Focus

The future of the editorial role in publishing

The Revd Professor Alison Baverstock

I jointly set up the Masters course in Publishing at Kingston University in 2005; ever since, we have been preparing graduates for a future in the industry they long to join.

Throughout this time, we have consistently found that our arriving students have had a similar experience. All have felt pressure from those either observing, or sometimes helping fund, their studies. They have received two key messages: firstly, that publishing is very hard to get into; secondly, that it's an outdated industry, so the associated skillset is no longer relevant. It's common knowledge, after all, that 'everyone is a publisher now' – all you do is press a button and content can be shared. Even if those passing on this advice have no prior knowledge of the publishing industry, or much involvement in books or reading, these opinions have been confidently shared.

There is some wisdom here. Access to publishing can feel difficult if your background doesn't fit what you see as the prevailing industry demographic, or you don't live near to a major city, or have useful connections – but in my experience, there are also many who assume it's an industry that is hard to enter, and so don't even give it a try. The means of sharing content have certainly expanded hugely, with social media continually creating new opportunities to be heard. But within this wider context, the role of the content manager, ensuring that the process is effectively handled, is still very much needed – I would cite as evidence all the independent publishing services that have sprung up in recent years.

But back to the incoming students. At the end of their first day, during which we've offered a broad summary of what publishing is and where it's going, we ask them to write on a sticky label what they aspire to be. Again, there is general unanimity. They all want to be editors – most usually for Faber.

'Editor' is the one publishing role that almost everyone has heard of. Our arriving students generally know nothing of rights or special sales (common eventual destinations), but rather imagine themselves sitting in a quiet room correcting their authors' grammar – or scanning the submissions pile for potential talent.

We spend the next year unpicking their assumptions. The role they anticipate barely exists in-house these days; it's largely been put out-of-house and under pressure: an 'overhead' which needs to be ever-reduced. Few publishing houses pay for editing by the hour: most now pay by the job, with a consequent downward force on rates of pay. During the time I spent on the

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management committee of the Society of Authors (2012–15) it was really common to hear complaints from members about the poor standard of editing offered by publishers. Some agents started to fill the gap by building it into the service they offered. Other traditional editorial roles have been turned into professional services, such as manuscript advice or writing courses, which writers may self-fund as a way of developing their craft.

Where does the editor sit within the development of publishing?

It seems to me that the story of publishing is largely the history of challenges being overcome: not enough paper during the two world wars and so having to decide which books to print; how to reach the potentially paying public who do not necessarily frequent bookshops; how to distinguish between new formats that will last and those that will not. Publishing generally survives because of the human need for stories and reliable information. And throughout its history, the editing function has helped manage what is presented to the reading public. My prediction for its future is that as content will continue to be the most important thing, so too will the editorial role remain essential in ensuring it is fit for purpose.

To me, a greater background challenge we are facing is the general lapse in literacy, and the wider need for this key skill to be acknowledged and valued; both as essential to the building of effective individuals (BOP Consulting and The Reading Agency 2015) but also to build the next generation of book buyers as industry surveys repeatedly show us that current high-spenders on books are ageing. The pandemic highlighted gross inequalities in educational support, and although the National Literacy Trust managed to get children's books included within food parcels sent to those struggling at home, and so presented books as life essentials, gaps in reading levels have only increased since due to poor delivery of educational catch-up (National Literacy Trust 2022). Reading is such a vital life skill, for the general flourishing of the population as well as the preservation of the industry producing materials to support it, and we all need to be concerned.

How editors are likely to be valued by the industry in future is interesting. From academic research undertaken into self-publishing (eg Baverstock 2011; Baverstock and Steinitz 2013a and b), I had a growing awareness that freelance editors were finding this new breed of authors a regular source of work. It seemed to me that publishers were no longer in sole control of the book market, and I wanted to explore the future role of the editor within this situation.

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In 2014, I received permission to survey members of what was then the Society for Editors and Proofreaders (now the CIEP). I had an extremely high response (over 500 replies) and a particularly significant response to the invitation to offer additional comments, all (of course) presented in immaculate English. I was invited to share the findings at the SfEP's subsequent annual conference.

