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Technical Editing: Practices and Prospects

by **Joseph C. Fineman** (Freelance Copyeditor, Malden, MA) <joe_f@verizon.net>

I have been involved in technical editing for more than forty years, first as an assistant editor at the *Physical Review* (1964–1971), and since then as a freelance copyeditor, editing journal articles and books in mathematics, physics, chemistry, engineering, and economics. I have also had spells as a consultant to a startup typesetting company specializing in science and engineering (1972–1995). In this last capacity I was concerned mainly with typography and documentation, but also saw a good deal of the detailed operation of the firm — including even the handling of manuscripts that I had copyedited. Thus, I have had the chance to see what happens to manuscripts, not only during copyediting, but also before and after (though that experience must be out-of-date to some extent) and to observe the transitions from metal type to computer-assisted phototypesetting and from print to the Internet. The following are my impressions, with special reference to some remarks made by **Sanford Thatcher** in his column “The Value Added by Copyediting” (*Against the Grain*, September 2008).

Mr. Thatcher quotes a technical copyeditor who was called on, or at least allowed, to do substantive editing, even checking the authors’ arithmetic. That is foreign to my experience. In scientific and engineering publications, copyediting is largely confined to enforcing the publisher’s style rules and the usual conventions of grammar and mathematical notation, and making sure that the manuscript will be clear to the typesetter. Catching substantive errors in content, questioning whether the author has actually read the references, and the like have never been my business. They are the business of referees, who are consulted by the journal editor or some equivalent at the book publishing house before the manuscript is accepted for publication.

Those people often do not do their job. As a copyeditor, I have handled manuscripts that I could not believe had been read by anybody (even their authors) before being accepted, because they were unreadable or full of obvious errors. I have a degree in physics, and I have seen a lot of technical language go by, and these days **Google** can usually tell me whether a certain weird expression is actually established in the field; so I can often guess a plausible substitute for some nonsense and query the author as politely as possible. However, I cannot do the work of a scholar in the field, and even with the Web at my disposal, life is too short to look up all the references. The best I can hope for is that the author will be chastened by my corrections and (even more) by my wrong guesses. I can, of course, query the author if I have the wit to notice at least that *something* is wrong. In the desperate case of an author in a provincial Chinese university who has badly overworked his Chinese-English dictionary, I may verge on rudeness by putting a note on the first page:

Au.: There were severe difficulties with the English. Please check all our changes, if possible with the help of a colleague who is more fluent in English, to be sure the meaning is preserved.

Technical editing includes, of course, the editing of mathematics. As a mere copyeditor, I am not following the argument when I look at a stretch of math. However, there are conventions, as there are in English, with regard to punctuation, spacing, and the like, and I am on the lookout for inconsistencies in notation and for barbarisms such as the computerese use of the asterisk for multiplication, which does not belong in human math. It is also (usually) within the copyeditor’s purview to police such stylistic matters as roman versus italic, the size and shape of brackets, the choice of $\exp\{ \}$ versus e with a superscript, and the various ways of writing fractions. Caution is needed, though, even in these routine judgments, because in mathematics, much more than in ordinary language, it is allowed to make up one’s own rules for special purposes.

Whither Technical Publishing?

It is clear that the Web has taken over the task of actual communication in science and engineering. If I do a Web search for some dubious

expression, the odds are that **Google** will bring up the manuscript I am working on. In every moral, legal, and practical sense, it has already been published, and in a far more accessible form than the print version ever will be. Printing it is not publishing it, but giving it a dignified burial — an occasion on which my services might well be dispensed with, burial being (by common concession) too late for correction though possibly not for prayer.

Nevertheless, print persists. (Indeed, most of my jobs are still destined for print publication.) There seem to me to be two main reasons for that, of which the first may be a good one, and the second is probably the main one.

