The Crisis of Editing

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ADE Bulletin 131 (Spring 2002), pp. 34–40
ISSN: 0001-0898
CrossRef DOI: 10.1632/ade.131.34
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GETTING out a journal rests on a compact among contributors, readers, publishers, and editors. Editors have a specific role to play but also a particular point of view on the structures and processes that result in a journal’s appearance. Rarely does a single editor impose a univocal program on any long-lasting or influential publication (F. R. Leavis’s twenty-one-year editorship [1932–53] of the quarterly Scrutiny is an exception). Producing a journal is an industrial process, having more in common with filmmaking than writing a book. Preparing manuscripts for publication requires expert consultants, copyeditors, text editors, printers, and so on. If a journal is fortunate enough to have a copyeditor who is also a stylist and able reader, then a certain journal prose style might develop. An extraordinary text editor will allow multiple styles to coexist in an industrial system tending to regularization. But even if a journal is blessed with such a text editor, it cannot overcome the problem of the shortage of excellent stylists among academic authors writing even for well-known journals. Contributors normally write a prose based on common topoi.

Given that academic journal publishing is a collective but divided business, the essential and most authorial task of the editor, to assemble and direct publication for and according to a particular purpose or program, gives way, as might any form of intellectual judgment, to collective standards. This yielding weighs on both sides of a critical scale of value.

In English, the editor appears in the seventeenth century, helping to organize, distribute, and reproduce knowledges and texts using new technologies and new economies. Editors appear with print mass production and with national and protoscientific associations publishing their proceedings. We believe that good editors not only organize material to meet certain intellectual and social ends but also help refine and shape submissions to conform to collective standards. Contributors normally write a prose based on common topoi.

On one side of the scale, then, editors regulate and order knowledge, style, and discourse to ensure conformity; producing “anonymous knowledge” (Foucault) and working within the “paradigm” (Kuhn) of ordinary knowledge production are familiar terms to describe this process. On the other side of the scale, editors should have the daring to give unexpected texts and knowledge to the world. Between these two necessary and valuable roles, a contradiction exists. The first is a policing, almost a censorship, best understood as a pedagogical act, an act of education. The second is a transgressive and generous act properly seen as a daring gift, a gift of daring itself. Inherently, educating and editing implicate each other. To edit is to put forth (Latin edere), while to educate is to lead forth, to school, to instruct in manners, morals, and intellect (educare, educere). Editing is close to writing, to authorship, to circulation and distribution, perhaps to stating, certainly to giving a gift. To educate is to rear or bring up and can sometimes take the form of a gift.

The editor must always put forth and call forth. Often these actions coalesce as the editor calls forth into what is known to put forth according to common standards. The Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions of educate bring us close, at moments, to a liaison between editing and educating. The first current usage of educate is “[t]o bring up (young persons) from childhood, so as to form (their) habits, manners, intellectual and physical aptitudes” (def. 2), communicating the openness of what it means to form, the various forms an education might take, the liberal and pluralistic possibilities for shaping a social subject. The danger of forming too closely, of tyrannically foreclosing possible complex ways of being human, is implied in the next definition: “To train (any person)
so as to develop the intellectual and moral powers generally” (def. 3). This word and its derivatives embody an anthropology conceiving the subject as plural in its capabilities, needing the discipline of form, but shaped properly to enact its powers of reason and judgment free of any determining limits on those powers. The last current definition catches how educate can limit: “To train, discipline (a person, a class of persons, a particular mental or physical faculty or organ), so as to develop some special aptitude, taste, or disposition” (def. 4). For the editor, the question arises: Can one educate for innovative transgressive daring? Can such an education be given as a gift by the editor and, if so, to whom? Can it be elicited from a contributor and directed to an audience or gathered from a contributor already educated in the readership?

Humanistic anthropology requires the editor to educate, to bring forth into community, to form the community; and to draw into the fields of knowledge that which the newly educated subjects can sustain and revise. This process is what happens to already existing paradigms. To edit without educating would be mere mechanism.

In this anthropology, the editor must have an education. Guiding or leading forth must set out from the already known. Editing is an inter- and intragenerational act. Extending tradition and establishing authority, it motivates the young and takes place among contemporaries to circulate ideas and recognition. Do giving and daring limit the educational role of editing and of literary journals? If so, where is the limit?

The editor puts forward materials to make them conspicuous; to present ideas for examination; to help a field, a discipline, or knowledge make progress. This putting forward is normal educational practice; it gives the highest value to existing knowledge, to the means for producing knowledge according to existing common standards, and to the supplementary succession of one fashionable mode of talk by another. But daring consists in the disruption of the existing paradigm; it also steps away from the structure of conflict and debate that the model of succeeding paradigms requires.

