

BOOK WORM

NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIETY OF EDITORS (WA) INC.

November 2005

From the Chair

Christmas will be a little early this year

Your committee has thought long and hard about ways we might be able to attract members to join together to celebrate Christmas 2005 in the appropriate spirit of cheer, good food, a glass or two of wine and much goodwill.

In the past, attendances have not been great. As we all know, December is filled with so many work, social and family commitments that there is never enough time to fit everything in to the few weeks before the 25th. In an effort to avoid a last minute rush we have decided to combine our November and December meetings to hold the Society's Christmas function on Tuesday 29 November.

Sandra Roe has kindly offered her home (7 Milson Street, South Perth) to us for the occasion. We will circulate final details, including the time for our gathering and a date for RSVP, through e-groups in a week or two. In the meantime, please mark the date and place in your diary so that the evening will be locked in to your busy schedules.

Betty Durston

Editorial

Well: yet another bumper issue! There's a lot going on, what with conferences and the creation of a national editing body and tours of *The West*'. For a potted version of the former, take a look at Amanda Curtin's 'snippets', some of which are pretty pithy and amusing.

I have to apologise in advance in case there are any errors in this month's *Book Worm*, as our regular proofreader has been having e-mail problems (there's nothing like a computer for generating frustration!) and has been unable to look it over. There will not be another *Book Worm* until the new year, but I hope to see you all at the Christmas function. Until then...

Tanya Marwood

Forthcoming Meetings

November-December Meeting: Christmas function

When: Tuesday 29 November (evening: time to be advised)

Where: Sandra Roe's home: 7 Milson Street, South Perth

RSVP: to be advised

Report on October Meetings

1. West Australian visit

A visit to *The West Australian's* office complex on Tuesday October 4 gave nine members of the Society of Editors (WA) a valuable insight into the editorial production of a major daily metropolitan newspaper.

The modern complex in Hasler Road, Osborne Park, is a far cry from the old Newspaper House in St George's Terrace. Gone are the daily rumblings of the printing presses on the lower levels—the newspaper is now printed in a separate building.

Another striking difference is the tight security. After signing the register in the entrance foyer, and issued with our visitors' badges, we were met by journalist David Hummerston at the upper floor entrance, where he ushered us into the massive work room via security code. David indicated the various sections: the editor Paul Armstrong in his office, and his team at their computers: the chief of staff, the night editor, other senior editors, the chief graphic designer, more graphic designers using Quark software on Apple computers, general reporters, feature writers, sub-editors (who work into the early hours), the sports section, and the West Magazine staff.

We sat in on part of the editorial conference in the room adjoining the editor's office. Paul Armstrong explained that the daily conference usually involves "robust argument" amongst senior staff about the content of the following day's edition. We were handed copies of the news lists under discussion: they contained summaries of articles written by staff journalists, and summaries from *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *The Canberra Times*, and other national and worldwide sources. A staff member used a notebook computer to flick photographs for selection onto a big screen behind him. In about an hour and a half, we saw the decisions behind a few pages' content.

The chief of staff drew attention to the newspaper's local stories. Two of them were particularly interesting: a feature on the plight of WA's salty rivers—which were so salty that the State Government had just delivered a report on how nothing could be done about the major rivers—and a story on the crocodile attack on a girl north of Derby. He related how the family group had looked around the

freshwater pool and, even though their whining dog refused to jump in, they thought they would have a swim because it didn't look like there were too many crocodiles. One of our group interjected: "It only takes one!" The chief of staff continued: when the crocodile grabbed the girl, her father pulled her up out of the water and swam with her to the shore with the crocodile still on her and he pulled it off her. "He did the full Crocodile Dundee thing!" said the chief of staff, whereupon a staff member came into the conference room to announce the death of comic actor Ronnie Barker. "And it's goodnight to him", said the editor—one of the front-page headlines on the next day's edition of *'The West'*.

Sandra Roe

2. Meeting to discuss CASE Issues Paper exploring a National Organisation for editors in Australia: feedback and comments

Summarised by Tom Jenkins and Kerry Coyle

The Issues Paper was discussed at a meeting in Perth on Tuesday, October 4 under three main headings:

- **Which model of registration for IPE would you prefer?**
- **What should be the function of a national organisation?**
- **How do you see the States working with the national organisation?**

The views, comments and questions expressed below relate particularly to the WA society's comparatively small size and its geographical isolation. The membership agrees that the name Institute of Professional Editors is a good one and that it should immediately be reserved on the National Names Index.

