the way work was done.

So long as the post war boom was expanding print markets, the press owners, publishers and print employers moaned about the way their hands were tied by their employees, but did little about it. As the recession has begun to corner them, however, they have been forced to turn and face their problem. The tools with which to dismantle the structure of craft control were by now ready to hand. Photo-composition, then computer technology, now digital composition, lasers, electronic scanning and transmission, cable, satellites — these are ideal for the purpose. With the help of its 'new technology', capital in the

### THE MEDIA AND NEW TECHNOLOGY

Not many weeks ago the amalgamation talks between the National Graphical Association (the print craft union) and the National Union of Journalists broke down. The impediment to unity was a divergence of view on the question of where power

printing industry, now increasingly taking the form of multinational corporations with far-reaching business interests, is swiftly reducing the old skills to anthropological curiosities.

In the press lords' ideal world the journalist will key her/his story direct into the computer memory, using a keyboard with video screen. The advert typist will do likewise. The editor will call the story up from the computer memory onto her/his own screen and over-type amendments. (The proof reader may well fall down a technological crack somewhere hereabouts and disappear from view.) Someone, a lonely surviving comp perhaps, will assemble the page by calling stories onto a large screen and 'massaging' them into shape. Instructions as to typesize, typeface, column width etc, can be made by depressing a few keys. In one deft move the whole page will then be converted by a digital typesetter into a printable image. Goodbye to the camera-person and the platemaker. They follow the stereotyper into the trash-can.

Perhaps the press-room remains unchanged, however? Not when ink-jet printing arrives, dispensing with cylinders

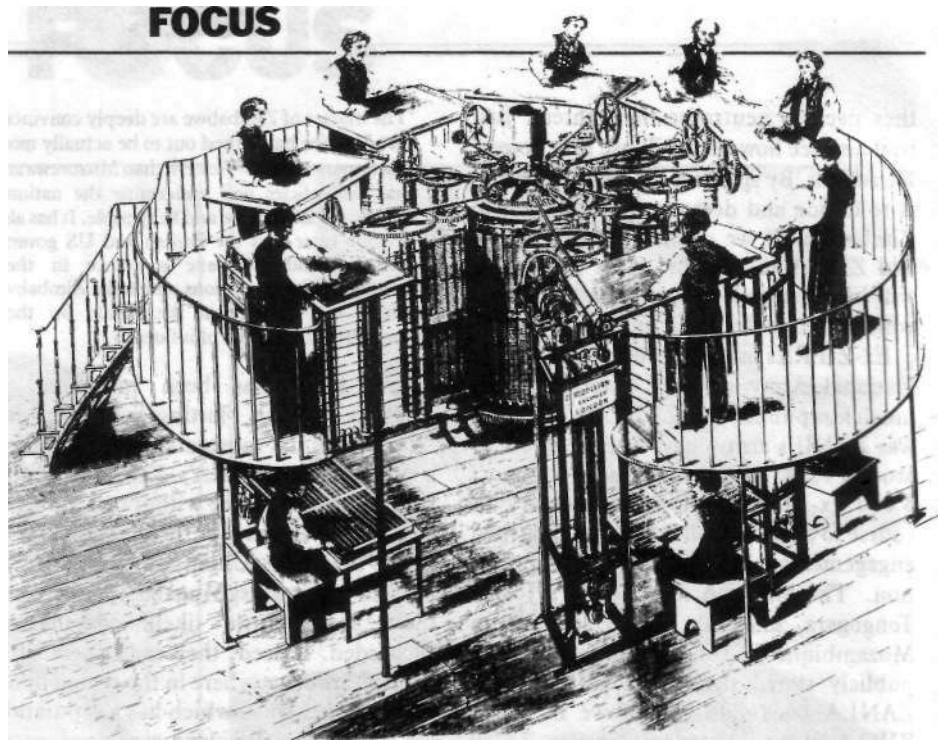


photo: The Times

An Applegarth Printing Press about 1862

and printing surfaces. And the SOGAT workers, hunking paper at the blunt end? Some, somewhere maybe. But many will be by-passed by facsimile transmission of the printing image to distant places by

telephone wire or airwave, so that paper itself need not travel so far by rail and road. So the old incumbents, like King, Queen and Jack in a pack of cards, are thrown to the winds. Some may land back in an

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adjacent niche, others will blow clean away. Meanwhile, some new characters are to be seen around the newspaper: the white-coated technician, computer programmer, electronics engineer. What union do they belong to?

It becomes of crucial importance to each union that the members of another do not steel a march during the shake-up, dispossessing rivals of work. When the employers use technology to hit at one group, another is more likely to lend support if they both march under a shared union banner. So the consolidation of capital and these powerful re-organisational technologies have been the cause of greater unity among the unions. In 1982 the massive SOGAT, itself a product of 35 amalgamations, joined up with the long-lived NATSOPA to form SOGAT-82. Likewise NGA-82 is the marriage of the NGA and SLADE. And then there were two. That, however, depends on where you draw the boundary of print. Soon the new enlarged NGA and the journalists began to talk about a merger. The journalists also cast glances the other way, towards the broadcasting unions. The movement is slow and painful, but it will not be many years before we see a Media Union of not far short of half a million members.

The trouble is, however, that within each of the new unions lurk the vestigial rivalries of old occupations. The creation of a consolidated union does not heal the mutual scorn of production and office workers. It does not magic away the ghettos of low-paid women's work, an extreme marginalisation of women. The endemic war between skilled and unskilled

is, if anything, exacerbated by the pairings of NGA/SLADE and SOGAT/NATSOPA. Professional elitism and individualism won't vanish overnight if the journalists merge with the printers. Nor is there any surety that production workers will give the same priority to cleansing the media of its class, racial and sexual obscenities as do the more progressive among the journalists. The most important guarantee of progress is that each painfully negotiated merger should produce a new union with a structure and practices that are more democratic and open to membership control than those it replaces.

*Cynthia Cockburn*