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Editing: The Value of Quality Content in an Online-First Industry

By Meg Giddings

Introduction & Problem

There's no doubt the journalism industry is currently in a state of flux. Traditional print newspapers are losing readership and dropping revenue, and the future appears to point toward online content. It is at this point that the industry must adapt or continue to struggle into decline. As part of that adaptation, traditional techniques may have to be abandoned in order to welcome new ones. But what techniques shouldn't be forgotten? What aspects of the process from reporting to publishing are crucial to the production of good journalism? Clearly the reporting cannot be forsaken, and the writing itself is the spine of the process, but what about the editing phase? Does it remain a vital component of producing a story, or is it more superfluous and able to be eliminated for the sake of saving time and money?

This paper aims to examine the current state of editing within the journalism industry. Research questions to be asked include: What does editing entail, and what are the different types of editors? What is good editing, and what does it take to become a good editor? How is the advent of copy editing software impacting traditional forms of editing? How is the push for speed in getting content online affecting accuracy and the editing process? How are budgetary restrictions on news organizations impacting editors and the quality of content? Can reporters be expected to self-edit, and how effective is this technique? And, perhaps most importantly, does editing matter? Do average readers notice the quality of content, and does it affect their decision of what content they choose to read? Should news organizations consider further eliminating aspects of the editing process, or should they be prioritizing training future editors with the appropriate skills? These questions are critical to an assessment of the role of editors in a shifting

industry, and their answers will demonstrate how editing is regarded and valued among professionals and from the perspective of news consumers.

Data

Before an examination of the changing role of editing in the field of journalism is possible, it's necessary to clarify what editing is and what editors do. In the typical (traditional) newsroom, there is a hierarchy of editors, usually starting at the top with the editor-in-chief, followed by the managing editors, some assignment editors and then the copy editors. Depending on the size of the organization, each of these editors may be involved with actual stories in varying degrees. Editor-in-chief duties tend to deal more with the overall task of running a paper or a website, like hiring and budgeting. Unless the organization is very small, they will rarely spend any time editing stories. Managing editors deal more with "day-to-day operations" to ensure content is published. In smaller organizations, they may take a look at stories, but usually they work with assignment editors to ensure the appropriate coverage is being allocated to reporters. Assignment editors are those that work the most directly with reporters. They usually each have their own section to be responsible for producing content for, and they make sure reporters are covering what needs to be covered within that section. They also take the first look at reporters' stories and edit them for content, structure and objectivity. This is referred to as "macro editing," and this is the time when leads are reworked and writing style is perfected. It's up to assignment editors to make sure stories are understandable, newsworthy and well-written. Then, it's the copy editor's turn. A copy editor's job deals more with "micro editing" for style, grammar, punctuation and spelling (Rogers, 2016). Of course, all of these job duties can overlap. The ultimate goal is to make sure the copy is the best that it can be by the time it's published, and various types of editors work together to achieve this goal. Although managing editors and

editors-in-chief are crucial to the running of a news organization, this paper intends to focus on those editors (assignment and copy) who work, in some form, directly with written content.

Although the definition of editing as a practice is relatively clear, it can be much more difficult to define “good” editing. While making a story better is the whole intention of editing, that isn’t always necessarily the case. It takes a good editor to read a story and know how it could be improved. So, what makes an editor “good”? Anna Yeadell-Moore, an associate editor at *Novel Gazing*, says that good editors are self-disciplined, and they should act as guides while maintaining the writer’s style and voice. She denotes five essential qualities in a good editor:

“A good editor,” she says, “(1) does not have an ego, (2) will be brutally honest with you, and will treat you and your work with respect, (3) has an obsessive eye for detail and is sensitive to inconsistencies, (4) will make sure that every sentence counts and is structurally sound, (5) can explain, in detail, the reason why every change is made” (Yeadell-Moore, 2013).

