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K. Barton

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Ink In Their Veins: News Process In A Suburban Daily

The St George & Sutherland Shire Leader is the premier newspaper in the southern suburbs of Australia's largest city, Sydney. Roy Morgan readership figures for March 2000 shows the newspaper, which covers a population of over 391,962 people, has a total readership of 299,000. Circulating twice weekly, The Leader is published in two editions to cater for the residents of the Municipality of St George and those of the Shire of Sutherland, separated (north and south respectively) by the Georges River. With a reach of 80 per cent, The Leader, part of the Fairfax stable of community newspapers, has by far the highest readership and reach of any suburban newspaper in the Sydney metropolitan area. St George edition spans 36 suburbs and comprises 128 pages. Sutherland, at 152 pages, covers 32 suburbs. Nine hours were spent with The Leader's journalistic staff to study the newspaper's production process and the role of the subeditor within that context.

Kathryn Barton

Communications Consultant, Sydney

"I don't know the address. I just turn up at the same place every day. There's a big sign on Forest Road. My extension? I'm not sure. Just phone the switch. See you Monday, then."

Over the phone, Paul Wiggins, subeditor for the Sutherland edition of The St George and Sutherland Shire Leader, exhibited few attributes of what might be considered a good sub-editor such as those discussed in Evans (1973) – that is, good communication skills with a solid grasp of the language; in possession of an orderly and well-balanced mind; insightful; having a sense of perspective; capable of accurate work in a flustered environment; quickness of thought; well-informed common sense; a capacity for absorbing fact; knowledge of the main principles of the laws of libel, copyright and contempt; able to cope with trying, sedentary work; possessing a good sense of team where the skills of a seasoned industrial relations negotiator with a strong diplomatic leaning comes in handy.

The Leader office projects a slap-dash image. It smacks of

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organised chaos yet, in reality, the room is cleverly designed around the newspaper production process.

9.45 am: The day's well underway at The Leader. Paul's busy "subbing" filed stories for tomorrow's Sutherland edition. An article about a fleet of DC3s is causing him trouble. The angle is buried too far down and the intro, way too long. Paul sits with the author, a work experience student, to find a new angle. She chews on her biro for inspiration.

The dummy for the Tuesday edition is compiled the previous Thursday but nothing of substance tends to happen until Monday morning.

Both subeditors give the Internet a good workout, whereas once they consulted reference books. Paul checks aeronautical sites for basic information to ensure the DC3 story is factually correct.

10.15 am: Letters to the editor. Grammar and syntax only are corrected. Letters are not edited to the paper's style guidelines that are loosely based on that of The Sydney Morning Herald (Fairfax's major metropolitan paper). "I always ask myself when editing letters 'am I helping this person to get their message across,'" Paul said.

Headlines for the "Your Say" (letters to the editor) section aim to keep the paper's opinions out of the picture through the use the author's colourful language or by paraphrasing the issue.

10.45 am: Peter Switzer (financial commentator) contributes to The Leader and, according to Paul, is a candidate for some "comma guidance".

If someone consistently uses bad grammar or too many commas, Paul points them in the direction of books that might assist them.

Journalists ask advice of both subeditors all day. It is understood that the subeditors are "the gurus". They are the arbiters of taste, know the rules, understand local issues, are up on the latest sport, can quickly identify any consequences of the published word, and keep internal "goings on" at arm's length to protect an objective stance.

Independence and objectivity are important to the paper. Having the courage of its convictions, the paper has consciously relegated the advertising department to another floor and (Paul looks serious) "staff rarely fraternise".

11.00 am: Paul regularly consults the Fairfax style guide on issues of spelling. "If you worry about the smaller things you are more likely to pick up bigger errors."

Pat Musick, the deputy editor and subeditor of the St George edition overhears a question about errors and chimes in. "There was a time when copy used to go through many hands and mistakes had less chance of slipping through, whereas now, they do. Computers have eliminated the perceived need for checks and balances that used to exist," she said.

11.15 am: Editorial staff look at what should go on the front page. If a photograph is particularly good, the accompanying (perhaps lesser) story may appear on the front page.

For the Sutherland edition, Paul is responsible for the design of pages one through five, the "Your Say" section, as well as the back sports pages. Headlines may or may not be left to Paul. If the editor feels the urge, they will already appear before Paul calls up the page on his massive monitor.

Pages one through three are filed early so that, should a major story break later, the finished pages can be pulled and stories redistributed throughout the paper leaving new EGN (early general news) pages to be designed afresh.

12.15 pm: Following the editorial meeting, the pace quickens with the volume of the newsroom rising in answer.

