



Journalism's Interior Linemen

(Note: Gene Foreman, a key thinker and active participant in the discussions that led up to the founding of ACES, made this speech at a copy editors' conference in 1996.)

By Gene Foreman

In the last two decades, a technological revolution has swept newsrooms, but it has done little to alter the professional status of the copy desk. These editors may work now with sleek computer terminals instead of paper, pens, pica poles and paste. Yet they continue to labor in anonymity, usually drawing attention only if they make a mistake. I call them Journalism's Interior Linemen, because they clear the path for Journalism's Running Backs: the columnists who get the photo sigs in the paper and the reporters and photographers who get the bylines and credit lines. Like their football counterparts, copy editors work without expectations of glory. Both groups derive their job satisfaction from the knowledge that they make it all possible.

Although the copy desk continues to have a low profile in the newsroom, it is much more important now in the newspaper company's larger scheme of things. (Not that the publisher has come around to hand out medals.) Today's copy editors still perform the traditional tasks of refining grammar, punctuation and spelling; tightening and straightening prose; and crafting headlines and captions with reader appeal. With their computers, they also have absorbed the functions of yesterday's legions of blue-collared compositors. If the technological revolution had not drastically reduced production labor costs, many newspapers would be unprofitable now.

It is hard to imagine the modern copy desk without the pervasive presence of computers. This is truly the Age of Computers. As a journalist who worked in the pre-computer age, I can assure you that the computer way is much, much better. But the new way is not without its drawbacks.

First, let's look at the ways the computer has improved newspapers, quite apart from the cost savings. The finished product is better. Photocomposition, a process facilitated by computers, results in higher-quality printing. Typographical errors, once rampant in many shops and almost impossible to eliminate in even the best papers, now are history. (Whatever errors get through now are editor's errors.) The newsroom controls nearly the entire production process, making it easier to enforce quality standards. At papers that are paginating, type is perfectly aligned and there is no such thing as a crooked rule. Finally, we are able to produce type and compose pages much faster than in hot-type days. Though many editors swear otherwise, we have been able to move deadlines back - and, by using savvy shortcuts, manage to publish late-breaking stories that in yesteryear would have had to wait a day.

But the pertinent point is that these miracles have come at a price. And the price is paid by the copy desk. Copy editors have to devote huge chunks of their time to punching composition codes into their computers. This diverts editors from their journalistic duties. As new generations of computers are developed, we in the newsroom must insist that vendors streamline composition commands so they intrude less in the editing process. Also, the constant manipulation of the keyboard poses a health problem for copy editors. Unless they practice change-of-pace exercises and take breaks from their computer stations, they are highly vulnerable to RSI. That's repetitive stress injury, an affliction of wrists, arms and shoulders that can be career-threatening if not checked.

Another development has complicated the lives of copy editors. That is the newspaper design technique that has increased the amount of display type - headlines, readouts, captions, lifted quotes and the like. This is a desirable development that makes our papers more appealing to busy readers. People are able to move through the paper quickly, sampling our wares and deciding whether to stop and read further. Desirable though this may be, the design technique has

increased the workload on copy desks.

The role of the copy editor in the newsroom remains an adversarial one. There's no getting round that; copy editing requires critical analysis of other people's work. It can lead to tension. Smart leaders try to defuse that tension and foster constructive relationships among groups of journalists. They correctly point out that a good copy editor is a reporter's best friend - someone who will head off mistakes, is a trusted sounding board for risk-taking writing, and burnishes the reporter's copy with headlines that invite the reader. Improving relationships between copy editors and the rest of the newsroom needs to be an important factor in our deliberations.

So, if the computer revolution has in some ways made the copy editor's task more difficult, and if we have increased the volume of display type we expect the copy editor to write, and if little has been done to improve the status of copy editors in the newsroom culture...is it any wonder that we have a malaise on the copy desk?

I would like to sketch for you what I consider to be the reasons for that malaise.

