COPY READING AND NEWS EDITING

TAYLOR and SCHER

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AND NEWS EDITING

to Marjorie
and Klema

PREFACE

THIS BOOK sets down the contents of two courses—Copy Reading and News Editing—taught by the authors at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. It is our hope it will be valuable in the teaching of similar courses and helpful to young copy readers and others in news rooms.

Copy reading and news editing cannot be taught by textbook alone. The subjects should be presented through the laboratory method simulating as closely as possible the news room situation. Practical work, pitted against deadlines, should include the handling of news-wire copy, work around a copy desk, a news desk, and a make-up desk. No amount of lecturing or reading of books can be substituted for this experience.

All editing practices on all newspapers cannot be covered in a book such as this. Each newspaper has its own methods—many of them worked out through years of trial and error—and this book is not an attempt to judge which are superior. Instead, the authors have attempted to describe the practices most widely used—those that the majority of copy readers will be likely to face.

A few acknowledgments: We are deeply grateful to Jess Bell Jr., Prentice-Hall editor, who helped us iron a lot of kinks out of the manuscript. We are grateful also to Dean Kenneth E. Olson of the Medill School of Journalism; it was he who suggested we write this book, and his encouragement kept us at it. We are indebted also to our colleagues on the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Sun-Times;* they—from managing editor to copy boy—run excellent schools of journalism themselves.

HOWARD B. TAYLOR
JACOB SCHER

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THE FUNCTION OF THE NEWSPAPER

THE FIRST FUNCTION of the newspaper is to inform. Woven through this function run the threads of its other duties—to instruct, to interpret, and to mold public opinion.

The pattern of the news, story for story, varies across a broad range. News stories, in varying degrees, are momentous, inconsequential, interesting, dull, sad, funny, edifying, revolting. The editor's raw material is the entire flux of human events. He blends his ingredients—with lights and shadows, balances and contrasts—to present what he considers to be a fair, accurate, and interesting report of the day's news.

To attract and keep readers—to stay alive by remaining financially sound through circulation and advertising—newspapers develop a formula for their news presentation. Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst made crusading one of their ingredients. Horace Greeley emphasized editorial opinion. Charles A. Dana developed the human-interest treatment of news. Edwin Lawrence Godkin published a journal of political science. William Rockhill Nelson fought for civic betterment.

Since the turn of the century, the American newspaper has developed a common denominator. This consists of culling from the amorphous flow of world events those stories which will both inform and interest the reader and putting them into a package that by typographical arrangement emphasizes and grades the news and attracts readers. This common denominator is like a balanced meal. A diet of meat and potatoes alone will not sustain the newspaper, nor will one of salad alone or dessert alone. Put together in proper proportions, the menu is balanced and the newspaper informs, instructs, and entertains. Each day's news differs, and each day's flavor varies.

The editor constantly faces the admonition to print not what the reader wants to read but what evangelists think the reader ought to read. Other critics, and particularly the inexperienced about to undertake some aspect

of editing, believe it is the editor's responsibility to ram his ideas of justice and human improvement down the reader's throat. The seasoned editor has little patience with either view. He has developed the tempered state of realism that is the necessary alloy for the practical world of gathering and printing the news. He does not believe that the newspaper's sole duty is to reform the world and save readers from themselves. Any concept that places upon the newspaper entire responsibility for the virtue of its public underestimates the intelligence of the American reader. More than that, it is blind to the fact that news must have a flesh and blood component, that it must come as nearly alive as the persons and the events it describes. The responsible editor does not publish a scandal sheet, but neither does he publish a Sunday school paper or a journal of sociology or economics. The editor serves a constituency that wants and deserves to know about the human interplay that manifests itself in all facets of the news. Thus he is somewhat akin to an umpire who calls the strikes and the balls as they are pitched to the plate. His job is to tell what is happening and his concern is the objective presentation of events and persons.

The experienced editor lays down but one general rule: Make the world come alive every day—in the stories, in the headlines, and in the make-up of the newspaper. Fulfilling this requirement calls for imagination, understanding, sympathy, a knowledge of human affairs, and an insight into people. Given those qualities, it requires also a knowledge of the technical devices used by the copy reader, the news editor, and the make-up editor. The three are the architects who each day build the final product that comes off the presses. This book is an exposition of their techniques. It discusses:

1. Copy reading—the editing of news stories and the writing of headlines for them.
2. News editing—the handling and display of all the news in the paper.
3. Make-up—the fitting together of the news stories and the illustrations to form an attractive, inviting paper.

THE THREE PROCESSES

Go into almost any medium-size or metropolitan newspaper office in the United States and you will see a horseshoe desk and a number of men sitting around it. At the elbows of each are pencils, erasers, paste pots, scissors or rulers, and copies of the paper in various stages of being clipped and torn up. This is the copy desk, and thousands of newspaper men

spend their lives working on it. They edit the stories that appear in the newspaper and they write the headlines for the stories.