12.30pm: There's a short lull. "Everyone in the newsroom is aware of what I'm waiting on and today it's mostly EGN (early general news)." Paul's tension increases as he casts an accusing eye around the room seeking out the "no shows".

He uses the down time to double-check facts with reporters. "You get to know what reporters you can rely on."

12.45pm: "Allegedly" is omitted from an article about steroids found by police in a 22 year old's car. Paul summons the young journalist telling him not to be naïve. "Ask all the questions. Look at all the possibilities. Ask 'is it an indictable offence. Is there anything in this story that could influence a jury therefore influence the outcome of a trial?' What's this guy charged with? You don't say."

Paul believes journalists should beware of police statements; police usually have an interest in influencing news. "They don't have media officers and whole PR units for nothing," he said.

Paul, palms together with tips of fingers either side of his nose and chin resting on outstretched thumbs, looks to be seeking divine inspiration.

With his quick prayer answered, Paul jumps onto the online (intranet) Fairfax legal guide. "Legal people are not there to take away your permission to do things, but rather tell you how you can do something legally," he said.

Paul recommends the "Is it fair and can you prove it?" maxim that he believes prevents most legal problems. "Of course, the law is more complex, but this does get you out of difficulty."

12.55pm: The stories start rolling in along with more reporters not deskbound earlier in the day. They return to file their stories, handing them straight to Paul and Pat.

1.00 pm: Paul phones The Sydney Morning Herald's sports desk to check on the spelling of a sports commentator's name. The Leader's journalist has "Fitzsimmons"; while the SMH's deskman assures him "it's only one 'm'". Paul's not convinced. He checks the Internet, then the



Fairfax site to find the correct “FitzSimons”.

1.10pm: There is a problem. The main head shot for the back page doesn’t “read” left to right. It is unacceptable to “flip” the picture. “That’s playing with reality and we don’t do that. Besides, this guy’s got mates and they’ll know he doesn’t look right.” Another – lesser – shot is chosen.

Paul agrees that design is probably as important as content. He refers to fine arts concepts such as the “optical centre theory”. The optical centre appears in the right-hand top quadrant, close to the centre of the page. “That’s where the reader’s gaze is supposed to hit first. I guess I’m conscious of that fact when putting a page together. Still, most people tend to read from top to bottom, or from left to right.”

1.30pm: The photographer, kitted out, asks if anyone needs any other “pics” done today.

Digital photography means more time on the road for photographers whose easily archived photos appear in “thumbnail galleries” on The Leader’s computer system. The beauty of digital photography means they can be assessed and re-shot if necessary on site without having to wait for proof sheets. They can be emailed to the paper from remote locations to make deadlines while maximising other photo opportunities.

All day emails keep popping up for Paul. “[Those] from journalists I’d rather get now than be asked later when the pace is hectic. Like this one: ‘Hey, that dude was charged with possession of a restricted substance.’” The charge is added to the steroid story.

Paul prints each finished page and tacks it to a corkboard at eye-level behind the monitor so he can casually scan the finished page for missed errors or design faults. He is playfully scathing of reporters who rush to the board to see where and how their story has ended up.

The Leader is produced on Cybergraphics software, a system taking six days to train each user. Paul is the most competent of The Leader’ users, while others in the newsroom are “subject matter experts” on particular topics. The Sydney Morning Herald is produced on Cybergraphics and Paul believes it could well become the industry and Australian benchmark.

The software has the power to save each version of updated stories and, alongside, lists the editor and the time the correction was made so a record can be filed.

Special coloured text appearing between different symbols within a story is visible on-screen only, omitted upon printing. That text aims to assist both the subeditor as well as the reporter – the latter using the function to explain elements of a story or to reinforce the appropriateness of an unusual spelling.

Importantly, the software alerts the subeditor to word or line count being under or over that allowed in the page design.

2.00 pm: Paul, in his late thirties, skips lunch but dashes out for

a Benson & Hedges Special Filter with a very strong black coffee chaser. Given the very nature of the job, Paul believes it would be unusual to find a subeditor without a journalistic background. "You learn on the job and in different newsrooms. You don't go straight from being an intern in a hospital to performing brain surgery."

Paul, who holds a Bachelor of Political Science, has worked in newsrooms since graduating, starting life as a proof-reader. He cut his journalistic teeth on a student paper. For over six years he was the chief subeditor at New Zealand's National Business Review. Paul has spent the next six years employed by the Fairfax group - with The Leader since December, 2000.

Pat Musick has spent an amazing 22 years at The Leader. She has a degree in Journalism from an American university.