Based on my observation of the industry as a whole, the biggest underlying problem is the reluctance of many top editors to invest in adequate staffing on the copy desks. These editors perceive that they will get a bigger return on their budget dollars by putting more reporters in the field. While it is hard to fault their zeal for covering the news, the fact is that we publish the equivalent of a full-sized book in the space of a few hours each night. To edit with care, to perform the painstaking proofing and re-checking from edition to edition, requires a lot of bodies. The staffing shortage is exacerbated at newspapers where the editors did not have the foresight - or the clout with management - to expand copy desks when they took over the composing room's functions. But let's be realistic; these are tight economic times for newspapers, and we aren't going to be expanding our staffs anytime soon. So we are not going to right the wrongs of staff allocations overnight. We should ask top editors to acknowledge that they are wrong and, at least on a proportionate basis, to start doing something about it.

A second reason for the malaise is that, sad to say, copy editors don't get respect at many papers. They aren't taken seriously by the reporters and the reporters' editors;

their questions about content and tone are brushed off. These indignities are heaped on a job that is already anonymous in nature and generally unappreciated. Again, it is up to top editors to set the tone. They have to insist that copy editing be vigorous and assertive; that the copy desk is an equal partner with the reporting staff in charting the newsroom's course; and that copy editors are always included in study committees and training groups.

A third problem is the way that many newsrooms are organized. The leaders of copy editors frequently are assigned other duties - most commonly, laying out pages and supervising production. When these responsibilities are placed on the copy chief, supervision of copy editing inevitably suffers. Pages have to be laid out, or the paper doesn't come out. Reading back on stories and coaching copy editors are low priorities. Another organizational mistake, I think, is putting copy editors under the supervision of an editor responsible for assigning news coverage. Experience has shown that such editors tend to identify with their reporters and to show more concern for their welfare than the welfare of the copy editors. It's better to have copy editors in their own chain of command, with their own leaders to champion their cause and a degree of independence in editing the work of their assigning-desk counterparts.

A fourth source of the copy desk malaise - and I continue to speak in generalities - is ineffective leadership on the copy desks. There is a tendency for their bosses to promote the best copy editors from the rim to the slot, reasoning that because the slot is a gatekeeper in the flow of copy into the paper, they should have the best wordsmith there to keep mistakes out. Wrong. These are leadership positions. We should be looking for people who are skilled in managing the work of others, people who are caring about the professional needs of their colleagues. Of course, the best copy editor may not possess the best leadership skills, any more than the best reporter will automatically make the best city editor. We should recognize that the skills of rim and slot are different and put leadership qualities first, as long as the candidate has strong professional credentials. And because copy editors work in one place all day, in close quarters and under constant deadline pressure, they even more than reporters require sensitive leadership.

My overview of the copy desk in 1995 would not be complete without telling you that copy editors themselves can do much to raise the level of professionalism on

their desks. Even on the best newspapers, there are far too many grammatical and style errors. I'll grant that some of these are the result of overwork and a scarcity of time, but more often they stem from a failure to grasp the fundamentals of the written language. I consider it inexcusable when these shortcomings are dismissed as unimportant. My mail attests to the fact that the readers do not consider them unimportant. Knowledge of English mechanics, and of a newspaper's stylebook, ought to be givens on the copy desk. Frankly, what I find remarkable is that a concern about language details - among professionals who earn their living with the language - should itself be considered remarkable. In what other professions is precision assigned so little value?

We will be looking this weekend at ways we might improve on the copy desk. We are looking for innovations that really work. They have to result both in happier copy editors and better newspapers.

There are other reforms that need to be made: A proportionately larger allocation of resources to the copy desk. Better adherence to deadlines by reporters and assigning editors, so copy editors have time to edit. More conscientious hiring procedures for copy editors, giving candidates job tests and on-the-job tryouts. Scrupulous standards for internal transfers so the copy desk gets qualified and motivated journalists, not rejects.

I caution that lasting improvements are not likely to come from ideas that disperse the copy desk's already insufficient staff throughout the newsroom. Welcoming copy editors into the camaraderie of reporting teams is a well-intentioned idea. However, if it means that less editing is done, or that the editing is done by journalists who lack the specialized language skills of copy editors, I doubt if the newspaper is going to be better off.

We should take heart from the realization that most top editors really want to solve what they term "the copy desk problem." They know they ought to be doing better by their copy editors.

I think that any proposal, to succeed, must address the key issues of improving professional respect among copy editors' peers in the newsroom. I look to you, as copy editors, for methods of recognition that you would find gratifying and not patronizing.

Gene Foreman was the 1996-97 chair of the ASNE Human Resources Committee when he gave this speech to a copy editors' conference at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1996.

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