The first is the instability of the Web. The small-scale instability (that pages get revised without notice, that sites disappear, etc.) is a technical problem that can be solved by appropriate archiving. But the Web as a whole, and even the Internet, are not very old, and it would be rash to assume that they will survive. They may turn out to be vulnerable to malice (private or governmental) or, as they get more complicated, to some unanticipated feedback loop, perhaps even one that passes human understanding. In the event of a crash, plenty of people will still have downloaded texts, but they will be a lot harder to find than in a library. Thus, one may reasonably argue that the two media should be run in parallel for a while longer. I do not know how persuasive this excuse ought to be, or how long it will last, but it has some color of plausibility.

The second is that, for the time being, the print publishers have enough political clout to convert their business into a racket by forcing the scholarly world and the taxpayers to support it. I am sorry to have to badmouth my customers, who have treated me respectfully and paid me well, but the fact is that they show many signs of merely going through motions, and it seems fair to guess that the business is approaching terminal demoralization. I have heard tell of a time, shortly after the appearance of the Web, when the bigwigs at a prominent publishing house specializing in technical books sat around a conference table and couldn’t imagine anything useful for them to do any more. A few years ago a spy saw the inside of such a place, and told me that the desk editors were terribly overworked and surrounded by stacks of manuscripts on every horizontal surface. I have also heard that many authors these days cannot be bothered to read proof, because by the time a manuscript reaches that stage it is no longer of much interest to them or anyone. A reputable engineering journal for which I have done a lot of work has a style guide that is full of errors and inconsistencies and was last updated in 1994. Almost none of my customers forward authors’ complaints, and few answer my style questions. Most of them still make me edit hardcopy. Many of them, until I put my foot down, did not even supply me with the authors’ computer files for use in checking. (I will no longer work on hardcopy without that amenity.)

In my opinion, this foolery cannot last long. It is too expensive. We are not dealing here with something like the automation of shiploading, where the replacement of manual labor required massive capital investment, affording time and money to pension off the stevedores gracefully. We are dealing with something more like the development of phototypesetting, which was not only better than letterpress and typewriting, but cheaper. I don’t know what the former Monotype operators are doing now, but it must be something else. In my own case, I am almost retired anyway.

To be sure, it is widely denied that the Internet is, or ever will be, a better communication tool than ink on paper. That view seems to me to be a mixture of sentimentality (which I share) and shortsightedness. Even now, if I really wanted to read a Web posting on the bus or in the bathtub, I could print it out or buy a laptop at modest expense. That sort of recourse is bound to get cheaper and more convenient. And even now,

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sitting at my desk, if I am writing a posting and want to quote something from a book I own, I will not (as formerly) run to the bookcase, pull the book out, and copy the quotation, but will first see if it is on the Web, because if it is, I can find the passage and copy it more quickly, easily, and accurately. Also, when one gets beyond text, the superiority of the Internet is spectacular. For illustrations, color in print is expensive; on the Internet it is cheap. (In two journals of my acquaintance, for whose subjects colored illustrations are especially valuable, the compromise is to refer the reader to the Website!) Animation in print is (almost) impossible; on the Internet it is routine. Finally, the Web has the advantage, already mentioned, of immediate availability, all over the world, to people who cannot afford journal subscriptions.

In this situation, one naturally wonders about peer review and copyediting (whether narrowly or broadly defined). Ought they to continue? If so, how — and in particular, are they to be paid for, and if so, how? The answers are none of them obvious to me.

Peer review, in the 1960s when I saw it working at the *Physical Review*, probably did a fair amount of good. At that time, the journal was ultimately accepting about 85% of the manuscripts it received, so one might be tempted to conclude that not much filtering was going on; but the referees often made improvements in what did get accepted, and their effect as a deterrent against frivolous submissions must have been considerable.