2.20pm: The front page is "sent down" (they view the same files online) to Fairfax's headquarters.

2.54pm: Editor yells, "How do you spell 'tie-dyed'? Is it 't-h-a-i-dyed' or 't-l-e-dyed'?"

On the topic of accuracy, Paul refers to the newspaper as "the first draft of history". He believes that people will always "get news wrong". It's a question of how many resources a newspaper has to make sure the bare minimum of mistakes get through. "There are a number of checking levels - the highest level is to tick every word. We don't have time or resources for that. You bring your own "level" to the job."

Errors in subediting are rectified clearly and quickly in print. Paul's approach is to "bite the bullet, but don't grovel." Legal issues require more care and are referred to Fairfax's legal department. Complaints about particular by-lined works are "sent straight back to the reporter".

3.10pm: The pressure's mounting. Paul needs to re-work priorities while barking at a journalist: "You can't write 'bong'! Yes, I know everyone knows what it is, but call it a marijuana water-smoking pipe or something!"

3.22pm: Paul - head in hands - is "stuck" on a headline and quickly enlists the help of the editor. He has to keep moving.

Paul uses a mix of personal style and experience in choosing headlines. "You need to learn to write headlines to fit. The bottom line of the headline should not be longer than the first."

The headline should reflect the introduction. Paul believes people get annoyed trying to work out the association between the heading and the story angle. He advocates writing headlines for smaller, "down page" stories before the bigger headlines on the same page. This, he believes, helps to give equal time, energy and thought to all articles.

In choosing headlines, look at the subject then choose a verb. In theory, headlines should have reader involvement, like: "You can become a VIP."

Paul prefers journalists didn't suggest headlines, leaving that task to him. He feels they tend to suggest the clichéd and the obvious. It may well be more deep-seated than that. Paul seems to relish testing his speed coming up with the right headline, much like an accomplished crossword enthusiast who delights in interpreting cryptic clues at rapid pace.

3.45pm: "Pages aren't made of rubber, son," Paul responds to a journalist who wants to add something to his already filed story.

Paul suggests that good stories for The Leader are those that are quirky as well as newsworthy. He suggests thinking about what's important to people in the readership while not being "overly parochial".

3.55pm: As the paper starts to take shape, remaining headlines need to be written.

The clever "Thugs order cash to go" headline is canned by the editor as being inappropriate given that staff at a fast food outlet were tied at knife-point. Paul is back at the drawing board and disappointed with the "straight" result. Still, he moves on.

4.00pm: "How can you not have a clear victory when you're all running in the same direction?" Paul chides the photographer about his choice of caption for a sprint meet.

The closer to deadline (6pm) the louder and more insistently staff yell each missing story title in a bid to be heard above the escalating hubbub of the room. Filed stories are held in alphabetical order using a 10-letter descriptor.

It's time for Paul to "get to work" editing the front page. It is extremely important to check the date – lest this edition become a collector's item.

Paul dismisses as generalisation the theory that journalism graduates cannot write or spell. "That opinion has been around for years. I put that in the same category as the 'youth today are all rude and their music is crap' theory. The longer you are practising journalism, the better your writing and spelling should be."

4.05pm: The Sutherland edition is three pages short! More stories needed. Paul is getting agitated that the Miranda bureau has not responded to urgent messages. He anxiously awaits a direct quote from the Mayor of Sutherland that will make his headline "Kerr snubbed me" usable. He wants the mayor to say that Councillor Kerr did indeed snub her by not inviting her to a meeting.

Paul is annoyed the journalist has written a high profile story without one direct quote. "Get back to Sonda (the mayor) and get a direct quote and get it now!"

4.35 pm: Good news, the mayor agrees she was snubbed. Paul now works his headlining quote into the story. "Headlines have to be impactful."

While most of Paul's speech is extremely fluid and colourful, for

someone so pedantic about accuracy and detail his keyboard skills and/or adherence to email etiquette is surprisingly haphazard. Where will he be in a few years' time? This was the emailed response:

"Ambition puts one a slippery pole. A prime reason for working here is that the hours allow you to have a life outside the paper. It was once said of me that I have ink in my veins. I tend to agree and so will remain in newspapers regardless of what happens with the internet, etc. Corporately FCN suits fine and provides me with the income that I need for what is essentially a non-possessions oriented lifestyle. Taking history as a guide, there are four likely avenues that would arise between now and retirement if I remain in the Fairfax group. (1) SMH or AFR duties on insert sections that work a 9-5 shift. (2) Taking on Pat's role [deputy editor] years down the track when she retires. (3) Editor of a smaller paper, given that I have done that on a relieving basis before. (4) Development of new products for FCN, again a role I have taken previously (I've closed more magazines than) the censor. (14 March 2001)

4.45pm: The editor surfaces to check on progress of all pages.

