

## Editors in transition

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**W**hen I prepared this paper, I wondered if I actually had any strong views about editors and editing in general, let alone editors in transition. At first I didn't but then I thought about the image of editors that seems to prevail, at least in the book industry. I thought that, in my view, if editing is to thrive, to receive the recognition it deserves and more than its current modest pay levels, then book editors need not only to value and retain their traditional structural and copyediting, proofreading, project management, supervision and liaison skills — with all the subsets of specific abilities that informs each of them — but also they need to 'get out more', to become more commercial.

I thought that editors — by which I mean all editors, not just those commissioning or acquiring titles — need to challenge their comfort zone, they need to spend more time understanding the market into which their books are published. They need to pass from their current role to a broader, more expansive one. They need to rethink the old paradigm whereby editors have focused on whether or not a book is publishable to one that gives equal weight to whether or not it's also a sound financial investment, a book that will sell and sell for its owners. It rolls off the tongue very easily, but of course it's really a very big ask for editors already working to difficult timelines. But it is one that has to be addressed.

I'm sure many of you would say that my suggestion is pure rubbish because it doesn't reflect the reality for so many editors who spend huge amounts of time in the marketplace, looking at what their competition is doing, talking to booksellers and reading, reading, reading, or have jobs where their skills are highly regarded and well rewarded. You're right in regard to that group which manages to juggle so much, often in their own time in awkwardly snatched hours between all the other demands of work and 'real' life. Rather I was thinking about the 'perception' of the editor at a time when perception can be as powerful as any reality. You only have to look at the way politics is handled in Australia to know what I mean.

I've been reading about editors and talking to people about their views on editing. Not properly structured questionnaires but informal discussions that have proved very valuable. I've learned that not only is editing hard to define — try it with a layperson and you'll see what I mean — but also it's hard to describe exactly what an editor does.

It's certainly not as simple as describing an exact science or a specific set of skills. Rather it requires describing a collaborative art, one demanding discretion, discipline, determination, doggedness and detachment, and strong commercial skills as well. That's a glad bag of skills if ever there was one, a set of skills that doesn't sit comfortably with the image of the reluctant, shy individual, predominantly female whose love of her craft and search for the 'good' book that should be published is increasingly



at odds with commercial reality. A person reluctant to accept recognition, working away at a job little is written about, which itself is strange given how integral the editor is to the whole publishing process. That editors in America and the UK have high profiles doesn't surprise me. Why they don't in Australia does.

But why should the perception, the stereotype of editors, be any different from the stereotypes we carry about other jobs. After all, editors — like journalists, public relations people, indeed everyone working in the communications industries — bring different personalities and backgrounds to their work and take different approaches to how they do their work. Many are totally committed while others are detached — 'guns for hire' if you like. I'm not sure one approach is better than the other, so long as the job gets done well, on time and on budget.

Which led me to think about training, where it should happen, who should teach it, how it should be recognised. Being responsible for RMIT's Graduate Diploma in Editing and Publishing, which incidentally was itself established by the Society of Editors Victoria, obviously means I take the view that there's no substitute for mixing formal learning with work, which is why we like to accept only those already working full time in the industry, albeit at entry level. It's why we help place potential students in full time employment before they start the two-year program. In this regard we are different from many other university, TAFE and private training courses, too many of which, in my view, offer promises of employment which simply isn't there and teach content and process far removed from current industry practice.

I certainly don't shy away from the fact that RMIT's program seeks to offer the equivalent to the old fashioned cadetship that I was privileged to have when I joined McGraw Hill as a trainee editor over 30 years ago and was told my first task was to sell books, because only then would I understand what the market wanted, a prerequisite, I was told, to being a good editor. I was also 'forced' to work in production, finance and distribution, again because the view was that editors needed to have in-depth understanding of the whole publishing supply chain (we didn't call it that in those days, of course) if they were to do their job properly. Sadly, such cadetships no longer exist.

I've carried that 'holistic' view throughout my career and try to put it into practise now that I'm teaching. I think it's why RMIT's program with its emphasis not only on skills building, but skills building in a commercial context, is the first and to date only editing and publishing studies course accredited by the Australian Publishers Association whose members recognise it for its vocational/professional development orientation.

It seems to me that editors ought to be aware of market information. They need a sort of 'what's being bought, where, why and at what price' overview. In my view, this is no longer just 'nice to know' information editors should have, but 'must have' information if editors are to reposition themselves for the future.



I once described the book industry information we now have as ‘the good side of the GST’ because so much of it was paid for by the GST compensation package. I’d have preferred books not to be taxed, who wouldn’t want their industry’s products to be tax free, but equally, I was hard pressed to fully endorse the view taken by many of my colleagues that books are so different, so precious that they should be exempt from a broadly based goods and services tax. That said, like others, I was dismayed at how sales dropped when the GST was first introduced. Maybe the industry would collapse, I wondered. It didn’t of course and instead bounced back and has continued to grow, albeit slower than we’d all like.

I now realise it’s not the GST that’ll threaten the book as we know it, but rather technology in its many guises — especially the way technology competes in various forms for the entertainment dollar where so much of the book industry sits.

It’s no longer good enough to work in an industry run on anecdotes, where one person’s opinion of what might or might not sell or be selling was based on experience alone. An industry where only time would tell if judgements were correct. Now we have detailed and timely information on the book industry –increased and more detailed surveying by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, better inventory management systems and, of course, the robust and detailed sales tracking and analysis that Nielsen Bookscan has brought the industry over the last four years. In my view, editors who don’t regularly access this data are not only letting themselves and their employers down, but also their profession’s ability to be central to the publishing process.

This sort of information enhances editors’ ability not only to choose good books but also good investments, as well as enhance their collaboration with their authors and colleagues. This is, I hasten to say, not an argument that publishing decisions should be based solely on statistics, market trends and financial decisions. That argument’s been had and hopefully put to rest. Publishing’s always going to value creativity, great writing and the editor’s ability to give the author their best voice.

While I appreciate that the editor’s role is a complex and tough one, all editors need to become conversant with commercial reality and get on top of detailed market information to inform the investment decision that every publisher must make. Only then will they ensure they’re not marginalised in the publishing power structure.

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