

Editing for Today's Changing Media

THE EDITOR'S CHANGING ROLE

For generations, news was produced and distributed in assembly-line fashion. Reporters gathered and wrote it, editors edited it, and publishers produced and distributed it in print or broadcast form to mass audiences. It was a one-to-many model born in the Industrial Revolution.

Editors in that environment served as **gatekeepers**. They decided when to open the gate, allowing information to flow to the public. Editors had total control over what was published or broadcast. They determined which stories were *newsworthy*—those they deemed useful, relevant or interesting to their audiences. Editors controlled the gate, and consumers got only what editors gave them.

Editors also controlled the **play** a story received. Was it newsworthy enough for Page One, where almost everyone would notice it, or should it be relegated to a brief on Page 37, where few would read it? Did it make the cover of *Time*, or did it not make the magazine at all? Did it warrant top billing on the evening newscast, or was it left to the local newspaper?

Editors were powerful. They called all the shots.

Today, that is far from universally true. The Internet and wireless devices (mobile phones and tablet computers) allow users to *choose* what news they want to consume from multiple providers—some traditional and some not—and from digital databases of information vastly larger than the content of the nation's largest newspaper or a 24-hour-a-day cable-television news channel. In this more egalitarian environment, the one-to-many model disappears, and the user takes control.

Consumers now have almost unlimited access to millions of daily news items on the Internet. Sophisticated software allows them to program computers or wireless devices to receive only the news they want. Increasingly, that software, not an editor, serves as the gatekeeper. The consumer, not the editor, has control of the flow of information.

Obviously, not everyone consumes news this way. Editors still serve as gatekeepers at newspapers and magazines, and in radio and television newsrooms. Editors still choose what to put on the front page of news websites. Editors still edit newsletters,

corporate magazines and even advertisements. But an ever-increasing percentage of the world's population is discovering that it doesn't need editors to get information.

Editors, for their part, lament the erosion of their power. One veteran editor said at a meeting of newspaper editors: "We have historically performed a great service to society by setting the public agenda. When people consume only news that they want or like to read, they miss out on reading about important public issues they *need* to know about. Not many people want to read about garbage collection or sewer plants, but they need to know about the city's problems with those things."

The point is well-taken. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television have performed an important public function in setting the public agenda. Editors must continue to find ways to serve that function in an era when the audience is no longer a captive one. That will happen only if editors produce compelling publications, newscasts and online sites that are perceived to be accurate and truthful.

Editors, then, are faced with a changing environment. No longer are their roles as gatekeepers and **agenda setters** guaranteed. In today's changing media environment, these roles must be earned. Consumers must trust editors to give them what they need to know to be productive citizens. Consumers must perceive value in the editor as gatekeeper and agenda setter. Consumers must perceive a need to have editors help them sort through the sea of information now at their disposal.

Earning that trust won't be easy. Each time a newspaper makes a mistake or a television station ignores real news in favor of the sensational, public confidence in the media erodes. Each time a cable news network passes off editorializing as news, the credibility of that medium among thoughtful consumers erodes a bit more.

Editors cannot afford to be arrogant. They must earn the public's trust by making good judgments and presenting the news fairly and accurately. If they fail to do that, their influence will continue to diminish.

Thus, the best path editors can follow is this one: Practice good journalism grounded in the fundamentals of truth and accuracy. In the end, this is the only way to earn the public's trust.



DEMOCRATIZATION OF THE MEDIA

The one-to-many model big media employed exclusively in the past still exists, but it exists alongside a new form of media known as **citizen journalism**. Modern technology lowers the cost of entry into the media business. Desktop-publishing programs such as Adobe InDesign have made typesetting and design a snap, which in turn lowers the cost of starting a printed publication. The Web makes it simple for anyone with Internet access to create a website. **Podcasting** and **vodcasting** make it easy to create a radio or television program and distribute it worldwide. The result? Anyone and everyone can publish a newspaper, newsletter or magazine. Anyone and everyone can be a broadcaster.

These easily accessible media provide ample opportunities for the public to avoid big media if it so desires. Think *The New York Times* has a liberal bias? Avoid it by

going to any number of conservative websites. Think your local newspaper does a poor job of covering recruiting for your favorite college football team? Avoid it by going to a website that covers nothing but what you want.