In June 2014, *The New York Times Insider* asked its staff, “What makes a great editor?” In a three-part series, columnists and reporters expressed their view of what a good editor should be able to do. Business columnist and reporter Gretchen Morgenson says, “The best editor is the person who can take a modest story and make it big, broad and powerful.” Reporter Amy Chozick says,

A strong editor can read 3,000 words and immediately home in on the one salacious detail buried in paragraph 17 that readers will remember and talk about months after the story runs. We will move that detail higher up in the story, or make it the lead. And sure enough, Twitter goes crazy over that detail.

Reporter Amy Harmon says, “Great editors have the courage of their convictions, even when their reporters’ courage wavers. A great editor can convince you, in the face of the

overwhelming evidence you supply to the contrary, that the story matters.” And op-ed columnist Tim Egan says,

Every writer needs an editor, and anyone who says he doesn't has a fool for a muse. A great editor is honest — no saying one thing and meaning the other. A great editor has a deft touch, the ability to hack and slice and make it seem like minor surgery. They channel your voice, rather than grafting theirs onto your piece. But whether it's a book editor or a newspaper one, the greatest share this quality: They ask the right question. Genius starts with, “What if...?” (Insider Staff, 2014).

Clearly, there are a variety of characteristics that make up a good assignment editor, and these can differ depending on the type of content being produced. However, being a good copy editor is relatively more straightforward. Traditionally, there are very specific skills required of copy editors in a newsroom. First and foremost, they must have a comprehensive grasp of grammar and punctuation, as these, along with typos, are the mistakes that readers notice first (Stockton, 2014). Additionally, most news organizations require copy editors to have a working knowledge of the organization's preferred style. The Associated Press Stylebook and the Chicago Manual of Style are a couple of the most common styles adopted by publications. Depending on the news organization, copy editors may also be expected to have the skills to write headlines and compose social media posts (Finn, n.d.). As organizations consolidate their staff as a result of declining revenue, job duties shift, and often, new job titles are even conceived to reflect this. At the Los Angeles Times, copy editors have been “rechristened” as “multiplatform editors,” suggesting they have a greater array of responsibilities. Henry Fuhrmann, a former assistant managing editor who oversaw the copy desk at the LA Times for nearly seven years, said that as the organization has downsized, copy editors haven't fared well (Fuhrmann, phone interview conducted Nov. 29, 2016).

A 2013 Poynter article by Andrew Beaujon discusses the disproportionate hit copy editors have taken in newsrooms across the country. Beaujon references the American Society of News Editors' annual survey of newsrooms, in which journalism jobs are tallied by category (Beaujon, 2013). The survey, officially titled the "ASNE Newsroom Employment Diversity Survey" (formerly the "Newsroom Employment Census"), intends to measure the percentage of minorities working in newsrooms in the United States compared to the percentage of minorities in the overall U.S. population, but it also provides authoritative national journalism employment data. Based on the survey, the number of copy editor positions dropped by 47 percent from 2002 to 2012. To compare, reporting positions fell 26 percent in the same period and supervisory positions 24 percent, with journalism jobs on the whole dropping 26 percent. From 2012 to 2015, copy editor positions have dropped a further 28 percent, leaving them at less than half of what they were at the start of the millennium (ASNE, 2016).

Fuhrmann said this trend is certainly evident at the LA Times, where the copy desk peaked at 120 employees in the early 2000s. By the time Fuhrmann took over the desk in 2009, he said it was down to about 75. Now, in 2016, in the aftermath of a recent buyout, there are 44 people on the multiplatform/copy desk, according to the LA Times staff directory. That's a 63 percent decrease over 15 years. And yet, while the staff has shrunk, the work certainly hasn't been diminished. If anything, it's increased, according to Fuhrmann. He said that with the pressure to produce hundreds of stories a day for the web, that constitutes a significant amount of labor, substantially more than may have been required back in the print-only days. Editors are harder worked and more stressed, he said, and while the reduction in copy staff hasn't resulted in any huge errors, or "big picture things" not getting caught, there are essentially less people doing quality control (Fuhrmann). Many newsrooms have seen cuts similar to the LA Times, and some have even eliminated the copy desk altogether, including the Denver Post, the Salt Lake Tribune,

the Baltimore Sun, the Cincinnati Enquirer, and the Contra Costa Times (now the East Bay Times). One of Canada's largest newspaper publishing companies, Postmedia Network Canada Corp., cut copy editors at the Vancouver Sun, the Star Phoenix and the Leader-Post (Harlow, 2012).

