

Copy Editing Not Great Priority for Online Stories

by John Russial

Responses from 155 U.S. newspapers revealed about half always copy edit their online stories. More than 15 percent reported they never copy edit, among them 25 percent with more than 100,000 circulation.

What is the role of newspaper copy editors in the online era? Are the skills they employ to maintain standards of accuracy, fairness, clarity, grammar, spelling and punctuation in print being widely used to improve the online edition? Many of their colleagues in the newsroom have been pressed into service as foot soldiers in the online revolution. Print reporters and photographers often are now asked to provide breaking news and multimedia content for the Web.¹ Are copy editors being included?

One might expect copy editing to be considered as important in the online era as it is in print, particularly when newspapers are beginning to post major stories online before printing them and publishers are looking longingly at the Web to replace declining print revenue. But anecdotal information about the broad impact of staff cutbacks on quality² and the number of obvious mistakes that appear in copy written exclusively for newspaper Web sites suggest otherwise. Longstanding work schedules designed for print-edition publication make it difficult to have breaking news edited. And some argue that the value copy editors add to news stories is less crucial in online publication, where speed of posting often is the number-one priority. The pressure to publish quickly is intense, and online editors and managers are aware of the increased likelihood of error when speed of posting and the pressure to constantly update are criteria.³

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The relationship between errors and credibility has been noted by scholars for decades, and it is a longstanding concern of newspaper editors.⁴ Ensuring accuracy has long been a fundamental part of a copy editor's job—backstopping reporters and other editors. And although the impact of inaccuracy online has not been examined, there is no reason to suspect it would be different from print.

The value that copy editors add revolves around quality, and maintaining quality has always been a tough sell when newspapers face difficult economic times. Meyer found a weak relationship between copy editing quality and business success and noted that newspapers that treated their copy editors better, such as providing for a lighter workload, tended to be more successful.⁵ But some voices are suggesting that, given the declining revenue and cost pressures news organizations are facing, perhaps editors are an unnecessary luxury. Mutter ignited a spirited discussion in his blog Newsosaur in February 2008 when he provocatively asked, "Can Newspapers Afford Editors?"⁶ A variety of bloggers and others responded. McIntyre, who supervises copy desks at the *Baltimore Sun*, vigorously defended the contribution of copy editors but indicated that the need for the level of editing review might not be as great online as it is in print because of the ability to update online content.⁷ Fisher, a journalism instructor, also defended quality from a copy editor's perspective but pointed out, "In business, quality rarely sells."⁸

In this climate, where the need for copy editing is being questioned and the resources to pay for it are not forthcoming, yet greater emphasis is being placed on the online report, it is worth examining how much copy editing actually is being done. This study reports the results of a national survey of U.S. newspapers and how they are, or are not, handling copy editing for online publication.

Literature Review

Copy editors were at ground zero during the first two decades of the digital revolution in newspapers. They bore the brunt of new tasks, such as composition coding in the short-lived OCR era and later, when front-end systems "captured the keystroke" of reporters for phototypesetting. As back-shop composition departments shrank, copy editors also took on other roles previously filled by production workers, such as proofreading.⁹ When pagination became widespread in the 1980s and into the early 1990s, copy editors again were asked to take on tasks that had been done in production departments.¹⁰ That innovation led to a shift in page composition from manual cutting and pasting done by printers to assembly on a computer screen. A few newspapers retrained compositors to handle electronic page makeup,¹¹ but most small to mid-size newspapers shifted the work to copy editors, and many larger ones created design desks, often staffed by former copy editors.¹²

One recent survey indicated that copy editing skills are considered valuable by online managers. McGee pointed out that the skills rated most important

by those managers were traditional editing skills, such as grammar and spelling, news judgment and ability to work under time pressure.¹³ Gordon, in commenting on the study, noted that the skill set favored by the online professionals reminded him most of copy editors. He recommended that students interested in copy editing pick up some of the new skills, such as HTML and content-management system use.¹⁴

Copy editing has been the target of cost-cutting on and off in recent years. A decade ago, for example, several newspapers attempted to fold copy editing into other newsroom activities, such as reporting topic teams or design desks, in part because of cost pressures.¹⁵ The idea did not spread far beyond those few newspapers, and at least one of them slowly rebuilt its copy desk.¹⁶

The current economic climate has increased the pressure on copy editing resources, as it has on other newsroom staff. Copy editors have figured in cutbacks at some large newspapers, and at others, copy desk positions have been frozen and left

unfilled when vacancies have occurred. More recently, cost-cutting through regional centralization of editorial functions, such as has occurred in the San Francisco Bay Area newspapers controlled by the Singleton group, has led to criticism about the possible impact on quality of local stories. And in mid-2008, the *Orange County Register*, reeling from several years of declining circulation and staff reductions, announced that it was outsourcing some copy editing for the *Register* and page layout to India for one of its community newspapers.¹⁷ Whether outsourcing will become a trend is unclear, but the fact that one newspaper at least is exploring the possibility indicates that copy editors are clearly not immune from the overall financial pressures facing newspapers.