The problem with the old one-to-many model is that readers don't get to talk back or discuss the issues except in limited ways. Sure, you can write a letter to the editor about a story you dislike, but it may or may not be published. What readers and viewers want is a chance to *discuss* the news with those who report it. Readers and viewers want to read about or see things the traditional media seldom cover. They want to be part of the news-gathering and reporting process. They want their views heard.

Some editors are embracing the concept. Increasingly, blogs on the sites of traditional media provide a forum for readers to criticize a newspaper column or blast a television station for gory coverage of a crime. Some have gone even further. The *Columbia Missourian* devotes space daily to reader-produced news. Local citizens write stories and take photographs. Newspaper editors work with them to do minor editing and design the pages. The result? Readers who write for the paper feel a connection to it that never existed before. And for the stuff that won't fit in the printed product, there's also an outlet—space on the newspaper's website called From Readers.

Editors around the country, like those in Columbia, are embracing citizen-produced news as a welcome extension of what they do. After all, reporters can't be everywhere and can't cover every story. Citizen journalism allows editors to extend their coverage in ways never before possible.



THE CHANGING MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

While the role of the editor is changing, it is doing so in consort with the changing nature of the media. Consider these realities:

- Newspapers continue to reach a smaller segment of the general population each year. While the population continues to grow, newspaper circulation declines, although when print circulation is combined with unique website page views, the total number of people reached each day by newspaper companies is increasing.
- Most newspapers are still profitable, but often, that's true only because of a virtual print monopoly in a given community. In almost every city across the nation, print circulation is declining, and in most there is only one newspaper.
- Broadcast television audiences have been fragmented by the growth of competition. New networks such as Fox and The CW have added local stations in many markets, and the proliferation of cable-television channels—particularly 24-hour news channels such as CNBC, MSNBC, Fox News and CNN—have added to audience erosion.
- Except for public broadcasting and all-news stations in a few major markets, radio isn't much of a player in news in North America. Many stations air network news or read news items from local newspapers, but few local stations employ news reporters. Arguably the best news found on American broadcast radio is produced

by National Public Radio, which has affiliates nationwide. Satellite radio and the Internet have allowed subscribers to listen not only to public radio news but also to foreign news services such as the BBC and CBC, and to channels devoted to 24-hour coverage of traffic and weather for the nation's main metro areas.

- Magazines, for the most part, reach targeted audiences that are widely dispersed, often making them unsuitable for local advertising. Production costs are high, and postal rates, on which many depend for distribution, inch ever higher.

Thus, the traditional media, while still profitable, often find their profit margins challenged by forces largely beyond their control. But make no mistake about it: The existing media, while challenged, are certainly not dying. To illustrate:

- Newspapers typically operate on profit margins around 5 to 10 percent of gross income. That's a remarkably healthy margin, far surpassing those in many other industries, which are typically only about a third of that and often less. Even extraordinarily profitable industries such as oil have similar margins. Each year, ExxonMobil earns 10 percent of its revenue in profits.
- Most magazines, while not necessarily news oriented in the traditional sense, attract advertisers in droves because of the appealing demographics of their audiences. If an advertiser wants to reach computer users, *PC Magazine* or *Macworld* will do the job.
- Most local broadcast stations are thriving, even as the traditional networks—NBC, CBS, ABC and Fox—have been hurt by audience fragmentation. And cable-television outlets such as The Food Channel and ESPN do a great job of delivering the target audiences advertisers crave.
- All-news radio stations, found mostly in large metropolitan areas, are doing well financially.

The traditional media, then, are far from dead, even if they are not quite as profitable as they once were. Newspapers, magazines, radio and television are with us to stay, even in the face of new challenges such as Web publications and wireless devices.

The Media Begin to Converge

Indeed, traditional media are finding new ways to compete. The buzzword in the media industry these days is **convergence**, and traditional media are exploring many forms of it. So what is convergence? It's defined in many ways, but possibly the best definition yet offered is this:

Convergence is the practice of sharing and cross-promoting content from a variety of media through newsroom collaborations and outside partnerships.

The U.S. Telecommunications Act of 1996 made convergence possible because it relaxed ownership regulations on television and radio and made it possible for stations to collaborate with print counterparts. Perhaps the best-known early convergence experiment is one that involves the *Tampa Tribune*, WFLA and Tampa Bay

Online (www.tbo.com), all owned by Media General and based in Tampa, Fla. Media General took the unusual step in 2000 of constructing a new building to house all three operations. Management then pushed the three media outlets to overcome competitive distrust of each other.

