



Whom Kneads Kopy Ediotrs?

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If a reporter accused military personnel at the decommissioned El Toro Marine Corps Air Station near Irvine, CA, of recklessly (or was it wrecklessly?) contaminating the soil, Mark Ludwig, my copy editing colleague at the *Los Angeles Times*, knew how to handle the situation. If a photographer spelled a local spelling bee champ's last name "Abecedarian," although the reporter spelled it "Abcedarian," Mark made calls, sent e-mails, and checked the phone book. He would excise the offending opinion word or correct the aberrant spelling. And those were some of the least significant things he did before shepherding the story from the rim to the slot. Then, he would grin at the rest of us rim rats and nod.

"There will always be a need for copy editors," he'd say. And we'd chuckle, confident about our indispensability to the newspaper—and to journalism and the English language. We were *The Times'* last line of defense, and we earned our generous pay by preventing lawsuits, saving reporters and columnists from embarrassment, making sure sources and readers were treated fairly, sending stories back to reporters and editors if there were holes, honing the words so the stories were accurate yet had flair, and crafting headlines like sparkling crowns on the heads and shoulders of well-researched, carefully written pieces. It was our calling, and we were proud to serve.

Today, Ludwig is an associate professor of journalism at California State University, Sacramento. Has the continual downsizing of editing staffs made him change his tune?

He writes in an e-mail,

It's true that I have often said, 'There will always be a need for copy editors' in the sense that because it would be embarrassing for a publi-

cation to eliminate that function, there would always be work for copy editors. It was once my fantasy that the newspaper be put out once without copy editing, but I never dreamed that would become standard. If you look at news copy today, either in print or online, I think you can see what I'm talking about.

Ludwig points out that The McClatchy and GateHouse media groups are among those consolidating copy desks. A story in the *Illinois Times* spells out some of these changes and more, including copy desk changes at newspapers owned by Cox, Gannett, the Tribune Company, and MediaNewsGroup. Steve Myers reports for Poynter.org that MediaNewsGroup's *The Denver Post* is abolishing copy editor positions. Editing tasks are to be spread among the remaining staff. Meanwhile, MediaNewsGroup's the *Contra Costa Times*, which oversees production of 10 Bay Area News Group newspapers, is reducing the time allotted for editing. *The Ottawa Citizen* and *Montreal Gazette* each are cutting about 20 editing jobs and are part of Canada's largest newspaper group, Postmedia Network. *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, N.C., and the *Charlotte Observer* are among those McClatchy newspapers sharing a publishing center in Charlotte. The remaining editorial staff at the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, a Gannett newspaper, reportedly received a memo saying that with fewer editors, everyone needs to be more alert about catching mistakes. Staff members were asked how they would feel about being coached by a high school English teacher about grammar mistakes, according to John E. McIntyre, night content production editor at the *Baltimore Sun* and a past president of the American Copy Editors Society. He reported this on his blog, "You Don't Say."

These are just some examples of the evolution or devolution of the copy editor's job. Many managers at newspapers and magazines seem to feel they need as many "feet on the street" as possible, and that in tough economic times and with the challenges of the 24/7 newsroom, copy editors are expendable. But can the journalism industry and the "discipline of verification" survive the shift to what journalism researcher Alfred Hermida says is a transformation from the "individualistic, top-down ideology of traditional journalism" to what he refers to as "ambient journalism." Hermida, in his article, "Tweets and Truth: Journalism as a Discipline of Collaborative Verification," describes "ambient journalism" as a practice shaped by "networked, digital systems where news is ubiquitous in the form of unstructured and fragmented data," and in which "services like Twitter question a news culture based on individual expert systems over knowledge-sharing."

Hermida writes, "The impact of social media on the definition of authority is not just affecting the profession of journalism, but also the fields of academic knowledge and medicine." Hermida adds that "... social media services such as Twitter provide platforms for collaborative verification, based on a system of media that privileges distributed over centralized expertise, and collective over individual intelligence."

We seem to be moving into an era of verification by the Borg, and resistance may be futile.

