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Larry Wilson: A new take on an old profession

By Larry Wilson, Public Editor

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Blog



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The slow food movement began after the ridiculous appearance of a McDonald's at the foot of the Spanish Steps; its leaders served those in line free bowls of perfectly al dente penne instead.

"We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods," wrote Folco Portinari in 1989.

But slow journalism? Well, it's a movement, too, but a much newer one just beginning to drag its feet.

Some of the early faithful gathered Monday morning at the behest of Pasadenan Sasha Anawalt, director of the USC Annenberg/Getty Arts Journalism Program.

We talked, we rantted, we tried to save the craft

in a basement lecture hall, then retired to fine and no doubt slow-steamed mole tamales in an USC campus park at lunch.

Here's how the slojo notion came to former NYTimes.com reporter Naka Nathaniel, one of Sasha's panelists: He saw a newspaper photo of the 38 high-end cameras aimed at David Beckham arriving in America. All the fotogs were getting the same shot. What, Naka reasoned, if we pooled resources, shared shots from two cameras, and freed 36 journalists to go cover something that actually matters?

These are the kinds of questions the panelists were asking. They were also applying lessons learned elsewhere to a new approach we might make to reporting the news. The artist and craftsman who blogs brilliantly under the name Mr. Jalopy, who wrote the Maker's Bill of Rights, puts it this way to the companies (Disney, Apple) he consults for: "Stop thinking about your innovation stopping at the end of the assembly line. Work with your collaborators." For newsies, that means continue to use the technologies that are letting you, the customer, into formerly closed doors. Jalopy wants to demystify the material world, and to prepare for a simpler time in which we can tinker again. It all boils down to this: "Screws better than glues."

Opera director Peter Sellars wants to drop the journalistic pretense of objectivity when it comes to reporting on, for instance, mass starvation. He decried "the sterile video images from Darfur" from a reporter "who has made it back to the Intercontinental for a steak dinner just before

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the kitchen closed." Moderator Douglas McLennan called the slojo journalist one who would break down such walls "a disentangler of lies and weasel words."

Naka noted that one way to deal with such an overwhelming story is to post all notes and photos online and invite readers to edit. When he did that from Darfur, his work was turned both into a play and a moving fictional letter to the world from one of the starving Darfurians.

Let's shake it up. Do as young people in Estonia did: Google Map all the illegal waste dumps in a region, then get 10,000 people one weekend to remove them. "It is not really about the rubbish. It is about changing people's mind sets. Next year it might be something else," said an organizer. Now that's what I call a new, slow journalism that works.

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