At a smaller desk nearby sits the news editor, through whose hands the news is funneled. The general handling and the emphasis of the news is his responsibility. He determines the content of the paper—subject to the ultimate approval of the managing editor. He decides which stories merit page-1 display, where on the page they are to appear, and how, in terms of typography, they shall be presented. He decides which stories shall be relegated to inside pages. He determines how the news is to be illustrated.

Across the desk from the news editor sits the make-up editor. His job is to fit the news and the illustrations into the paper. He works with a set of dummies that constitute the blueprint of today's edition. The dummies are page size in miniature. The dummy for each page shows the amount and the position of the advertisements in it and the amount and shape of the space in which news can be displayed. In the space available for news, the make-up editor dummies the slugs of the stories and the illustrations that are to be displayed there.

The function of copy reading, news editing, and make-up is the same in all newspapers, large and small. On all, stories are edited and headlines for them are written. On all, someone determines how the news shall be displayed and emphasized. On all, some system determines how stories and illustrations are placed in the pages. Although the function is always the same, the processes by which these three responsibilities are discharged and the care and time devoted to them vary widely in relation to the size of the newspaper.

THE COPY DESK

MANY small dailies have no copy desk. There, the city editor usually does what editing is done on local stories and writes the heads for them, while the telegraph editor (or the managing editor, for the two jobs often are combined) edits the wire copy and writes the heads for it. On the smaller paper, little attention usually is paid to refining and improving the copy. The local news appears approximately as the reporter has written it, and the wire copy goes into the paper with little editing beyond the marking of paragraphs and the trimming of stories for space. Lack of editorial man power—not indifference—is the reason for this.

The process on the medium-size newspaper is more detailed. The staff of the medium-size paper is larger, and the duties of the members are less general and more clearly defined. Here several staff members devote

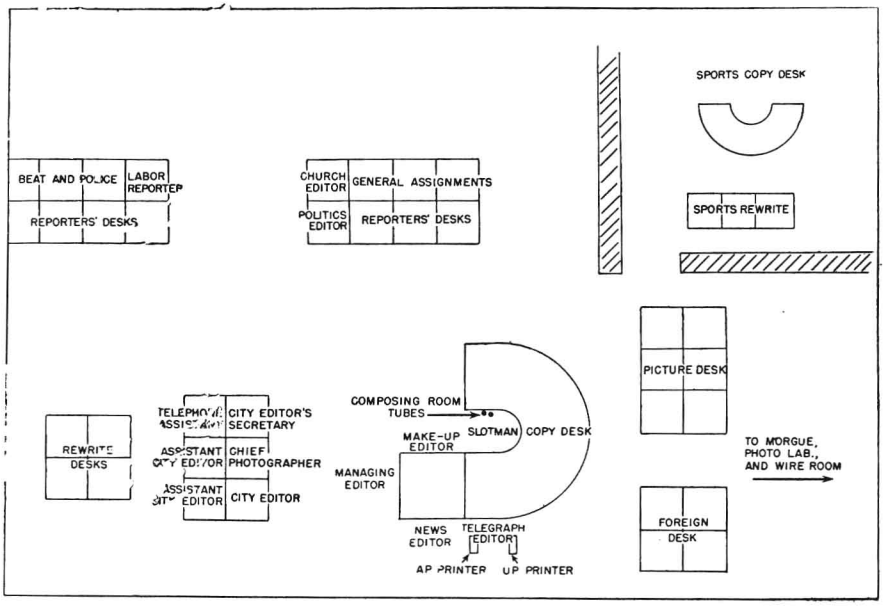

Figure 1

their time to editing the copy and writing the headlines, and each story consequently receives greater scrutiny.

On the medium-size daily and on the average metropolitan newspaper, the copy readers work on what is known as a universal desk, so-called because all main news is edited on it. The copy readers sit on the outer rim of the horseshoe and are called rim men. The head copy reader, or the head of the desk, sits in the slot formed by the inner rim of the desk and is called the slot man. He supervises the work of the desk. He deals the stories to the rim men, oversees the editing of the stories, and approves the headlines after they have been written. The universal desk customarily handles all news except sports, financial, and society news, which is edited by staff members in those departments. Figure 1 shows a typical floor plan for a universal copy desk.