Today, crossover reporting in Tampa is increasingly common:

- A *Tribune* story about a passenger who landed a plane after the pilot became ill carried the bylines of both a *Tribune* reporter and the WFLA anchor.
- A report on dog bites ran as a two-part WFLA series, a front-page *Tribune* story and a Tampa Bay Online package.
- A *Tribune* story on the removal of a statue from a shopping center included a picture by the photo editor, who also shot video for WFLA.

Cultural differences among the media can cause problems when media converge. When television first came along, many of its early newscasters came from the newspaper industry. Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite brought with them the demanding ethical and reporting standards of the newspaper industry. But over the years, television developed a new set of standards driven more by what is visually pleasing than by traditional news values as practiced by newspapers. Now, as convergence occurs, these disparate cultures must begin to meld again.

Cultural differences aside, convergence makes sense, and it is happening nationwide. Television is the unquestioned leader in providing the American public with today's news headlines. Newspapers and magazines can provide more depth and understanding. The Internet can offer even greater depth than newspapers and interactivity unmatched by either print or television. The merging of these disparate media makes sense for a changing world in which the consumer sets the terms for the consumption of news. The goal of forward-thinking media companies is to give consumers the news and information they want in whatever form they prefer.

Convergence isn't happening only at large operations in big cities. The *Lawrence (Kan.) Journal-World* still prints a newspaper, but it also operates websites, including one focused on University of Kansas basketball, and a cable-television operation complete with local newscasts. Indeed, many newspaper companies are adopting a print-second model in which news is posted on websites or broadcast stations before it appears in the newspaper.

Convergence is not always dependent on cross-ownership of media companies or collaborative agreements. Today, many legacy media companies provide content in whatever form people want to consume it. Newspaper companies are adding audio, video and interactive graphics to their websites. Television stations are adding newspaper-like stories and still photographs to theirs. And almost all of them are delivering news to mobile phones and tablet computers.

Clearly, convergence is here to stay. What we are witnessing is nothing less than a revolution in the way news is produced and consumed. And none of that is dependent on common ownership. A separately owned newspaper can pair with a local television station for cross-promotional purposes or even news sharing. And both are quite likely to operate websites, possibly collaborating, as well.

In converged newsrooms such as the one in Tampa, journalists are finding they must learn about a medium other than the one in which they were trained. A television reporter might be asked to write a newspaper story, and he or she must be able to do so. A newspaper reporter might be asked to take along a digital recorder to get a sound bite of a news event for a website or radio station. And many, while not required to cross quite so dramatically into a new field, must at least have enough knowledge of the strengths of various media to know how best to tell a story in a multimedia environment. This is the world of the editor in the age of convergence.

Increasingly, journalists may train in one medium, go to work upon graduation in another, and at some point change to a third or fourth career, depending on job opportunities at the time. As a result, today's journalists should view themselves not as television reporters or newspaper editors but as news specialists comfortable with working in a variety of settings—on the Internet, at a magazine, in television and perhaps even in the related fields of public relations and advertising.

Media companies realize the importance of giving consumers news and advertising information whenever and however it's wanted. That, in the end, is what convergence is all about.

The Changing Nature of News

If the media are changing, so is the nature of news itself. Editors no longer are the sole arbiters of what news is and what it isn't. Today, consumers increasingly decide that for themselves.

Traditionally, editors defined news as information having one or more (usually more) of these qualities:

- *Audience.* Readers of *The New York Times* are more likely to be interested in urban renewal than those of a local paper in Cedar City, Utah.
- *Impact.* The number of people involved in or affected by an event, as well as the emotional depth of an audience's reaction, helps to determine whether it is news.
- *Proximity.* Things that happen nearby are often more interesting than things that happen far away.
- *Timeliness.* Something that just happened is likely more interesting than something that happened last week or last year.
- *Prominence.* People like to read about famous, wealthy or powerful people, so entertainer Kanye West is more interesting than someone of whom few people have heard.
- *Novelty.* Something that is unusual or the first, the largest or the greatest is news.
- *Conflict.* People are drawn to read about conflict between people, states and nations.

Another way editors have defined news is to evaluate how *relevant* it is to readers or viewers—that is, how *useful* or *interesting*.