Many newspaper owners, publishers and editors are looking to online as a natural successor to print, even though online revenue is not growing fast enough to offset the declines in print ad revenue and there are indications that the growth is slowing.¹⁸ Gannett is shifting the focus to online publishing at its newspapers by promoting an "Information Center" concept. CEO Craig

■ *A somewhat unexpected finding is that there is no difference in the likelihood of editing based on newspaper size.*

DuBow says, "News and information will be delivered to the right media—be it newspapers, online, mobile, video or ones not yet invented—at the right time."¹⁹ The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* has restructured itself into a Web-first news organization, and other large newspapers are trying to do the same thing.²⁰ The *New York Times* publisher Arthur Ochs Sulzberger commented in early 2007 that he did not know whether *The Times* would be published on newspaper in five years, adding, "I don't care either."²¹

The pace of change and the underlying economic uncertainty have added to stress levels across the newsroom, and copy editors have historically been among the most stressed. Studies have documented job dissatisfaction among copy editors,²² especially at small papers²³ and burnout, in part the result of technological demands.²⁴ Pressures have grown at larger newspapers too, where declining ad revenue has led to deeper staff cutbacks and increasing workloads. At the same time, pressure is growing to produce more content specifically for the Web. Large newspapers have traditionally used their more extensive resources to create more specialized functions, such as copy desk supervisors as well as copy editors. At small daily newspapers, a copy editor/paginator is typically responsible for copy editing, headline-writing and page design. In many cases, stories are not edited twice, and sometimes they are not even proofread. At larger newspapers, a slot-rim structure typically ensures that at least two copy editors read all stories, and often a third proofs it—after an assignment editor reviews it. In the face of those cost pressures, have large newspapers been able to preserve that more intensive level of copy editing review for online stories?

Newspapers have traditionally copy edited all editorial content, including commentary and editorials. In the online era, staff-written blogs have become quite popular,²⁵ and their content spans a wide range—from news updates to "reporter's notebook"-type diaries to outright opinion. That sort of material would be copy edited if it appeared in the print publication. Is it being copy edited online?

In an effort to examine such questions in a national context, this study explores a set of questions involving copy editing of online material.

- Whether online-only stories are copy edited before publication
 - Whether such stories typically are edited by copy editors or somebody else
 - Why those stories are not copy edited at sites that said they weren't,
 - Whether captions for online slide shows, an increasingly popular feature of newspaper Web sites, are copy edited
 - Whether staff blogs are copy edited and, if so, by whom
 - Whether a newspaper has online copy editors
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Method

The study employed a mail survey of U.S. newspapers of more than 30,000 circulation, randomly sampled and stratified by size. A list of U.S. newspapers was assembled from the *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook*²⁶ and divided into three groups (more than 100,000, 50,000-99,999 and 30,000-49,999).

Seventy newspapers were randomly chosen from each group for a total sample size of 210 newspapers. The sample represents more than two-thirds of U.S. daily newspaper circulation. Small dailies were not surveyed because their staffing of copy desks and degree of organizational structure are very different from the approach in larger newspapers.

Surveys were sent to two staff members at each newspaper—a copy chief and an online editor or supervisor. The two job categories were chosen because they are the positions most likely to have detailed knowledge of the editing process for online content. An initial list of staff names was drawn from the *Editor & Publisher Yearbook*. Staff names and titles were then checked against online staff lists, which many newspapers publish, and by phone, when the information was not available online or the job titles were missing or unclear. For example, staff members who function as copy chiefs, the newspaper's main supervisory copy editor, often go by other titles, especially at mid-size newspapers. "News editor" or "assistant news editor," are commonly used titles. Online staff members who do similar work also sometimes have different titles, such as online editor, online producer or Web producer. Checking staff lists and telephoning was a necessary step because published lists, such as the *Editor & Publisher Yearbook*, fall out of date very quickly, especially in their listing of online editors. The final sample included 210 copy chiefs and 210 online editors.

Three waves of surveys were sent in late summer and early fall 2007—the first to the entire sample, the second to the copy chiefs who did not respond and the third to online editors from newspapers where persons did not respond in the first or second waves. This approach, which is somewhat atypical, was done to maximize the number of newspapers with persons responding at a reasonable cost. Relatively few newspapers returned two responses in the first wave, and an examination of responses from newspapers that participated showed that copy chiefs and online editors had responded very similarly.

