Technological Takeover

 Technology has invaded everyday life in numerous ways. Kids are getting various gadgets and gizmos at younger ages. The latest cellular device is another appendage for business professionals and Joe Shmoes alike. Computers are even starting to replace jobs formally completed by human counterparts. Because of this technological revolution, it is difficult to find one aspect of the world not yet affected. One of the professions greatly altered by the emergence of new technology is copy editing. Debates between professionals over whether this change is positive or negative have been intensifying. But after numerous studies and surveys, editors and professors are reaching a consensus regarding the issue. Technology has had a negative effect on the copy editing profession because the emphasis on accurately finding mistakes has dwindled, the number of available positions has decreased, and the relationship between editor and author has been severed.

 Copy editing began as simply performing the medial, often new, tasks around the office. But as innovative media emerged, the profession evolved. This form of editing has experienced many changes—from combining reporters’ photographs, to proofreading pieces of literature, and finally to paginating newspaper layouts (Russial 7). In the present day, editors’ jobs consist of those previously mentioned, plus many more as new technology is created. What started as strictly manual labor turned into full-fledged computer-based jobs. But once technology became as necessary as oxygen, copy editors’ jobs began to diminish. Many companies saw editors as more of an annoyance than an actual benefit; therefore, editors were “promoted” to other jobs, such as teams of reporters to basic desk work (Russial 8). As technology and the economy continues to put immense pressure on the journalism world, editors’ jobs will become slim to none.

 Many say technology has not changed much as of late, so the copy editing profession has not been transformed to the point of extinction. But once the evolution of technology over the past few decades is examined from a distance, it is easy to see how far society has come technologically. As generations progress, so does technology. From color television, to portable telephones, to CD players, to laptops, to the latest version of the iPhone—technology has come leaps and bounds in such a short period of time. The computer is now essential in every business—and the only means of communication in some. Numerous business owners are even purchasing cell phones for all of their employees to carry constantly. The journalism world is no exception to this new evolution; if anything, it has been one of those that has felt the greatest impact. The incessant demand for breaking news at the time it occurs is putting publishers and editors in a bind. Because today’s society has become accustomed to news this very second, getting news out as quick as possible has overtaken accuracy as top priority. “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” (Russial 6).

 But this constant flux in technology and the editing profession has caused many professionals to change their editing ways. Even though, it would be common to believe as technology has evolved, copy editors have come to prefer electronic editing over hard copy. But according to a survey conducted by David Dayton, results prove editors still hold a preference for old-style proofreading. Out of all the editors surveyed, 74% stated they prefer hard-copy editing over electronic editing (Dayton 199). Addressing the opposite point of view, even 54% of editors said they remained with hard copy editing due to writers preferring this method (Dayton 199). Health problems that accompany the constant use of electronic editing are also one of the main reasons editors prefer the hard-copy method. Forty percent of the editors Dayton surveyed said hand, elbow, wrist, and arm pain are the key reasons why they do not use electronic editing. Other health issues such as fatigue, stress, headaches, neck/back pain, and eye strain also ward them off of electronic editing (Dayton 203).



*Table 1.1 (Dayton 199)*

 *Table 1.2 (Dayton 203)*

Accompanying the numerous health problems, a decrease in editing accuracy also occurs while using the electronic method. “A number of studies have indicated that textual errors in newspapers can decrease the perceived credibility of the papers” (Wharton-Michael 28). If a newspaper consistently contains numerous errors grammatically or structurally, the public tends to think less of the paper. Because of this increased criticism, it is vital for both publishers and editors to ensure nearly no errors are detected in literary pieces. A study conducted by Wilkinson and Robinshaw revealed those who used the hard-copy editing method found more errors and took less time than those using the computer (Wharton-Michael 29). Electronic editors also experienced a greater sense of fatigue even though they read fewer pages than the paper editors. The fatigue felt by those using an electronic medium was pinned as the cause of fewer detected errors. “Participants in the computer condition appeared to be more affected by fatigue. They missed more errors as the experiment advanced, but their reading time for the material was increasing” (Wharton-Michael 30). Because the electronic editors recorded faster speeds, Wilkinson and Robinshaw wondered if the decreased error detection was caused by the fatigue or the increased speed of reading. So the new question becomes, if fewer errors are accounted for, is speed via computer a better method for editing?

