

## The news flow and copy editing

### INTRODUCTION

In media organizations, news stories flow through a channel from the reporter or a writer to the editor. The reporter who does the leg-work or a writer who contributes a piece of writing acts as the first gate-keeper. The manuscript Reporters or writers file is called copy. In the process, the copy passes through many media gate-keepers who make inputs so that the copy will conform to the organisational houses style, news value, ethics and legal standards. In doing that, both the reporter and others in the copy flow chain are guided by so many factors which could be personal, socio-economic, political and religious factors.

### The News Flow

In newspapers and magazines, there are so many intermediary communicators between an event and the ultimate receiver (the readers). A magazine's schedule allocates time for all the editorial tasks, from initial commissioning of news story to reporters, through picture research to sub-editing and layout. The nature of the information will determine the nature and number of the intermediaries. These intermediaries are the gate-keepers. For instance, a copy can flow from the reporter to the deputy political editor, to the political editor, deputy editor and then the editor. The sub editors have to enforce that schedule, ensuring that copy arrives and pages leave on time. The subs should have editors support in their struggle to enforce deadlines. They are also responsible for keeping control of copy-flow. Ensuring that the correct files come in and go out. A logical structure of file names is important here, to log traffic between editorial office and outside facilities. Subs must know editorial computer programs and system inside out.

### Copy Editing

Copy-flow is a complex matter. It determines the sequence of events from initial ideas to the moment the magazine leaves the editorial floor, whether as old fashioned pasted-up pages and bags of transparencies, optical disks, electronic data down the cable or even finished printing plates. It is not one single sequence. At various points, things happen simultaneously. There will

be numerous 'feedback loops' where work, once done, is assessed and if necessary done again. And, to add to the complication, schedules for several issues will overlap. Given these difficulties, it is no surprise that most editors stick with the schedule they inherit, rather than taking a clean sheet of paper. Editors might start tidying up by drawing up a flowchart, a working drawing that will let you take account of your resources: people, materials and time. Don't expect to get it all on one neat diagram. Isolate various aspects of the problem and deal with them one at a time. Separate sheets of paper might show you what all your people are doing at various times, where editorial copy is going in paper and digital form, what proofing materials are being generated and the paths they take, and so on. Start with planning. There will probably be some kind of initial meeting with section editors, if your magazine is that big, or your writers will bring their ideas, but also the information you need to help you organise the issue: the dates of significant

events for both you and your readers, and so on. You should have any publishing information that is available at this stage: issue size ('pagination'), the likely advertising volume and editorial allocation, and anything else that will take up editorial space, such as in-house adverts, offer pages and competitions. You

discuss how to fill that space, and by the end you should be well on the way to working out an approximate running order. The next stage is commissioning and briefing. You find suitable writers, photographers, illustrators and picture libraries and brief them, preferably in writing. In-house contributors have to be organised too. It is possible to commission photography, and start library research, before you have the words. Illustrators, though, often need the writing, because they respond to specific phrases and verbal images. All parties must be well aware of 'copy in' dates which will have been set by your chief sub/production editor. The next stage, which you might call initial editing or rough editing, starts as soon as the first commissioned material begins to arrive. At this stage, good 'housekeeping' is essential. Most copy now arrives via e-mail, but if any printed manuscripts arrive they should be copied and stored safely. Whatever form commissioned material takes, it needs to be logged in and safely stored. Incoming material should be copied to the correct computer folder or queue and allocated to the appropriate editor. The copied files should be renamed according to a meaningful convention devised by your chief sub/production editor to ensure

that the right versions make their way into the right issues. (If you are working on Apple Macs, you can also colour the file icons to identify different versions.) The whole naming system should be the sole responsibility of one person, probably the chief sub/ production editor, but there should be a written explanation of how it works for use in emergencies. Preferably the filename should indicate the issue of the magazine it is intended for and the status of the copy, but beware that the lengths of filenames are limited in some computer systems. You might start with a one-word title, then add the date, then the initials of the first copy editor. When someone else passes it, let them add their name: And so on, remembering to bear in mind your system manager's rules about file naming. A sophisticated editorial management system, built around a database, will ensure that once a file is brought into the system it cannot be lost or overwritten.

