

The death of sub-editing

Margaret Ashworth recalls sub-editing before computers and describes the impact that technology has had on today's newspapers.

Not long ago a story in the *Daily Mail* about a collie lost on a mountain referred to it as a b*tch, with an asterisk as if it were an obscenity rather than the correct and harmless word for a female dog. When I read that, I realised that subbing is well and truly dead.

It was not just that a sub-editor had changed the correct copy (as I was later told), but that it had been seen before publication by several senior subs and executives. None had objected to it. The depth of ignorance this reveals cannot be plumbed.

For me, this grotesque nonsense symbolises the state of sub-editing today. Once a proud and integral part of newspaper production, carried out by people of enormous flair, knowledge and wit, it is now a marginal affair at best. The national newspaper subs of today are concerned with technical matters such as dragging in adverts, sourcing pictures and making sure legs of type are level, squeezing consideration of the words into last place. The vast majority of newspapers and online news providers have done away with subs altogether, and copy goes straight from the reporter to the page. Yet subs and reporters have very different mental make-ups. Reporters are all-action, gung-ho types, who never let the facts get in the way of a good story. They genuinely do not notice when they spell the same name two or three different ways in one story. Subs on the other hand are terrible nit-pickers. I notice if an unusual word appears twice in a book. I see if there is a space between a word and a full stop. I know without looking it up that it is Phillip Schofield, not Philip. Yes, it's tragic. But the point I am making is that subs are a vital part of newspaper production, yet now we are considered a waste of money. How has it come about during my career of 40-odd years that such a high art has been brought so low?

Working as a sub-editor

When I did my first casual shifts at the *Mail* in 1974 the printing process was already prehistoric. The local paper I moved from used early paste-up technology but national papers, hog-tied by the unions, were still using methods not far removed from Caxton's. Copy was set in type by operators sitting at huge clattering Linotype machines with pots of molten metal beside them (thus the expression 'hot metal'). Then it was assembled into pages, line by painstaking line, on metal-topped benches in a huge echoing hall known as 'the stone'.

The subbing process

What is subbing?

The subbing process was still exactly as it was when Graham Greene worked on *The Times* in the 1930s, and went back a lot further than that. Nearly all the subs were men. When I joined, there was one other female and nearly everyone else smoked, heavily, so there was a permanent fug. We sat at two parallel long tables on which messengers, or 'copy boys' – often quite elderly – laid out a pad of flimsy paper, a pot of glue with a brush, and a spike (bent over at 90 degrees because some sub, allegedly Larry Lamb who went on to edit *The Sun*, had impaled his own forehead) at each place. We all had our own scissors, pen, ruler with both inches and points, and headline type book. The chief sub, the copytaster, the splash sub (responsible for the main story on page one) and the spread sub (who did the centre pages) sat at the 'top table' linking the two legs. The chief sub handed out the stories, typed by the reporters and duplicated on a Banda machine (I can still recall the smell of meths on the fresh damp pages) to the subs. We rewrote in longhand, corrected and generally polished the copy. If paragraphs needed rearranging, we cut up the copy and pasted it on to plain sheets of paper. (We were still in the original *Mail* offices off Fleet Street, and most nights, parties of visitors were shown round by the messengers. They would be shown every intricacy of the 'tape room', the messengers' hidey-hole where copy was duplicated, but waved past the subs by the copy boy saying, 'These are the subs. They cut up bits of paper and stick them on other bits of paper.') Every page of copy had to be marked up with the catchline to identify it, the sheet number of the copy, the page number for which the story was destined, the type size, column width, whether it was roman or bold, and 'NES', meaning nut each side, a nut being an en or half an em, and signifying the margin at each end of the line. Every capital letter had to have two little strokes under it and every paragraph had to start with a square bracket.

Casting off

One of the main tasks of the sub was 'casting off', or estimating the right number of words to fit in a given space. This was more of an art than a science. A beginner would count the words, but with practice most of us could guess the length reasonably accurately. Unwanted copy was put on the spike and messengers sent

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the finished stories upstairs to the printers in pneumatic tubes, the sort that were used in old-fashioned department stores.

Headings

Headings were another joy. Given a style of, say, three lines of 48 Schoolbook Bold across four columns, you would get out your book of type samples, work how many characters would fit in a line, handwrite a trial heading and count the characters. All three lines needed to be about the same length and fill the space. You would try to avoid using 'm' and 'w' which counted as one and half characters, while 'l' and 'i' were halves. The system was unforgiving. If you sent a heading which was even one character too long for the line, it would come back from the 'case', where larger type was set by hand, with the dreaded word BUST written across it.