The trend of eliminating copy editors is evident in the number of available articles online offering "self-editing tips for reporters without copy editors." Jessica Eggert of American Journalism Review compiled some advice by asking copy editors what tips they would give to reporters who are expected to post their content online quickly and without an editor. "Two major themes we heard are the need for reporters to educate themselves on the rules of editing and to explore ways to gain distance from their own words in order to spot mistakes and faulty language," Eggert says. More specifically, she outlines these suggestions for reporters:

- 1) Think about the readers and how annoyed they will be by errors.
- 2) Take an editing class. Now.
- 3) When on deadline, edit the most important stuff first.
- 4) Step away from your work, then come back to it.
- 5) Learn to read your own work 'objectively.'
- 6) Get someone, anyone, to read your article.
- 7) Being right is better than being first (Eggert, 2015).

Leighton Walter Kille of Journalist's Resource offers an even more in-depth set of guidelines for reporters who have to edit their own copy, with No. 1 being "Verify all factual assertions in your article." Kille suggests that "putting on an editor's hat" after writing a piece can help a reporter see their own copy differently. "Separating the copyediting process from reporting and writing ensures that time is dedicated to each one," he says (Kille, 2015). Fuhrmann said he's given lectures on how reporters can improve their own self-editing skills, because it is more and more

likely that nowadays they will find themselves “working without a net” — without the “luxury” of an editor. “If we can teach all journalists to be their own first best editors... then I think that would be a service any journalism school could provide to its students,” he said (Fuhrmann).

For smaller news organizations, it’s just not feasible to employ copy editors. Instead, reporters and other editors absorb the would-be duties of a copy editor into their responsibilities. Kellyn Brown, editor-in-chief of the Flathead Beacon, said he or a part-time contributing editor will look over a story, editing for content and organization as well as grammar and style. Stories that are going in the print edition will get several reads, both by editors and fellow writers. They even get printed out and line-edited. “Quick” stories that are just going online, however, only see one round of editing (Brown, phone interview conducted Oct. 25, 2016). This is representative of a national trend toward online content receiving far less editing attention than conventional print content, in order to get stories up and online quickly. While the Los Angeles Times still circulates a print newspaper, it doesn’t get as much attention as it used to, Fuhrmann said. With so much more online content to deal with, all resources are stretched thinner, so everything print and digital gets a little less attention. “You’ll see some of the seams showing,” Fuhrmann said. “On a day-to-day assessment, you might see less errors being caught than you would have in a different era” (Fuhrmann).

The shifting focus to online content is affecting more than just traditional print newspaper companies. While radio organizations have a somewhat different editing process, they are still feeling the pressure of a web-first publication model. Montana Public Radio now publishes its audio pieces online, often in advance of airing on the radio, and all of these pieces are accompanied by a written version of the story. Providing online copy is an additional task that MTPR has had to integrate into its publication process, but with no additional staff. MTPR news director Eric Whitney said having to put out a web product in addition to a radio product puts

“more pressure on already limited resources.” Web stories are written from the radio script, which is developed “for the ear,” so they must be altered to make sense visually, which means checking for grammar and style conventions, something Whitney has had to absorb into his role as an editor and director. Whitney said MTPR focuses on producing great radio content, but they have to maintain their web presence in order to stay relevant and reach as much of their audience as possible (Whitney, phone interview conducted Oct. 25, 2016).

An innovative option for such organizations — those that don’t have the resources to employ copy editors — could possibly be the implementation of copy editing software. A 2014 article by Michael King in *American Journalism Review* discusses the advent of “automated copy editors” and their impact on the journalism industry’s “human ones.” Copy editing software, like Grammarly, PerfectIt, Tansa, StyleGuard and Lingofy, uses algorithms to catch grammar mistakes. As paying for a Grammarly subscription (\$30 a month) is cheaper than paying a full-time copy editor (or several), it’s clearly tempting for news organizations to take advantage of this technological development. However, software like this cannot (yet) catch errors of a factual or stylistic nature. King suggests the possibility of editing software being used as an accompanying tool for human copy editors, much like a dictionary or a style guide, rather than replacing them all together. In fact, incorporating this type of software might lighten the work load, catching basic grammar errors and freeing up editors to “focus on bigger-picture issues” (King, 2014).

