1-1-1999

When words don't matter anymore: Contemporary newsroom technology and wordsmithing

J. Ewart
Central Queensland University

Recommended Citation
Ewart, J., When words don't matter anymore: Contemporary newsroom technology and wordsmithing, Asia Pacific Media Educator, 6, 1999, 82-98.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss6/8
When Words Don’t Matter Anymore: Contemporary Newsroom Technology And Wordsmithing

Australian newspapers are on the cutting edge of technological change, with regular upgrades of computerised production systems now a fact of life. In keeping abreast of technological advancements many newspapers have sacrificed the key elements that were the basis of traditional newspapers. This paper examines how pagination technology has reduced the sub-editors' traditional emphasis on wordsmithing and thus the implications for newspaper contents.

Jacqui Ewart
Central Queensland University

Technology is presenting a growing problem in Australian newsrooms for copy sub-editors. While some sub-editors are riding the crest of the technological wave that is bringing sweeping changes to their roles, others are not faring as well. Pagination technology has downgraded the copy sub-editor's task. Traditionally newspaper sub-editors were engaged in producing clean, and even elegant prose. Multi-tasking and the mechanical demands of computer programs are now distracting them from their primary function. While bowing to the economic imperatives associated with the production process, senior Australian newspaper management has expressed concern about this. A shift in focus is required to maintain the copy sub-editor's function and preserve good quality content.

While pagination technologies have enhanced design, layout, production and page control capacity, the impact of this new focus on design and copyfitting, often at the expense of traditional sub-editing practices such as the revision and correction of copy (wordsmithing), has yet to be fully realised. The shift in emphasis, from wordsmithing to design and copyfitting, has not been solely caused by pagination, indeed the management of pagination in newsrooms is closely related to this change in priorities.
However, the availability of pagination systems and programs such as Cybergraphic (a Windows program) and Quark has both enabled and encouraged a greater emphasis on newspaper design. By embracing new technologies for purely economic purposes, newspaper management has sometimes failed to or been unable to give due consideration to the effect such technology may have on the quality of newspaper content. Factors such as increased error rates and declines in grammar can sometimes be overlooked by management because of the very visible improvements in design brought about by pagination systems.

Many sub-editors believe the current focus on design is just a result of the new technology they are coming to grips with and that the focus may shift back to wordsmithing in the future. While design is important, particularly as newspapers struggle to compete against television and the Internet, wordsmithing is the essential basis of sub-editing and should never be overlooked.

While it may not, at this point, be feasible to investigate the apparent decline in copy quality using a quantitative approach, it is possible to undertake some preliminary qualitative research. Copy, design and layout sub-editors from two major Australian metropolitan newspapers, The Age and The Herald Sun in Melbourne, Victoria were interviewed about their experiences with pagination and its impact on quality copy. The design sub-editors at these newspapers were involved in setting the overall design of pages, while layout sub-editors undertook the mechanics of laying copy and photos into pages.

I also spoke to production and training management at both newspapers, interviewing 20 people during several shifts. In writing this paper, I considered the perceptions of copy sub-editors to be most important because of their daily experiences in the area. However, the comments of design and layout sub-editors and others interviewed also provided valuable insights into and reflections on the broader context of copy sub-editors' experiences. Several of the sub-editors interviewed were multi-skilled, moving between design, layout and copy sub-editing duties and their perceptions were also noteworthy. Sub-editors were interviewed in their workplaces, which enabled observation of their work practices and use of pagination technology.

This paper presents their comments and draws conclusions about the impact of pagination on the cornerstone of sub-editing, that is its wordsmithing function. These conclusions will be examined in relation to Russia's (1998) research, which provides a
timely warning for those Australian newspapers which may now or in the future consider following the American path by elimin­
ating the copy desk function, or incorporating it into other areas of the newsroom.