Which model of registration for IPE would you prefer?

SOEWA supports the formation of IPE as a Company Limited by Guarantee (Option 3 in the Issues Paper). As a profession, our alignment with the bodies which are already Companies Limited by Guarantee is clear (we are told there are about 8500 of these in Australia). However, we have advice from the Small Business Development Corporation (WA) that a statement that IPE as a 'small proprietary company' would be exempt from most complicated record-keeping requirements is incorrect. SBDC says that as a public company, IPE would have to comply with record-keeping requirements of the Corporations Act. The financial statements would need to be audited by a registered company auditor; an audit by a qualified accountant who is not a registered auditor would not be adequate. SBDC further points out that the wording of a constitution for a company is likely to be quite different to the wording of a constitution for an association.

What should be the function of a national organisation?

- **Oversee accreditation (through its subsidiary, the Accreditation Board)**

- Enhance the profile and project the good image of the editing profession in the local community and nationally
- Have a contactable national spokesperson for the media and to issue media releases
- Establish a schedule of fees
- Engage in dialogue with other nations
- Promote standards nationally
- Take a much higher-profile role in education
- Consider whether to accredit editing courses or to give advice and information about such courses
- Consider whether IPE should organise courses for professional development
- Maintain a website, including news, who's suing who (!), people in the business etc

How do you see the States working with the national organisation?

It is accepted that an increase in SOEWA fees (current full membership is \$40 a year) and a change to our constitution would be necessary. SOEWA points out that not only is our membership one of the smallest (now almost 100 members), but because of the predominant location of the publishing industry in the Eastern States, SOEWA has few members who are fully-employed as editors. Most are free-lances; many are under-employed. An increase in membership fees could reduce our numbers. There was a general sentiment that we would like to preserve our independent function in WA. A number of questions emerge:

- Would State contributions to IPE finances be made on a per capita basis? This seems to be implied in Section 8 of the Issues Paper. Hypothetically, if there were 1,500 members of Societies of Editors throughout Australia, WA (with 100 members) would pay 6.6 per cent, Victoria (400 members) would pay 26.6 per cent. Payments by the States have hitherto usually been made once a year. State societies should expect to continue to run their own business.
- Would members of State Societies acquire membership of IPE through the State Society's membership of IPE and, leaving aside the issue of accreditation, be able to add M.I.P.E. to their names? Would this involve, for example, States sending membership application forms to IPE (which seems like duplication of paperwork and effort)?
- Voting rights relate to the question of control. Should every individual member of the State body be a shareholder/member of the national body? Do individuals need to be members of the national body to be accredited?

- Would an IPE constitution include a provision for national conferences to be rotated round the States? (Note: only ONE representative from WA is going to the Melbourne conference.)
- WA members would welcome opportunities for professional development, eg. through improved contact with professionals from other States.
- Would fees for work be set on a national basis? There is a tension here between what WA members would like to be paid and what the local market will stand.
- Would accreditation be applied to courses at universities and elsewhere?

IPed Notes: News from the Institute of Professional Editors (formerly CASE)

By the time you read this, the second national conference will have come and gone. As I write, the e-mails are flying among IPed delegates and the Accreditation Board to prepare their presentations for the conference.

During the last few weeks the state and territory societies have held workshops and discussions in response to the Issues Paper prepared by the National Organisation Working Group. The paper set out the possible legal structures that a national organisation could adopt. Its reception has been generally favourable, but members have many questions they want answered before we go ahead. Two critical matters are the balance between the societies and the national body, and costs and sources of funds.

The formation of the national organisation will be further discussed in a plenary session at the conference. If you have not been able to attend the conference or your society's discussion, send comments and questions on the Issues Paper to your society's IPed delegate. All feedback will be taken into account as the outline is refined into a formal proposal, and of course no move will be made without the explicit approval of the membership.

Most of the members of the National Organisation Working Group have chosen to end their involvement at this point, so we are looking for volunteers to re-form the group and move things forward. People with legal knowledge and/or experience in the administration of similar organisations would be particularly welcome, but enthusiasm is a sufficient qualification. This is a chance to serve your profession at a crucial point in its evolution and to make friends with your peers and colleagues in other parts of the country. Contact your IPed delegate, listed on the website at www.case-editors.org.

