DH6012 – Contemporary Practices in Publishing and Editing

Reflective Portfolio

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Introduction

In this reflective piece, I will place particular emphasis on what I see as three linked and fundamental concerns in contemporary publishing and editorial practice. These are the continuing vital, yet arguably diminishing, designated role of "editor" in various media; editing in the digital space, with reference to the possibility of positive change in scholarly editing and the participatory dynamic as it contrasts with a more sandboxed approach; and the evolving nature of editorial practice as it contends with a constantly moving digital world.

The Changing Nature of the Editor on the Digital Frontier

The editor has and will continue to exist in the publishing process as the judge of what is included in and excluded from a text and the recognised arbiter of quality, with the accountability this brings. Editors of major news media and scholarly presses, whether chief editors, managing editors or copy editors, continue, by and large, to have the same roles and deliverables they have had for decades. What has changed is the world of publishing around them, where, as Shillingsburg notes, the electronic media and online platforms of the digital space "have freed readers and scholars from the restraints of print editions" (Shillingsburg, 2006, p. 4); it is no coincidence that many of these "restraints" came within an editor's gravitational pull.

In the digital sphere exemplified today by social media and online news, much of what is published is intended for immediate consumption. The deadlines of printed newspapers or magazines have been superseded by the fluid reporting of news and stories across the day, with news published as it happens. This has led to the concurrent rise of citizen journalism, where a person with a smartphone may be better placed to relay events than a trained journalist.

The editorial role has been sidelined to an extent because of this shift to the digital space. Towards the end of the 1990s, the debate may have been about how editors of news organs or scholarly texts acted as "gatekeepers" of information and the effect of "press barons" that led to printed and television news going through a filter before being consumed by people (Giddens, 1995, p. 448). The shift to digital has short-circuited these concerns to a

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degree, and Schreibman speaks to the benefits of this democratisation in scholarly texts with the "social edition" and the possibility of mass digitisation (Schreibman, 2013).

Can Editorial Practice Adapt?

I have realised that the shift to a digital rather than physical space means we may have to re-evaluate the editorial role for a new age. For example, O'Sullivan notes that there has always been a tendency to prioritise form over matter and structure over content in aspects of scholarship (O'Sullivan, Long and Mattson, 2016), but as the "dynamics" of scholarship, and indeed the wider publishing universe, have been changed by the shift to digital, I feel it is important that we go further than just accepting a more direct plane of contact with people, recognise its benefits and address potential pitfalls through the reinvention of some elements of the editorial role.

For example, Shillingsburg notes that "editing creates new texts that present or represent the works of the past" (Shillingsburg, 2006, p 12) and I have detailed how much of what is placed in the digital realm now in the likes of a Facebook post, a tweet or an Instagram post is meant for consumption in the now. I wonder how such media will be even interpreted in five or ten years because the meaning, almost by definition, is tied to its historical context. I have no doubt digital publishing, exemplified by the likes of the crowdsourced "social edition" mooted by Schreibman, will be more democratic because of the "shared common purpose in engaging in a dialogue" that O'Sullivan describes but perhaps an editorial responsibility may emerge to consider, along with the traditional aspects of providing established guidelines or facilitating peer review, the additional questions of how publications will sit in a wider historical context, perhaps five, ten or 50 years from now. Patrice Flichy notes that "inventors of a new communication system reason in terms of substitution when they would be better thinking along the lines of shifts of uses" (Flichy, 1995) and I believe it imperative that we see the benefit of potential "shifts" in editorial practice rather than see it being "substituted" *in toto*, or perhaps, more accurately, subsumed into a digital crowd with no defined responsibility.

Lessons in Embracing Change

I am concentrating on two prominent areas in publishing, namely news media and the scholarly sphere, as on the face of it they seem to have seen different effects from the emergence of digital cultures. Traditional news media have seen the erosion of influence as a result of the shift to "citizen journalists" and social media or microblogging as a means of disseminating news. In a sphere where editors may have been seen as gatekeepers rather than custodians of knowledge, this erosion of influence has led to the emergence of dubious news, for example, which has the cyclical effect of further eroding trust in the institutions of tradition print and television media.

