In a Changing World of News, an Elegy for Copy Editors

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I went to the Newseum, a shiny new building in Washington that news companies and foundations have erected as a shrine to their industry. Since it’s my industry, too, I thought a museum, where sacred relics and texts have been placed safely in the equivalent of a big glass jar, might make me hopeful about the future.

“Where’s the section on copy editing?” I asked the guy at the entrance.

He wasn’t sure. “Try Internet, TV and Radio, on the third floor.”

“For copy editing? Newspaper copy editing?”

He checked with a colleague. “News History, on five,” she said.

Ouch. Copy editors are my favorite people in the news business, and many I know are still alive and doing what they do. As it happened, I couldn’t find anything about them on the fifth or any other floor. A call later confirmed that the museum has essentially nothing about how newspapers are made today, and thus nothing about the lowly yet exalted copy editor.

I was one for a long time, and I know that obscurity and unpopularity are part of the job. Copy editors work late hours and can get testy. They never sign their work.

As for what they do, here’s the short version: After news happens in the chaos and clutter of the real world, it travels through a reporter’s mind, a photographer’s eye, a notebook and camera lens, into computer files, then through multiple layers of editing. Copy editors handle the final transition to an ink-on-paper object. On the news-factory floor, they do the refining and packaging. They trim words, fix grammar, punctuation and style, write headlines and captions.

But they also do a lot more. Copy editors are the last set of eyes before yours. They are more powerful than proofreaders. They untangle twisted prose. They are surgeons, removing growths of error and irrelevance; they are minimalist chefs, straining fat. Their goal is to make sure that the day’s work of a newspaper staff becomes an object of lasting beauty and excellence once it hits the presses.
Yeah. Presses. It has probably already struck you how irrelevant many of these skills may seem in the endlessly shifting, eternal glow of the Web.

The copy editor's job, to the extent possible under deadline, is to slow down, think things through, do the math and ask the irritating question. His or her main creative outlet, writing clever headlines, is problematic online, because allusive wordplay doesn't necessarily generate Google hits. And Google makes everyone an expert, so the aging copy editor's trivia-packed brain and synonym collection seem not to count for as much anymore.

The job hasn't disappeared yet, but it is swiftly evolving, away from an emphasis on style and consistency, from making a physical object perfect the first time. The path to excellence is now through speed, agility and creativity in using multiple expressive outlets for information in all its shapes and sounds.

As newspapers lose money and readers, they have been shedding great swaths of expensive expertise. They have been forced to shrink or eliminate the multiply redundant levels of editing that distinguish their kind of journalism from what you find on TV, radio and much of the Web. Copy editors are being bought out or forced out; they are dying and not being replaced.

Webby doesn't necessarily mean sloppy, of course, and online news operations will shine with all the brilliance that the journalists who create them can bring. But in that world of the perpetual present tense — post it now, fix it later, update constantly — old-time, persnickety editing may be a luxury in which only a few large news operations will indulge. It will be an artisanal product, like monastery honey and wooden yachts.

It would be nice, at least, to thank the copy editors on the way out. But after visiting the Newseum, I know what I have suspected for a few years: if newspaper copy editors vanish from the earth, no one is going to notice.

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