While the data gathered in this study indicated pagination had resulted in major improvements for design sub-editors at The Age and The Herald Sun, copy sub-editors had noticed fewer enhan­cements. Sub-editors in both workplaces overwhelmingly believed the new technology, coupled with new management practices, resulted in a decrease in the number of sub-editors employed. Productivity expectations at both newspapers had risen with the introduction of new technologies such as pagination, with sub-editors expected to undertake additional duties such as those performed previously by compositors and linotype operators. There was ample evidence of this, including the following comments: “The newspaper is cutting back on the number of sub­editors with the new system. Although there is no substantial change at this stage [December 1998], as people leave they won’t be replaced (Sub-editor The Age).”

And: “Pagination is one person doing the job of three people — layout subs doing the job of linotype operators and com­positors on the stone (Training Manager Herald Sun).”

Copy sub-editing was thought to have been most affected by the gradual decline in the number of sub-editing staff. The driving force behind the introduction of pagination was finan­cial: “Anywhere [pagination] systems are brought in to save money they [newspaper management] are now finding you need as many sub-editors as you needed comps to do the work or far more than they were prepared to pay for” (Sub-editor The Age).

Sub-editors and management at The Age and The Herald Sun believed the impact of the reduction in staff numbers across newspapers, which accompanied the introduction of pagination, had a major impact on the number of errors appearing in their publications.

It means that about four of our subs on the general desk, to use a specific example, are now doing the work of the comps and not concentrating, or not having the time to concentrate, on the words. So that means there is four fewer pairs of eyes on the words that are in the paper. Across [sport, features and general] departments you have probably got half a dozen experienced key subs who are no longer subbing words. (Assistant editor The Herald Sun).

New technology such as pagination can militate against good wordsmithing practices, with sub-editors reporting they spend much more time dealing with the technical aspects of com
puterised production. However, pagination is not solely responsible for the shift in focus from wordsmithing to design. Most sub-editors interviewed believed the management of technology in newsrooms had resulted in this changed emphasis. The diminishing of traditional sub-editing’s primary task of wordsmithing emerged as the key concern during the interviews with the sub-editors at The Age and The Herald Sun.

As well as the technology, and its management, sub-editors discerned a third factor as contributing to the apparent increase in literals and grammatical errors: the lack of experience and wordsmithing ability among younger sub-editors. The identification of these factors and the changes pagination has brought to sub-editing provides a framework for the examination of the rest of the data gathered during this study. The following sections of this paper will explore these three factors, but before doing so it is important to examine sub-editors’ perceptions in relation to the removal of their wordsmithing focus.

What’s happened to the words?

The traditional focus of a sub-editors’ work has always been wordsmithing. This focus developed because content has, until recently, been considered the keystone of good newspapers. Newspapers have often informally used the number of errors, such as typos or literals and grammatics, as one measurement of their success and quality (sub-editors The Age and The Herald Sun).

The key duties of (pre-pagination) sub-editing included: correcting errors and typos; checking the clarity of writing; examining a story for fairness, balance, and logic; ensuring the logical organisation and completeness of a story; and checking it was free of libel or unlikely to attract legal action (Russial 1998:8). Sub-editors were also responsible for fact checking and ensuring accuracy. The wordsmithing component of the sub-editor’s job not only allowed them to perform many of these tasks, but also ensured the overall comprehensibility of a story.

Some management and production staff interviewed believed the introduction of pagination and the subsequent management and organisation of news production resulted in the removal of the focus on wordsmithing. While most sub-editors felt the decline in the importance of the written component of the news was most evident in the increased number of literals and grammatics appearing in their publications, two disagreed:
"I think we are cleaner in [the number of] literals. A lot of people disagree with me on that score. Maybe grammar is not as strong as it might have been 20 years ago. The system picks up typos that used to plague our newspaper." (Sub-editor, Herald Sun).

While one sub-editor from The Age thought there were fewer typos and grammaticals appearing in the newspaper, he believed the quality and rigour of the proofing system had declined with the introduction of pagination. "We used to give everything to [proof] readers after it had been typeset, but we don’t have them any more" (Sub-editor The Age).

