

This essay, written in June 2012, was part of the required work for completing a Postgraduate Certificate in Editing at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. The task set was to write about the scope of editing in the twenty-first century with specific reference to a current job advertisement.

The Scope of Editing in the Twenty-first Century

By Kate Manton

In the twentieth century, Roland Barthes announced the death of the author.¹ In the twenty-first century, some are arguing that the editor is headed the same way,² but such reports might be premature. For one thing, according to Barthes the author's death made way for the pre-eminence of the reader, and an editor is, if nothing else, a reader and a readers' advocate. For another, governments, corporations and publishers are still advertising for editors. A recent scan through the advertisements on the *Seek* jobs website delivered a creditable list of roles, including a print publications officer for a community organisation, a book editor/project coordinator for a publishing company, a magazine subeditor/writer, and a number of online editors/copywriters/web publishers.³ One advertisement, reproduced at the Attachment, stood out as a particularly good example of the role of a modern editor.

The required Online Communications Editor for the federal government's Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency will have a wide range of skills, from writing, through copy-editing to project management. Let's start, though, with the fact that this editor will be working entirely with online publications, primarily the Agency's website. Discussions abound about whether the book, too, is dying,⁴ but the book could be long cold in the grave while the editor is alive and well and working on the internet. Where there is published communication, there will be editors. As editor Jenny Lee writes, 'In an environment of information overload, the quality of communication is more important than ever, and editing is the most effective form of quality control at our disposal.'⁵

Website editors require all the skills in the editorial toolbox, save those specific to print production, but they also need to be 'content strategists'. As practitioner Kristina Halvorson defines it, 'content strategy plans for the creation, publication, and governance of useful, usable content.'⁶ It's how you decide what to publish, how you structure it, how you produce it. On the web it is also often called information architecture;⁷ in print, it's mostly called editing. Once, an editor might have needed to 'pick up your fountain pen and begin work on the manuscript',⁸ as editor Janet Mackenzie remembers. Now, editors working in the online environment are likely to

be coding with HTML or XML (to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the availability of technical staff), wrangling a content management system and processing graphics. All this in addition to getting the text right.

This task of getting the text into working order is still central to an editor's role. The advertised job requires the applicant to have 'a strong editorial background' and be able to ensure that 'content is optimised and accessible'. The second selection criterion is 'experience working within, and upholding, brand and written style guidelines ... to ensure content meets those standards.' The *Australian Standards for Editing Practice* outline in some detail the extensive copy-editing and structural editing skills an editor must possess.⁹ It is no surprise that editors are passionate advocates for clear text, as they see how much skill goes into refining the work submitted until it becomes the work published. Sylvia Hunter, a journal editor, writes, 'Why bother publishing your thoughts or your findings if they are so poorly conveyed, so ungrammatical or so disorganized, as to be impenetrable to your colleagues?'¹⁰ The Agency advertising for an online editor understands that this tenet applies as much to an organisation's public communication as it does to scholarly publishing.

Far from being dead, editing has blossomed into new areas — an editor can be involved in books, magazines, journals, annual reports, corporate and other websites, newspapers, blogs, and so on. However, some commentators have expressed anxiety about the future of editing in book publishing, the area traditionally associated with editors, because of the increasing presence of ebooks.¹¹ This concern largely results from the growing phenomenon of self-publishing, as ebook technology makes it easier for authors to bypass publishers. One Amazon executive has said that 'the only really necessary people in the publishing process now are the writer and the reader. Everyone who stands between those two has both risk and opportunity.'¹² The role of the editor is uncertain in these new arrangements, with one commentator asserting that 'Amazon pays editors as if the editor lived in a third-world country' and arguing:

An even more fundamental shift that I expect to see is that increasingly less work will come from publishers and the burden of hiring an editor will fall on the author. Should that occur, it will be disastrous for the author, for the editor, and for the reader. Experience so far with authors is that few are willing to invest the necessary resources for professional editing in the absence of pressure from a third party, such as pressure from a peer-reviewed journal. The gamble is too great and the value of editorial services is too ephemeral, not readily seen.¹³

The reference to third-world countries is also telling, as editing is becoming more of a globalised profession. Our online editor might well need to attend the Agency that employs him or her, because of the need to work closely with the rest of the

organisation. If that editor needs to outsource a big copy-editing project, though, there's no real reason not to send the job to any qualified person who can email files. So for editors it is becoming increasingly important to define what 'qualified' means. In Australia, the Institute of Professional Editors and all the state societies of editors have engaged in a concerted effort to define the profession. The *Standards of Editing Practice* are a fundamental part of this effort, as is the introduction of the Accredited Editor qualification.¹⁴

