

Don't be depressed or editing your way out of a recession

A year ago, we were told that the Global Financial Crisis would bite and bite hard. Like everyone else, editors contemplated their prospects. Would it be as bad as the Great Depression? Worse? There were plenty of Hanrahans saying we'd all be rooned.

The glass half full brigade looked to the silver linings. There could be unforeseen advantages. A shake-up of international markets might lead to less consumption, less waste, a simpler and more sustainable way of living. In fact, there was a drop in traffic and road accidents in London and a recent report suggests that the economic downturn has led to the biggest fall in carbon emissions in more than three decades.¹

Since the news of the banking and financial sector meltdown broke, we've seen political solutions in the form of stimulus packages here in Australia and with counterparts elsewhere, and we are repeatedly told that green shoots are sprouting in the United States and in other countries. Even more optimistically, we are told that Australia has done much better than comparable countries, with job losses limited and recovery swifter than almost everywhere else. Could it be that the worst is over and it will soon be business as usual?

Despite the tentative signs of good news, almost exactly a year on, most of us are still holding our breath as to the magnitude of the downturn and its lasting implications. Today I want to explore with you what's happened in our neck of the woods over the past year and to make a modest contribution to futurology for editors.

While the effects of the economic downturn in the publishing industry can be measured by data that demonstrate that there is less full-time in-house employment and fewer job vacancies advertised, it's harder to measure the effects on freelancers. The fifth national survey of editors, which the Conference organisers have kindly distributed among your papers, may provide further information on this question. In the meantime, anecdotal evidence I've gathered from colleagues indicates that the flow of work to freelancers has diminished, but that there are signs of a tentative recovery.

This paper seeks to tease out what the landscape might look like in the aftermath of the GFC, to search for ways to take early steps to avoid the worst of it, and to reposition yourself and your business in a post-GFC world.

The pain will be spread unevenly

In March 2009, when I began to look at the implications of the GFC for editors, I did some crystal ball gazing combined with memories of downturns past. Here were my predictions.

- I predicted that the effects would depend on which **sector** you rely on: the sectors hardest hit in a depression would cut back on 'frills' like editing early on. While, historically, the most profitable sectors for editing are corporate, government, private, trade and academic, more or less in that order, I thought that in the wake of the current economic downturn, this was likely to change somewhat.
- **Business and corporate** clients, I reasoned, are often the first to see editing their publications as a luxury they can ill afford. Many would reduce the number of publications they produce. Advertising and marketing budgets would be slashed and that would mean fewer promotional texts would be sent out to editors.
- **Government** work would decrease, although some areas of government were likely to expand (the environment, social security and employment services for example). There would be a trend for editing work that used to be outsourced to be done in-house and there would be fewer showy and splashy launches, less glossy documentation. All of this means a smaller volume of work for editors but pockets of enhanced activity.
- **Private** clients (otherwise known as writers and authors) tend to continue to write through good times and bad. Most writers don't write primarily for the income it generates and those who employ editors will probably continue to employ editors. This said, everyone will feel the effects of the global downturn, including writers, and everyone will be looking to save on the cost of publication. Others may delay editing or try to do without it as a cost-saving measure.

This was the situation in March, when all the indications were for a dramatic downturn. Experienced economists spoke gloomily of double digit unemployment, a housing market crash of up to 40 per cent and massive losses in the finance and professional services sectors initially, followed by contractions in retail, manufacturing and export industries.

So much for futurology. This is what actually happened.

Trade publishing and the media in general contracted quite dramatically. The media took a nosedive internationally and, to a lesser extent, here in Australia, although it must be said that this trend predated the global financial crisis. Even the most successful publishing businesses are feeling the pinch. In March 2009, Lonely

Planet announced that it will be 'making up to 50 roles redundant across its global workforce and across a variety of departments'.²

This was followed by news that a contraction in employment across the publishing industry was confirmed by a survey conducted by *Weekly Book News* for the first quarter of 2009.

Compared to last year, the number of book trade jobs advertised in *WBN* has fallen significantly in the first quarter of 2009.

According to a survey of the positions vacant ads placed in *WBN*, figures from the first quarter of 2009 are suggesting that Australian publishers and booksellers are reluctant to offer new positions this year. It would seem that the book industry is approaching the looming economic recession cautiously.