Janet Mackenzie

IPed Liaison Officer

A few snippets from the 'Editing in Context' conference, Melbourne, October 2005

Amanda Curtin

'Being obsessive and compulsive—that's part of what makes a good editor. "Control freak" is another apt term.'

Kathie Stove, editor

'Editors need to get out more.'

Michael Webster, RMIT/Nielsen BookScan, keynote speaker

'Among book editors, there is an identifiable nostalgia for in-house, hands-on training, described as "sitting by Nellie" training.'

Lee White, editor

Re possible postnominal initials for accredited editors: 'No one seems keen on APES.'

Janet Mackenzie, editor, keynote speaker

Response to a question about the possibility of accrediting editors who are not members of a state society: 'Why should we offer benefits to people who have not funded the R & D?'

'It isn't that many books today are badly copyedited but that that they are not copyedited at all.'

Nicholas Hudson, publisher

Nicholas Hudson's favourite signs:

TENANTS REFUSE TO GO IN BINS

WHEN FLASHING WATCH FOR PEDESTRIANS

Of the latter, he remarked: 'If there are no pedestrians, what's the point of flashing?'

‘Parsing should not be taught. It is a rare delicacy that should be kept in a secret cupboard and brought out in Year 12 for those few students who express an interest in becoming book editors.’

Nicholas Hudson

‘Certain celebrity writers absolutely refuse to be copyedited.’

Michael Lewis, writer, editor

‘It’s not the reader’s job to work out what the writer means.’

Michael Lewis

‘Editors need a sense of humour.’

Comment from an audience member

‘Take care lest your youthful editing end up in an archive to be studied one day.’

Jackie Yowell, publisher, editor, keynote speaker

‘Fame, good looks and public-speaking ability are all advantages when submitting a manuscript to publishers.’

Debbie Golvan, literary agent

‘Most publishers say that they don’t accept unsolicited manuscripts, but still they [the manuscripts] arrive and they do get read—eventually.’

Jennifer Henry, managing editor

‘Editorial skills are being redefined as technological skills.’

Robert Moore, editor

‘Our greatest competitor [as freelance editors] is India. Knowledge workers are beginning to face the challenges that manufacturing workers have been grappling with for a couple of decades.’

Janet Mackenzie

Keynote Address: 'Editing in Context' conference

Peter Donoughue, Managing Director, John Wiley and Sons Australia Ltd

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The Big Squeeze

(or... Are we living through the death throes of publishing as we know it?)

Just over two years ago I was privileged to be able to introduce one of the keynote speakers at the inaugural CASE national conference in Brisbane.

As I remember it, my short introduction had much more impact than the rather tepid and forgettable keynote that followed it. I didn't mean to create much of a fuss but I was delighted at the reception my speech received. I suspect that was because it wasn't so much a speech but more a manifesto. It was a personal attempt to express what I sincerely felt was at the heart of the profession of editing in these troubled times, and it became a rallying cry.

I don't want to blow my own trumpet necessarily, but I would like to repeat the key words that many of you who were at the conference found so encouraging, and I would like to expand on those words today.

I said this:

At a time when:

Celebrities can't write

Corporations lie

Actors can't sing

Journalists run agendas

Politicians deceive

And institutions are cowered—

we need editors with high standards to produce text readers can trust.

At a time of insecurity, a time characterised by the misuse of language, those of us professionally engaged in the business of information need courage to confront misinformation, hype, cant, cliché and spin.

More than ever, we need editors committed to quality and excellence. Such editors have always been underrated in the publishing industry. Large and critically important parts of the editorial function have been outsourced for decades. We publishers have decided we don't 'own' that function, just as we don't own the composition or printing functions.

But it has always seemed to me that we are an impoverished industry because of it. Our standards, as publishers, have been lowered. Our regard for quality, for the quality of the text itself, is off our radar screen. The less we pay for editing the better. That's all we care about.

The hope for quality therefore rests with editors themselves.

Today I'd like to put these sentiments into a far larger context and use the opportunity to reflect on some real challenges we face as a publishing industry as we plummet headlong into a very uncertain future.