What emerged, and was crystallised in two subsequent academic papers (Baverstock, Blackburn and Iskandarova 2015a and b), was that editors are highly qualified and professional, and routinely and generously developmental in their approach to those they work with. They are regularly altruistic, often spending time resourcing help for those they cannot service themselves.

While, somewhat predictably, it emerged that editors are increasingly undervalued (and price-pressured) by the publishing industry, which has relied on their services, they were – as I suspected – increasingly finding a wider market for their services. They were already helping to develop and finalise content for a variety of different clients.

In the publishing press I commented that this should be a wake-up call to the traditional industry. Publishers have long taken editors for granted, assuming that it was the sheer pleasure of working on their books that made their collaborators' lives worthwhile. What rather

emerged from the data was that completing satisfying work within prescribed deadlines, and having control of their available time, were generally the most satisfying aspects of editors' working lives.

How can the role of editor achieve greater prominence in publishing?

My research showed that editors take care, and that they tend to be modest and quiet; they often don't like either touting for business or negotiating remuneration. Editors do however need to be ongoingly conscious of their role as providers of essential services; to develop as entrepreneurs rather than out-of-house extensions of publishers. Their role needs highlighting.

Here there is progress. It was Stoke Barrington (apologies if another publisher did it before them) that I first spotted listing the names of all those involved in their books in the back pages, and the practice has grown. It's also now common for authors to offer a closing appreciation for those involved in their book; hailing a community of the professionally and personally supportive, rather than allowing the reader to assume their book to be the outpouring of a single genius. The last few books I have read have all featured a fulsome singling out of the editor. Here is Phil Stamper's (our most recent **Kingston University Big Read**) credit to his editor, which comes directly after that to his agent:

> (Thank you) to Mary Kate Castellani, my brilliant editor, for having a wealth of faith in me – and Cal! – from day one. You pushed me, you caught me *every time* I cut corners, and helped me create a book I'm unbelievably proud to call my own.

Other new initiatives within the publishing industry are showing how things may develop in future. For example, in his presentation at the Riyadh International Book Fair in October, Dan Gerstein, founder of Gotham Ghostwriters (the fast-growing US service agency for self-publishing writers) predicted that the significance of brand within publishing will diminish markedly.

This realisation is overdue. Public awareness of publishing brands has surely long been overestimated by those working in the industry. The reading public tend to be familiar with the format and look of a title, but not the name of the imprint; the voice of the actor reading the audiobook, not the name of the author. How the reading public (and of crucial significance, the 'non-reading' public) understand and buy reading material needs much more *commercial* understanding, but this particular 'c' word has long made legacy publishers feel uncomfortable.

Meanwhile, new players entering the market are grappling with other long-standing issues. For example, Boldwood Books, set up by former MD of Headline, HarperCollins and Head of Zeus Amanda Ridout, is demonstrating real momentum towards doing things differently. She commented:

> As far as Boldwood Books is concerned, editorial is back in the driving seat, as the choice of content made by publishers is of crucial importance – it's here that we can add most value. We are looking at the whole business model of supplying content to readers and reworking. For example, on publication day we release titles in ten formats, from paper and hardback to digital and audio, and each book launch offers the opportunity to offer their other titles – we refuse to call it 'backlist' – because each book is new to someone who has not yet read it. We insist on international rights – because a good story works in any market – and so promote diversity of voices and perspectives. And we print on demand as orders come in; accepting only 'firm' (ie non-returnable) stock orders from retailers, and so tackling the industry's long history of over-production and resulting environmental waste. (Ridout 2022)

This rethinking of how publishing works, and getting back to the basics on which stories are chosen for wider sharing, is catching on; Boldwood titles now regularly feature in the bestseller lists for all formats. Editors are well placed to benefit from this, and it is notable that of the 14 Boldwood staff, 7 are editors – and they are on the payroll, so central to the business rather than marginalised as a business cost.