Interestingly, both of these sub-editors worked in the features section of their respective newspapers. While both reported increased workloads, they said the technology had also improved their working life. Traditionally, staff in newspaper feature sections have been able to plan and manage work flow in their areas much more effectively than their counterparts in the general news and sports sections.

While general news and sports sub-editors face tighter deadline pressures, features sub-editors often have advanced knowledge of the content of their sections and copy is frequently available earlier than in other sections of the newspaper. Sub-editors reported that technology such as pagination assisted in work flow and planning, with the introduction of computerised data bases making retrieval of information easier and quicker. This may explain why these two sub-editors believe there are fewer errors appearing in the newspaper.

The removal of proof readers had placed increased pressure on sub-editors to check copy and ensure it was error free. Those interviewed felt the loss of readers, combined with the additional duties sub-editors had taken on with the demise of the composing room, had impacted heavily on the time available to correct errors and proof read material.

For example: "There are a few more literals appearing, errors of fact and that sort of thing. There were many times when I was saved by a compositor or linotype operator saying ‘this is not right’, but you don’t have that any more" (Sub-editor The Herald Sun). And: "I think there appear to be [more typos, grammaticals and other errors] because under the Cyber [Cybergraphic] system we have done away with the readers, the fine body of people who could pick out a mistake from a mile away" (Edition control manager The Herald Sun).

While sub-editors liked the control that pagination gave them over all aspects of production, this was somewhat offset by their increased responsibility. Pagination meant they were often solely responsible for any errors which appeared in their publications. However, the volume of copy being processed by copy sub-
editors made it less likely that consistently good copy sub-editing occurred. An interviewee noted:

Because of the sheer volume [of copy we sub] it tends to be a more rote task. [In the past] you were given a licence to basically treat stories as you saw fit. You used your judgment on it. Your judgment had to be right, you couldn’t screw up the story. People are a little bit more precious about their words these days. They tend not to do as much rewriting as in the past (Sub-editor The Herald Sun).

Many copy sub-editors felt their career paths were limited because of the emphasis metropolitan newspaper management placed on the design abilities of sub-editors. For some this meant limited opportunity for promotion and little recognition of their efforts in the workplace. The frustration this caused was best illustrated by the following comment:

Probably the biggest disadvantage of a pagination system is that if you are technologically literate it is regarded as better than if you are a good wordsmith. Some people’s talent is words. It [wordsmithing] is not necessarily valued any more and it should be. Because someone like me can do the technical stuff, I get to do it and move on [be promoted] and people who are fantastic with words are getting overlooked a bit and that is really sad (Sub-editor The Age).

While pagination had resulted in major improvements in design and layout, many staff agreed this was often at the expense of their publication’s content and words. There was an overwhelming feeling among interviewees that their newspapers needed to return to the basic business of newspapers: the words.

Increased Workloads:
Management of Newsroom Technology

With the introduction of pagination, thousands of production floor staff in newspapers across Australia were made redundant (pers comm 1998). Although the new technology was able to perform some of the duties of these now redundant staff, both design and copy sub-editors have been forced to absorb many of the duties which were performed by linotype operators and compositors prior to the introduction of pagination. These additional tasks have added significantly to the workload of sub-editors, increasing the time they spend on non-content related tasks. The impact of this extra workload on the newspaper’s written content was captured by the following comment:

The difficulties [with pagination] include a lot of very sloppy words [appearing in the newspaper]. Pagination is all about productivity. It is terrific for production lines, but you cannot apply...
normal standard productivity measures to newspapers. We are trying to do more work with fewer people and the result is more boo-boos (*Training manager* The Herald Sun).

Sub-editors were also finding they were left with little time for traditional sub-editing duties because they had taken on additional duties with the introduction of pagination: “Everything is done in such a rush we don’t have the option to double check stuff. The workload has increased with the new system. The work is more laborious with a lot of really technical things we have to do that we didn’t have to do before” (*Sub-editor* The Herald Sun).