Proofs and printing

Proof prints of stories were sent to the reading department – a rather strange, library-like room where quietly spoken men checked proofs for typographical mistakes. The corrected proofs were then returned to the typesetters, who were paid for resetting their own errors.

The newspapers were printed in the basement, and when the presses started running, the whole building would vibrate. For more on all this do have a look at a wonderful site written by Hugh Dawson, my first chief sub at the *Daily Mail*: www.tomorrownewspapers.co.uk

Concentrating on words

Cumbersome and archaic as this sounds now, all the technical stuff was second nature and the concentration was entirely on the words. Subs chatted to each other, asking or giving advice and helping with tricky headlines. One would say to another: 'What's our style on guerilla?' or 'Can you think of a shorter word for Ombudsman?' (My favourite query, from a casual, was 'What's our style – Iran or Iraq?') This was how the craft was learned and passed on from seniors to juniors. You learned many things every day and it built into a compendium of knowledge, hints and tips. Without doubt, experience is the most valuable asset of a sub. I remember thinking during my last week at work (not that I knew it was my last week at the time) 'I'm still learning in this job.'

One usually had a lot of time to hone and polish each story. In 1974 a big news night was eight pages out of a total of 28 or 32 pages, the rest being features, sport and advertising. Nowadays the paper is often around 100 pages, with 30 or 32 being news. The space restrictions meant that stories were crammed in, and most had to be cut to the bone. This was a great discipline, and every word was weighed to test if it was really necessary.

Sometimes only a couple of words needed to be changed, sometimes a wholesale rewrite was necessary. Because they were at one remove from the story, subs could see more clearly how best to package it and sell it to the reader. They could spot errors and double meanings that the reporter, in his or her haste, had overlooked. It was much easier, as an outsider, to cut words that the writer had sweated blood to create. And there has never been a reporter who was not forced to admit that on occasion subs had improved his copy or picked up an error which could have been costly, if not disastrous.

New technology

In 1987, the *Mail* finally hauled itself into the 20th century and brought in new technology. This led to far-reaching changes.

It must be hard for people even a little younger than me (I'm 67) to imagine the trepidation we felt before the screens arrived. Computers were not commonplace in homes – I did not get one for several more years. Very few of us had even seen one, let alone used one. A few older subs retired at this point, and I lost sleep thinking I would never grasp it. In fact the training was good and we did come to grips with the system, an early version of Atex.

The new technology took most of the drudgery out of the job. Subs received copy on a screen and fed it into the shape required. No more guessing the length – you could see when it was a fit. Headlines could be altered on the screen until they fitted, and subs quickly found out that they could squeeze the type if a line was too long (which resulted in some fairly dreadful-looking headings). At a stroke, subs replaced the typesetters, the case hands who set the headlines, the stone hands who made up the pages, and the proof-readers.

How did technology affect the subs?

The advent of the screens had an immediate effect on the subs. It was as if we had been shoved into little boxes. You could not see the people opposite and you could not hand a story to your neighbour for his thoughts. From that moment the flow of help and advice among dountable subs was reduced or halted. We were all locked into our own computer worlds.

End of page restrictions

The new technology also ended the restriction on space. With hot metal, the number of pages was limited by the rate at which type could be set. Increasing the amount of type would have meant employing more labour at great expense. But once the writers' original words were in the computer system, there was nothing to stop editors ordering 72, 84 and 96-page papers. Larger papers had a big effect on the craft of sub-editing. Where once we had to cut stories

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to fit into small spaces, now there were vast expanses of newsprint to fill – but only the same number of events happening in the world. Stories had to be run at length and often extra copy, usually culled from previous stories, was needed to fill. This was the very reverse of a sub's instincts to cut all extraneous matter. I found it deeply unsatisfying to have to tell a story three times over in slightly different ways when it would have been improved immeasurably for being slashed back.

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Errors

Another effect, in my opinion, was to allow more errors into the paper. Somehow the old-style typed copy, with its wonky letters and crossings out, seemed less professional and more likely to have errors in it than the neat and regular lines of computer print. I am sure more errors creep through simply because of the 'correct' appearance of screen copy.

Composing pages

For a while, finished stories were printed out and sent to the new paste-up department, where the successors to the stone hands cut them out with scalpels and stuck them on blank pages. Pictures and adverts were added in the same way. However as the technology evolved it became possible to compose the pages on Mac screens. A new kind of computer operative arrived to tidy up the pages and bring in the pictures and ads. Inevitably these skilful young people were known as Maccers. They would make sure all the legs of a story were precisely lined up, put the visually correct amount of space between a picture and its caption, and so on. However for some years there has been a drive to get the subs to take over these operations, reducing the actual subbing to a more or less fringe activity second to the technical demands of composing a page.