This tension between older and established news media practices and the effects of mass participation social media appeared to manifest in 2020 when Bari Weiss, an op-ed editor at *The New York Times*, resigned, citing "an illiberal environment" after more than 1,000 of the paper's staff protested the publication of a piece calling for a military intervention in response to civic unrest that occurred in American cities at the time (Lee, 2020).

In contrast, scholarly editing seems to have shifted into the digital realm without such upheaval. Shillingsburg (Shillingsburg, 2006) notes how scholarly editing is about "reincarnating text" and it may be the case that because the *modus operandi* is not rooted in the immediate, it does not suffer the same pitfalls as news media and instead sees the benefits of the participatory dynamic that digital cultures can facilitate.

It is the case, however, that scholarly editing faces its own dilemmas. Historically, scholarly editing "focuses on the study of the composition, revision, publication and transmission", as Shillingsburg notes, and this feeds into the construction of an edition. O'Sullivan (O'Sullivan, Long and Mattson, 2016) notes the tension between those who want to see the *status quo* maintained in the sphere and those who wish to "explode pre-existing academic structures" in order to foster the "thick collegiality" that can smooth the process of sharing ideas in the most open way. The tension between interpretation, knowledge creation and scholarship and the potential pitfalls of the participatory model, which have had such negative effects on news media, must be borne in mind by the editors who have ultimate responsibility for scholarly texts.

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Looking to the Changed Nature of Editorial Practice in the Digital Realm

Ballatore and Natale indicate there have "always been prophecies of mediums disappearing" (Ballatore and Natale, 2016) that have not been realised and the same appears true of traditional publishing. It exists in a sometimes uneasy relationship with its digital sibling. The role of the editor has been shifted as a result but comparing the effects of the digital revolution on the traditional news media and scholarly editing provides some insight on how to grapple with the challenges of the emerging digital landscape.

The clearest factor that emerges from such a comparison is the rise of open data and participatory editing. Part of the reason traditional print media has seen such upheaval has been the advent of participatory practices and the shift in attitudes that has led to people finding news on microblogging and social media sites, which short-circuit the editorial process. This has led to people having an expectation of getting news for free, despite the inherent cost of news production, which has the twin effect of driving news media to produce stories that users are more likely to read in order to achieve monetisation through advertising and of eroding the influence of traditional news media in a type of circular effect.

In contrast, the academic publishing sphere should, at least on the face of it, promote the open sharing of ideas as knowledge is only useful when it can be accessed and used. Participatory editing depends a great deal on people giving up their time and expertise in a charitable way, and there are also challenges arising from this "democratisation" of the academic publishing process, such as how to facilitate proper peer review and avoid the damaging equivalent of "fake news" in academia.

The key question arising from this is how we value work. Much of the commercial and ideological unrest in traditional news media arises because there is no consensus on how work, including editorial, design and journalistic work, is valued by both producers and consumers. Before the onset of digital cultures, it may have been easier to place a value on traditional publications like books and newspaper articles but because of the rise of the free, open and participatory model, it has become more difficult to do this.

It may be the case that the reader, or even the general consumer of media, is the important social actor in this and in a sense, he or she is taking on some of the editorial responsibility. Even in the digital age, certain newspapers maintain editorial standards while other news outlets or publishing platforms appear to have less exacting standards but this is a matter of

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subjective perception. The digital revolution has provided people with tools to produce and consume more media than ever before but the responsibility for what to do with the information and how to act on it rests, as it always has, with the reader.

Conclusion

The emergence of digital tools and platforms has in many ways upended editorial roles and practice to the point that some question whether they are still relevant. In considering the contrasting spheres of traditional news media and scholarly publishing, I have concluded that editorial practice is altered but should not be subsumed into digital noise. Opportunity may arise if the editor learns the lessons of how digital tools have affected contemporary publishing and changes his or her practice to act not just as gatekeeper or custodian of knowledge but as the shepherd who guides the reader judiciously through difficulties that can arise on the digital landscape so he or she can make the best use of this expansive frontier.

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