Currently, a more popular option for many organizations seems to be outsourcing. A 2008 article in the *Columbia Journalism Review* discusses the emergent prospect of outsourcing editorial tasks all the way to India, but this doesn’t seem to be the standard practice quite yet (Frumin, 2008). Rather, most newspapers are outsourcing to a parent company. The Hartford Courant in Connecticut began outsourcing its copy editing in 2011 to Tribune Co. in Chicago.

That same year, Media General “consolidated” copy editing for the Tampa Tribune, the Richmond-Times Dispatch, and the Winston-Salem Journal, among 23 other dailies, to two “editing hubs” in Tampa, Florida, and Richmond, Virginia (Channick, 2011). The Oregonian announced in July of 2016 that it will be outsourcing copy editing and some design to a sister publication in New Orleans (Jaquiss, 2016). The Toronto Star, Canada’s largest newspaper, shifted editorial responsibilities in 2013 to Pagemasters, a subsidiary of The Canadian Press, also owned by the Star’s parent company, Torstar (Freeman, 2013). Pagemasters’ website states that it offers “a complete range of editorial production services, from copy editing and headline writing to design and layout of features, supplements, customized news pages and ‘common’ pages similar across most papers such as national and world news pages.” The website also says, “Pages can be delivered to your newspaper’s specifications and high quality standards at a fraction of your current production costs” (Pagemasters North America).

Fuhrmann said he knows many advocates for outsourcing and acknowledges the use of these copy editing “hubs,” but he isn’t sold on the idea. “I’m in the camp that you can’t do that without recognizing some form of declining quality,” he said. Outsourced editors just can’t contribute the same level of knowledge and experience to a story as someone who lives and works in the area where it was written and will ultimately be distributed, Fuhrmann said (Fuhrmann). In an American Press Institute article from July 2016, Natalie Stroud examines a recent study on the effects of outsourcing on editing errors. The investigation was conducted by Justin Martin, an assistant professor of journalism at Northwestern University in Qatar, and one of his students. It reviewed five newspapers (the Hartford Courant, the Raleigh News & Observer, the Winston-Salem Journal, the Newport News Daily Press and the Toronto Star), comparing the number of corrections issued by the papers one year before they instituted out-of-house copy editing and one year after. The results were mixed — there was “considerable

variability” in the number of corrections, some increasing, some decreasing, and some staying about the same after the transition to outsourced editing. Although this study clearly has its limitations, especially in the number of newspapers examined, it appears to suggest that outsourcing doesn’t conclusively impair editing quality. At the same time, it doesn’t intimate that it is any more effective than in-house editing (Stroud, 2016).

Outsourced or not, the question of the importance of editing at all remains. Alex Birkett of ConversionXL, a conversion optimization consulting and marketing company, discusses some of the research on how grammatical errors can impact credibility and perhaps subsequently sales revenue. Birkett outlines four types of credibility that a website can provide, as established by behavior scientist B.J. Fogg: presumed credibility, reputed credibility, surface credibility and earned credibility. Typos and grammar errors fall under the category of earned credibility, as they are a facet of a user’s personal experience with a site. These types of errors can be glaringly obvious and immediately put off readers, or they can be more subtle and gradually undermine credibility. Further, Birkett mentions a few other studies of the impact of grammar on first impressions. A study by Grammarly reviewed the LinkedIn profiles of native English speakers in the consumer packaged goods industry, finding that fewer grammar errors correlated with more promotions and frequent job changes, and those who had fewer grammar errors in their profiles overall achieved higher positions in the industry. In a study of 1,700 online dates, marketing company Colour Works found that “43 percent of users consider bad grammar decidedly unattractive and 35 percent think good grammar is appealing.” Digital communications agency Disruptive Communications surveyed over a thousand web users in the United Kingdom and found that 42.5 percent of them cited poor spelling or grammar as most likely to damage their opinion of a brand on social media. Birkett acknowledges that grammar is only one factor of

credibility, and the research is somewhat limited, but these existing investigations do seem to suggest that grammar can negatively influence credibility (Birkett, n.d.).

