

## Doctoring up Editors

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## Doctoring up Editors

### Abstract

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# Doctoring Up Editors

Jack Belck

WHO AMONG US hasn't been confronted by some outsider asking, "What's an editor?"

How do you answer a question like that? Do you quote the dictionary and say that you "select, arrange, and annotate a manuscript for publication?" Or do you leave the questioner with his fancies that an editor has something or other to do with "the newspaper," be it the campus sheet or the local, commercial rag?

Obviously, a definition of *editor* isn't easy to come by—witness the hordes of editors' wives (or husbands) who are only dimly aware of what their spouses do during the hours they're away from home.

Unfortunately for the editors themselves, the very lack of clarity about what they do, are supposed to do, or try to do, leaves the entire profession (if it is that) fair game for misinterpretation, manipulation, and exploitation.

We can get some idea of the tremendous spread in opinions about what an editor is by considering that an editorial position vacancy notice circulated around the country by one state not too long ago demanded a Ph.D. for an editor. Yet elsewhere, department heads happily hire as editors ex-newspapermen with no credentials other than success in their field.

Between these two extremes, we have sociology, English, animal husbandry, and God-only-knows-what majors doing work loosely titled "editing." Some trained especially for this work, others drifted in via the back door.

All of which suggests that editors are a rag-tag, amorphous lot, an opinion shared by many authors who come to have their

“babies” transformed from typescript to print, only to find the pro with a blue pencil a stubborn, opinionated sort who sticks his nose into subject matter and others’ assumptions.

But times are changing, and the previously noted demand for a terminally-degreed editor shows pretty clearly just how the changes are going. In a word, editors are going to be *profession-alized*.

It’s inevitable—the old-style registered nurse with her three years of training has been replaced by a college graduate only too happy to turn the bedpans and patients over to candy-strippers, volunteers, orderlies, and anyone else of lesser educational stature willing to work manually with the sick and dying.

While the military ground out capable lab technicians and physiotherapists in weeks, today’s workaday world demands degrees, so you pay more for your urinalysis and backrub, although you get nothing more for your money.

Closer to home, for every newspaper willing to hire a live-wire, intelligent, hustling kid who can write, there’s another sniffing about for somebody with a master’s (at least) in everything from political science to consumer affairs education.

It’s a plague!

But what’s causing it? Well, in the field of communications, we have the development of a host of pseudo-sciences which copy assiduously from all the other pseudo-sciences by tying their fortunes and prestige to the computer.

Talking, reading, looking, and listening have been corralled under the heading of “Communicology” or “Communication,” and these brand-new disciplines are inevitably headed up by someone with a vested interest in furthering the market value of the Ph.D. degree he himself holds.

The *communicologists*, to steal jargon left and right until clarity becomes fuzzed and reason absent, have bloomed into a lot of specialists who have the singular attribute of being among the worst at being able to communicate clearly and succinctly. (Would you want as a friend or co-worker somebody who refers to a customer throwing a direct mail piece in the rubbish as “negative feedback response?”)

Would you care to be seen with a doctoral candidate who does his dissertation on “readers versus non-readers” when you know he defines a “reader” as somebody who reads one book during the previous calendar year? (Which means someone who reads 2,367 journals and 544 newspapers, including the Sunday *New York Times*, is classified as a “non-reader,” but some lunkhead who struggled through *The Godfather* fits among the literate.)

What we’ve got here is a “front lash.” Already, campus populations are shrinking, graduate school enrollments are down, the glittering image of a degree’s worth has tarnished. But public institutions are always a step or two behind, so we have a dogged determination to credentialize staffs at a time when the outside world is trying to de-credentialize.

Editorial staffs get the worst of it because they traditionally have consisted of generalists with few degrees doing battle among specialists with many. It’s been a losing battle for some time, as evidenced by the proliferation of such things as specialists in *natural resources* communications, *community affairs* communications, *public health* communications, etc., etc.