Today, however, consumers are defining news for themselves. If a website has appealing content, some viewers will find their news there, no matter how reliable or unreliable that site may be. And Web entrepreneurs are carving out niche markets to take advantage of this reality.

Traditional media have done little, for example, to cover the recruiting of high school athletes for college football and basketball teams. Today, two national websites, The Insiders (www.theinsiders.com) and Rivals (www.rivals.com), provide reporters who collect that information and distribute it online to an audience with a seemingly insatiable appetite for sports. The related forums on these networks help spread both news and rumor.

The reality is that much of the information provided by these specialized Internet services is timely and reliable. On the reader forums, however, much of it is not. Consumers don't seem to care. Whether fact or rumor, to them it is news.

Another challenge to credibility is websites that support a cause. When people surf the Internet for information about a topic, it's often difficult to determine whether a site is objective or supporting one side of a controversial topic. Again, much of the public doesn't seem to care.

This could help explain the proliferation of cable-television news networks, where solid news coverage is interspersed, often without any warning, with commentators who editorialize rather than objectively report the news. Cable-news networks with a political bias—either to the left or right—are easy to find, and people who share their biases gravitate toward one or the other, based on political preference. Seemingly, many in the public are comforted to find a news channel that reinforces their biases.

Is the stuff these channels produce really news? By traditional definition, much of it certainly is not. But perhaps that is not important. This tells us that many consumers don't value the traditional media's penchant for objectivity. Nor do they perceive any real value in the traditional news brands, those media companies with a long history of providing quality news. Given the freedom they have to roam the Web, many consumers will get information wherever they can find it from whatever source.

Although critics often accuse the mainstream media of unconscious bias in stories, intentional political bias once played a central role in American journalism. During the party press era of 1781 to 1833, writers were certainly colorful in their invective against political opponents, but few would argue that readers were better served 200 years ago when it came to getting fair coverage and accurate information.

Regardless, consumers are voting with their feet. They are going to media outlets that provide the information they want. For many, if the information they want is politically tilted, that's not a problem if the political tilt agrees with their own views. Convincing these people that this isn't the best idea is perhaps the single biggest problem facing the editors of tomorrow.

If all this is discouraging, it's important to keep one thing in mind: Most thoughtful citizens still *want* someone to help them sort through the news. Most *want* editors who are reliable and who work at branded publications and television outlets they trust.



A New Source of News

The growing popularity of **blogs**, sometimes called *Web logs* or *Weblogs*, illustrates the rapidly changing patterns of news consumption in the U.S. Blogs are Internet websites on which users exchange information, personal thoughts and Web links, and they are increasingly popular.

Some blogs focus on the media and are frequent stops for journalists. Others cover almost any imaginable topic. Some offer useful information. Some are totally useless. But a good blog gives people with common interests a place to exchange ideas.

For some interesting examples of blogs, see the list of links on K. Paul Mallasch's website:

www.mallasch.com. Mallasch also has created a blog on grassroots journalism called Journalism Hope: www.journalismhope.com/.

Sites such as Blogger (www.blogger.com) offer automated publishing systems to permit the easy creation of blogs.

Nationwide, newspapers and television stations are creating blogs, often moderated by their own reporters and editors. Such blogs allow readers, viewers and editors to connect in ways that were never possible in traditional media



THE ROLE OF THE EDITOR

The changing nature of news is the reason the role of the editor will remain important, even as society embraces nontraditional media. Because anyone can become a reporter or publisher on the Web, there will be an increasing need to separate fact from fiction, to know the source of information and to determine its credibility. Editors are trained to do just that.

Editors, however, will have more competition than in the past. Consumers will look to other sources of information to help guide them in their decision making. One such source will be the Web, with its **chat rooms** and discussion forums. These digital conversation rooms, in which users interact with each other, serve much the same purpose as town-hall meetings or call-in talk shows on radio and television. They provide a forum for a variety of views, which in turn enables the consumer to form an opinion about an issue.

But information provided in town-hall meetings or on talk shows is not always accurate. That's where editors can help. With their training in fact checking and their ability to separate fact from fiction, they can continue to play a major role in agenda setting, if not gatekeeping.

Indeed, good editors can help consumers sort through the mass of information now readily available and make sense of it. Good editors can help the public define what's credible and what's not. Good editors can have a significant impact on the audiences they serve.

The public may play a greater role than ever before in defining news, but editors are far from obsolete. Indeed, they are needed more today than ever before.

