

From the University Presses — The Value Added by Copyediting

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In all the fierce debate about open access, there is unanimous agreement that whatever the means of scholarly communication in the future will be, it is absolutely essential that peer review be maintained as a core principle. The assumption, of course, is that having scholarship reviewed by experts will give those who access it reasonable assurance that it meets the standards currently accepted by a discipline for originality, conceptual clarity, responsible use of sources, proper application of methods of analysis, logical coherence, relevance of the evidence adduced to confirmation of the hypotheses proposed, and the like. The fundamental meaning of “fair use” comes into play here, too, as this process of one scholar building upon the work of predecessors, quoting from their previous writings and suitably acknowledging them in footnotes and bibliography, and thereby advancing the state of knowledge in the discipline is what that legal doctrine has always been intended, first and foremost, to protect. (This is in contrast with efforts to apply “fair use” to justifying the sheer multiplication of copies of the original, with no value added, which is the Pandora’s box that Congress opened with the reference to “multiple copies” in Section 107 of the **1976 Copyright Act** in response to heavy lobbying by higher education institutions.)

Very little attention has been paid to date, however, to the importance of copyediting in ensuring the integrity of this process. Perhaps the reason it has been ignored is that the debate over open access started within, and has remained primarily focused upon, scientific disciplines where most publication is done

via the vehicle of the article in a journal, often highly technical, where equations and formulae may sometimes dominate over prose and leave less scope for a copyeditor’s skills with language to be deployed. (I am assured by one editor who responded to a draft of this article and has done substantive and developmental editing on thousands of scientific articles, however, that there is still wide scope for significant editing. As he says, even in highly technical articles “the equations are usually accompanied by thickets of impenetrable prose,” and a lot of his work “involves making sure that the text and the equations say the same thing.” He also adds that he checks “the basic math in tables, since it’s amazing how often scientists get the sums and averages wrong.”) For journals in the humanities and social sciences, at any rate, copyediting surely must continue to play a major role in the process of quality control. As advocates of open access, having scored significant victories in the realm of scientific, technical, and medical (STM) publishing including the mandate for deposit of NIH-funded research articles in **PubMed Central**, now move on to rally scholars in the liberal arts to their cause, this role deserves more understanding and emphasis than it has hitherto received.

I admit here to a personal bias. I began my publishing career in 1967 working at **Princeton University Press** as a copyeditor. Even after becoming social science editor, then assistant director, and finally editor-in-chief there, I still copyedited manuscripts from time to time for the sheer enjoyment of doing so. And even for the first several years after

becoming director at **Penn State University Press**, I took on a few manuscripts every year to copyedit — until copyediting went the way of everything else and became a job carried out mainly on computers. Not that I have anything against editing on computers, mind you, but I do miss the tactile pleasure of wielding a blue pencil to make marks on paper. And once a copyeditor, always a copyeditor: it is painful to read many newspapers today because of the numerous grammatical and other errors they have on display. A particular pet peeve of mine is the sign at the checkout counter found in many grocery stores and in **Wal-Mart** that says “10 or less items” (ouch!).

At first, as a beginning editor, I was appalled to find so many mistakes in the footnotes of even senior scholars. I especially remember an expert on **Martin Luther** whose chapter in an edited volume contained multiple errors in the citations to the authoritative edition of **Luther’s** works, which I systematically checked in the **Princeton** library after becoming suspicious. I also recall a major scholar on **Voltaire** having similarly been in need of such remedial assistance. And an author of a book about **John Stuart Mill**, I discovered, had many of his quotations from **Mill** wrong, as I discovered when I checked the originals. Any copyeditor can tell such tales of scholarly lapses many times over. They know how much their help is needed by scholars. Perhaps the most memorable example in my experience is a book that won a **Pulitzer Prize** whose copyeditor, I was aware, had done a yeoman’s job of rewriting the work. I was foolish enough to have mentioned this example, naming the title and author, in a public forum once and subsequently received a letter from the author’s attorney threatening a libel suit if I did not publicly retract my comment and offer an apology. But fortunately, from my connections with the legal community on copyright matters, I was able to benefit from pro bono advice from a top law firm, and the letters I wrote in response carefully crafted according to that advice, combined with the knowledge that I could produce complete documentation to establish the veracity of my claim, dissuaded the author from pursuing the complaint. But, even though this is an extreme example, who knows how many scholars have been spared from major embarrassment by their copyeditors working quietly behind the scenes to repair their flawed writings?

I therefore marvel at the readiness of so many advocates of open access, starting with **Stevan Harnad** who has long championed what he calls Green OA (which means authors’ self-archiving of their peer-reviewed, but not yet copyedited, articles on their personal Web-

continued on page 70

Biz of Acq from page 68

email announcing training sessions on a new online ordering system will include a link to screenshots posted up on the **wiki**. During these training sessions, I show both the new ordering system and the place in the **wiki** where the bibliographers can find a review of the session. In casual conversations and meetings, I ask if there are any documents or procedures they would like to see in the **wiki**.

Also, when there is a new procedure or document, I highlight it within the **wiki** by adding a star next to the link or by moving the link to the banner at the top of the main page. The **wiki** can be changed quickly, so when the document is no longer the newest and most relevant link, the star can be removed or the link returned to its original place.

If Not A Wiki, Then What?