When I was at the *Physical Review*, the referees were not paid, and I believe that is still generally true of science and engineering journals. (I gather that many book publishers do pay their reviewers modest honoraria.) That people who have other valuable work to do are willing to perform this tedious service free is a tribute to their scholarly conscience, though of course it is flattering to be considered competent for it, and in the days before preprints and the Web it also gave them a sneak preview of work in their field. (Even more remarkable is their willingness to write review articles, which can take a good year out of the author's life.) Thus, the cost of the process is merely the administrative one, which is modest. When I left the *Physical Review* in 1971, it was running about 2,500 pages a month, and the staff consisted of three editors, half a dozen assistant editors, and half a dozen secretaries. (The list of available referees ran to several thousand, and was maintained on a mainframe computer.) There should be no great difficulty in moving such an operation over to a Web journal, and I imagine that that has been done to some extent.

One could argue, however, that with the Web in place such gatekeeping is less important, because the entire community of colleagues is online and provides instant criticism. Perhaps writing and posting review articles, which clear away the trash and become the publications most referred to, would be a better use of scholars' time than attempting to prejudice. That **Wikipedia**, which does not even require its contributors to be experts, can be as useful as it is shows that there may be some merit in a shift of effort from pre- to postfiltering. The physics site **arXiv** does only the most rudimentary prefiltering to move crackpots and the like to a harmless place.

Well, what about copyeditors? They cannot live on *noblesse oblige*. Are they any use, and if so, how are they to be paid, once they can no longer be paid out of the proceeds from selling blocks of paper?

A great deal of what we used to do, and in print publications still do, is in my opinion no longer worth doing. In particular, the idea of enforcing a house style ought to be abandoned. It made sense in the days when a manuscript was the input to an enormous machine tended by many people (compositors, proofreaders, etc.) who had to work fast but be alert to the possibility that they or their neighbors had made a mistake. In such an effort it is desirable that there be standard ways of doing things, even if they are different from other people's ways, and indeed, even if they are silly. But in a situation where the final form of a publication is produced by massaging rather than redoing the author's input, enforcing (e.g.) a uniform style for references is a lot of pointless work. The best that can be said for moving the pieces of references around is that, unlike many activities that get paid for in this world, it does not do much harm. The same goes for the bizarre linguistic rules that get invented by desk editors and accrete over the years in each publishing house and various style books.

That brings us to the question of language correction, which in my opinion is the most plausible reason for the copyediting of Web publications.

Readers are spared distraction, and authors are spared embarrassment, if obvious blunders are corrected. The cost of that would be small. (It would be smaller still if all authors could be induced to read over what they had written.)

Then there are ESL writers, who by now are probably an actual majority of writers in English, at least in technical fields. As I mentioned, some of them — especially among those hailing from Eastern Europe and Asia — need help even to be intelligible; but they are the ones copyeditors are least able to help. For the rest, I can manage to translate them into standard English, but so, I suppose, can most readers, and with greater facility through familiarity with the subject. A couple of years ago I browsed in a science-fiction novel in which a lingua franca, called *Good Enough English*, had been established for international use; it could be taught to Russians and Chinese without imposing on them the complexities of definite and indefinite nouns. Indeed, so long ago as the 1960s, after I sent back an accepted *Physical Review* paper with a form letter saying the English needed work, I received a charming reply saying that broken English, as spoken at conferences, was already the international language of physics, and we should be willing to publish papers written in it. I turned the matter over to my bosses, who were polite but firm. I suspect, however, that in the long run some such compromise is inevitable. (Perhaps the children of scientists and engineers will learn the pidgin from infancy for use on the Internet, and will turn it into a creole.)

Finally, there is the question of imposing standard English, even on native speakers. I think it would be a good thing if judicious persons had the power to limit the rate of change of formal language and to distinguish changes for the better from those for the worse, but I am afraid that no such project is feasible. (**arXiv** of course does not bother.) The idea made some sense when print had a monopoly on publication; but since the advent of the photocopier and the Internet, it has been easy for whimsies and barbarisms to become well established in written English before editors ever see them. Here is a note I put on the coversheet of a recent manuscript:

Properly, “scatter” is the random variation of data about their mean value, and “scattering” is the deviation of particles from the line of a beam. However, this MS, beginning with the title and continuing through all the references, shows that the distinction has been completely lost, at least in this corner of the engineering world. That is unfortunate (it makes the title and the subject terms less useful for retrieval), but it is clearly too late to do anything about it.