Jobs for Editors

Those who write well are in demand, and those who edit well are in even greater demand. That's because writing jobs are common entry points for those graduating with a degree in journalism or communications. The glamour of the byline seems irresistible for many.

Those who eagerly pursue editing careers, however, are fewer in number. As a result, the media industry scrambles to find qualified editors. That explains the existence of a program such as the Dow Jones News Fund editing intern program, which for more than 50 years has offered attractive paid internships at large and small newspapers in an effort to entice young journalists to consider newspaper copy-editing careers.

But newspaper copy editing is merely one of many options for those trained as editors. Newspapers need editors at every level—copy editor, city editor, graphics editor, photo editor, design editor, Web editor, news editor, editorial page editor, managing editor and executive editor. Magazines have similar needs but sometimes give their employees different titles—researcher, editorial assistant, contributing editor and senior editor.

Similarly, broadcast newsrooms require a raft of editors—news director, executive producer, show producers and desk assistants and now Web editors. The notion that nothing but video is edited in a television newsroom is far from true.

Websites often are staffed almost entirely with editors who rely on freelance writers and others for content. Most website news operations are like big newspaper copy desks with multiple editors to handle content.

The companies that advertise also have editors. Someone must edit the text in advertisements. And many other types of companies require editors in their corporate communications department, where they work on employee magazines and newsletters, annual reports, technical manuals and industry newsletters.

And, of course, there is the matter of convergence. Convergence is creating a demand for a new type of editor, one as capable of handling a magazine or newspaper story as editing video and the words that accompany it. The demand for those cross-trained in various media is growing daily. This, too, adds to the demand for editors.

Editing jobs are so plentiful, in fact, that companies are often willing to pay editors a higher salary than writers. Some of the nation's largest newspapers pay a differential to copy editors as a means of enticing journalists to work at the copy desk. The difference in pay between copy editors and reporters is sometimes considerable. Although in recent years there was an attempt to reduce the number of editors at newspapers, more and more newspaper executives are realizing that was a huge mistake. The quality of newspapers has slipped, and many executives are now rethinking their decisions to cut editors.

The variety of skills editors must master and the large range of news with which they must be up-to-date keep their work varied and interesting. Rather than being specialists on a narrow beat, they are generalists. And the skills good editors must

have make them prime candidates for advancement either to better, larger newspapers or into management. Since their job brings them into daily contact with other departments of the newspaper, they quickly become familiar with how each department works, as well as how the business as a whole fits together. The same is true at magazines, and good word editors are increasingly valued at television stations, which now find themselves creating newspaper-like stories for websites. And the Web itself has created many new jobs for editors, regardless of whether they work for traditional media companies.

The shortage of editors exists not because people don't like being editors. Instead, it exists because more people think of writing as a first choice.

The Art of Editing

In the first edition of this book, published in 1971, editing was described as an art, no matter where or by whom it is practiced. That axiom remains true today. Although media may change, the role of the editor remains clear: Provide timely and accurate information in the best form possible.

This edition of *The Art of Editing* has been extensively revised to reflect the dramatic changes occurring in the media industry. It's worth remembering that despite the unsettled nature of the industry, there is no chance that editing jobs will disappear. Indeed, the number of career opportunities for talented editors seems to grow each year. The skills that can be acquired from this text will help you edit, no matter which medium you enter. Not everyone is an artist, and not everyone can be an editor. Those who learn here can be both.



Suggested Websites

American Copy Editors Society www.copydesk.org
 American Society of Newspaper Editors www.asne.org
 Dow Jones News Fund newsfund.org
 Lawrence (Kan.) Journal-World www2.ljworld.com/
 Specialized Information Publishers Association www.sipaonline.com
 Radio-Television Digital News Association www.rtnda.org
 Tampa Bay Online www.tbo.com/

Suggested Readings

- Gant, Scott. *We're All Journalists Now*. New York: Free Press, 2011.
- Hewitt, Hugh. *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That's Changing Our World*. Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2005.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- Mathison, David. *Be the Media: How to Create and Accelerate Your Message . . . Your Way*. New Hyde Park, N.Y.: Natural E creative group, 2009.
- The Missouri Group: Brian S. Brooks, George Kennedy, Don Ranly and Daryl R. Moen. *Telling the Story: The Convergence of Print, Broadcast and Online Media*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013.