The overall response rate from the three mailings was 42.3 percent (178 completed surveys). A more important metric, given that the newspaper rather than the individual editor, was the key unit of analysis, was 73.8 percent of newspapers represented (either the copy chief or the online editor) for a total of 155 newspapers out of the sample of 210. Data were analyzed using only one respondent from each newspaper. Copy chiefs were used when both types of editor from a given newspaper responded.²⁷ The responses were roughly balanced across groups, with the small-newspaper category slightly under-represented.²⁸

Findings

How many newspapers have persons who copy edit online stories before posting? Figure 1 shows that someone at about half of the newspapers in the sample “always” copy edits stories before posting. Respondents at more than 15 percent of all newspapers, however, reported that they “never” do, including 25 percent of the largest circulation category (newspapers greater than 100,000). Using the five-point scale, the correlation between likelihood of copy editing before posting and actual circulation size is not significant ($r = -.096$, $p = .261$), indicating that there is no difference based on newspaper size.

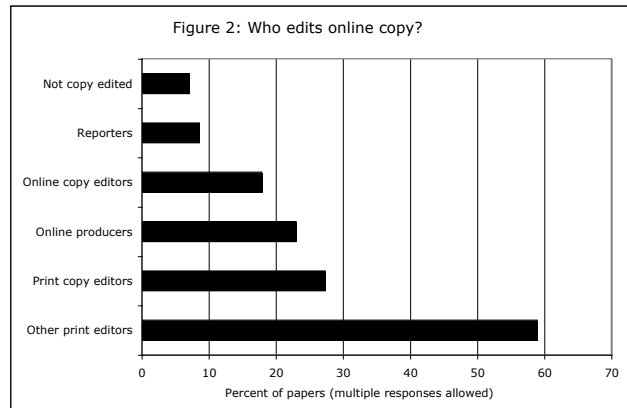
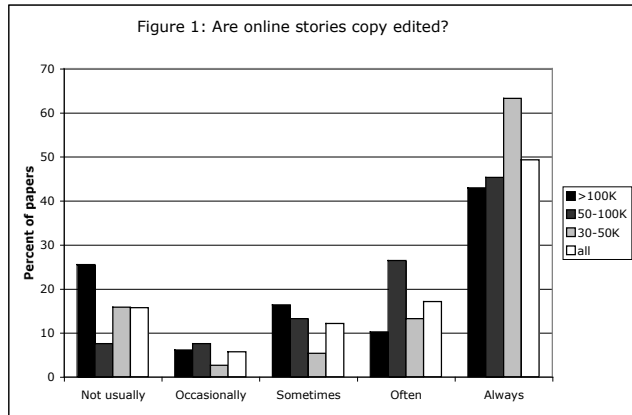


Figure 2 indicates that at many newspapers, online stories are often copy edited by staff members who are not copy editors. The job category most newspapers list is “other print-side editors, such as assigning editors,” at nearly 60 percent. The next-highest category is “print-side copy editors,” at nearly 30 percent. Many of those other editors (by a ratio of 2:1) do have copy editing experience.

In response to a question asking why online stories would not be copy edited, the most typical answer was “It would delay posting,” followed by “Not enough copy editing staff for print and online.” [See Figure 3.]

Captions for slide shows are not copy edited as often as are online stories. Figure 4 shows that, across all circulation categories, fewer than 30 percent of newspapers always copy edit slideshow captions. About 25 percent of the 150 newspapers answering this question reported “never,” including more than 35

percent (19 newspapers) with more than 100,000 circulation. The correlation between copy editing of captions and actual circulation size is not significant ($r=-.019$, $p=.17$), indicating that there is no difference based on newspaper size.

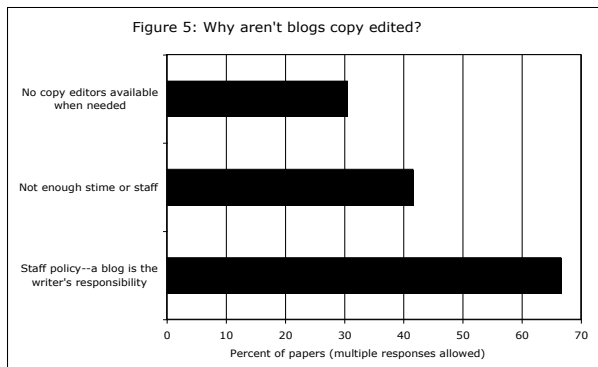
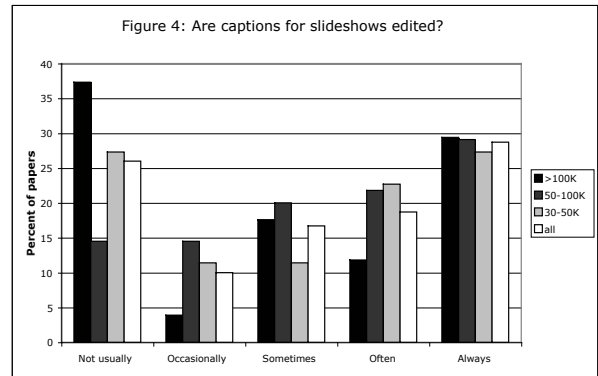
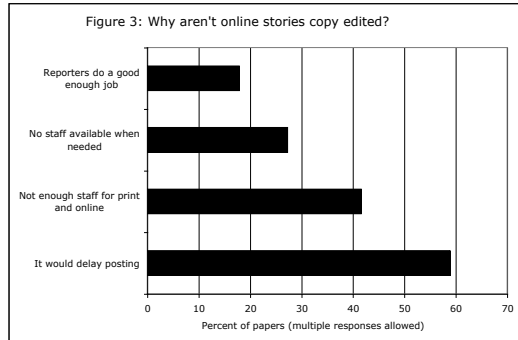
Ninety-five percent of the editors at 155 newspapers reported they had staff blogs. About one-third said the blogs were copy edited, and half of that group said blogs were typically edited by print-side assigning editors. Online producers copy edited blogs at about 30 percent of the newspapers that edited blogs. The chief reason cited for not copy editing blogs was “staff policy—blogs are considered the writer’s responsibility.” [See Figure 5]