While we use a **wiki**, the central idea is not the tool itself, but the creation of a stable space for bibliographers to access up-to-date acquisitions-related information. Too often the available information is scattered or outdated, leading to miscommunication and endless repetitions and retrainings on the same procedures. By dedicating an area of the library Webspaces for Acquisitions communication to bibliographers, all parties save time and effort by having a single reference point for the work they do together. 🍷

From the University Presses
from page 69

sites and those of their institutions), to accept a world in which scholarly communication will increasingly be dominated by writing that has not benefited from the copyediting that publishers supply as value added to the process. Scholars who are jumping on this bandwagon should think twice about exposing their unedited prose, warts and all, to the world before it gets treated and refined by accommodating copyeditors.

Maybe the faculty at **Harvard** in the arts and sciences, and now in the law school, or those who have followed suit at **Stanford's School of Education** think their prose is beyond reproach and in need of no such patching and repairing. Wrong! Two of the three authors whose writings I used as examples above came from **Harvard** (and the third from **Princeton**). The administrators at **Harvard** who have championed making the work of the faculty freely available on the Internet seem completely oblivious to this danger of exposing so much bad and error-filled writing. Now they would prefer, of course, to have PDFs of the final articles as published mounted on **Harvard's** institutional repository. But surely they are not naïve enough to think that most publishers will comply with their wish, at the risk of undermining their own businesses — and I include here university presses and society publishers as well as for-profit companies. To avoid potential embarrassment, they therefore have two choices: either hire staff to copyedit the articles before they go up on **Harvard's** site or help authors pay fees to publishers that will compensate them for allowing final published articles to be available via open access. The former choice would be expensive and administratively cumbersome, not to mention adding yet another version of the work to the public record. The latter would be administratively easier but expensive, too, thus not really helping to solve the problem of the high cost of journal publishing that the proposal was intended to accomplish. Instead of paying for subscriptions, **Harvard** would simply be substituting payment of OA fees, with little likelihood that the overall costs of the system would be reduced in any significant way.

The problem of having multiple versions of articles is a real cost of Green OA that needs to be studied further. Perhaps, for purposes of

teaching in the classroom or simply sharing knowledge with colleagues around the world, unedited versions would suffice. But even at this level there are risks of propagating errors, as in mistakes in quotations that once used incorrectly may be multiplied many times over, as readers do not bother to go back to the original sources to check for accuracy but trust the authority of the scholar using them to have quoted them correctly. (My correspondent who edits articles for science journals confirms the seriousness of this problem: "Huge errors can creep into the literature when authors use preprint [unedited, unreviewed] versions of papers, and the problem snowballs: so few authors return to primary sources that incorrect interpretations are perpetuated and persist in the literature to damage future generations.") Surely, then, for purposes of formal publication, the additional level of quality control that is provided by good copyediting is a value worth paying for, and libraries would do well to reflect whether their needs as repositories of authoritative knowledge would be well served by relying on anything but the versions of articles that are in their very final form, suitable for long-term archiving. Whether students and scholars who access the unedited versions will bother to go to the archival versions for citations in writings that they produce remains to be seen, but clearly they should be encouraged to do so — students, because they need to be taught responsible scholarly methods, and scholars, because they have a professional obligation to their peers to do so.

How big a problem may this turn out to be? Some sense of it comes from a recently published, and much discussed, paper with the cute subtitle "Fawltly Towers of Knowledge?" by **Malcolm Wright** and **J. Scott Armstrong** in the March/April 2008 issue of *Interfaces*, who write on "The Ombudsman: Verification of Citations" (http://marketing.wharton.upenn.edu/Marketing_Content_Management/Marketing_files/Publication_Files/Citations-Interfaces.pdf). Their first paragraph neatly summarizes the nature and extent of the problem: "The growth of scientific knowledge requires the correct reporting of relevant studies. Unfortunately, current procedures give little assurance that authors of papers published in leading academic journals follow this practice. Instead, the evidence suggests that researchers often do not read the relevant research papers. This manifests itself in two ways: First, researchers overlook relevant papers.

Second, they make errors when reporting on the papers, either through incorrect referencing or incorrect quotation of the contents of the cited paper." They go on to cite previous studies of incorrect references in other disciplines ranging from 31 percent in public health journals to as high as 67 percent in obstetrics and gynecology journals and studies of errors in quotation with similarly disturbing numbers, such as 20 percent for medical journals in a systematic survey conducted in 2003. Remember that these errors occur in published articles. The likelihood is that the rates would be significantly higher without the intervention of copyeditors.

The fact is that, for all the value of peer review, it is the rare academic reader who will take the trouble to check references and quotations for accuracy. Scholars are aware that copyeditors can be relied upon to scrutinize manuscripts more closely for such details, so they generally do not bother to spend time on this task themselves. But even copyeditors cannot afford to check everything; it is very costly to do the kind of fine-grained editing, involving trips to the library, that I was allowed to do at **Princeton** forty years ago. The economics of publishing can no longer afford such a luxury, and many publishers have cut back on proof-reading, too, or even eliminated it altogether for cost-saving reasons. Fortunately, the ease of access to reliable online resources for fact-checking, reference-checking, and even checking of quotes has made it possible for copyeditors to continue doing some of this very detailed work even in today's economy at reasonable expense. And editing online provides other advantages that improve the efficiency of copyeditors and help keep costs in check. It would be a shame if concerns for reducing costs target copyediting as a dispensable frill, for its contribution to the excellence of scholarship is much greater than most people who have not directly benefited from it realize.

I end, therefore, with a question and a plea. The question is: how far do we want to allow open access to exacerbate the problem of "Fawltly Towers of Knowledge?" The plea is: when open access is discussed as a panacea for facilitating the dissemination of knowledge worldwide, don't forget the contribution that good copyediting makes to ensuring that such "knowledge" is communicated clearly and accurately. 🌿

Rumors
from page 00

continued on page ???