Hermida and others suggest the role of the journalist might be evolving from that of authenticator of news to that of curator of news, in which journalism becomes "less of a product presented to the audience as a definitive rendering of events than a tentative and iterative process where contested accounts are examined and evaluated in public in real-time."

John Paton, CEO of Digital First Media, which includes Digital First Ventures, MediaNewsGroup, and Journal Register Company, might seem to have engaged in "collaborative verification" with Hermida. Paton told the Canadian Journalism Foundation that his organizations

have accepted we are no longer the old-fashioned agenda-setters or gatekeepers of information for our communities. ... What we can do, however, under the power of our brands, which are still trusted, is to help organize relevant information out of the river of content now available in each community.

Some of his newspapers have set up Community Media Labs, in which the newsroom is open to

the public to blog, attend newsroom meetings, drink a cup of coffee, and make story suggestions. At his Torrington, CT, newspaper, for example, "[W]e have tried to embody the basic values of the Web—transparency, inclusiveness, and interactivity," Paton told the Canadian group. The *Torrington Register Citizen's* Open Newsroom Project blog describes how the newsroom is open to the public, and the company's "goal is to partner with our audience in everything we do."

Paton is optimistic about how the media can thrive and how essential it is to embrace the digital and social media worlds. "No social media connection. No news organization," Paton told the Canadian group. As Paton sees it, an audience that is nurtured by a media outlet will welcome that media as the hub of dependable information and social ties, ties that the audience and media produce together. Paton recommends the media add investigative reporting units because the media then can ask "questions that others are not asking," and in this way, the media will get their audience's attention and the audience will "demand answers" to the questions. Thus, the audience will be engaged, and the media eventually may find some solutions to becoming economically sustainable, according to Paton.

Yet, in a Digital First environment, will allowing errors to get on the Web because the audience and employees can correct them later encourage the audience to pitch in to make the corrections and work toward a common goal, or will errors discourage the audience and lead members to conclude "the brand" is full of sloppy editing, is untrustworthy, and thus, its advertisers must be untrustworthy, too?

Research, such as that by Fred Vultee of Wayne State University, "has shown that readers can distinguish between edited and unedited content and that the difference matters," writes journalism professor Andy Bechtel. Bechtel, who teaches in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina, also is a member of the Executive Committee of the American Copy Editors Society.

"There will always be a need for editing," Bechtel writes in an e-mail. "Readers of professionally produced news and information expect it to be of high quality. You see this in reader comments on news stories on occasion: 'Who edited this?' or 'Where are your editors?'"

As former copy editor Ludwig sees it, "Every sto-

ry needs at least one editor's eyes before being published, no matter the platform. A second set would be better. Publishers who allow unreviewed work to be posted risk their credibility, as well as lawsuits."

Yet these voices may go unheard in the rush to publish first and fast and to do so cheaply. In an opinion piece published in Postmedia Network's National Post, writer Yoni Goldstein discussed the outsourcing of copy editing and how "online news sites and blogs tend to be nearly completely unconcerned with the kinds of typos and grammatical errors that copy editors are paid to seek out and fix."

Nevertheless, this development is not something to lament, as Goldstein sees it. If the copy editor is ... unacknowledged within the newsroom and a relic online, it is because we as readers have evolved. We no longer sweat the small stuff of proper hyphenation and correct usage of semi-colons—it's the ideas and opinions that we're after. If a few words here and there are misspelled, so what? We're smart enough to know it hardly matters to the quality of the story or argument.

So let us say a quiet farewell to the simple copy

editor ...

Goldstein's piece, which no longer is available on the *National Post* site, drew a fair amount of reaction. Some said the piece must be satire. Many, though, made the point that copy editors aren't simple, and they are not going away quietly. And many people still think both the nuances of grammar and the pitfalls of libel matter. Mike Grundmann, another former Los Angeles Times copy editing colleague who teaches journalism at James Madison University, sums up well the copy editors' side: "Quality's expensive. Schlock is cheap. How much are you willing to pay? ... Through painful experience, publishers and editors have been forced to ask themselves, 'Get it first or get it right?' What are the consequences of each? Well-resourced staffs can do both, but we're not in that era."

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Please also see [On Editing and Editing Education](#)