While many of the non-content type tasks have fallen to design and layout sub-editors, copy sub-editors have also been affected. Copy fitting, which was previously the task of compositors, has been incorporated as a routine part of the copy sub-editor’s role. The tasks performed by a copy editor were explained by an interviewee:

*The Age* copy subs check copy, cut it to fit, check the style of writing and headlines, then it [the copy] goes to a check subs’[sub-editor’s] desk. The check subs are the senior copy subs and they will check everything: story, style, grammar and headlines. We then, if time permits, proof every story and it will be read by another copy sub. So, there are at least four or five people who read the story before it gets into the paper. That’s the ideal, it doesn’t always happen that way (*Production editor* The Age).

Those interviewed believed that as well as creating additional tasks for sub-editors, pagination and the operation of its requisite computer programs had gained priority over the newspapers’ content. For example, one sub-editor said:

*The new technology has distracted sub-editors from their main function, which is to look at the text. Some of the modern day sub-editors are more technicians than wordsmiths. I think it [wordsmithing] is an art that will be lost while we are grappling with the complexities of the new system and getting new versions of Cybergraphic that will allow us to do more of the things we used to do. I do think it [the loss of focus on wordsmithing] is only a temporary thing, that will last only two or three years* (*Sub-editor* The Age).

Other sub-editors believed the demands of modern sub-editing had also contributed to the number of errors appearing in the newspaper: “In modern subbing, the emphasis is more on the look than the words. The words are secondary to an extent. Very often just making sure things fit is more important than [wordsmithing]” (*Sub-editor* The Age).

While those interviewed believed pagination had improved the appearance of their newspapers, they believed the technology had to be better managed to refocus sub-editing processes on content, for example wordsmithing:
Newspapers are looking better [because of pagination] but the words are suffering. Readers notice spelling mistakes. These things get past [sub-editors] because they are doing all the technical stuff and you can find spelling mistakes get through basic subbing because whereas that used to be the sub-editor’s job, now they are overloaded because they are busy doing other things (Sub-editor The Age).

Part of the management of pagination at The Herald Sun included the introduction of an edition control desk. Staff in this area are responsible for checking the page, ensuring headlines are related to the content of their stories and checking photos appear on their respective pages. While this has been successful in some respects, it has not fully eliminated errors:

[I don’t know] whether there are more [errors] now because the sub is not just subbing the story, they are subbing and laying out and shaping and putting copy into the page, which was what compositors used to do. Occasionally we pick things up here [on the edition control desk] but not everything (Edition control manager The Herald Sun).

While The Herald Sun has attempted to refine its handling of new technology, with the introduction of features such as the edition control desk, Australian newspapers need to better manage new technologies, particularly those being introduced to newsrooms. Human factors, such as those highlighted by the sub-editors interviewed for this study, have not been high on the list of priorities for those introducing new technologies. While new technologies often suit production line style operations, newsrooms should not be treated in this way (Russial 1995).

How technology militates against wordsmithing

While the management of technology in newsrooms has contributed to the problems copy sub-editors have experienced, the technology has also been problematic. Staff at both The Herald Sun and The Age, praised Cybergraphic because of the improvements it had enabled in the design of the newspapers, but it was described by sub-editors as a less than adequate copy subbing tool:

It’s a more graphic technology than something for [copy] editors. We can’t concentrate on the text as well as we used to in the past because we are grappling with the technology, rather than being a [traditional] sub-editor. The quality of copy has definitely decreased [since the introduction of pagination]. All you have to do is look at the paper day by day to see the number of literals is up (Sub-editor The Age).

As with any computer system, quirks in the program sometimes make particular tasks difficult. Both newspapers have added various components to their Cybergraphic systems as their staff have become familiar with its capabilities. However, there are
still some problems: “We still have problems. For example, typos creep through because the spell check won’t correct errors in smaller, two-letter words. We are still trying to improve what the system can and can’t do” (Editorial training manager The Herald Sun).

