

Do Journalists Need Shorthand Anymore?

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This morning I was at a validation meeting for various journalism courses at the [London College of Communication](#) with a panel that included Observer journalist [Denis Campbell](#). Denis was an excellent sports correspondent before turning his attention to health matters, so he has seen different aspects of the trade. The question before the assembled journalism educators was “do you need to insist that ALL journalism students have good levels of shorthand?”

This is what Denis thinks:

The point I was trying to make about Avram Grant was that if he comes into the Chelsea press room at 10pm after a Champions League semi-final and talks for 10 minutes and the reporter has until 10.30pm to file 400 of Avram's choicest words — a typical scenario — then not having shorthand will leave him unable to provide the necessary copy by deadline. A tape recorder gets it exactly, but is laborious to transcribe. And one's fellow reporters who do have shorthand will be too busy writing furiously to share it with you, as they'll be up against their deadline too. So what will be journalist-without-shorthand do then?

It seems to me that in the integrated media age more reporters are going to have to file more copy more often for more outlets, at least from big events — sports tournaments, court cases, big running stories etc — as they'll be filing for their paper's website, as well as the paper product, and maybe their radio station etc (like some DTel staff do now). Time will be even more precious than it is now. So shorthand will be even more important. If journalism teaching colleges decide that even basic shorthand is no longer necessary, will sports editors and news editors in future feel confident in college-trained people to send them to big events where such filing requirements are standard? If I was that person's boss, I'd choose someone else who won't be faffing around. What if their tape recorder breaks down?

My partner the London College of Communication is renowned for preparing students for the rigours of real newsroom life. They come away from the Elephant and Castle with all the legal, governmental and practical editorial knowledge needed to work in local, national and international newsrooms. But in a world of new media where everything is digitised and where so much of journalism is about re-working material, do you need to devote 100 hours to teaching 80 words per minute of scribble?

I was taught [Teeline](#) on an NCTJ course in Harlow many years ago. It was the most painful exam I have ever taken. I used my shorthand regularly when I worked in local papers reporting courts and councils. I have used it occasionally since then. But as a TV producer and then editor, it was a handy skill rather than the vital tool of someone who covers trials or diplomatic press conferences.

But Denis argues that even in sports journalism it has become significant. Indeed, his case is that with New Media it has become even more important because it gives the ‘professional’ hack a market advantage. This week's [Press Gazette](#) has three cases where sports journalists are being sued and if they don't have proper notes based on shorthand then their case might be weakened. And as Denis said, if you are in a press conference and Avram Grant says something controversial (some chance) then shorthand may still be the best way to isolate the quote is and put it in the paper (or website).

I see his point. There can be no harm in having a skill that doesn't depend on a computer chip or a battery. But I

suspect that there are now many other forms of journalism apart from straight reporting: features, commentary, video etc So is it less necessary? Those of us who have shorthand like to think that it is vital, but is it any more important than an ability to type fast enough for [Twitter](#)?

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