A key challenge will be to ensure adequate pay for editors. In this regard, too, our online editor will be faring better than many in traditional book publishing. An annual salary of \$83,000 is considerably higher than the average earnings of an Australian editor. In a recent article urging editors to avoid underquoting, Renée Otmar and three other senior editors state that a 2011 survey 'with a total of 345 respondents from across the profession, found that freelancers were now earning approximately \$62 per hour, or \$49,000 per annum, before tax'. The authors note that, by comparison, 'in May 2010, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported the largest group of employees in Australia to be professionals (19.8 per cent of the work force) earning on average a total weekly cash salary of \$1348, or \$70,137 per annum, before tax'.¹⁵ Perhaps as the scope of editing expands to include a wider range of roles, some with proper professional remuneration, editors might be in a position to charge higher rates in the traditional area of book publishing. It is not clear, though, whether publishers would be able to accommodate higher wages within a business model already under strain.

Given that the advertised job is paid at a higher rate, it is appropriate that it involves project management, as outlined in the fourth selection criterion. The *Standards for Editing Practice* include a substantial section on project management, under the heading 'Management and Liaison', stating that 'regardless of the size of the publication or the extent of the editor's role, all editors need to manage their own (and sometimes others') time and resources.' Some editorial jobs would involve only management of one's own work, but it appears that this role will require the editor to manage the whole online publishing program.

This role, in fact, is a good example of how many skills one editor needs to have, especially in a small publishing team. For instance, this online editor will also need 'to acquire detailed knowledge of gender equality issues in the workplace and an appreciation of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999', and it is interesting to note how often editors are required to possess specialist knowledge. Janet Mackenzie writes that 'in a world of increasing specialisation, most [editors] are generalists'.¹⁶ Many editors, though, can only function with specialist knowledge, and this is as much the case in 2012 as ever before. Editors of scholarly editions and

journals, performing both curatorial and copy-editing functions, have in-depth understanding of their topics; editors in government and corporate organisations end up as specialists because they are usually editing text that essentially has only one author and one subject matter. Equally, editors must be able to write well, and some editorial jobs, such as the one advertised, require the editor to produce a great deal of original copy.

When this online editor is not project managing, writing copy, copy-editing and content strategising, he or she will be editing images (first selection criterion); the advertisers state that ‘some experience with multimedia would be a plus’. Editors in the twenty-first century are increasingly working directly with visual material rather than issuing instructions to other professionals in the area. They may even be involved in editing works in a ‘transmedia’ environment: in *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins defines transmedia storytelling as ‘stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world’.¹⁷ Some transmedia projects will not require traditional text editing but others will require creative editing across boundaries. J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books, for example, have grown into a transmedia project, with the launch of the *Pottermore* website adding to the many products already surrounding the series.¹⁸ As transmedia expert Jeff Gomez recently said:

From a transmedia standpoint, I think that digital books only scratch the surface. If [*Pottermore*’s] producers are clever — and I think they are — what they’ve done is created a communal storytelling engine, a battery that will continue to grow and nurture the Harry Potter brand for many years to come.¹⁹

This transmedia environment exemplifies the trend for communication to be directly between the author and the reader. As noted above, some predict that authors will be increasingly responsible for the quality of their own work, and it seems that the reader, too, could be asked to perform some of the ‘curatorial’ role currently performed by editors and publishers. Javier Celaya, vice-president of the Spanish Digital Magazines Association, writes that ‘there are all kinds of possible transmedia business models ... but all of them have a common denominator: a direct relationship with the user ... [T]he relationship between companies and their users (B2C) will be more important than the current intermediation process from “company to company” (B2B).’²⁰ A different commentator, writing about digital scholarly publishing, notes approvingly that ‘all readers may become editors too’.²¹ It’s not clear, though, whether readers, or ‘users’, really want to take on this job. The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency clearly thinks that users of its website need an intermediary;²² it is employing an Online Communications Editor for just this purpose.