I've titled this address 'The Big Squeeze' because I think the industry is being squeezed by some very large and profound macroeconomic forces. These forces or pressures are unstoppable, and they are all the more powerful by being relatively invisible, by playing out in the background of our rather more quotidian issues and concerns.

First, let's look at some sober statistics on our industry. As you know the Australian Bureau of Statistics has been collecting statistics on the book industry consistently for the last ten years: on publishing since 1994, and on bookselling since 2001.

These statistics provide lots of useful data on all sorts of things, and they've received wide coverage in the trade and in the media generally. One of the best analyses is the one prepared by Jeremy Fisher from the ASA in his booklet *Current Publishing Practice* released last month and available directly from the ASA.

But most commentary has missed the two critical facts that emerge from these figures. Firstly that our total revenue growth has come to a shuddering halt (in fact we're selling exactly the same number of books now as we did ten years ago!), and that bookselling profitability has been on a consistently downward trend and is now, at barely above one percent, at an unsustainable level. No one, repeat no one, believes profitability will improve, at least without major structural changes.

The complicating factor in this is that the profitability of publishers has shown the opposite trend. Publishers' profit margins have gone from the low single digits four years ago to close to ten percent in 2004.

I make this prediction: retailers are not going to stand back and let this situation continue. They are going to come at publishers far more aggressively than they have to date. They are going to want a more equitable sharing of trade profitability.

What the ABS figures show is that, the larger the bookselling business, the less profitable it is. Yet the definite trend, not only in Australia, but around the world is towards bigness and conglomeration. The Waterstone chain is buying Ottakers in the UK (perhaps to be known as 'Wottakers'!). Borders is rapidly expanding in Australia, and along with A&R and Dymocks, will dominate the retail trade. Even in the School supply retail sector two giants have emerged through acquisitions over the last five years—Landmark and Campion.

So Big Retail is one element of the Big Squeeze.

The second major one is China, or let's call it, for the sake of symmetry, Big China!

You may wonder what China has to do with the book industry in Australia apart from its possible attractiveness as an export opportunity. I don't think I'm drawing a long bow in believing that it matters a whole lot.

It relates to the slowdown, or more accurately, the shutdown, in our revenue growth.

Let's look at some facts.

Australia's imports from China have doubled over the past four years. They now make up 13.6% of our total imports, compared with 13.7% from the US. In another two or three years China will be head and shoulders above the rest. Whether it be whitegoods, foodstuffs, homewares, clothing, whatever—the pressure on Australian manufacturers and other importers is intense and unrelenting.

Across the whole gamut of consumer goods prices are being forced down, cost increases are having to be absorbed and margins are under severe strain.

Price expectations are being re-moulded daily.

But not in the world of books! Oh, no! We publishers are so used to getting our price signals from our UK and US parents, principals and suppliers, that we have remained oblivious to this huge tectonic shift under our feet.

Book prices are getting way out of kilter with other commodities and items of value on the Australian market at a time when we are fighting hard for the discretionary consumer dollar.

I'm coming round to the view that our general level of book prices in this country may be up to 30% too high. We have been propelled there over the last five years by the fall in the Australian dollar early in the decade, and the GST. But both these are now over as issues.

All our hardbacks are \$10–\$15 too expensive. The \$29.95 trade paperback should be no more than \$24.95 but in fact we're seeing more and more \$32.95s recently, a disastrous trend in my view. And as for mass-market paperbacks, they should be no more than a movie ticket: \$12–\$14.95.

These are, after all, the actual price levels being charged on the more popular titles by most of our downtown retailers, but in the form of discounts off RRP. These people know their consumers intimately.

If our prices were a lot lower, then simple economics would suggest there'd be no room and no need for deep publisher discounts to retail behemoths (which hurt independents acutely), and it also suggests that volumes would significantly increase, at least to a greater extent than any Books Alive campaign could possibly achieve.

But mostly it would work to restore the credibility of our industry with the consumer, and the vital importance of books to our society and culture. It might

even help awaken 'Generation Y' to books and reading! (Although that might be stretching it a bit!)

Ultimately, we would give revenues a much-needed kick-start.

Unfortunately however, getting to this new place, if we ever as an industry accept the challenge to go there, will be very painful indeed. But we are certainly not alone as an industry in having to accept some pain in a period of transition. Look at the telecommunications industry, and in particular, Telstra.

