

Look How Far We've Come: Changes in Court Reporting Technology

Have you ever wanted to be a fly on the wall? Two members of the Technology Evaluation Committee, Marybeth Everhart, RPR, CRI, and Bill Weber, RDR, CRR, had a conversation about how technology has changed in the profession of court reporting. Keep reading and get an insider's look at a first-hand account of how technology has evolved for the court reporting profession.

Weber: I guess if you want an article about how things have changed in the profession, you ought to get an old guy like me who has been around awhile to talk about it. I would speculate that Marybeth is here to make sure I get my facts straight and to give her own unique perspective.

So, just a brief bit of history. I actually dictated. I'm PC -- not politically correct, as anyone who knows me will tell you, but "Pre Computer." I know what a Stenorette and steno pads are, and I witnessed such great innovations as the **Steno Mark** red mark that would mark your paper notes on the edge of the pad, so you could go back and clean up an area by looking at the side of the notes for the mark. What an innovation that was! My, my, have things changed. And for the better!

Everhart: Ah, if only I could say I'm so much younger than Bill that I've never even heard of any of these inventions, let alone used them. But I, too, used a Stenorette, and my biggest concern was that I'd get tendonitis in my thumb from operating the microphone! And the Steno Mark was, indeed, a stupendous invention.

But how about some of the first CAT-ready writers? Mine weighed a ton and was huge. Imagine a steno machine with a side car! The big "wing" attached to the side of the old StenoLectric writer contained the electronics that wrote to a digital tape, which was then plopped into a tape reader on a Cimarron CAT system. What a beast it was, but it was quite high-tech at the time.

And the first CAT systems . . . remember those? I was a trainer for BaronData in the early 1980s, and I trained reporters on those mainframe computers that were the size of a dining room table, with dictionary disks the size of a large Domino's pizza! Even though it took hours to translate one job, we thought they were marvelous.

Weber: I guess that should help to remind us that the words "change" and "technology" are so intertwined that you can't divide the two. Surely, if we survived that, we can survive whatever comes our way. Where has the time gone?

In 1997, during the Oklahoma City Bombing trial, PubNetics first gained national exposure by providing e-transcripts. I immediately jumped on that trend when a friend of mine told me about it. I was a federal reporter and had to pay for all my own supplies, so I asked every attorney who ordered a transcript to take it in e-transcript. Now, there are several competing products that deliver transcripts in PDF format.

I can remember doing daily copy in Federal Court and all that time spent printing, binding, and delivering. All these changes are about saving time.

Everhart: How about your first realtime output? I remember that day — and probably my next 20 realtime hook-ups! Letting people see my realtime was so scary at the time; but how much more efficient we became — *and* integral to the proceedings. I agreed to do that first realtime job because my husband thought it was a good idea. What did he know? Of the approximately 35 reporters working for that freelance firm, I was the only one willing to connect my steno to someone else's computer.

And what a royal mess I thought I'd made of the first few jobs. There were times I thought I'd never be hired again. But apparently those glaring errors were all in my head — or on my screen — and no one else noticed.

The best part about writing realtime for me was that I was no longer an anonymous part of the process — a piece of furniture, if you will. I was being requested for depositions and being missed by counsel only if I was not available. Of course, cranking out transcripts at a much faster pace and making considerably more money didn't hurt any!

Weber: Oh, so you enjoyed that little bit of stardom. I like being more a part of the process, too. Just the other day, I was writing a realtime job for a client who always connects and says he can't live without a realtime connection. His opponent told me when working with us, he wants realtime every time. That's okay with me. But now a new person is looking at the realtime, and I'm a little nervous. My client came to the United States from Argentina and has a bit of an accent. He's reading a document, and I'm hearing him say, "donning." Of course, I can't see the document to see what the word is supposed to be.

On a break, the new client said to me, "Man, this is great. I don't know why I don't have all my reporters provide this." Then he said, "By the way, I only saw one mistake. The word 'donning' should be 'daunting.'"

Was I embarrassed? No, I knew there were more errors than that one. That's the only one he saw! We worry too much about looking bad.

Look at how realtime is delivered now compared to 10 years ago. Not only do we hook up attorneys and judges who are present, but other participants or observers of the proceedings can receive realtime feeds via the Internet through streaming technology. All of these technological changes make us more valuable. However, reversing that thought, if reporters aren't keeping up, they become less valuable.

Everhart: I agree completely! If we don't keep up, someone — or something — else will. Instead of viewing new technologies and developments as threats, I prefer to see them as challenges — more ways to add some spice to the daily grind. Writing realtime became a game, and each day I challenge myself to write better than the day before.

When I speak to students, I tell them quite honestly that I don't think there has ever been a better time to go into reporting — and I believe that. When you and I started, oh, those many years ago, our choices on graduation were becoming an official reporter or a freelance reporter, and that was it. Now, there are so many more opportunities that never would have existed had it not been for the development of realtime and the incorporation of so many amazing technologies into our profession. And who knows where we'll be 10 years from now —or even two years from today?

You mentioned making mistakes and clients viewing our errors. I guess I tend to be more of a “glass half-full” kind of person, because I see my mistakes as an opportunity to educate clients. I want them to know I'm not perfect — never have been and never will be. However, I do strive for perfection, and the more information they provide up front, the better they run their depositions, the better the end product. This is, after all, a team effort, and working together can yield some pretty amazing results.

Weber: Well said. I guess we ought to wrap this up. We really haven't even scratched the surface; there have been so many great changes. I'm like you, Marybeth. What new technology or device is out there that will make me better, more efficient, and more competitive?

Everything that comes along is not always a threat. Sometimes it's an advantage.