For January this year the number of advertised jobs was less than half the number seen in January 2008.³

One thing is comfortingly certain. Whether conducted in house or sent to freelancers, publishers will continue to require the services of editors. They know the value of editing (even if they don't pay us accordingly).

Academic work is an area that might bring pleasant surprises in time. While the lead time for academic publications is several years, it's common for people to retreat to academia when jobs are scarce. School leavers see studying at university as more attractive than unemployment and if you're laid off and get a redundancy payment, a wise response is to retrain in an area with better job prospects. This suggests that the higher education sector will expand rather than contract, with a flow-on effect to academic publishing of books, journals, seminar and conference papers for academics and postgraduates and thesis editing. This last, although undeniably done for rock bottom rates in many cases, can be a reliable, if small, earner during hard times. Looking towards the longer term again, it is worth remembering that thesis editing can lead to working relationships with scholars-turned-academics who continue to turn to their reliable editor when they have conference and journal papers, chapter contributions or books that need your careful touch.

Another aspect of the uneven spread of the economic pain emerges from the feminised nature of the editing profession. Female workers are faring worse than males, according to an August ACTU report on the effects of the recession on women, whose findings include a 31 per cent lower earning capacity for women in some sectors of the economy, more women opting out of the labour market altogether, with consequently lower retirement savings.⁴ When you consider that

at last count, 87 per cent of editors are women, this finding has a disproportionate effect on our profession in these tough times.⁵

What can you do to shelter from the storm?

These sectoral variations mean that your **business profile** will be an important factor in how well you will weather the coming economic storm. How you fare will depend, too, on how established you are as an editor. If your work is well known and you have a stable of regular clients, you are in a better position than someone starting out as a freelancer and just beginning to develop a professional network and clientele.

Being **versatile** is always a handy character trait, whatever your profession. Many editors have more than one string to their bow. When casting about for additional income, work that editors look for outside their usual field might be in an entirely unrelated area or in another of their specialist subjects (history, legal affairs, science). Some people's sidelines are closely related to publications work. They might run workshops, act as readers for publishers or offer indexing services. Now could be a good time to polish up your networks and skills so that you can take advantage of more than one stream of income.

There will of course be **exceptions** to all the trends I've outlined: some areas of the corporate sector that do well while others fall, some publishers may prove to be unlikely success stories while a few of their competitors go broke. I'm not suggesting that we should abandon the more difficult areas of the industry and flock to those that may be seen as better prospects. There will always be work for good editors in every field and your wise choice might be to continue in the areas you've always worked in, even if there may not be as much work as you have been used to. Alternatively, a certain amount of strategic diversification could be necessary, in the short term at least.

Professionalism is always important but never more than when there are lots of freelancers hungry for work. Now, more than ever, a polished CV and good working relationships with clients are absolute necessities. Clients can pick and choose from a larger pool of editors when sending out work and those of us who run our own businesses can expect a rise in cold calling from people looking for subcontracting work. There will be a downward pressure on rates, which I think should be resisted. Good editors are valuable in all economic climates.

Learning from past experience

What do economists say about recessions and depressions in general? The received wisdom is that the finance and construction sectors are the first hit. Then consumer durables are the first to feel the pinch in the retail sector. Luxuries are abandoned in favour of necessities.

There is a theory that more affordable luxuries can boom — chocolate eating and cinema going are two that are often touted. Wouldn't it be nice if people turned to books for a cheap thrill? There's an indication that romance fiction might be the publishing industry's equivalent of chocolate in the company's statement that 'Mills & Boon will hopefully be a recession-proof brand'.⁶

Another turn-up for the books, so to speak, is the resurgence in self-help titles, including one from 1937. *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie, is back in the bestseller charts, along with a swag of newer motivational books by psychologists and philosophers writing for the general reader, including Martin Seligman and Alain de Botton.⁷ People are asking big questions. What's it all about? How should we live? What are the keys to happiness?

