FUTURE OF PRINT MEDIA JOURNAL

The Editorial Role: A Disillusionment In the Publishing Arts

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If at its onset the Enlightenment heralded the rise of a greater regard for public thought, firming up precision in editorial technique and ethics, the author suggests that today's lack of care in publishing may aptly be termed a Disillusionment. He argues that the rise of desktop publishing has contributed significantly to a rapid decline in respect for the overall publishing arts and a blurring of functions within the editorial role, probably more rapid in the past few decades than ever before. Being lost are several skills which traditionally have contributed to quality, and these operations are not being replaced in automation.

During the first half of the last century, increasing industrialization and a pub lishing ethic ensured not only a steady career path for those in the publishing arts, but also a commitment to attention to quality in the creation of the published word. Until the end of that period, the relative cost to publish was high enough, even for large companies, to justify care in production of almost every piece which was to be mass produced. By the present day, our responsibility to reproduce the written word faithfully has slackened; care has become lopsided toward the strictly visual, and even the visual has suffered.

Certainly, this was hardly a sudden event. Since the Renaissance, steady trends, often downward, can be seen in the value of each word published. Aldus Manutius's choices in design, with his wholesale use of italic and other techniques to economize, are at once both welcome and lamentable. Later, Enlightenment rationalism brought sometimes greater consistency and sometimes a loss. The encyclopedists stressed precision of meaning and wording; grammar was explored and clarified. The appearance of the broadsheet newspaper, which increased readership and awareness of current events, also brought with it mixed blessings in reporting and grammatical accuracy. The telegraph, for its part, contributed to the rise of the daily news, increasing both reader awareness and the inaccuracy. But if at its outset the Enlightenment heralded the rise of a greater regard for public thought, firming up precision in editorial technique and ethics, today's lack of care in publishing may aptly be termed a Disillusionment in many ways.

The editorial institution involves a broad range of skills and functions. The vast number

of categories under that heading, for any medium, has ranged anywhere from lowly proofreader to sovereign publisher-dictator. At the heart of the job rests the question of whether the product will find its audience and speak to that audience clearly. Thanks largely to the rise of desktop publishing, the job of typographer and designer are also now blurred into the general category of editorial work, since in many cases one person is doing these two jobs in the same blink of an eye as the strict editorial work.

None of these trends necessarily represents a bad development, especially if it promotes populism. But we have seen over the past 30 years a rapid fall in respect for the overall craft, probably more rapid than ever before. Being lost are several skills which traditionally have contributed to quality, and these operations are not being replaced in automation.

First to go, beginning even before desktop publishing, were typography and typesetting. In the great daily newspapers, the experienced Linotype operator was a skilled technician who not only knew how to cast a line, he more often than not had a fair grounding in newspaper design, printing science, syllabication and hyphenation, punctuation, English grammar, and even editorial paragraphy and proofreading.

In fact, even marginally literate keyboarders were generally known to be cognizant of many rules of good wordcraft. In the U.S. Government Printing Office's famous *Word Division* and other guides to hyphenation which for decades lay on the desks of most trade and newspaper typesetters, the word "service" is broken between the "v" and the "i." This rule is remembered among Linotype operators by the adage, "There is no *vice* in *service*." The reasoning behind this choice is logically based on the priority of hyphenation to present as much of the sense of the word before the break occurs, the idea being that a reader should, wherever pos-

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Throughout the 1980s and 1990s he continued with various projects in software and print design research and development while acting as a first-hand witness to the many changes in the graphic arts industry. He is a master typographer and lettering artist, is a respected commercial illustrator and graphic designer, and has contributed to numerous commercial and experimental projects in print and electronic media and the intersection of the two.

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sible, be able to divine at least the shape and pronunciation of the word, if not anticipate the word in full, even before seeing the second line. Today, because syllabication and hyphenation are sometimes confounded, most software hyphenators have lost this distinction and many other things which even mediocre compositors considered *de rigueur*.

Other rules of good typography, including such notions as a readable line length, line spacing, and even choice of typeface, were lost in desktop publishing and are usually not recalled in the editorial stage of a published work. In articles in various trade magazines which discuss the evolutions in their industries, this trend is probably the most universally and widely lamented loss.