Henry Adams edited the *North American Review* (*NAR*) for several years during the 1870s. In a letter to a contributor he insisted that the “rule of the Review [. . .] has been to decline controversy” (26). Not that Adams avoided dealing with contemporary political, literary, and intellectual issues. The *NAR* directly attacked the important objects needing intelligent treatment, but it often stepped aside from debates elsewhere under way—ignoring them as false issues—and it enlisted writers not committed to the standard ways in which important topics were discussed or conceptualized. In relation to demanding intellectual problems, Adams wanted the *NAR* “to maintain the offensive” (265). When he accepted the editorship of the *NAR*, the journal was on the edge of bankruptcy and had been taken over by for-profit publishers. He managed to restore the journal’s financial stability while carrying out his editorial project, but his daring carried him into open conflict with his publishers. In what became his final issue, he chose to put forward essays that outraged them, though they allowed its publication with a disclaimer that Adams offset with a statement of his own goals: “The object is to ascertain whether and to what degree Americans should feel satisfaction or disappointment at the result of a century’s activity. The moral should be tolerably sharp-pointed, and the treatment broad” (231; see also 237).

The nature of the project was proposing and then putting forth nothing less than a comprehensive review of the political, intellectual, and cultural institutions formed by the imagination and struggle of a new civilization. Calling forth substantial acts of judgment from highly knowledgeable intellectuals, the journal would dare to transgress the continuities of institutional and intellectual projects, offering new paradigms and clear analyses as to whether the education and thought of a civilization had met or failed to meet its needs. The journal would do this not to educate or lead but to enact thinking of a sort that education and common standards preclude.

Writing to the University of California president Daniel Gilman, Adams said, “My plan in diverting a number of the *North American Review* into the Centennial Business was to do something which seemed all the more necessary because no one else would do it; that is, to measure the progress of our country by the only standard which I know of, worth applying to mankind, its thought” (243). The limit between educating and editing stabilizes itself in the relation between “necessary” and “no one else.” It is the difference between the common standard standing on the humanistic subject of knowledge and the daring gift intelligence gives in its place.

The standard for measuring the value of a society or civilization is its thought; yet along what lines can we know thought or weigh it? For Adams, the question impinged on the nature and value of the human
in its work in building civilization. Editing comes to be, in his instance, a daring to measure the given.

Editors are not daring if they are only the conduit of old knowledge or accepted attitudes. If, in practice, all that authors submit are essays written in already recognizable form about topics already assumed to be important, then the editor can be neither daring nor giving. The editor should seek out or create what is needed. By knowing the fields, by judging intellectual projects and their worth, by directing writers to certain ends, and by accepting the gift of chance, the editor can work to advance the paradigmatic to or beyond its limit.

In practical terms, the editor puts forth those writings, properly organized, that meet common standards. Editors meet common standards by making sure that expert readers find submissions original and worthwhile. Editors guarantee reason and decorum, accuracy and thoroughness. The apparatus of notes, bibliography, clarity of style, importance of topic, and so on—all these formally important, almost legal qualities editors ensure in the work they circulate. Thus the plagiarist and hoaxer haunt editorial nightmares.

In an age of commodification, though, editors ensure more than the formal and scientific. Their obligation to these standards sometimes comes up against the programmatic aims of agendas, practices, or politics. Disinterest lies at the heart of formal standards, and so on—all these formally important, almost legal qualities editors ensure in the work they circulate. Thus the plagiarist and hoaxer haunt editorial nightmares.

Recognition is the crisis for editing. A journal of work, risk a great deal in departing from the genre. Editors conscious of familiar essays coming in the mail and appearing in their journal's pages could have several responses: self-congratulation at doing so well, satisfaction in contributing to the field, or concern at such iteration. Curiosity normally finds its antithesis in boredom, since curiosity needs constantly to know anew whereas iteration and recognition create predictability and support professionalism. The curious editor might give readers and contributors something new, tired of the cash value of the familiar—then that which is taken to be critically new becomes a grail. (As William James writes, "Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system" [100].) But this effort provides no relief.

In the Pensées, Pascal turns quests into boredom: "Curiosity is only vanity. We only want to know something so we can talk about it" (50). Editing's contradictions grow as the tension of normalizing and daring oscillates as repetition and innovation, exposing the compulsive desire for innovation as the deadly sin of pride.