Because the increase in errors has not deterred readers from using the electronic medium, e-books are overriding physical books. Obviously books purchased electronically are cheaper than those found in a book store; so as various versions of e-readers emerge, it is more common for individuals to stop buying paper books. Due to this change in literary scenery, the necessity for copy editors is also transforming. Editing on the computer is obviously a faster method than hard-copy, and today’s society is leaning more towards the faster, the better. Therefore, if a computer can do the same job as an editor in half the time, why not eliminate the job? Editing will get done more quickly via electronic copy, and a computer does not have to be paid for its service. These arguments may lead to the virtual end of the copy editing profession. Editors could become scarce; only there in case something goes terribly wrong or by some chance the computer makes a mistake.

If copy editors are eliminated, no one will be there to pick up the pieces if a crises arises. The computer could experience an error; all of the technology in the office may either stop working or get a virus. No one in the company may be qualified to edit the literary materials adequately. Because of this, having at least one editor in every publishing office and newsroom is important. Yes, most likely every computer in the entire building will not clunk out, but anything is possible. Even if the spell check program is functioning properly, that does not necessarily mean it is accurately editing. Almost everyone who has written anything more than a poem knows spellcheck/grammar-check does not always get it right. The computer does not know if an individual meant to have a purposeful fragment in their writing; it sees the unfinished sentence as an error and wants to fix it. The computer also does not comprehend the writer’s message. An unnecessary word or the deletion of a needed word are just some of the few things a computer does to a literary piece. Even though spellcheck is faster and easier, editors are still more practical. A living, breathing person can understand those purposeful fragments and underlying messages. Editors can also examine the context of the piece along with the grammatical structure. So far, this has been something computers have not been able to do.

Even if an editor is a better source of proofreading than spellcheck, using electronic editing would make more sense if a newspaper is already online. Because most literary manuscripts are submitted electronically, why should they be printed off? This would save paper, and most likely save time in the long run. Having to spend the time printing off all the literary works, proofreading them, and then manually fixing the mistakes on the computer copy would waste valuable time. Instead, the computer’s spellcheck could be used as the editing medium. By using this method, less time would be wasted and less paper would be used. Also, if a piece needs to be emailed to another individual in the company, it is already digitized. No one needs to sit at the computer to edit the piece, type it after the editing, and then email it to the designated individual.

Because of this new technological emergence, the numbers of copy editors is slowly dwindling. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the copy editing profession will possibly change 1% between 2010 and 2020. And since this profession is gradually becoming less needed, college students are less willing to major in anything editing related, (or even English-related for that matter.) In today’s society it is difficult to find a desirable job even with a college degree. So if a profession is slowly diminishing, why would a college student want to become an editor? Many college students are having to put aside their dreams to pursue a reasonable degree. It is no longer easy to enter into the English world. Between the need for hard-copy newspapers and editors dwindling, it has become tougher for a new college graduate to enter into this field of study. In today’s economy, it is difficult to pass up other reliable, better-paying professions. Finding a highly profitable job has become a major necessity during these financially tough times.

The increase in skills necessary for the job could also be a factor as to why college students are wary of entering the English world. Technology has forced editors to acquire new expertise that was not even imaginable a few decades ago. The grammatically based abilities are still very similar, but now computer knowledge is needed as well. The copy editing profession has reached the point of half grammar and half computer. “Computer editing, pagination and digital imaging, which were barely a dream 30 years ago, are tools of the trade today” (Fee, Russial, and Auman 23). An English degree and the basic understanding of grammar is no longer marketable in today’s competitive society. Because of this increase in essential skills, numerous questions arise regarding the proper education of college students.

“The questions are fairly simple but the answers complex: How much technology should we teach or expect students to learn by themselves? A lot, a little or none? What does the industry want, and is it appropriate to expect journalism programs to provide it?” (Fee, Russial, and Auman 24). Depending on who is being questioned, some may say traditional skills are good enough for editors, while others believe various talents are vital. According to English professors and copy editors alike, proofreading is still the top contender of needed skills (Fee, Russial, and Auman 31). Nevertheless, technological savvy such as page designing, paginating, Photoshop, and graphics are almost as important (Fee, Russial, and Auman 32). On the other hand, professors tend to believe Photoshop is more important than professionals. Graphics is another aspect professors highly regard but professionals do not. This varying in opinions is due to professors seeing a change in the career and wanting to prepare their students. But professional copy editors may not be required to possess as many technological skills as is currently believed.