Another anomaly of the Cybergraphic and Cyberpage system was the fact that a layout sub-editor and a copy sub-editor could not work on the same story at the same time. The story had to be stored before it could be changed or used by another sub-editor. This glitch quickly highlighted time management problems caused by the system. Cybergraphic and Cyberpage have yet to respond to these changes in work practices.

Copy sub-editors at The Age were already working with an Atex copy system when pagination was first introduced to the newsroom. This meant they did not initially experience any major changes in their work practices as that first pagination system, called Edpage, was an Atex add-on and retained the basic copy-editing commands with which copy sub-editors were familiar. However, when copy sub-editors switched to the Cybergraphic system, despite the advances in technology and pagination, they found the new system was not perfect and it was often not as good as the pre-Windows technology.

A problem, specifically related to the technology, was the appearance of additional “noise” (information and commands) on the copy sub-editor’s computer screen. While this is a basic component of any Windows program, sub-editors found this ‘noise’ often drew their concentration and focus away from the copy being sub-edited. The problems this caused were highlighted by the following comment:

It [the system and appearance of the computer screen] is not the same or as clear cut as it used to be and when you put the text on the screen there is a lot of noise [information and commands] that never used to be there. You can’t read a paragraph or a sentence clearly without things breaking into it, whereas in our old system it was very simple and straight up and down, you could see what you had there [on the screen]. Quite a lot of sub-editors are having problems with this (Sub-editor The Age).

While pagination had made designing news pages easier, it had created difficulties for those dealing with copy who wanted to do anything other than the basics with it. For example: To do anything fancy [with copy] actually causes a lot of problems at this stage, such as jumping [spilling] a story across three straight pages, that took us hours to achieve. So, the choice is, are we going to grapple with it for hours or are we just going to have to run short stories (Sub-editor The Age).

Some sub-editors felt such difficulties in using the system
had resulted in less adventurous design. I can basically say that they [pagination systems] will be more efficient and they will be more cost effective in the long run, but at this stage we are suffering from higher stress levels and the paper is suffering from more errors and less adventurous design (Sub-editor The Age). Sub-editors believed the increased technical demands caused by pagination were partly responsible for the apparent increases in error rates. These demands were sometimes beyond sub-editors’ capabilities:

I think the main problem is that it [pagination] distracts us from doing our main job [wordsmithing]. The quality of the copy relates to modern subbing where the emphasis is more on the look [appearance and design of pages] than the words. The words are secondary to the extent that very often you are just making sure things fit as that is more important than what the words say (Sub-editor The Age).

The Herald Sun Cybergraphic editorial support manager believed the newspaper’s error rate was related more to human factors than the type of system in use. He said: It doesn’t matter what sort of computer system you have. You are still basically putting out a newspaper and you have good operators as well as bad operators. You would think the system should decrease the number of problems that you’ve got, but again you are still dealing with people. If they make mistakes normally then it doesn’t matter what system they are on. But I’d say there has been some improvement [in copy quality]. There are more checking procedures [with Cybergraphic]. Things don’t slip through the cracks as much as they used to. And, of course, there’s more accountability, but again it comes down to still dealing with people, it’s just that they are using a newer computer system.

However, the majority of sub-editors disagreed, saying the system and its management caused many difficulties. The Herald Sun’s Assistant Editor said pagination technology was supposed to assist copy sub-editors, for example by providing an electronic shape to which sub-editors drew (or placed) the story. This enabled them to see at a glance if the amount of copy they had to fill in the electronic hole was too long or short:

That should make it easier for downtable [copy] sub editors. In practice it hasn’t necessarily made any improvements there. I have to choose my words carefully here. There are still errors getting in that I don’t find acceptable. I haven’t quite gotten around that yet. It has given sub-editors more control over what they do. For downtable subs it should be a simpler process, but it certainly hasn’t cut out the literals and bad grammar. It should have given people more time to concentrate on those things, but they are still there. I really can’t say if they are there to a lesser or greater extent than they were before because there has been a lot of other change in the meantime. We have reduced our staff as well since The Herald Sun was created from a merger [of two papers]. Work practices have changed pretty dramatically, so it’s hard to compare (Assistant editor The Herald Sun).
While pagination technology appears to militate against good wordsmithing, some of the issues raised by those interviewed may be easily remedied as technology progresses in the future. Those producing future generations of pagination programs and systems should be able to remedy some of the problems in existing systems, thus enabling further improvements to the wordsmithing component of sub-editing, while retaining the gains already made in design and layout.