It should always be possible to revert to the last saved version. Systems such as the Quark Publishing System allow the locking and unlocking of files, so that stories can even be copy edited while others are laying them out. Those who have to manage with simple networks of individual computers have to devise their own systems for ensuring that originals are kept safe and that files are opened and edited sequentially. It is foolish to spend time polishing a feature that someone else has already edited and passed. It is also essential that your designers lay out stories using the correct versions of the text. It is a good idea to read the original story on paper. It can be printed out and a 'top-sheet' form stapled to it carrying details of the story's origin and progress. There can be a checkbox to indicate its progress—or rather the progress of its equivalent in the computer system—as it makes its way from editor to subs and on to layout. Or there may be a 'job bag', a plastic or paper file holding everything of relevance. Different editors tick or initial the top-sheet as the story makes its way around them. The top-sheet should also include author contact details and information about the original commission, for instance how long it is supposed to be and what it is intended for.

Later, relevant proofs and even transparencies will be added to this growing file of material, which moves around the office as the computer file moves around the system. Depending on the time available to you, and your confidence in your commissioning and editing staff, you may choose not to read original copy. But

you will certainly want to read early edits of the story, and the original should always be available as part of the 'job file' or 'job bag'.



At the initial edit, editors and senior staff should be making sure the copy fits the brief, and then cutting and shaping stories, sending them back for rewrites, adding any panels and boxes, and thinking about headlines, stand firsts and other display matter. Some magazines have a single meeting at which all headlines are written in a batch. There is a danger here of allowing these important elements to become 'samey', stereotyped and tired. Better, probably, to allow individual stories and individual editors to suggest their own headlines. The first broad copy-editing stage must be followed by a sub-editing stage, in which subs check facts, construction, legality, grammar, spelling, house style and the rest. The copy will probably go to the chief sub first, who will allocate it appropriately. Traditionally, subs have done most of the rewriting and the writing of headlines, stand firsts and captions. Increasingly those tasks have moved up the hierarchy, leaving subs to become more involved in copyfitting. Editing constitutes a major aspect of treatment of contents in newspaper and magazine production. No matter the nature of a story, its newsworthiness and relevance to the readers; poor editing could mess it up or even give an opposite meaning to the message the publication wants to pass out. Editing is a painstaking job which involves:

Removing irrelevant or unwanted portions of a story including making corrections, rewriting portions of the story, and ensuring that the house style (accepted way of presenting stories by an establishment) is adhered to. It also involves the consideration of ethics, legal issues, ownership and advertisers interest. Since media houses have dual mandate, one to the society and the other to the owners, the editors and management team try to balance these two mandates in their daily operation. Scholars have listed seven reasons for editing.

These are:

- **editing for correctness-this is editing to correct weak sentences, wrong spellings, etc**
- **editing for grammar**
- **editing for accuracy of facts**
- **editing for balance**
- **editing for safety**
- **editing for clarity**
- **editing for style**

Also, editorial matter could be edited for space. By this stage, the art process will be under way. Once, there were two quite distinct processes: design and page make-up. Designers used pictures and typewritten copy and heading material provided by editors and subs to create paper layouts. They passed these to typesetters and finished artists who made the pages that would be made into printing plates, using either metal or photographic paper and film.

The Mac and QuarkXpress (and Adobe InDesign, more recently) have removed that whole stage. But it is still sensible for designers to work on designs, after reading the copy and examining the pictures, before they try to create the finished pages using real text and graphics. Editorial design should start as a visual statement into which editorial matter is brought, rather than as a mass of editorial matter which the design struggles to accommodate and prettify.