2015

The Scholarly Publishing Scene--Glimpses of the Editing Life, Then and Now

Myer Kutz

Myer Kutz Associates, Inc., myerkutz@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>

Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kutz, Myer (2015) "The Scholarly Publishing Scene--Glimpses of the Editing Life, Then and Now," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 3, Article 30.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7101>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

The Scholarly Publishing Scene — Glimpses of the Editing Life, Then and Now

Column Editor: **Myer Kutz** (President, Myer Kutz Associates, Inc.) <myerkutz@aol.com>

Years ago, well back in the last century and before, publishing was one of those professions called “accidental.” I’m pretty sure that the term is out of fashion now as applied to professional and scholarly publishing. (If you google “accidental profession” now, the hits tell you that the term has been applied more recently to project management.) But when I joined **Wiley** in the mid-seventies as an acquisitions editor for professional-level engineering books, I found that, like me, several of my fellow editors had advanced science or engineering degrees. There was one salient difference in our educational and professional backgrounds. I’d been a **Wiley** author in the previous decade and had reviewed proposals now and then for my editor, who recommended me when management decided to expand into disciplines where the company’s presence was limited.

We found ourselves in the professional and reference (P & R) division of a major publisher because of our subject-area knowledge, not because we knew anything about publishing. None of us, I’m quite sure, had ever taken a single college course in academic publishing (or any other branch of publishing, for that matter), probably because we hadn’t seen publishing as a career. In any case, I doubt that there would have been any such courses available to us if we’d had the foresight to take them. It was different on the other side of the house, in the college textbook division, where the editors were former travelers, who’d learned from years of campus visits what would convince professors to select a particular textbook from among its competitors. (Not only the subject coverage and the quality of the pedagogy, but also all the ancillary teaching materials were important.)

You learned as much about the mechanics, if not the lore, of publishing as you wanted to. There were, as I recall, no publishing knowledge requirements. Your job was to acquire manuscripts whose contents filled a need of practitioners and of upper-level students about to become practitioners. I had the good fortune of having a boss, **Bob Polhemus**, with five or six editors reporting to him, who was a P & R publishing raconteur. I didn’t have to, but I made it my business to soak up as much of his knowledge as I could.

In those days, the era of *Mad Men* and 20 or so years after, when **Wiley** occupied several floors of a conventional modern Manhattan skyscraper, editors had offices on the periphery of the main floor. The offices all had windows, floor to ceiling walls, and doors that could be locked. Cubicles were not the order of the day. Serendipity? You took care of that by having lunch with your fellow editors on the company’s dime. As long as you claimed that you’d discussed business, lunch, including cocktails and wine, could be written off legally as a business expense.

Just like in *Mad Men*, your secretary sat outside your office door. She typed your corre-

spondence and reports, screened your incoming phone calls and put through your outgoing calls. I required that my secretaries take shorthand. In those days, even though several of my fellow editors were women, nearly all secretaries were female and were called “girls” by the senior secretaries.

If you considered just the office and secretarial arrangements, you were safe in concluding that editors were fairly high up in the company hierarchy. There was more to their perceived status than that, however. In those days, only two levels separated editors from the company’s president. My boss, **Bob Polhemus**, reported to **Mike Harris**, the VP in charge of all P & R publishing, who reported to **Andy Neilly**, **Wiley’s** president. **Neilly**, as I recall, had risen through the ranks of the college textbook department to become part of the cadre of professionals who took over management of the company from the **Wiley** family. (Ownership remained in the family, however. The legendary **W. Bradford Wiley** remained chairman. More importantly, publicly traded shares in the company were issued in two classes, voting and non-voting, and the family controlled the voting shares.)

It was **Mike Harris**, brought to **Wiley** because of his general management expertise, who conducted my job interview. A barrel-chested chain smoker, likeable despite a gruff demeanor, he put aside the fact that I’d spent the past year as a freelancer writing magazine articles and half-a-dozen paperback originals. His big question was whether I’d maintained a membership in the **American Society of Mechanical Engineers**. When I answered in the affirmative, I got the job.

I didn’t have to deal with a human resources department. Things might be a wee bit different now for job applicants from outside professional and scholarly publishing. **Jack Farrell**, one of the top recruiters in the industry has described (in an article in the *PSP Bulletin*, which I edit) the interview process in these terms: “we have started to see increased use of video interviews as a means to screen candidates. This is not interactive video conferencing such as **Skype**. Rather, a candidate is presented with a set of questions and can answer each in 90-120 seconds. Answers are video recorded from the candidate’s computer, and used by the hiring manager to determine who advances to the in-person interview. The video interview software is sophisticated but easy-to-use. Candidates can practice sample recordings, but the “live” responses are done in one take — no do-overs. This requires substantial preparation on a candidate’s part. The efficiency of online interviews is highly appealing to hiring managers, so we expect its use to grow quickly.”

Back in the day, editors were so close to the top of the company’s power structure that when **Andy Neilly** looked for two staff

members to head up what he called “a strategic leadership team,” he picked two editors. I was one of them. Eventually, I became interested in electronic publishing and became part of the publishing vanguard that would participate in the early days — this was in the first half of the eighties — of the migration from print to digital, which, as has been noted countless times, has been a major disruptive force in publishing. Most of my fellow editors didn’t want to pay too much attention to it. They still had goals to meet in terms of numbers of book contracts signed, manuscripts transmitted to production, and books published. As was often said of even senior managers, you hunkered down, did the job you knew how to do, and hoped that retirement would arrive before a tidal wave hit that would wash you out to sea. My putting online the full text of one of **Wiley’s** flagship products, the *Kirk-Othmer Encyclopedia of Chemical Technology*, was

nothing more than a sideshow for a long time. I have to admit that I treated the project that way myself in the mid-1980s, when I became VP and general manager of the Sci-tech publishing division and all technical encyclopedias were part of my portfolio.

Twenty-five years ago, getting acquisitions editors involved in, even less tangentially interested in, electronic publishing was a fruitless task in most cases. But now, as **Jack Farrell** notes, “[p]roducts are created, developed and distributed differently. Expertise in the digital terrain is at a premium. Editors (now called Content Strategists in some circles) are asked to develop born digital projects, and must now possess technology smarts as well as domain expertise.” It’s heartening to read **Farrell** on how publishing companies are coping with the digital world: “The move to digital demands a mash-up of skills that vary dramatically from traditional roles. For the most part, this talent is being grown within the publishing industry. Only on rare occasions are we asked to “look outside” for candidates. We used to hear this request often, but much less recently. This is a testament to publishers’ ability to effectively train talent in this important area. Our advice to candidates is to expand their digital remit as much as possible as the trend toward digital will only increase.”

The bottom line in P & R publishing is, go to where the market is moving (don’t get there too far ahead of the market) and you will prosper. At the same time, cost factors are pushing publishers toward consolidating positions, so editors have more on their plates than ever before. They cannot expect to have the cushy life their professional ancestors had. That’s only for viewing on television period dramas. 🐼