Apart from the resurgence in self-help books, what wisdom do 'old hands' have to offer about previous downturns? If you talk to your colleagues who worked their way through previous recessions, there are lessons to be learned. One colleague who ran an editing business for many years had this to say on the topic:

We remember the last recession in the early 1990s and the effect it had on our business when the public sector contracted hugely, let alone on people who relied far more on private sector work than we did. The lack of spending on perceived luxuries like editing continued for quite some time after the economists declared the recession had been over, too. So yes, to be starting out now would be challenging unless you had good, reliable contacts and, preferably, a partial-income stream from another source.⁸

While the focus of this paper is on the positive, this is the bitter medicine that editors may need to take. As things start getting better, it is likely that there will be a long tail on the dragon. Confidence returns incrementally. The upturn will arrive slowly and the positive effects of economic recovery will not be felt overnight. And unless you have a well planned entry to the profession, it's not an easy time to start out as an editor.

In the search for green shoots for editors the most promising candidate is a set of technical developments that have been around for many years but are still finding their identity — I speak of **electronic media and digital publishing**. Much of the fanfare that greeted these developments proved to be ephemeral. Predictions of the paperless office and the demise of the book were premature, but although the digital revolution has transformed the working life of editors, the potential has yet to be realised.

This is the first serious recession of the internet age, and I believe that now is the time for the scope of and applications for electronic media to come into their own. In the past couple of years, technological advances have matured into major branches of all aspects of the

publishing industry — transforming publicity, sales, advertising, employment, marketing and promotion. The speed of the transition will accelerate as readers age and users take their place. But perhaps the major force driving the expansion of e-publishing is the cost benefits. The digital age, contend some analysts, 'is exerting an inexorable downward pressure on the prices of all things "made of ideas."' ⁹ It is certainly transforming the publishing industry.

In the year to July 2009, 'travel guidebook sales fell by 18.1% in the UK, Australia and the US as a result of the economic downturn' but digital revenues were up. ¹⁰ 'Online sales of books in Australia have grown in recent years, but are still estimated at only about 5% of the market.' If we look beyond our shores, we see that 'In the US and the UK, this figure is more like 20% and growing rapidly'.

Editors are well advised to position themselves at the forefront of this development. For editors to move into digital publishing and marketing requires investment of time, development of skills and a degree of risk-taking, this last never easy in a time of economic uncertainty. Yet if you take the view that the future will increasingly be electronic, it is an investment in the future, an investment in relevance.

Job titles can be an important way to carve out a niche in the emerging technical publishing world. What's in a name? Often it can mean a large wage differential. The skill set between editor and content manager might be slight but the remuneration gap can be large. One Sydney editor describes herself as a 'communications consultant' and reports that she is able to command higher rates than if she calls herself an editor, despite the fact that the work she performs is the same.

Of course, many editors have been integrating their work with online publishing as part or all of their professional activities, some for many years. But for those who've seen web publishing and the technical skills required for online editing (as distinct from onscreen editing) as optional extras in their professional toolbox, the time has come for most old hands and all newcomers to regard working online as a core set of skills, integrated into a thorough knowledge of the production process, management, substance and structure, language, illustrations and consistency, all the five *Australian Standards for Editing Practice*.

The benefits of **diversification** have never been more compelling. Spreading your eggs so that they are not all in one basket has always been a successful strategy many employ to conduct their editing business. In a shrinking economic market, it will be a lifesaver for some. While there are undeniable benefits to specialisation, most freelancers are generalists or at least they rely on more than one niche area of editing. The wisdom of being known in more than one area

becomes apparent when you can direct your work to areas that are not so hard hit.

Diversification is not simply a matter of subject areas but also a question of client base. Editors who rely on one or two main clients may find it wise to spread their dependence a little wider so that if their chief bread-and-butter gigs dry up, they don't find that the bulk of their steady income disappears with them.

There are always exceptions to general trends. Just as there is still a demand for skilled blacksmiths in contemporary Australia, so traditional editing techniques will never be obsolete. There will continue to be work for competent editors with a strong background in traditional book editing—albeit a shrinking demand pool. And specialisation can reap its own rewards by allowing individual editors and editing businesses to become known in a particular field.

Working smarter has been the relentless advice in management circles for the last couple of decades, and not just to editors. Inelegant as the phrase may be, it is more important than ever to offer services to clients that provide tangible benefits. When times are tough, clients can be more choosy about who they work with. Strategies that save time without cutting corners on quality will stand you in good stead in a competitive market. This might be greater use of macros or something as basic and useful as improving your turnaround on providing quotes.