It's plain that the ease with which text and images can be published digitally is challenging traditional publishing and editing. In a recent book of essays about the future of the book, *Hand Made High Tech*, two authors illustrate different attitudes to these challenges. One, editor and writer Ryan Paine, despairs:

If, in their fight with Google for a monopoly, Amazon gain an ascendancy in the production and distribution of literature to the same extent News Ltd has gained control of the world's news media, our literature will go the way of our journalism: as meat goes to domesticated dogs — cheap, nasty and homogenised.²³

The other, Peter Donoughue, a veteran of book publishing, argues that good editing will be the last thing standing in the publishing industry:

Perhaps I'm naive in thinking that this serious, collaborative, sympathetic profession of editing will be re-born as the core of publishing. But I do know this: people are sick to death of unedited prose — the knotty, clotted, jargon-infested illiterate bilge that clogs our time and space. How refreshing and joyous it is to read clear, lucid, beautifully balanced sentences that sing and instantly communicate.²⁴

That's a sound, optimistic note to finish on. Perhaps we may not be looking at the death of the editor so much as the death of the traditional publisher. The Online Communications Editor will be performing a crucial role: without this editor the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency's website would be a disorganised list of unevenly written documents. Without editors, readers would have no advocates; without editors, authors would have no-one to read, filter, curate, judge, encourage, clarify and refine. It is of little relevance whether the text is printed with ink, pixels or e-ink, or not printed at all but spoken in a podcast or an audiobook. In any medium, to err is human; to improve is still the editor's job.

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Endnotes

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² Murphy, J. Stephen, 'The Death of the Editor', *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 58, no. 4, October 2008, pp 289–310.

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⁶ Halvorson, Kristina, 'The Discipline of Content Strategy', *A List Apart*, 16 December 2008, <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/thedisciplineofcontentstrategy/>, accessed 12 June 2012.

⁷ See, for example: The Information Architecture Institute, <http://iainstitute.org/>, accessed 15 June 2012.

⁸ Mackenzie, Janet, *The Editor's Companion*, second edition, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2011, p 17.

⁹ Council of Australian Societies of Editors, *Australian Standards for Editing Practice*, 2001, http://iped-editors.org/site/DefaultSite/filesystem/documents/Standards_Website.pdf, accessed 8 June 2012.

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¹⁷ Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, New York, 2006, p 293.

¹⁸ *Pottermore*, <http://www.pottermore.com/>, accessed 12 June 2012.

¹⁹ Humphrey, Michael, 'Pottermore: Expert Explains How Harry Potter's Website Will Transform Storytelling', *Forbes*, 29 July 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelhumphrey/2011/07/29/pottermore-expert-explains-how-harry-potters-website-will-transform-storytelling/>, accessed 12 June 2012.

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²³ Paine, Ryan, 'You're the Voice', in Groth, Simon (ed), *Hand Made High Tech*, Press Books, December 2011, Kindle edition, location 251.

²⁴ Donoghue, Peter, 'Moving On', in Groth, Simon (ed), *Hand Made High Tech*, Press Books, December 2011, Kindle edition, location 212.

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Listed 1 Jun 2012



Online Communications Editor

- \$72,508 to \$82,955 pa plus 15.4% superannuation
- Australian Government Agency
- North Sydney location

The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) is an Australian Government Agency that assists organisations to achieve gender equality in the workplace.

We are looking for a creative, energetic and committed person with superior communication and interpersonal skills to join our communications team in the senior position of Online Communications Editor.

The ideal candidate will have experience working with web technologies and a strong editorial background. Duties will include producing content for publication on the Agency's website, advising on improvements to the Agency's online presence, and ensuring content is optimised and accessible.

Applicants will need to meet the following selection criteria:

Selection Criteria 1:

Demonstrated experience in maintaining a corporate, government or news website with large volumes of content, including editing of images.

Selection Criteria 2:

Experience working within, and upholding, brand and written style guidelines and working across an organisation to ensure content meets those standards.

Selection Criteria 3:

Demonstrated excellence in oral and written communication, including the ability to translate complex or technical information into plain English.

Selection Criteria 4:

Ability to work quickly and independently, including ability to deliver a large quantity of time-critical work under broad guidance.

Selection Criteria 5:

Ability to acquire a detailed understanding of gender equality issues in the workplace and an appreciation of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999.

Whilst not essential, tertiary qualifications in Communications and some experience with multimedia would be a plus.

We are an equal opportunity workplace and seek applications from suitably qualified men and women.

In order to be considered for this role **you must address all the selection criteria**. We recommend that you obtain a copy of the Application Package for this role from our website www.eowa.gov.au

Alternatively you are welcome to contact EOWA on (02) 9432 7000, or email recruitment@eowa.gov.au.

Your application must be emailed to recruitment@eowa.gov.au by close of business on Sunday, 17 June 2012.

Email: Please click the 'Apply Now' button below.

www.eowa.gov.au