Pascal's thinking about boredom irritates myriad anxieties. The curious editor, innately human, wants to exceed dependence, habit, iteration, and recognition. Ironically, cash value, not credit, becomes the measure of dependence and familiarity. Curiosity takes cash value as boredom. In other words, the succession of paradigms, of novelties, and of innovations rests in finitude and dependence and so discloses itself as boredom. In the light of Pascal, the editor's very life incarnates boredom: "How tiresome it is to give up pursuits to which we have become attached. A man enjoying a happy home-life has only to see a woman gambling, and he will be very sorry to go back to what he was doing before. It happens every day" (50–51). Curiosity creates foolish romance, destroys the happiness of well-being and domesticity, exiles itself forever, and creates a pattern of inescapable regret. This pattern repeats over and again from the force of necessity. It is the defining characteristic of the human confronted by finitude and driven by pride and lack of imagination.

Pascal’s story comes close to de Man's tale of modernity (142–86). Should we take these texts as defining the beginning and end of modern subjectivity, we would remain with the problem of understanding how, if at all, editors might contain these conundrums as they deal with ordinary submissions to journals.

Professionalization induces the satisfaction that recognition imparts: "We have won." Whenever a
new model displaces an old, this inducement does its work. Vanity seems to be satisfied, and the wayward spouse, electrified by risk or jouissance, never has to return home. A curious editor will always be unfaithful and, unlike Don Giovanni, always weary of success—setting forth a greater vanity, the desire to know the unspeakable. ‘We would never travel by sea if it meant never talking about it, and for the sheer pleasure of seeing things we could never hope to describe to others’ (Pascal 50). Editors search the productive world of writing for what they might see but cannot say. Vanity, for some, keeps the process going; they know that success demands either an end to human finitude or a permanent exile, seeing what their finitude lets them neither say nor hear. Pascal’s anthropology removes hope from the boring struggle against the comfortable, happy, and domestic. Human unhappiness comes from a neediness that compels the quest for independence.

The current state of academic publication is so complex that it cannot be summarized, and the publications are so numerous that they cannot be classified. (When I first drafted this talk for presentation at the 2000 MLA convention, the MLA’s Directory of Periodicals listed 3,700 titles. As I write [3 July 2001], the list is over 4,000.) Nonetheless, we must find a way to address the practical question of how contributors induce editors into crises acute enough to make publication interesting. By definition, the answer is not in publication for career advancement. Contributors too often write for already established audiences and so are unlikely to produce anything but normal work. Of course, boredom can set the human crisis moving in an editor, but something more must happen to drive the editor from professional self-satisfaction to a point on the horizon.

Contributors know that a decision to publish depends on an act of recognition, a discovery of the familiar, by a journal’s editorial apparatus. Publication normally requires that expert readers and editors look into a manuscript and see themselves, their practices, their standards, and their interests staring back at them. A journal publishes not because an article persuades it to put new knowledge into circulation but because, conservatively, an article defends and expands the professional and intellectual space the journal has come to occupy. Iteration and circulation build fields and discourses.

In practical terms, when editors and contributors iterate, recognition devalues new knowledge in two ways. First, in the form of celebrity: editors hope to publish essays written by scholars with a recognized track record who contribute a new piece of their work. Second, editors hope to sponsor or gain other sponsors by accepting essays written by younger or less well known scholars who write into an ongoing debate or according to an established professional line. (Look through several issues of well-known journals, searching out notes that give thanks to senior scholars whose comments or generosity made publication possible, and so on) Both are forms of branding. What is bad is the devaluation of the unfamiliar, of the skills needed to persuade that the anarchic and unfamiliar have importance—in sum, the devaluation of secular virtues in favor of the dogmatic scientism of an ethos of professional recognition.

Avant-garde journals contribute to, support, and benefit from this general structure. When looked at from a medium distance, with the eye of an editor watching the competition, what emerges is socially clear. The profession has shaped itself into a continuum of acceptable rhetorics and ideological, professional positions, readily commodifiable and branded—available for sponsorship. Various institutional practices and many individuals cede their right and obligation to judge, intensifying the police role of editors.

More than once, department heads and chairs have called me to ask if boundary 2 accepted an article by a colleague. They tell me the colleague’s tenure rests on the editorial decision. These heads and chairs don’t like my standard response: Why not read and judge the quality of the work for yourselves in your department? If a critical continuum of accepted positions is now the profession, then journal publication means little more than a particular colleague has been certified in a specific legitimated jargon or practice.

How do academic journals play their part in this professional structure? Most send unsolicited manuscripts to expert readers. Since most pay neither their contributors nor their expert readers, the process tests the citizenship commitments of the profession. As a rule colleagues willingly read and offer reports, sometimes quite detailed, on the manuscripts sent them. In almost all cases, boundary 2 solicits at least two or three expert reports and presents them, the manuscript, and any correspondence with the author to an editorial collective that makes some decisions by Internet but most at meetings.