The introduction of pagination into newsrooms was not without its benefits and supporters. Many of the sub-editors interviewed were vocal critics when it came to the pitfalls of the system, but they also found reasons to praise pagination. Among the benefits of pagination they listed improved control over their ability to organise their work, better access to archives and files, and better spell checks. Interestingly, many still complained about the number of spelling errors appearing in their publications. One sports sub-editor from The Herald Sun found pagination enabled almost instantaneous reporting of events. It removed pre-pagination time lags that used to be experienced in the processing of stories when compositing and linotype staff were involved in the publication process. The following comment provides an example of this particular benefit of pagination:

When we are doing an overseas soccer story we are more or less writing it off the TV. For example, in a Chelsea game in England which was played this morning, the final whistle went, the players were walking off, and we'd written it [the story] and sent the page. You couldn't possibly do that if somebody else [compositors] was involved in the process before it became a complete page (Sports sub-editor The Herald Sun).

The increased flexibility of the system for copy sub-editors was illustrated by another sub-editor: “This one [system] is good because when you send your story [to a page] you immediately get a printout, but you can still read it off the screen. There are a lot of things you can do now that you could never do before” (Sub-editor The Herald Sun).

Another benefit of pagination was that the chances of repeating a word in several headlines on the same page had diminished. Pagination allowed a copy sub-editor to see the layout and check other headlines on the same page, while the layout sub continued to make up the page. For The Herald Sun sports sub-editor, this feature of pagination meant an improvement in his ability to do his job as a copy sub-editor. He said: “The system has improved some aspects of copy subbing such as being able to find stories easily and not having to drag them from a variety of sources as in
the past. It’s basically because it is a system that has been designed specifically for newspapers.” Others were more effusive in their praise for pagination and the improvements it had made to the sub-editing process:

I think there is no question for me that it [the system] has improved out of sight. I am not at the mercy of the linotype operators trying to decipher my handwriting. You [the sub-editor] have control and you can get it right. You have little backups, like the spelling check facility, which highlights typos and you have the ability to re-order a story without having to write copious amounts of longhand and shuffle paper (Sub-editor The Herald Sun).

While the introduction of pagination resulted in major improvements in the design and layout of newspapers, copy sub-editors experienced far fewer improvements. Indeed, they felt there had been significant declines in their ability to edit copy because of the additional duties their jobs now entailed. While Australian sub-editors’ experiences with pagination technology have often been divided according to their age and the tasks they undertake, they have overwhelmingly appreciated the control it has given them over their jobs. Research in the USA shows sub-editors there experienced similar difficulties and rewards during and after the introduction of pagination as did their Australian counterparts.

Wordsmithing ability of less experienced sub-editors

Anecdotal evidence gathered in this study indicated that younger, less experienced, sub-editors were being hired by newspapers. Because of their proficiency with technology, younger staff usually filled positions involving a high level of technical expertise such as design positions. However, they often had limited journalistic experience or wordsmithing ability. A few of these younger staff had little or no journalistic experience and some interviewees expected this trend to continue while the focus of layout and design sub-editing remains on technical and design ability.