Use of trainees

Despite this, I am sorry to say that in my opinion the use of trainees has been the biggest contribution to the death of subbing. Again, I cannot stress enough how important experience is in the art of sub-editing. It takes years to produce a halfway decent sub. Until the *Mail* started its own training scheme, recruitment to the subs desk was either from local papers or other nationals. There was a wide mix of intake, from those who had made a promising start in the provinces to highly experienced over-40s. There was an organic progression up the table from novice to those near the end of their careers.

Training schemes are nothing new. I was a trainee with the now defunct Thomson Regional Newspapers in 1971. The *Mirror* group ran a similar scheme at the time. But there was

a major difference between those schemes and that of the *Mail*. The old ones took in as many recruits as they needed to fill vacancies available on their local papers, then let them make their own way to the nationals; the *Mail* takes in a set number of trainees every year and funnels them to the national titles whether there is a place for them or not. There is now very little recruitment by any other route.


One of the main drawbacks to relying on the training scheme for recruitment is that 99 per cent of possible employees are excluded. The trainees all have top degrees, often from Oxbridge. They are paid a very low starting wage, nothing like enough to support a person working in London, weeding out all except those from relatively well-off families. So there will never be another Derek Jameson, the Reuters messenger from a single-parent home who went on to edit the *Daily Express* and the *News of the World*, or Charlie Wilson, the copy boy who eventually edited *The Times*. The one bright spot is that at least half the trainees are women.

Changes in attitudes

Another potential problem is that today's highly-educated and self-confident young folk have a different attitude to the job from many of us old hands. When we landed a job on the *Daily Mail* it was the achievement of a lifetime – we were working on the best table in Fleet Street and we were proud of it. The politics of the paper didn't matter in the least to us and we had no problem working with copy that opposed our own beliefs; what did matter was that we were working to the very highest standards in the business and had the respect of everyone in it. Of course plenty of contemporary trainees have a great attitude and abundant talent, and have rightly gone on to greater things. Others, charming young people as they are, seem far less committed to their employer. Indeed I know of at least two who left because, as they openly admitted, they were embarrassed to tell their friends at dinner parties that they worked for the *Mail*. Amongst some of those who stay, there is often a certain amount of superior amusement at how seriously the older staff take their work. There is genuine amazement that anyone can really care about spelling or grammar or punctuation, and ignorance of current or past events is not considered a problem. When a mistake is pointed out, instead of being mortified, as I would have been, the youngsters shrug it off with an implied 'Whatever'. There was a conversation a while ago between an old-timer and a trainee who had not heard of Rudolph Valentino. 'Before my time, I'm afraid,' said the trainee breezily. 'Hitler was before mine but I've still heard of him,' was the reply. The trainee in question became chief sub on a quality national.

For more than ten years, fresh – and cheap – trainee subs have been arriving every year as if from a tap that cannot be turned off. At the same time all the most senior – and highly paid – subs have been lopped off by various means: early retirement, redundancy, ill-health, or pay-offs for being the victim of breached employment law. These were people with up to 40 years of subbing experience. The vacancies were filled by trainees.

The future of subbing

I must say I feel sorry for any enthusiastic newcomer to the subbing business. It is not remotely the craft it once was, when you could finish the evening with enormous pride in a good job well done. Maybe it was a big running story, updated over several editions, or maybe it was a one-paragraph short with a witty headline. It's a bit different to think 'I dragged in lots of ads.' All sub-editing practices are the result of many years of experience and knowing what works best to enable the reader to get the most from your product, but now almost no one knows what these practices are. That is a loss for us all. 

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Margaret Ashworth was educated at Beckenham Grammar School for Girls and University of Kent at Canterbury, gaining a 2:2 BSc in sociology (actually she can't remember now if it was a BA or a BSc!). She edited the student newspaper Incant.

She was a graduate trainee at Thomson Regional Newspapers and worked for three years on the *Evening Post*, Luton, both as reporter and sub. From 1974 Margaret worked for three years as a current affairs researcher at London Weekend Television while doing shifts at the *Daily Mail* in the evening and Evening News during time off and on Saturdays. She joined the staff of the *Mail* for 18 months or so then returned to London Weekend and briefly Thames TV. She went back to the *Mail* in 1981 where she remained until 2013, latterly as splash sub.

Margaret is married to Alan Ashworth, former assistant night editor of the *Daily Mail*, and they have two children. They live in Ribble Valley, Lancashire. Margaret runs the website Style Matters, a guide for writers working without subs, and its accompanying blog.

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