Accreditation deserves a separate mention as a strategy to weather the economic crisis. It is too early to assess the impact of accreditation in the marketplace but early indications were that employers welcomed accreditation as a means of ensuring quality control for the editors they engage. This is the time when being an Accredited Editor will stand you in good stead as a tangible way of showcasing your skills.

Analysing your own business trends and directions. Putting thought and time into planning, marketing and getting your records up to date are productive ways to use your time. We rarely have the time to analyse our own businesses when those dead lions are growling. A lull in work coming in provides an opportunity to look at the trends in your own business. You're bound to find interesting aspects and ideas for new approaches. If you have spare capacity, now could be the perfect time to analyse your clientele over the past year or two. How many of your clients are repeat clients? What proportion of your work comes from government, corporate and private sources? Which are the most profitable and dependable sources of income? Are there any identifiable trends? Do the results of your analysis hold lessons for directions you could pursue?

Once you've identified the areas that you wish to pursue, **marketing** your skills is the next step. From a well designed business card to viral marketing strategies, a growing range of strategies to enhance your business profile online is worth investigating. Establishing a blog, maintaining a new media profile are just some of the arenas that can promote your skills and experience as an editor. Journalists have set up web-based profiles such as The Earley Edition,¹¹ a blog that links to over 500 journalists' twitter accounts, as well as You Tube and Photobucket. There is scope for individual editing associations and IPEd to take similar new media initiatives on behalf of their members and I'm aware that some societies of editors have already established Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Here's one we all love. **Catching up on administration** and setting up systems. How long is it since you went through your filing system? What about going through your stationery cupboard and stocking up on supplies rather than dashing out when you need them? This could be a good time to rearrange your office or to archive the last ten years of electronic files of the manuscripts you've worked on. You could pull out (then neatly file away!) the conference papers and workshops you've attended and look through them again, something you always meant to do but never had time.

When times get tough, you go where the work is. Julie Covington's words from *Rock Follies* are worth considering in these trying times. As internet-based workers, freelance editors have an advantage over people who are tied to work prospects in a particular place. Now could be the time to expand your interstate and, indeed, international networks. The beauty of the internet is that you can do it without leaving your desk.

IPEd could be a valuable mechanism to help in this process if a national employment forum and database of editors were promoted under its auspices. This national conference is a great opportunity to extend your connections in the field, to compare notes with colleagues and to go home with new ideas to try out, business leads to follow up, like-minded souls to get to know better as part of your personal network.

Discounting is one response that sometimes crops up in tough times. It's not, however, the best policy to cave in immediately to what you perceive may be tough times with reduced rates or working conditions. In my experience of more than a couple of decades in the editing game, clients and employers will respond to reduced rates with alacrity but without loyalty or professional respect. Through the first year of the crypto-recession, I have not reduced my fees or my professional standards and I have found clients no less willing to pay appropriate rates than during the boom times.

This strategy would be strengthened if there were national support in the form of an IPEd-promulgated minimum rate for professional editing services. To my knowledge, only one editing association that has taken this step, with an advertised recommended minimum rate for its members of \$60 an hour, roughly the average that emerged from the last national survey of editors conducted in 2007.¹² ANZSI, the Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers, an allied craft, has recommended minimum professional rates for its members. The current rate for indexers, set in 2007, stands at \$60 (not including GST) and is due for review this year.

This would send a message to clients and employers that there is a minimum standard and one hopes that it would eventually put an end to job advertisements for rates as low as half that amount.

That doesn't mean that prospective clients won't try it on. A colleague wrote to me, 'I was recently offered \$20 per hour to create image credits pages. I can earn \$50 per hour as a cleaner! Makes one wonder what the hell one is doing.'¹³ I think you should know that she rejected the offer, stuck to her guns and was offered more appropriate remuneration.

Research. This is always my favourite area. As a fiction editor, reading novels, short stories and poetry is essential to my work. It's a tough job but someone has to do it. Now might be a great time to amble down to your favourite bookshop and head to the section on language and writing or on your own special field, whether it's archaeology or the law or education or any of the many areas that editors specialise in. You may need to use your credit card, but you can console yourself with the thought that the money you spend is both tax deductible and supporting your own industry. And there are always libraries.

Research can also mean catching up on developments in your specialist field — environment, education, health — whatever it might be.