Fred Vultee, an associate professor at Wayne State University, conducted his own research in regard to the influence of editing on readers. In 2015, he published the results of an experiment assessing “audience perceptions of editing quality,” supported by a research grant from the American Copy Editors Society. Vultee found eight articles that were each published by various news organizations that “were not edited well.” He copy-edited the articles himself, based on his 25 years of experience as a newspaper editor. He fixed errors in style, grammar, word usage and overall organization. Vultee then conducted a study with 119 students in which they were each presented with four edited articles and four un-edited articles and then asked to rate each on four different scales: professionalism, organization, writing and value. Study participants did not rate any of the articles particularly highly in any of the dimensions, but there was a clear difference in the ratings between the un-edited and edited versions. Study participants rated the edited stories higher in all categories, with the category of value being particularly significant, as this suggests that participants are more willing to pay for edited content than for non-edited content (Vultee, 2015). According to Natalie Stroud in an American Press Institute summary of the study, it is noteworthy that “digitally savvy young people picked up on editing differences and reacted negatively to unedited content.” She says “this research confirms the importance of copy-editing” for news organizations. “As newsroom job titles and duties have shifted in response to increasingly digital audiences, attention to the basics of news editing continues to play a valuable role” (Stroud, 2015).

While the research seems to suggest that editing remains a valuable component of content production, editing jobs continue to be outsourced, consolidated or eliminated. These changes appear to indicate a general devaluing of editors. In a 2016 Poynter article, Alison MacAdam

claims, “Journalism has an editing crisis, but we can do something about it.” MacAdam talks about her aspirations of being an editor early in her career and getting a less-than-enthusiastic response from her superiors. She says many organizations have “taken editors for granted” and thus not cultivated editing skills for the upcoming generation, creating a shortage of skilled editors, i.e. the “crisis.” MacAdam calls this the “most significant challenge facing newsrooms right now.” She says, “We now create far more content than any reasonable human being could ever read, and journalism has to work harder to get noticed.” Her perspective is that editing helps make stories more noticeable, more relevant, and editing is “a craft in itself” rather than something reporters should be expected to know how to do once they’ve accumulated the appropriate amount of experience. She discusses how editing requires more skills than simply reporting experience. It requires instinct and the ability to maintain perspective while still sympathizing with a reporter’s struggles. “Too often we have created systems in which editors bear huge responsibility but receive little institutional support, feedback, or rewards; they are critically needed but perennially ignored,” MacAdam says. She advocates developing pathways within news organizations to cultivate future editors, including investing in training programs and finding ways to “celebrate editors.” She encourages current editors to devote more focus to finding and developing the “the editors of the future,” as, she says, “The quality of journalism in the 21st century depends on them” (MacAdam, 2016).

While training programs for editors are not abundant, they do exist. The American Copy Editors Society, a non-profit organization that aims to promote and support copy editors in the industry, provides regional workshops for editing training as well as “Editing Boot Camps” and an annual three-day national conference. In 2016, ACES partnered with the Poynter Institute to offer “an advanced online training program for editors and writers seeking to hone their skills” — The Poynter-ACES Advanced Editing Certificate Training Package (ACES Staff, 2016).