My third and final mega trend, and perhaps this is the one that ends it for all of us, is Big Technology.

As publishers we are being called on to make large investments in technology right across the business: to enhance our customer service and distribution competitiveness; to reduce costs and greatly increase productivity in our editorial and production areas; to make our sales and marketing people far more effective; to bring the supply chain into the 21st century through EDI and e-commerce initiatives etc.

We simply must do this and more, if we are ever going to survive the coming price/value challenge.

However, that's not the BIG technology challenge as I see it. The tectonic plate challenge is the one that is forcing us into wholly new paradigms for content supply: where customers, not products assume centre stage; where customisation becomes a matter of course; where granules of content are freed from their analogue bundling and sold separately or in a myriad of combinations.

If customers chose to only buy the bits and pieces they want when they want them—sort of an iPod model of supply—then that has the potential to fundamentally subvert our revenue flows and profitability.

Various parts of the industry will confront this challenge at different times over the next decade or so, with educational, professional and scholarly publishers leading the way.

What does it say of our general preparedness to confront this transition however, when even such benign digital ventures as those currently being propounded by Google seem to scare us witless?

When here in Australia the trade publishing community still believes the possible abolition of the territorial copyright provisions to be the number one threat to our business!

So we are facing three major economic and social forces: Big Retail, Big China, and Big Technology.

The one undeniable fact of life in publishing over the next decade is that we will all be unbearably squeezed!

You may think it's hard if not impossible to muster optimism in these transitional times! But reflect on the following:

We find ourselves in the content business; we find ourselves in the communication business; we find ourselves in the quality business.

Content and communication of quality. If that's not a definition of publishing and editing what is? Are these things no less needed and desired? We know they're needed, and will be needed, more than ever.

I said in my introduction two years ago that our standards as publishers have been lowered: that our regard for quality, for the quality of the text itself, is off our radar screen. Editorial is the most challenged role in the organisation. My belief is that unless we rediscover this essence of what publishing is about we will have little to offer and will certainly be squeezed out of the value equation.

So ironically, we need to rediscover the value of the age-old craft of editing, that serious, collaborative, sympathetic profession that currently we treat so dismissively in our organisations. That which we outsourced, because we were into huge distribution centres, huge marketing and huge authors and all the other appurtenances of big conglomerate publishing, needs to re-assume its central place at the core of our business.

Perhaps I'm naive in thinking that things more coldly commercial won't survive the squeeze as well as the old, intense, creative relationships; the old skills and craft of recognising, developing and editing talented authors; the ancient role of challenging, clarifying, re-writing, querying, red-lining and binning.

But I do know this: People are sick to death of unedited prose. We're drowning in it. The knotty, clotted, jargon-infested illiterate bilge that clogs our time and space. How refreshing and joyous it is to read clear, lucid, beautifully balanced sentences that sing and instantly communicate.

In conclusion, I urge you to be passionate about your space, to fight for your place, to withstand the squeezing, to resist the marginalisation. What you do is too important because it is centrally important to the future of our industry.

You know this. Make it known to others.

Be loud and vocal.

Deadline for February 2006 *Book Worm* issue:

Tuesday 17 January 2006.

All submissions gratefully accepted.

Contacting SOEWA

President: Betty Durston, bdurston@cygnus.uwa.edu.au

Secretary: Kerry Coyle, Kerry.Coyle@wanews.com.au

Assistant Secretary: Sandra Roe, roewriters@ozemail.com.au

Treasurer: Linda Browning, 9266 2249, L.Browning@curtin.edu.au

General committee members

Ffion Murphy, 9450 1546, f.murphy@ecu.edu.au

Anne Surma, 9287 1494, asurma@murdoch.edu.au

Ceri Clocherty, clockers@istnet.net.au

Chris Walker, 9272 2767, cdwalker@ca.com.au

Tom Jenkins, 9457 2977, editdesign@westnet.com.au

Tanya Marwood, 9291 3723, tanya.m@globaldial.com

Newsletter

Editor: Tanya Marwood, 9291 3723, tanya.m@globaldial.com

Proofreader: usually Michèle Drouart, 9382 2930, drouart@webace.com.au (but not this edition)

SOEWA Web Site: <http://www.editorswa.iinet.net.au>

Web editor: Ceri Clocherty, clockers@istnet.net.au