Although some of those interviewed were not concerned about the youth of some sub-editors, others were because of their lack of familiarity with grammar. For example: “Most design subs are young and not experienced. Grammar is something they don’t understand and it is sometimes hard to know whether it is the technology [causing grammatical errors] or the standard of schools and other education factors.” (Sub-editor The Age). Others ex-
pressed general concern with the falling standards of grammar and the lack of spelling ability among many reporters who later became sub-editors. This had implications for the quality of a newspaper’s content, as one sub-editor explained:

An awful lot of journalists are not particularly strong in the basics of grammar and spelling. If a person who has written a piece is not particularly strong in grammar, and the person who subs it is not strong in that area either, then you get some grammatical howlers. A lot of grammar is subjective too, one person might want commas and another person doesn’t. We let words through now we would not have dreamed of [letting through] some years back. The specifics of grammar used to be addressed through cadetships (Sub-editor The Herald Sun).

The issue of the cadetship, and its role in teaching cadets basic literacy skills, is an interesting one. While newspapers continue to offer cadetships, they take a vastly different form than they did 20 years ago. Cadetships are usually offered to those with journalism degrees (Alysen 1999) and are often limited to one year, which acts as a type of probation. For the most part, extended three-year cadetships have been replaced by university courses.

Most journalism lecturers would agree that grammar and spelling skills, while essential, are not a specific component of the university course. Rather, they are a skill which students are expected to master before entering a course and certainly to have become proficient in by the end of their degree. Spelling and grammar are not core units of a journalism degree, although it is expected that students undertaking a degree will possess these. One sub-editor at The Age believed the improved educational standards of those entering journalism meant they often wrote cleaner and better copy. He warned against the tendency of some people to compare current industry standards with the past.

Despite the reservations some sub-editors had with younger sub-editors’ lack of wordsmithing, they felt their expertise with technology and design made them valuable members of the subbing team in the design and layout area. If a return to quality copy editing in newspapers is to occur, core issues including the lack of experience of some sub-editors and the lack of grammatical and spelling abilities in younger staff will have to be addressed either at the high school, university, cadetship level or in routine training by newspapers. One member of senior management at The Age suggested this might present regional newspapers with an opportunity to establish reputations as good training newspapers. Another issue which should also be addressed is
the decline in the status of copy sub-editors. Many copy sub-editors interviewed felt their jobs were not considered to be as important as that of their colleagues involved in layout, or reporting. Those managing editorial staff would be well advised to address this problem as part of an overall examination of the role of copy sub-editors in newsrooms.

What's happening in the USA and what can we learn?

It is useful to explore and compare the conclusions of this study in light of Russial's (1998) recent work canvassing the elimination of copy desks and copy sub-editing as a specific function in newspapers in the USA. His study showed how newspapers in that country had either eliminated the copy desk function, in the process increasing the focus on design through the establishment of design teams, or incorporated copy subbing into other functions within the newsroom. Russial provides a timely warning of the dangers of eliminating the focus on wordsmithing in newsrooms.

Russial (1998:2) found changes in the organisation of sub-editing teams in USA newspapers were focused on trying to "improve the editing process — to break down walls between reporter and editor, editor and designer, or editor and editor". This does not appear to have been the driving force behind the reorganisation and refocussing of Australian newsrooms. Indeed, much of the change in Australian newsrooms has been driven by profit motives and the high costs associated with pagination technology have only added to this drive.

Those USA newspapers which eliminated copy desks did so as part of a process aimed at changing what was seen as a production line mentality in newsrooms. Russial's (1998:4) study questions whether the literature supporting the removal of copy desks as a discrete entity is justified in its conclusion that "copyediting as it is currently organised and practiced adds little to the news product." He explores this issue further, suggesting that businesses to suit changing markets" (Russial, 1998:5). Russial (1998:14) found: "... the idea of eliminating the copy desk is particularly seductive in an era when newspaper corporations are falling all over one another to see who can downsize the most."

In Australia this approach has yet to be taken up with vigour by the newspaper industry, which means Australian newspaper copy desks may have a longer life span than their USA counterparts. Changes in sub-editing functions in Australian...
newsrooms have been and will continue to be closely related to the need to increase productivity and circulation. These pressures are coupled with increasing operational costs, and, of course, pressures from shareholders and owners for improved profit margins.

