



Copy editors want to help tackle credibility

Our goals are the same and we have ideas to help

By JANET CLEAVELAND

Copy editors around the country are rolling with laughter about "Never Been Kissed," the film featuring a young copy editor who has her own office and a personal assistant. Notes posted on the American Copy Editors Society discussion board on the Internet were quick to point out Hollywood's heavy dose of unreality.

How ironic that this movie is showing as ASNE is deep into the results of its three-year credibility study.

But why would Hollywood show copy editors as they are? Most of us labor into the night in anonymity, happy to check facts and catch errors, fix grammar and make stories conform to conventions of style and usage. We take pride in crafting headlines.

Good copy editors hold these values close to their hearts and protect their papers' credibility. But exceptional copy editors find ways to extend their passion for good journalism into their newsrooms, to help find solutions to larger problems.

The ASNE credibility study focused the attention of ACES – and, by extension, all copy editors – on the public's perception that too many errors of fact, spelling, grammar and syntax get into newspapers.

ACES' initial response to the study – posted at www.copydesk.org/credibility/htm – is the work of this writer; Hank Glamann, news editor-administration at the Houston Chronicle; John McIntyre, copy desk chief at The (Baltimore) Sun; Melissa McCoy, foreign desk copy chief at the Los Angeles Times; and Gene Zipperlen, senior copy desk chief at the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. We hope you'll take time to visit.

As you might expect, common themes run through our observations.

At the basic level, copy editors need up-to-date reference books, Internet access and improved electronic library systems. We think that in-house seminars and handouts – put together by copy chiefs and other deskers -- can help to teach grammar and usage to reporters, photographers and graphic artists, and to improve the skills of copy editors.

We ask that copy-flow charts be drafted to even out the workload during a shift so the desk is ready for the legitimate crush of stories breaking as the clock nears the zero hour. Give us as much time as possible to digest the facts, to look for inconsistencies and misuse of language, to protect the paper from excesses and bad judgment, and to guard against the unintended messages that even a single word can suggest.

But ACES doesn't want to offer ideas that break no ground in getting at the issues raised by the credibility project. Our work is about the future and how copy desks can help make our papers stronger.

As you move to take the project to the next level at your paper, be sure to include representatives of your copy desks. We have ideas that can help you to meet this challenge.

Keep the pressure on for quality control at all levels, for excellence in writing and editing. Tap into the offbeat knowledge that copy editors and others accumulate over the years.

Help ACES to prepare for the future by cultivating potential copy editors with scholarships, internships and on-the-job training.

Help us to continue providing the professional enrichment that we offer at our national conferences and at regional gatherings, through our quarterly newsletter and other publications, and through our Web site. Support other organizations that provide similar resources.

Nothing gets done without an exchange of information and a commitment to be the best in the business.

When lively discussion permeates the culture of a newsroom, any journalist, regardless of job title, can raise any question about a story and expect to be listened to. Let's share good solutions to common problems, wherever we may find them.

It's fitting that ACES has been invited to write this column. Formed in the spring of 1997 with a boost from ASNE, we are now an organization of nearly 1,200 copy editors. Our mission is aligned with the goals of the ASNE credibility project, and we're ready to help.

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