The well-known loss of typesetting jobs, coinciding with the onset of desktop publishing, is being followed by an attrition in editorial jobs. Particularly proofreaders and newspaper copy editors are often the first to go. Periodicals which report on the book, magazine, and newspaper industries have for several years been complaining of a crisis in demand for good low-level editors. These unheralded heroes, particularly in the newspaper business, are not always lost by job cuts; in fact, most of the urgent articles, generally in the newspaper journals, indicate a crisis of insufficient supply. Managing editors want copy editors, but they cannot seem to find them. "You cannot get them for love or money," noted Ruth Diem, human resources director of Hearst Magazines, in an article in *Folio: The magazine of the magazine industry*. More often than not, turnover is simply too high, generally because of the low wages and gradually decreasing status of copy editing which, in the past, though naturally not the highest-status job, at least was respected in newspapers and magazines. Today, the slow and painstaking process of proofreading is often seen by those unskilled in the art as superfluous to digital spellchecking, putting further downward pressure on its perceived status in newspaper and magazine publishing, and to a lesser extent in book publishing. This, I am arguing, follows the decrease in status of typesetting as a craft.

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Occasionally, we hear the argument that orthographic spelling is peculiar to the English language, and that a rigid typographic precisionism and consistent spelling are a peculiarity beginning with the Enlightenment, spurred on by the rationalist encyclopedists and dictionary compilers. This is not disputed; what is questioned is whether it should be dismissed as a peculiarity and not viewed as a forward evolution in good publishing art. Nevertheless, today, attention to consistency in spelling is often ridiculed as being too fussy and, if we are in an extreme mood, even "undemocratic." Concern for proper punctuation is sometimes considered downright fascistic.

If good typography and good copy editing are losing ground, logically the next losses should be in design and general editing. This trend has already existed since the rise in quick printing, laser printing and xerography, and desktop publishing in general, but the idea of these professions slowly disappearing is not yet as overt.

What do these tendencies portend for digital publishing? What we are seeing on the Internet, as is already well known, is a general trend toward massification and granularization not only of readership but of writership and content publishing. That is, not only are writers becoming their own publishers, but every reader also has the potential to be a writer-publisher. The direction, then, first of all, is toward an article-based editorial process, rather than a volume-based one. This is a natural direction for the Internet, which is already blurring the tenuous distinction among newspaper, magazine, and book. With luck, the editorial role will continue to hinge on a supply-and-demand proposition. If readers are expected to bear the burden of poor writing and injudicious editing, it is hoped that intelligent editing will once again rise in importance, and readers on their own will gravitate toward work whose writers, they know, are masters of language.

However, given what we know about job displacement and industry priorities, a "free market" approach to the editorial role is not altogether likely. What we probably will see, at least, given the increasing "articulation" of media (that is, going from editorially grouped and bound material to individual chapters and articles in the Internet soup), is the movement of the intelligence of the editor job to the desktop or to an online service industry. True intelligent software-based editorial agents may or may not come into being, but it is certain that the work of journalization, the act of organizing editorial material for a given reader for a given topic, will increasingly be assumed at the reader's end rather than by a publisher, regardless of whether the reader does this by hand or is aided by automation. At the very outset we see the bookmarking capability in all Web browsers. What we must see is more servicing in the organization of these bookmarks, whether on the desktop or on the bookshelf, and more services related to a user's compiled bookmarks.

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Proofreading and higher-level editing processes are things which have long defied automation. Digital spelling and grammar checking correct only the most obvious errors and often introduce new ones; they may never be equal to human eyes and brain. Arranging material editorially into any larger logical units—sentences, paragraphs, and ultimately articles and volumes—is an even more complex process. At least for the time being, human eyes will need to examine all work before it can be guaranteed for other human eyes. Ultimately, whether automated or manual, it will always be more efficient, and more civil, to filter out problems and organize our thoughts before publication.

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This article can be found on the Future of Print Media website at:
http://www.futureprint.kent.edu/articles/zelchenko01.htm

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