If trends continue, those we think of as editors will eventually be replaced by subject matter specialists who are fed a few courses in “communications” and then go forth to do badly what is at this moment still being done quite well.

What the academic manipulators can’t understand is that the nature of editing—good editing, that is—demands that the prime, if not sole, speciality of the editor is the ability to communicate—*how*, not what.

But that ability is quite absent in almost every academic discipline. You need look no further than the stuff written by Ph.D.’s in communications to see how little attention is paid to being able to get across!

Yet, the academics know their failings, hence the heartfelt cries about the “information explosion,” the agonizing over the reams and tons of specialized material that never see the light of day among those who could most use it. Information systems specialists cleverly reduce the huge gobs of printed material to microfilm, microfiche, and computer tapes—but nobody does much about

sifting the nuggets from the sludge, the good from the bad, the relevant from the irrelevant.

And how do the professional communicators react? They scurry off to their computers and contribute to the already unmanageable heap of data and details with more undecipherable—and perhaps useless—reams of footnoted studies.

A few years ago, I looked haphazardly into terminal degree programs allied to communications and found that they had precious little to do with anything I was working with or interested in. One highly-touted university, for example, offered courses so skewed toward quantitative analysis that its Ph.D.-clutching grads could as easily go to work for sausage factories or General Motors as with organizations dedicated to *talking to people*.

A pile of catalogs from similar “communicology”-oriented schools turned up not a single one that demanded first and foremost, writing or verbal skills of its students; not one insisted that flesh and blood human beings be understood before they can be communicated to and with.

This cop-out has self-evident roots, which it is necessary, if not exactly diplomatic, to mention here.

The ability to be a good editor is a talent, not a trade. Lucid, forceful language flows only from those who are artists of a sort. They work by hunches, by “feel,” not with fixed rules and the kind of black and white printouts created by IBM machines.

Unfortunately, bureaucracies go up the wall when confronted with filling jobs requiring talent. How can you measure it? How can you even know if it exists? I’ll tell you how, because other departments in the academic bureaucracy have already figured it out.

If you want to hire a painter to teach painting, check his degrees, find out how much he’s published on painting. You could hire a famous artist, but the problem is, famous artists are scarce, expensive, and usually ill-fitted to play the bureaucratic game. Why should they, they’re artists, aren’t they?

If you want a man to teach creative writing, you can try for Norman Mailer, but if he isn’t available, why, hire on a fellow who

has three degrees in creative writing and has published journal articles on how to do it!

If he can actually write—or paint—that's beside the point, isn't it?

So who can fault the administrator who proudly boasts his communications staff is loaded with communicologists who can compute tertiary distortive information flowpaths to the .004 level of significance.

That the prose flowing from these pseudo-scientists reads like the assembly manual for a particle accelerator is irrelevant. What matters is only that the hirers can rest secure, knowing their people are certified experts.

Luckily, some won't swallow that conceit. Even now, Washington, in its quest for genuinely fair employment practices, is asking states to prove two degrees are better than one, and three better than two. After the shouting has died down, there will be much embarrassment, and perhaps those among us who love working with the language will be spared the fate otherwise sure to befall us.

But don't get your hopes up. Chances are the language talents it has taken you so long to get halfway perfected will never be as important to some bosses as your pedigree. Worst of all, your rare, badly needed and only slightly appreciated communications ability will never compare in administrators' eyes with the bookkeeping abilities of the management-types who always seem to end up in the drivers' seats.

Authors and the public whose eardrums have been shattered by the information explosion may love and need your talents, but rest assured you'll be hard-pressed to compete with a certified academic who is right at home filling out forms, whipping up budgets, wrestling computer inputs into shape, and acting awake at endless meetings.

The little card you see here and there saying, "You, too, can be replaced!" should read somewhat differently when tacked over an editor's desk. For him, it would be more accurate to say:

"You, too, can be replaced, and probably will be—by an administrator."