Furthermore, the very notion of standard English carries some heavy baggage. In its name, a lot of people were taught a lot of silly rules in school, and the more spirited of them rebelled against it, and of those, some grew up to be linguists and put about a hostile ideology called descriptivism. And, of course, even the prescriptivists are not always in agreement. **Mr. Thatcher** is annoyed by “less” with countable nouns, but I myself believe that “fewer,” which had almost died out in U.S. English by about 1960, was not worth saving. He also writes:

Scholars who are jumping on this bandwagon should think twice about exposing their dirty laundry to the world, before it gets washed and nicely ironed by accommodating copyeditors. Would they go before their classes and their peers at professional conferences dressed in slovenly, unkempt clothes?

The answer is, probably a lot of them do, and some of them may actually be proud of it. A glance around a subway car these days reveals that slovenly, unkempt clothes are high fashion in some circles. I am afraid that we snobs will have to find satisfactions elsewhere than in harassing slob. We can, at any rate, make fun of them in suitable venues, such as the mainly prescriptivist newsgroup *alt.usage.english* and the mainly descriptivist Website <http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/>.

If, nonetheless, copyediting is to be done, there is probably a way to pay for it. In my day, noncommercial journals such as the *Physical Review* billed the author's institution for a (voluntary) page charge. It was set to cover the per-manuscript costs (copyediting and typesetting) as opposed to the per-bulk costs (paper, printing, binding, and postage),

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Copyediting's Role in an Open-Access World

by **Sanford G. Thatcher** (Director Emeritus, Penn State Press, 8201 Edgewater Drive, Frisco, TX 75034-5514; Phone: 214-705-1939) <sandy.thatcher@alumni.princeton.edu>

In an earlier article in *Against the Grain* titled "The Value Added by Copyediting" (September 2008), I raised the question of whether the move toward self-archiving of less-than-final versions of articles carried a risk of corrupting scholarship by tempting students and scholars to rely on imperfect versions of reported research because of their greater ease of access. Green OA has much to be said for it as a vehicle for more widespread and rapid dissemination of research, but it is not, I suggested, a perfect solution in every respect. What compromises would we be making by too readily accommodating ourselves to a new world of multiple variants of articles, I wondered?

My suspicions were based on experiences I had had early in my career in publishing when I worked on the staff of **Princeton University Press** as a copyeditor. I gave examples in the earlier article of some perhaps extreme cases of scholarly slovenliness, ranging from bad prose to incorrect citations to inaccurate quotations. During my later years as an acquiring editor and director, I continued to be exposed to the shortcomings of scholarly writing, but did not have direct responsibility for repairing them, relying on the seasoned copyeditors we had on staff or hired as free-lancers to take care of the problems. My commitment to copyediting as a valuable contribution of publishers remained strong, however.

But beyond those older anecdotes I had no evidence to offer of the problems as they exist today. Thus I decided to enlist the help of a few colleagues with copyediting expertise at other university presses who volunteered to assist me in conducting a preliminary assessment of the nature and scope of the risks that reliance on Green OA might entail for scholarship's integrity: **Jenny Hunt**, Assistant Production Manager at **Baylor University Press**; **Sylvia Hunter**, Editorial Services Supervisor in the Journals Division of the **University of Toronto Press**; and **Wayne Larsen**, Project Editor at **Southern Illinois University Press**.

For convenience, and because of its high profile, we focused on articles posted

at **Harvard University's DASH** (Digital Access to Scholarship at Harvard) Website, which now has more than 5,000 articles in its repository. Many of the articles posted there have links to the final versions as published, and it was therefore relatively easy for us to compare the Green OA versions with the versions of record to see how much and what kind of copyediting was done, since many of these journals are accessible through the subscriptions that the libraries at our universities have to them in digital form. While the copyediting done for the published versions caught most of the errors in the Green OA versions, we discovered that some errors remained in the versions of record.