Some metropolitan newspapers subdivide the copy reading process further, into a separate-desk system. Here the main news is copy-read on three or four separate desks. A few large metropolitan newspapers that use the separate-desk system divide the work among local, telegraph, and cable copy desks. The local copy desk handles local stories, which include the news of the city, its suburbs, and the metropolitan area. The telegraph copy desk handles all news that originates outside the city editor's territory but within the boundaries of the United States. The

cable copy desk handles all news that originates outside the United States. News of sports, finance, and society usually is handled separately by those departments, each with its own copy desk. Other metropolitan papers split the news three ways—across a local desk, a telegraph desk, and a state desk. Here the state copy desk handles news that originates outside the city editor's territory but within the state, and the telegraph desk handles national and foreign news. Thus some metropolitan papers channel the news through six copy desks—local, telegraph, cable, sports, finance, and society. Others divide it among local, telegraph, state, sports, finance, and society. Figure 2 shows a typical floor plan for a separate-desk system.

When the separate-desk system is used, a city editor or an assistant city editor usually is slot man of the local desk, the telegraph editor is slot man of the telegraph desk, and the cable editor is slot man of the cable desk. When the arrangement includes a state desk, the slot man there is the state editor.

Other variations occur. Some medium-size papers handle their copy on two desks, a local desk and a wire desk, the latter reading copy on state, national, and foreign news. An assistant city editor might be the

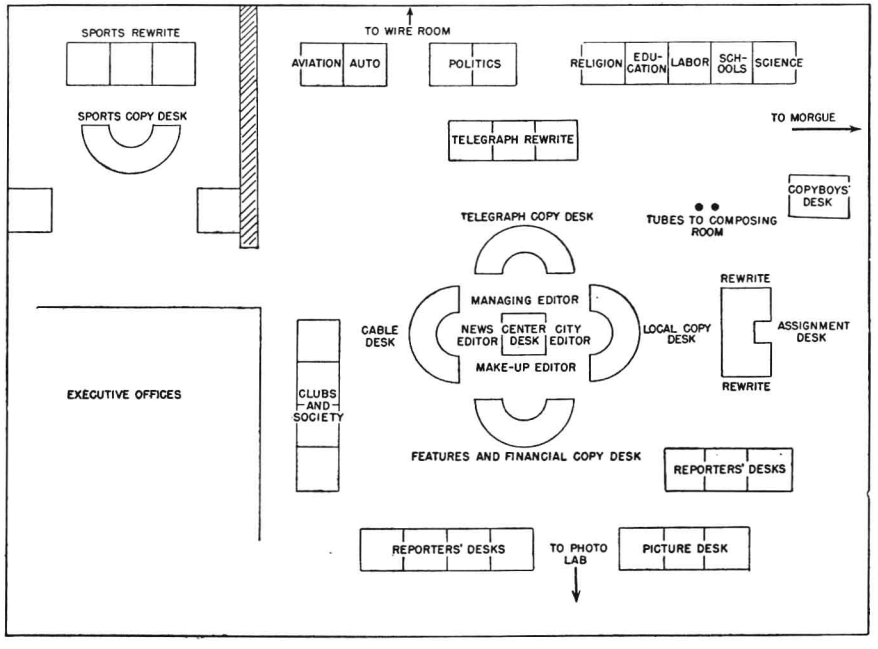

Figure 2

slot man of the local desk and the telegraph editor the slot man of the telegraph desk. Here the state editor might devote his time to editing and rewriting copy from correspondents and bureaus throughout the state, while copy readers on the telegraph desk put final touches on his copy and write the headlines for it. In another variation, the job of telegraph editor includes the supervision of cable news, with the telegraph editor working at one end of the horseshoe, at the slot man's elbow. In such an arrangement, the telegraph editor puts together the telegraph news and does a rough job of copy reading it, and the final copy reading and the headline writing are done on the copy desk. Sometimes, also, the state editor, working similarly on state news, sits at the other end of the horseshoe, at the slot man's other elbow.

A small-city daily using a universal desk might have four or five copy readers. A larger paper with a universal desk might employ a dozen or more. A large metropolitan paper, publishing many editions daily and operating around the clock, might have as many as 50 on its separate copy desks.

The separate-desk system has one manifest advantage. Each copy reader tends to become an expert in the field in which he works. Copy readers on the local desk can be expected to have a wide and accurate knowledge of the city, its geography, its personalities, and its politics. Those on the telegraph desk are experts in national news, and those on the cable desk should be specialists in foreign affairs. The separate-desk system, by dividing the work among many copy readers, makes possible the exercise of greater attention to each story, which should result in better copy reading, better headlines, and a generally improved paper.

THE NEWS EDITOR

HALF of the job of news editing is judging and evaluating the news—minute by minute, hour by hour—as it flows into the news room. The other half is displaying the news so that the completed product is an attractive, interesting, readable, informative, and coherent newspaper.

A revolution in news editing has occurred in the past century. Early newspapers were small and circumscribed by mechanical limitations. News was dumped helter-skelter into their skimpy pages. Little attempt was made to evaluate their content. The use of typographical devices to emphasize and to grade stories in terms of their relative importance was unknown. The burden of piecing together the pattern and the relationship of the news was placed upon the reader, who had greater patience and more leisure than the reader of today.