5.10pm: The Sutherland edition is finished. St George is still going, but is nearly there.

5.20pm: No rest. Paul discovers that a page two story covers one angle of a meeting, while the page seven story covers another yet both emerge from the same event. Rather than run the risk of the paper looking uncoordinated, he quickly writes a new line in one to relate it to the other.

Paul decides that the word "elderly" – used in the intro to describe a gathering – is superfluous given the picture of a group of (obviously) senior citizens who, he points out, may not see themselves as elderly.

With the paper "put to bed" and journalists gone home, time to tackle the thorny issue of reporter/subeditor relationships? Pat and Paul compete for air.

"Most of the time we make it better, and we save journalists a lot of embarrassment – that should accentuate the 'love' aspect of the relationship. We are their saviours," Pat's voice rises in pitch.

"Reporters get to use subbies as the 'bad guys' when dealing with subjects who may not have liked the way a story was written," she said.

She believes that overall, junior journalists "aren't a patch" on the more experienced. She cites poor knowledge of English, suspect colleges that produce "kids with attitude", bad spelling and the "inability" to look up the meaning of words as major flaws.

"There is a perception among some junior journalists that once they 'get graded' – that's it. Their general knowledge is poor, but they know it all. Having said that, a good young journalist stands out a mile."

Pat finds constructively criticising a reporter's work is useless.

"They appear 'pissed off' and keep making the same mistakes." She feels respect for the subediting role is lacking.

Paul believes that the subeditor/journalist relationship is not a pre-ordained one. "It's up to each to be professional and to be fair regardless of personalities. Being mindful of a subbie's style, listening to the advice he/she gives others as well as concentrating on good journalism techniques is a good start."

Another aspect they both agree on is that The Leader does not have any competition in its region. That is not conducive to "keeping journalists on their toes".

Both subbies believe that the paper's meagre budget is the enemy of good, junior journalists and they find it very hard to see reporters of calibre "go without pay rises", be that quit in pursuit of more dollars elsewhere, or simply sit it out at The Leader with little remunerative recognition.

Still, the relationship issue isn't the main "enemy" of a sub-editor's day. It's the clock. "You must designate, delegate and dispense" when on deadline to get the work done.

Eyebrows shoot up at the mention of the Code of Ethics. Both sub-editors admitted that the journalist's set of commandments is not necessarily on anyone's mind. Personal ethics and taste take its place at The Leader.

6.00 pm: Word comes that "The Classifieds" are running late. The subbies become nervous. "Panic is not a good look for preparing papers," said Paul, absently fingering the gold Benson & Hedges pack instead of his computer mouse.

As the paper's revenue stream, "Classifieds rule". They may "eat" a page that's taken three quarters of an hour to compile. Apart from the "want ads", the Tuesday issue of both editions has a property insert, while Thursday's includes a "Leisure and Lifestyle" supplement. Both supplements are stapled and inserted by laser-guided robots at Fairfax's printery. Perhaps not surprising for a small team, the property writer doubles as the paper's social commentator under an eponymous banner.

With a few moments to reflect on the day and on that unnerving telephone conversation with Paul of a few days earlier, the interviewer concedes that Evans (1973) is indeed correct. No one subeditor need have all the ingredients of a fine "deskman". Paul's (initially worrying) vagueness concerning the location of his workplace pales into insignificance having witnessed the man at work. It's as though his mind only stores those facts and those vital fragments of information pertinent to the paper on that day. It is difficult to remember ever witnessing a more driven, measured, focused and unwavering soul than Paul Wiggins.

7.10 pm: With the interview complete, it's the interviewer's turn to become nervous about being locked in the Westfield's [major

shopping centre conglomerate] car park. Where does Paul park? "Don't drive. Tried it once. Didn't like it."

REFERENCE

Evans, Harold (1973) *The Making of a Newspaper, in Editing and Design: A Five Volume Manual of English, Typography and Layout*. Heinemann, London: 1-15 discussing Mansfield's definition of good "deskmen" (Sub-Editing London: Pitman, 1939).

KATHRYN BARTON is a freelance communications consultant providing media and public relations guidance to Telstra Wholesale, UNSW School of Marketing, University of New South Wales International Student Centre and IDP Education Australia. Prior to starting her own consultancy, Kathryn held a number of in-house communications posts in the entertainment, fashion and finance industries. She is completing a Master of Journalism with the University of Wollongong. Email: kathrynb@bigpond.com