How to grow awareness of the value of editors within society

Those who have had their editorial eye trained can't unsee what is missing, or resist the temptation to correct loosely written text. But to maintain civilities, they surely need to convey the sense that their service helps meaning to shine through, and so enhances what was provided, rather than simply be seen as offering marking.

The launch of the Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading is a great start, and I would suggest the organisation continues to build on the wider societal

trends that affirm the role of those who help make text more accessible. There are many examples on which the CIEP and its members could comment, whether as an institution or as individuals. A few follow.

The National Curriculum (launched through the Education Reform Act, 1988) placed new emphasis on pupils needing to check their work before submitting it (at any age): the responsibility should lie with them for the version that is seen by others. Having lived through this process as firstly an educational publisher, and later a parent, I would argue this has led to schools understanding more about the processes of publishing. I began to see classes and schools embarking on the publication of work, perhaps for school fundraising or cohort bonding. The pupil-managed school yearbook became much more common.

The wider access to authors, through literary festivals, social media presence and higher media involvement, has kindled the desire in many more to write; to have a book published is no longer a distant dream – and the media regularly covers those who have done just that. This draws interest into how the process works. Could more public discussion of the different types of editorial roles be led by the CIEP, from commissioning and developmental editing to copyediting and indexing?

Of late, 'guest-editing' of publications and programmes by celebrities, or the launch of self-hosted podcasts – most notably by celebrities and members of the Royal family – has drawn attention to the shaping role of those making editorial choices. Alongside this has perhaps grown an awareness that curating content and bringing the most appropriate voices into the conversation is harder than it looks. Having the right people present in the studio does not always guarantee the best use of their time.

The rise of self-publishing, and its ever-improving status, has drawn attention to just how much effort goes into the preparation and finalisation of content. Along with a much more accepting view of what was previously seen as 'vanity publishing' has come an awareness that there are new ways to develop and share material – and respect for those who do. Within this, I think editors could stress both the value and discretion of their service. Those who want to perpetuate their story generally want it to be the best version. Parents, partners and beta-readers can be helpful, but the experienced advice of an informed and objective professional may be preferable.

Now a community has arisen around ways to self-publish, professional services are available to ease a process that anyone who has dabbled in will realise is much harder than it looks – at rates that look very reasonable compared with the call-out fees or hourly rates of plumbers and electricians. This should raise editors' confidence in their appropriate level of pay. The CIEP could build on the wider understanding that, in time, roles that can be automated may eventually become eliminated (eg airline pilot, accountant) whereas roles that require individual service will become further valued – and perhaps harder to secure (eg personal trainer, developmental editor).

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Conclusion

My conclusion is that the future of publishing is going to look much more varied, with activities and involvements spread well beyond the confines of the traditional industry. The role of publisher will carry on – we will continue to need curious and proactive people, who are comfortable taking risks and can anticipate the reading tastes and needs of the public.

But within the changing world of how publishers achieve their goals, and how readers are served with materials, editors need to remain confident. While costs will remain under pressure, the most reductive process-chain between content provider and audience will always require the involvement of someone who can help the text make its best case, and this is the editor. Expensive buildings and lavish formats may come to feel like a luxury – many of us got used to operating from home

during the pandemic, and if the story is strong enough, it can surely stand sharing with fewer frills. The publishing process can also take place anywhere, and networked groups of online colleagues may be a way of keeping prices down, as customers are gradually helped to become accustomed to pay more realistically for their reading.

But if the service offered by editors is essential to the publishing process, it follows that editors should maintain an entrepreneurial awareness of the wider world's need for their service – which is of relevance to a world of business partners other than just publishers. Perhaps future Masters students will arrive with ambitions to manage whole operations; spotting the business opportunities for content-related services and new routes to market – not just an individual starter role in the process.

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Written by The Revd Professor Alison Baverstock

The Chartered Institute of Editing and Proofreading (CIEP) is a non-profit body promoting excellence in English-language editing. We set and demonstrate editorial standards, and we are a community, training hub and support network for editorial professionals – the people who work to make text accurate, clear and fit for purpose.

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