



Printers hot, cold on new type

ROLL OVER, GUTENBERG. You've been replaced by a computer.

At the University printshop the change was slow in coming. The state printing office in Salem had to be convinced it was necessary. Funds had to be allocated, and a new, climate-controlled room had to be built in the basement of Allen Hall where the University printshop has been housed since the journalism building was built in the 1950s.

But like all change, it was inevitable — and the new computer typesetters went on line last month.

To the journeymen composers and printers who work there, the change has been something to get used to, to think about and philosophize on. To Walter Parsons, the printshop superintendent, the change was necessary.

"You can't remain static," says Parsons, a quiet, easy-going professional who has been in the printing business since 1936.

When Parsons took over as superintendent eight years ago, all type was set on four mammoth Linotype machines that cast individual letters out of molten lead, hence the term "hot type" for this method of setting type. Computer typesetters, or "cold type" systems use a photographic process to set type for printing.

Speed was the overriding reason for the development of hot-lead typesetting. Instead of setting individual letters by hand to form a line of type, lead type casters were built early in the 20th Century to automate the process.

In the last 10 years, however, most major printing operations and newspapers switched to cold type and photo offset printing. With the speed of electricity, type

could be set almost as fast as it was typed.

But "speed is funny," says John Kulick, a 25-year veteran Linotype operator.

Kulick, who has set type for University publications since 1975, says computer typesetting technology currently is not always that much faster than its hot-lead counterpart.

"It still has to be keyboarded," Kulick says. He maintains that a standard typewriter keyboard — used on all computer typesetters — is "inefficient."

Keys were first positioned to keep letters most commonly typed together — like "th" or "ck" — apart so the keys wouldn't stick during fast typing on old-style manual typewriters, he says. Computer keyboards haven't changed.

Linotype keyboards are designed differently, Kulick says, and a skilled operator can type much more quickly.

Nonetheless, the new computer awes him. "There's no limit to it," he says. "It just depends on the software."

ANYONE WALKING PAST the windows on the west side of Allen Hall is treated to a look at history — and at Kulick, who spends much of his time bent over one of the Linotypes.

The machine he operates is something of a cross between a Sherman tank and a Swiss watch. Standing more than six feet high and taking up as much room as four refrigerators, the Linotype clatters and clanks out each line of type as Kulick operates the keyboard.

Long cast-iron rods revolving on greased bearings swoop up the length of the machine, nimbly grasp the molded letters and fit them into lines. A 20-pound bar of lead hangs over an iron melting pot that feeds

the letter molds. Cast lines of type rattle down slots where they are mechanically locked into forms.

About 10 feet away from the Linotypes, in a special, soundproofed and whitewashed room sit two computer terminals. The temperature hovers evenly between 60 and 70 degrees, and the lighting is soft neon.

GARY SMITH IS one of the typesetters in the University shop making the switch from hot to cold typesetting. The adjustment has been easy, he says.

"I'm not a nostalgia buff," Smith states frankly. "I've been looking forward to this for years."

Finding all the capabilities and eccentricities of the new system has been his prime concern for the past month.

"I do have a fondness for linotype," Smith says, but he doesn't waste much time looking back.

"It's like a favorite pair of shoes that have gone beyond their use. I buy a new pair, but I still like to put on the old ones."

"It's like being a skilled craftsman and then having a new tool to use."

But Kulick, who says he can remember his uncle buying a Model A Ford and recounts being excited about the landing of the Hindenberg, continues to operate the Linotype for the shop between cold type jobs. He seems to have no problem welcoming the inevitability of the computer age.

"In my lifetime I've seen fantastic changes," he says. "I like new things."

By Harry Esteve
Photos by Mark Pynes