Collectively, we covered a range of journals in the humanities and social sciences: *American Economic Review* (2004), *The Journal of Consumer Affairs* (2010), *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1989), *Political Theory* (2007), *Proceedings of the British Academy* (2007), and *Psychological Science* (2010). Two articles from edited volumes, published by **Edward Elgar** (2006) and **Russell Sage** (2008), also were scrutinized. The authors included both junior and senior faculty. Three of the articles were written by more than one author. We made no attempt to be "scientific" in this selection, since such a small number could not constitute any kind of statistically significant sample. Our findings must therefore be considered as illustrative only. If there is any bias in the sample, it was purely unintentional.

Two of my colleagues attempted to quantify the results of their inspections. **Wayne Larsen** looked at the two articles included in edited volumes, but did not compare those Green OA versions with the versions appearing in the books and did not attempt to check the accuracy of quotations or citations.

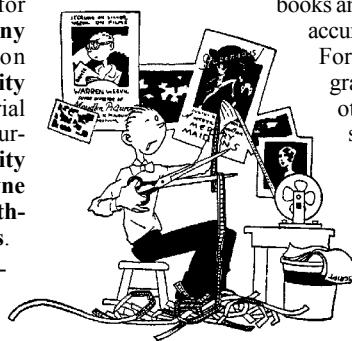
For one he counted 15 errors in grammar and 49 in style; for the other, 3 in grammar and 85 in style. For the latter, he noted, "inconsistencies or errors in punctuation and spelling style constituted the greatest number. These included spacing problems, such as quotation marks not closed up to

words; omission of commas between complete clauses in compound sentences; placement of commas where they are inappropriate." He also observed that "two reference entries mention only the author names (and, in one case, a publication year) and end with ellipses."

Sylvia Hunter provided a more detailed breakdown in her report. For the article on French history in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, she enumerated 4 grammatical errors (2 of faulty parallelism, 1 subject/verb disagreement, and 1 other), 10 stylistic infelicities, 1 spelling error, 4 errors in quotation, 2 citation errors, and 6 errors in tables, figures, etc. Problems with this manuscript included the author's indecisiveness about whether to use U.S. or UK formatting conventions and the unhelpful lack of specific textual references to the figures accompanying the article. The tally for the article in the *American Economic Review* included 31 grammatical errors (5 of faulty parallelism, 3 subject/verb disagreement, 1 dangling modifier, and 22 others), 23 stylistic infelicities, 6 spelling errors, and 7 errors in citations. The authors of this article frequently used acronyms in the Green OA version without providing the full names of the organizations to which the acronyms pertained; this problem was corrected in the version of record. One work cited in the bibliography as published in 1996 did not match the citation in the text, which was inexplicably changed from 1994 in the Green OA version to 1997 in the version of record.

Jenny Hunt did not quantify her findings but presented examples in considerable detail. The article published in *Psychological Science*, for instance, "did not include [in its Green OA version] important information such as the identity of the corresponding author, acknowledgments, funding information, and declaration of conflicting interests." Also, "the figure captions changed very significantly between the Green OA and published versions. The published captions were much longer and more detailed in their information/explanations and included the definitions for the error bars." Many of the problems were minor formatting errors or inconsistencies, but in a number of instances the copyeditor had improved the style by reformulating sentences for greater clarity

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which were covered by subscription fees. The granting agencies took a favorable view of page charges as a legitimate cost of research, with the result that most domestic institutions honored them. A smaller charge of that kind (a few dollars per page) would take care of copyediting if desired. It might remain voluntary, so that individuals without institutions, foreigners having currency problems, and the like could be

accommodated. **Mr. Thatcher** tells me, however, that there would be stiff resistance to such a scheme in the humanities.

Another possibility is that authors who think or know that they need a copyeditor might pay for one out of their own budgets. I have had such business. 🐹

Author's Note: I appreciate Mr. Thatcher's giving me this opportunity to express views so greatly at variance with his.