A weather eye on developments in the book publishing industry is another important way to keep your finger on the pulse. According to an ABA survey released in August this year, there has been a continuation of pressure on small, independent booksellers and an increasing market share to the big discount outlets and chain stores.¹⁴

As a profession, we need our voice to be heard at **regional and national forums**. Perhaps the most important event in publishing has been the debate about parallel book importing in a submission to the Productivity Commission. This is precisely the sort of debate that editors should participate in, both to make our views known and to wave the flag of our profession to allied professionals and policy makers alike. I was pleased to note that IPEd had raised its voice,

together with other industry groups such as the APA, the ASA, agents on the matter of parallel importing. Its submission to the Minister positioned editing as an integral component of the publishing industry.

Having considered the evidence available, we believe that such a move would have a severe negative impact on many people in all areas of Australian publishing, starting with local authors and flowing through to editors, book designers and typesetters, publishers, paper suppliers, printers and booksellers. While this list is not exhaustive it nevertheless already equates to a significant pool of employment. Furthermore, the local publishing industry is a crucial part of our nation's cultural infrastructure that we feel should be protected rather than abandoned for a benefit that is by no means certain to occur.¹⁵

Education and professional development. Keeping your skills up to date is an imperative for editors, in good times and in bad. Using down time to learn new software, new skills (indexing, say, or branching out into subject areas or genres that are new to you) is a productive use of your time when you have spare capacity. According to your preferences and budget, it might be worth considering enrolling in a professional course, whether it's a one-day workshop, a week-long design course, an online editing program or a full-time course at a tertiary institution for a semester or longer.

Get a life. If you love the work you do and you really don't want to specialise in a growth area like childhood obesity or begin a career tackling other people's theses, you might decide to accept that your earnings will be less than you have been used to for the last few years and to wait it out until the economy picks up. A lot of editors have lives outside publications work, ranging from alternative careers and interests to burning unfulfilled ambitions. If you can swing it, you might want to spend the time you used to burn the midnight oil on manuscripts learning salsa dancing or joining a book club, bushwalking or having a baby (don't laugh, it happens). I say why not? I would, however, draw the line at the following despairing comment I came across on a freelancers' e-list: 'I think it's time to start thinking about a life of crime.'

Perhaps most of all, the answer is in collegiality. Whether through lists, personal networks or more formal business arrangements, there is scope for greater cooperation and connections among editors and between us and our partners in publishing. I have been called a Pollyanna in my time, and my natural tendency is towards optimism. I'm not so blind that I can't see the coming years as a turning point in both publications and editing. Now, more than ever before in my personal experience of the industry, editors need to argue for their relevance, put themselves forward and provide a thoughtful commentary on the value of clarity, elegance and style in the written word.

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/jun/25/uk-road-deaths-record-low> and <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/09/21/2692493.htm?section=justin>.

² *Weekly Book Newsletter*, 4 March 2009.

³ Book trade employment off to a rough start for 2009, *WBN*, 20 May 2009.

⁴ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2009/08/24/2664199.htm?section=justin>.

⁵ Pamela Hewitt, *Fourth National Survey of Editors*, 2008, www.emendediting.com/blog.

⁶ *WBN*, 4 March 2009.

⁷ Carole Cadwalladr, 'Welcome to positive living' *The Observer*, 4 October 2009.

⁸ Robyn Colman, personal communication, 9 February 2009.

⁹ From Chris Anderson, *Free: The future of a radical price*, cited in Malcolm Gladwell, 'Is free the future?', *The New Yorker*, 6 July 2009.

¹⁰ *WBN*, 22 July 2009.

¹¹ <http://earleyedition.com/2009/07/04/501-australian-journalists-and-news-media-people-on-twitter/>, a blog established by Dave Earley with 501 journalists' Twitter accounts and links to YouTube and photobucket.

¹² Pamela Hewitt, *Fourth National Survey of Editors*.

¹³ Personal communication, 15 July 2009.

¹⁴ 'A large increase has been seen in discount department stores, a smaller increase in chain stores and zero growth to minimal decline in independents, generally due to results for rural and regional bookstores.' ABA CEO Malcolm Neil quoted in *WBN*, 5th Aug 2009.

¹⁵ IPEd submission to the Hon Peter Garrett, Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, 3 August 2009.