

BOOK WORM

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

June 2002

FROM THE CHAIR

Debates about accreditation, on the one hand, and about devising promotional strategies for the work of professional editors around Australia, on the other, are currently hot topics for CASE. We'll be soliciting your input on these issues over the coming months. However, one thing is already clear: such debates are demanding that we ask questions about how our identity and responsibilities as editors can or should be publicly articulated or circumscribed.

So what do editors do? The text-focused aspects of our work have been crystallised in CASE's *Australian standards for editing practice*, a document that represents a huge step towards defining the scope of an editor's practical responsibilities. But what about those responsibilities' necessary relation to our roles as mediators, diplomats, judges and social sensors? These less tangible, but often absolutely crucial, areas of our work require that we balance the (often competing) demands of writers and readers, individual preferences and community expectations. Maintaining both professional and personal integrity is not always easy. And what about our ethical accountability? Last month's meeting, exploring ethics hypotheticals (see Wendy Bulgin's report below) generated fascinating and complex questions (rather than any clear-cut answers) about the knotty moral dilemmas we regularly face in our work.

Janet Blagg's Education Night presentation on fiction editing will, no doubt, also touch on some of these issues. We look forward to seeing you on Tuesday 4 June.

Anne Surma

THANKS

As reported earlier, Betty Durston was honoured at the SOEWA AGM for 2002. She writes:

It is indeed a privilege to hold Honorary Membership of the Society of Editors (WA). As I said on the night of the presentation, achievements within an organisation do not occur in isolation, but come about through the united effort of all members working towards the same goal.

I would like to thank you all for your trust and support. In reality this is your reward; I hold it with pride on your behalf.

Betty

JUNE MEETING: EDUCATION NIGHT TALK ON FICTION EDITING BY JANET BLAGG

Janet Blagg has edited young children's, teen, young adult and adult fiction in a variety of genres for Heinemann, Collins Dove, Victoria Press and Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Her talk will cover some of the common issues met in editing fiction, as well as the commonalities between working with fiction and non-fiction. There will be plenty of opportunity for questions.

When: 7.30 pm, Tuesday 4 June 2002

Where: Tresillian Community Centre, 21 Tyrell Street, Nedlands (street parking)

Cover charge: \$2

Bookings: RSVP to Amanda Curtin (curtin@highway1.com.au or phone/fax 9377 2091) by **Monday 3 June**

**ADVANCE NOTICE OF JULY MEETING: EDUCATION NIGHT
PRESENTATION ON STRUCTURAL EDITING BY BRYCE MOORE**

Please make a note in your diary now!

When: 7.30 pm, Tuesday 2 July 2002

Where: Tresillian Community Centre, 21 Tyrell Street, Nedlands (street parking)

Cover charge: \$2

Bookings: RSVP to Amanda Curtin (curtin@highway1.com.au or phone/fax 9377 2091) by **Monday 1 July**

IS DATA A SINGULAR OR PLURAL NOUN?

Jean Weber addressed this question in a recent edition of her Technical Editors' Eyrie Newsletter, and her summary of expert opinion is reproduced with acknowledgment.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, fourth edition, © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company, says:

The word data is the plural of Latin datum, 'something given', but it is not always treated as a plural noun in English... Sometimes scientists think of data as plural, as in 'These data do not support the conclusions'. But more often scientists and researchers think of data as a singular mass entity like information, and most people now follow this in general usage [as] in the sentence 'We have very little data on the efficacy of such programs', where the quantifier 'very little', which is not used with similar plural nouns such as facts and results, implies that data here is indeed singular.

Merriam-Webster OnLine says:

Data leads a life of its own quite independent of datum, of which it was originally the plural. It occurs in two constructions: as a plural noun (like earnings), taking a plural verb and plural modifiers (as these, many, a few) but not cardinal numbers, and serving as a referent for plural pronouns (as they, them); and as an abstract mass noun (like information), taking a singular verb and singular modifiers (as this, much, little), and being referred to by a singular pronoun (it). Both constructions are standard. The plural construction is more common in print, evidently because the house style of several publishers mandates it.

Editor Geoff Hart <geoff-h@mtl.feric.ca> notes:

Although data is a plural noun in a strict Latin sense, and often in practice too, 'data' is now commonly used as shorthand for 'data set', 'group of data', or 'collection of data' in the sciences and computer industry, and thus inherently takes the singular form.

Datum retains its technical meaning both as a single item of data and as a reference point against which other points are measured (e.g., in surveying and mapping); 'data are' is both grammatically correct and commonly used when the meaning is plural.

Compare 'the data are contradictory' (one portion contradicts another; thus we're talking about two portions) and 'the data is self-contradictory' (same meaning, but with data treated as a single collective entity).

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HYPOTHETICAL ETHICS

Wendy Bulgin reports on the last meeting of the society.

At the May SOEWA meeting, the issue of ethics was explored through the use of a number of hypotheticals. About twenty enthusiasts attended, which indicates that the topic is certainly of interest to most, and likely to become increasingly relevant in the future.

We all received a handout incorporat8.3(ee-4.s.3(r)-1evan) (r)-4.e-8(nd)-5.6(out-4.e-a)-6.3(i)1.6(nn14(A)(t)1.7()-12.st6(a)-8(t8

Times change. Language changes. Readers' habits and expectations change, and authors and editors must respond to those changes. If a style manual is to be a reliable tool, it must reflect those changes. That is what *AGPS 6* does.