Though not as recent, Fuhrmann was a member of the first class of Times Mirror's Minority Editorial Training Program. Referred to as METPRO, the program was started in the mid-1980s to recruit young people from diverse backgrounds to train and work among Times Mirror's constituent newspapers. Fuhrmann participated in the copy editing arm of METPRO, which ended in 2007 and merged with the program's reporting arm. Fuhrmann said METPRO has left a legacy of diversifying the editing staff across the Times Mirror Company, and many great editors he knows came through the program. Semi-retired, Fuhrmann now freelance edits and teaches at the University of Southern California. He said, of the students he has worked with this year (around 40), there is probably one who wants to be a copy editor. He said it seems that most editors tend to end up at the copy desk only after they've been in the journalism business for a while. He attributes this to the fact that the more fixed schedule associated with copy editing is more suitable to some people's lifestyles than the constant deadline pressure of reporting. However, he said he thinks that all students "need to develop the copy editing skill set," and he is trying to get more students to take editing courses (Fuhrmann).

In 2008, as a response to the increasingly threatened role of copy editors within news organizations, ACES launched a microsite for collecting comments about why editing matters. The site, WhyEditingMatters.org, no longer exists independently, but ACES compiled a collection of some of its "favorite" comments from more than 250 that were submitted. These comments range from humorous specificities, like "Because there's a difference between there, their and they're" [Anonymous], to more elucidated responses, like:

Editing isn't threatened; quality is threatened, and thus the trust that the reader has in the product, be it electronic or dead-tree. A newspaper that would not save money by printing press releases verbatim on the back of used wallpaper nevertheless might think it can clip off a few pennies by eliminating that extra set of eyes, that extra level of judgment,

experience, and common sense. Like the farmer feeding his horse on sawdust, that'll save a fortune — till the horse starves to death [J Kaufman] (Why editing matters, 2008).

Analysis & Conclusion

Editing is currently in a period of instability. Most media organizations, if they haven't already done so, will soon be making a choice between prioritizing editing and letting it fall by the wayside. As falling revenue and the struggle to remain relevant foster an air of desperation, organizations are under pressure to improve efficiency and jettison excess resources. Due to the focus on mass content production in an online-first world, writers (content-generators) have come to be deemed the most imperative, and editors are viewed as less essential. Outsourcing, software or straight-up cuts are the choices that organizations see themselves presented with. Reporters and other editors (who already have their own ever-growing list of responsibilities) are having to absorb the duties traditionally performed by copy editors, as these positions are cut at twice the rate of other newsroom positions across the country.

But editing does matter. The available evidence suggests grammar is a substantial factor affecting credibility. And as Vultee's study shows, readers are more likely to be willing to pay for content if they feel that content has a higher level of professionalism, organization and writing style. Readers notice mistakes, and they are going to lose confidence in publications if they are continually presented with un-edited, error-ridden content. The quality of content affects what readers choose to read — and what they will pay to read. In an era in which media organizations are struggling to find an effective way to generate revenue after the demise of print advertising, this judgement and willingness to pay for value should be noted. Editing is essential to the publication process and should not be disregarded. As MacAdam advocates, there is

potential for enhanced cultivation of future editors. Organizations will benefit greater in the long run from training editors and encouraging young journalists to aspire to edit.

Future Study

While the current research does demonstrate the value and importance of editing, there is still much investigation that remains to be done to further support such claims. Though Vultee's study is effectual and well-executed, it wouldn't hurt for further studies of a similar nature to be conducted — those that assess readers' judgement of the quality of content and how this differs between edited and non-edited content. Also, a more detailed exploration of what aspects of editing readers notice would be beneficial. While it is suggested that grammar is the most noticeable and style the least, some substantiated evidence for this could be valuable. Further research on how grammar impacts credibility could also be significantly helpful. In this same line of inquiry, a crucial study that needs to be carried out is how much typos or errors in grammar — those factors that influence Fogg's distinction of earned credibility — influence revenue. Essentially, do grammar errors cost companies money? While Martin's investigation of newspapers that outsourced editorial duties provides a helpful initial examination of the effects of outsourcing, this study could be more enlightening if imitated on a larger scale and with more control for external influencing factors. In the same vein, it might be useful to examine outsourcing at parent companies versus private, external firms. Additionally, research could take a look at how readers view outsourcing and if it influences their opinion or trust in the organization. And lastly, while many argue that reporters can't effectively edit their own work, it would be interesting to see some empirical data for this. Studies could evaluate the quality of content of articles edited by the writers themselves compared with those same articles edited by professional editors.

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