Russial provides sound justification for the continuation of copy sub-editing as a discrete function. Australian newspapers need to commit to and realise the validity of Russial’s proposal that there are three key ideas which are integral to copy editing:

1. That copyediting and headline writing skills are vital in maintaining editorial quality.
2. That not everyone in the newsroom has those skills, is interested in developing them, or is even capable of developing them.
3. That these skills can be best developed, applied and nurtured in specialised operations known as copy desks (1998:6).

Editorial management in Australian newspapers might reflect on these three key ideas when trying to reinvigorate and improve the copy editing function in their newsrooms. The merits of copy desks include reorganisation of stories to catch inaccuracies, ensuring fairness and balance, along with ensuring more routine tasks such as checking spelling and grammar are carried out.

Russial asks how newspapers can ensure quality through good copy editing while developing and nurturing copy editing abilities in staff given the absence of copy desks and copy editing training (Russial 1998:14). His warning of the dangers of multi-skilling sub-editors is also timely. He suggests the incorporation of copy editing into the design function of newspapers could lead to a decrease in the quality of content because: “... something valuable may be lost in story selection, design, pagination – or copyediting. It is reasonable to assume that copyediting would suffer most if it is shifted to either originating or design desks because it would be an add on, not the primary focus of the job (Russial, 1998:7).

Russial also warns against reporters copy editing their own work because it does not value add, and these staff do not have the expertise or desire to copy edit. The copy quality of newspapers can suffer if reporters copy edit because they do not see it as their core job, and so it is done as an afterthought (Russial 1998:8). While pagination adds value to the design and layout component of newspapers, Australian sub-editors indicated that it can and does devalue newspapers’ content.
Copy sub-editors at *The Age* and *The Herald Sun* have experienced a major shift in their focus with the introduction and subsequent management of pagination in their newsrooms. For the most part, that shift has impacted negatively on the quality of their work as copy sub-editors. While layout and design sub-editors have experienced some minor pagination related problems, the benefits it has brought to their work have far outweighed the few negatives.

While the Australian newspapers examined in my study have not gone so far as eliminating copy desks, the number of sub-editors, specifically copy sub-editors, is in decline at both *The Age* and *The Herald Sun*. These newspapers have accepted some trade-offs with the introduction of pagination. It is heartening that senior management at *The Age* and some staff at *The Herald Sun* recognise the need to reinvigorate the copy desk function. Whether this can be achieved, given the comments of those using its pagination system, remains to be seen.

One thing is certain, Australian newspapers should reflect on the American experience of eliminating copy desks and copy editing as a discrete function, especially if they want to reinvigorate the traditional sub-editor’s role of wordsmithing and improve the content quality of their publications.

NOTES

1. There is less certainty about the reaction of readers to increases in error rates such as literals and grammaticals. More research is required in this area.

2. Many thanks to Andrew Holden at *The Age* and Kim Lockwood at *The Herald Sun* for facilitating interviews with staff. Thanks also to the sub-editors, senior management and production staff who generously gave their time in interviews and provided assistance with sub-editing this paper.

3. Although it was not possible to quantify this, almost all sub-editors and some management said they had noticed more literals and grammatical errors in their publications.

4. Competition with other media such as the Internet and television has resulted in a high focus on design factors in newspapers.

5. Reporters in some Australian Provincial Newspapers newsrooms have already started to sub-edit and lay their own copy into pre-set page formats. Other newsrooms in the APN stable are gearing up to introduce similar work practices. APN owns 13 regional dailies in Queensland and New South Wales.
REFERENCES


---

JACQUI EWART lectures in journalism at Central Queensland University. She worked in regional newspapers and media management in Queensland for ten years, and is co-author of "Get Your Message Across" published by Allen and Unwin. Her research interests include technology and journalism, public journalism, and media representation of indigenous peoples. Email: j.ewart@cqu.edu.au