A small percentage of newspapers (12.9) had at least one online copy editor.

Discussion

Copy editing clearly is not as great a priority for online stories as it is for print. A sizable number of respondents reported that they did not always

copy edit online stories before posting (about 50 percent ranging from “never” to “often”). That contrasts with typical print newspapers, where all stories are copy edited before publication, often by a rim and a slot editor. And many of the newspapers that do copy edit online stories are using print assigning editors,



who have many other duties and might have more pressing priorities.

A somewhat unexpected finding is that there is no difference in the likelihood of editing based on newspaper size. Results indicating that the largest newspapers were most likely to report that they “never” copy edited online stories and online captions for slide shows before publication is even more surprising. Size of newspaper has long been associated with more staff, more specialization and more eyes on stories. Large newspapers produce more online content, but they also produce more print content, and they have always had more copy editing staff to handle it. If large newspapers are acting more like small, poorly staffed ones when it comes to online content, that trend would not be a positive development at a time when newspapers are looking to online publication as the future.

Editors at some newspapers have found a way to copy edit online material, and the approaches vary considerably. At a session of the American Copy Editors national conference in 2008, representatives of several newspapers outlined their efforts. *The Los Angeles Times*, for example, experimented with several strategies, including rotating print-side copy editors into the online operation for short periods and scheduling some earlier desk shifts so that print-side copy editors could work on online stories before editing the print stories. *Florida Today*, a medium-circulation daily, turned print-trained copy editors into online producers, who are able to cover copy editing duties along with other online functions for most of the day. *The Rocky Mountain News* shifted two copy editors to 11:30 a.m. starting times so that much of the newspaper’s Web copy could be edited by trained copy editors. *The Wichita Eagle*, a newspaper that often publishes stories for the Web first and then repurposes them for print, restructured its copy flow so that online copy would go through copy editors rather than through assigning editors. Even so, according to a panelist at the session, copy editing for online is different—and stories are not likely to be perfect.²⁹

An underlying assumption in the study is that quality will suffer if online stories are not copy edited, and, in particular, if they are not read prior to publication by copy editors. That is a reasonable assumption, but it would be worthwhile to analyze the content of online stories and compare them against print stories on typical copy editing criteria, such as accuracy, clarity, grammar, spelling, etc.

Another issue that bears further scrutiny is the relative lack of editing of blogs. The copy editing process traditionally helps keep newspapers from publishing embarrassing or potentially libelous material. If blogs are considered the writer’s responsibility, as many newspapers indicated, or if blogs are not edited because of a lack of time or resources, newspapers might be setting themselves up for legal trouble at a time when they can ill afford the cost or the potential loss of credibility.

The results are based on estimates, rather than observation, and self-reports can be inaccurate. Copy chiefs and online editors, however, should be in the best position to make these estimates, and observation of so many sites would

be highly impractical.

Further study could examine whether this trend is continuing or whether newspapers are shifting copy editing resources to online publication. There is some indication that such a shift is occurring. A number of the returned surveys included comments that the editors were rethinking their staff structure and trying to arrange for more online copy editing, and some did have online copy editing positions.

It would also be useful to examine editors' attitudes about online copy editing—whether they feel it is fundamental or whether they consider it a luxury that they can no longer afford. Is it simply a reflection of other factors, such as greater cost pressures on staff resources and a greater imperative to publish online stories quickly, or is there a belief that copy editing simply is not as important in online content?

Unlike reporters and photographers, copy editors have not been invited to participate in the online revolution at many newspapers. That failure might have serious implications for the quality of newspapers.

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