Indeed, it includes so many changes that it is really a new book, almost unrecognisable as the offspring of its distinguished ancestry.

The most obvious change is in appearance. The cover, now printed using the four-colour process, is clearly intended to appeal to a wider readership; this is no longer a government publication that just happens to be of value to a specialised non-government audience, but a major contender in an increasingly crowded market. The pages are wider, so that the format is now consistent with many software manuals and other books on our office shelves, and the stock is a little lighter (at the cost of some show-through).

Other changes in appearance bring about significant improvements in accessibility (navigability, if you prefer). Spot colour is used extensively throughout, notably in corner bleeds that highlight chapter numbers and names. Here, I think, is a design error: it would have been very simple to position the bleeds down the outer edge to form a thumb index, instead of positioning them all in the same corner. (But there must be some scope for further improvement, to justify *AGPS 7!*)

The first two-page spread of each part outlines the part's contents, and again makes heavy use of spot colour. Within each part, each chapter has its own table of contents, with first- and second-level headings clearly differentiated. This use of clear and frequent headings has allowed the old practice of numbering each paragraph to be discontinued. This is a mixed blessing; the numbers unquestionably disrupted the reading flow, but they made it very easy to refer to a specific point during a telephone or email discussion. We will now have to use the page numbers and headings instead.

The increased page width has been turned to good account. Most body pages feature a wide outer margin that contains frequent asides — tips, examples or clarifications. This is a growing (and welcome) trend in informational texts; the marginal notes do much the same job as footnotes, but are more attractive and less disruptive, and help draw attention to key sections of the main text. The wider pages also permit a three-column index, which shaves a dozen pages off the back of the book. Just as well: the fifth edition's 468 pages have increased to 550 in the sixth.

No doubt as part of the orientation to a wider market, the content has changed in some interesting ways. There is now a substantial discussion of the publishing process, with special (and welcome) emphasis on planning. Questions of design — informational as well as visual — are dealt with very effectively in limited space. Publishing for electronic media, notably but not exclusively the web, is necessarily covered in some depth.

Everything, so far, cries 'new'. And certainly there is much new content. But what of the nuts and bolts? What of the advice about grammar, punctuation, typography?

Well, it's all there, except that it, too, is new. Much of the advice is the same, of course, but the expression of that advice has been revised. The result is a noticeable improvement in clarity — in reader-friendliness, if you like. *AGPS 5* and its predecessors were undeniably clearly written, yet the formality of a government publication was never completely absent. *AGPS 6* uses the language of the real world to convey real information to real readers. Here's a brief example, first from *AGPS 5*, at the beginning of para 13.54:

Legibility and readability are fundamental to good typography. They may seem the same, but there is an important difference. Briefly, legibility relates to the clarity of the image when reproduced in printed matter, while readability relates to the ease and comfort with which the matter can be read.

Here's the equivalent from *AGPS 6*, on page 324:

Readability and legibility are both fundamental to good typography. Briefly, readability relates to the ease and comfort with which the material can be read and legibility relates to the clarity of the letter shapes when reproduced.

I would have added a comma after 'can be read' in the second sentence, but there's no denying the overall improvement.

To repeat: yes, we do need *AGPS* 6. It's comforting to see so many well-known names, including several members of this society, among the project team and the contributors. Comforting, because we know that the people who put this admirable work together are people like us: people who know and love our language, and care about effective communication. They have re-created, rather than merely revised, an indispensable tool for everyone writing, editing or publishing in Australia today. And if they still fail to make a firm recommendation in favour of the serial comma, perhaps that's another change scheduled for *AGPS* 7.

And here's a comment from Alex George on the 6th edition:

Despite the recommendations on pp. 203 and 239 regarding inclusion and citation of the place of publication of a book, this edition doesn't have one on the title page or the verso! By consulting the National Library catalogue one can find that it is Milton, Queensland, so presumably it was included in the request for a CIP.

Further, for works in which no place is given, the 6th edn recommends that the abbreviation n.p. be used. What happened to [s.l.], the one stipulated in the cataloguing rules (AACR2)? Surely, if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

The 6th edn also gives no guidance on how to cite a work in which no publisher is indicated.

TAUTOLOGY

We had a few responses to Jan Knight's request in our last issue for readers' favourite tautologies. Thanks guys.

ALEX GEORGE: This is one I heard on the radio recently — 'the most biggest single issue facing the party'.

TOM JENKINS: In one of my courses, I use this example of tautology: 'The new innovation will give us temporary respite from our problems.' Point is that respite is temporary. But I have to say that the kind of tautology I most encounter is writing in which amateur writers, insecure about whether they've said something, say it twice, in different words! It used to happen with cadet journalists on the newspaper, too. It's amazing how much more taut prose is without repetition.

JAMES HANSEN: (in response to the Editor's reminder): Thanks, Allan, I almost forgot to remember.

Now here's another opportunity to let off some editorial steam:

BÊTES NOIRES

You're a reader, but often you can't help slipping into editor mode when some horror of verbal expression assaults you. It's the same one again! Let's have some of your 'favourite' *bêtes noires*. Your editor respectfully kicks off with the following:

They visited a number of countries including Spain, Italy, Sweden etc.

I bought some fruit, vegies and then went to see Mum.

Incidentally, none of the half-dozen dictionaries I consulted offered me the plural of bête noire; I had to ask Michèle — Ed.

DEADLINE FOR NEXT ISSUE: Tuesday 18 June 2002

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