On the other side of the spectrum, college students’ proofreading skills are deteriorating with the rise of technology. Among a group of freshman Business Communication I students, a pretest and posttest was given regarding grammatical basics (Enos 274). The majority of participants did not struggle on subjects such as nouns, verb agreements, and commas. However, they did find difficulty with other forms of punctuation, pronouns, prepositions, and conjunctions. The same pretest and posttest was also given to a group of college freshman in the Business Communication II class (Enos 275). These students performed at a higher understanding of the material, and had less of a difference between their results. Even though they too struggled with other punctuation, they also had difficulties with possessive nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. A third group of students were given the same tests, but scored much lower than the first two groups (Enos 275). The difference between this group and the first two, is the ‘control group’ had not taken any classes in business communication. This being said, nearly everyone out of the control group answered number style or other punctuation questions incorrectly. Other weak spots were commas, adjectives, and adverbs. However, the control group did not have such a contrast between the results of their pretests with those of the posttest.



*Image 1.1 (Enos 274)*

*Image 1.2 (Enos 275)*

Even though the effect of technology on copy editing is predominantly negative, there is a positive side as well. With new technology, getting a piece of writing from one individual to the next has become much easier. It is no longer difficult to forward manuscripts to one person, have it revised, and then sent to someone else. By using the electronic method, the editor can examine the writing, fix the mistakes right there on the screen, and email the revised copy onto the next stage. This new process skips a step and ends up in the necessary department more quickly. Also, because email is much faster than snail mail, a writer’s piece can reach its destination in a shorter period of time. This will in turn allow the editor to read and fix the piece of writing at a faster pace; and because these two steps can be completed faster, the final end product can be released sooner. This electronic method allows a work of literature to be published faster, allowing consumers to purchase it sooner. With this new efficient method, more books could be getting published, allowing the publishing companies to make more money.

*Image 1.3 (Enos 275)*

Another benefit to using the electronic method is copy editors can now either work from home or freelance. It is no longer necessary for them to work at the office to get projects finished by the deadline. Publishers can now email editors books so the editing process is completed in a timely fashion. Working at home can also cause less stress for the editor, increasing their quality of work. Without electronic editing, none of this efficiency would be possible.

Despite these positives, it is still the popular consensus electronic editing has impaired editors. In the end, no computer can replace the skills a human editor possesses. No piece of technology can fully understand the message the author is trying to portray. The relationship between editor and author is not easily replaced by something as simple as the newest version of spellcheck. Unless all of the abilities possessed by an editor can be put into a piece of technology, editors will always be superior—they will always be needed. Some may say this new technological era has given the copy editing profession another wind. But in all reality, technology has had a negative effect on the copy editing profession because the emphasis on accuracy of finding mistakes has dwindled, the number of available positions has decreased, and the relationship between editor and author has been severed.

Dayton, David. “Electronic Editing in Technical Communication: A Survey of Practices and

Attitudes.” *Technical Communication* 50.2 (May 2003): 192-206.

Enos, Marcella F. “Instructional Interventions for Improving Proofreading and Editing Skills of

College Students.” *Business Communication Quarterly* 73.3 (Sep. 2010): 265-281.

Fee, Frank, John Russial, and Ann Auman. “Profs, Professionals Agree About Students’ Editing

Skill.” *Newspaper Research Journal* 24.3 (Summer 2003): 23-26.

Russial, John. “Copy Editing Not Great Priority for Online Stories.” *Newspaper Research*

*Journal* 30.2 (Spring 2009): 6-15.

United States Department of Labor. “Occupational Outlook Handbook.” Bureau of Labor

Statistics. 13 Nov. 2013. <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/media-andcommunication/editors.

htm>.

Wharton-Michael, Patty. “Print vs. Computer Screen: Effects of Medium on Proofreading

Accuracy.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 63.1 (Spring 2008): 28-41.