Unlike a journal specializing in Mark Twain studies, for example, boundary 2 and other journals that
publish across diverse areas face an interesting question: Who are the experts? Would an expert be a traditional scholar in, for example, Du Bois studies or, better, a historian knowledgeable about nineteenth-century German intellectual formations? Such journals form fields as they go forward, the more so as they hold to certain ideological or methodological sets of arrangements and positions. Those arrangements might be political or simply professionally avant-gardist. If avant-gardist, journals fill their pages with articles of the most recently important kind. Their aim is not only innovation (and perhaps controversy) but also the certification and commodification of a newly established line, one probably coming belatedly into English studies. A typical example of this is the effects structuralist anthropology had on literature departments, preparing the way for other consequences from newer imported philosophical and poststructuralist approaches.

When young scholars, especially, submit to journals, they need to have read them carefully to know how the scholars’ way of writing fits the writing published recently in the journals. For boundary 2, readers can track a movement from hermeneutics and phenomenology to postmodernism, theory, and then globalization, along lines that relate American to other literatures and cultures. Avant-garde journals cannot survive without moving along with, and as the guide of, the profession. Contributors must be up-to-date on the journals to which they submit and should present their work in relation to materials already in the journals.

Most editors of avant-garde journals want the names of recognized authors in their pages. It is also an important way to gain legitimacy or make clear one’s established authority. Editors are also talent scouts and must spot the young bright people who are doing emerging work and who have the best chance of developing fruitful directions.

The well-being of entire fields and disciplines requires that this system work, but it works well in only one way: shaping publication for career advancement, which is often a consequence of polemical struggle. While unfortunately university administrators and the modern natural science model have made publication the sole basis, too often, for promotion and tenure, it is equally important to realize that journal publication results from the professional obligation to advance a career. People too often promote themselves by placing less value on the object of study and more on how a novel argument allows career advancement. There must be an already well-established reading of the text under consideration, for in the new polemical essay the real object is to defeat the given authority. (See, for example, Homi Bhabha’s frequently cited and much taught essay on Orson Welles’s film Touch of Evil, which gains authority in an effort to displace Stephen Heath’s foundational essays on that film ("Film" and "Touch").) This practice is not a matter of filial ingratitude but of fratricide over spoils. Whatever is said about the putative object is secondary to the career aim of the essay. This gambit results not in new knowledge but in a new kid on the block and so a newly authorized way of talking, a concept repetition commodified for recognition. A new stance appears on the continuum of permitted talk.

This process creates commodity value for academic work instead of responding to social or intellectual needs. Repetitive cognition makes minimal demands on thinking. Programs become career paths; thinking becomes the instrument of the program and, as such, can be nothing more than mastery of an already legitimated position on the continuum of positions that form professional discourse or an effort to add an authorized position to the continuum.

Editorially, work in this environment becomes easy. Almost all essays for consideration present themselves, by jargon or direct statement, as committed to a recognizable line or practice. The development and outcome of the essay appear early in the prose. Mastery of the line might get it published. Weakness, if provocative enough, might do the same.

This general tendency is not, thankfully, the only one—even if it is the necessary and dominant one. New knowledge does get produced; the surprising turn does take place. Sometimes the well-known brand is well known and highly valued for very good reason. Some brands, as we know, promise quality to the consumer. Other brands promise mere utility or momentary pleasure or meet a temporary need. It is impossible to work entirely outside the structure I have characterized—especially since the avant-garde commitments of those who want to pursue peripheral tendencies bring the journal right back to the commodification process it has tried to escape.

Reflecting on this set of structures and problems in academic journal publishing suggests that people should be encouraged to publish less. Editors should stop putting forth innumerable variations on whatever the newest take or method might be. As promotion and tenure have become increasingly quantitative, as
careers have come to replace study as the object of work, as institutions pass on to others the obligation to make judgments, the number of journals has had to proliferate. The profession has adopted, and journal publication makes possible, what Joseph Schumpeter calls “creative destruction,” the basic operating principle of capitalism that “incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one” (82).

Journals should make intellectual judgments motivated by a love of thinking and discovery, the sort of thinking that can drive an editor to be daring. Edward Said usefully opposes the amateur to the professional (Representations 65–83). It only seems paradoxical that amateurs need to have careers. Amateurs can carry many professional marks: tenure, salary, influence. They did once: Kenneth Burke, R. P. Blackmur, even Edmund Wilson come to mind. Erich Auerbach’s works treat many subjects briefly, for Auerbach did not believe that acquiring technical expertise was a good way to acquire knowledge (Mimesis 556). Confining himself to his areas of expertise, he nonetheless practiced the most far-reaching amateurish thinking, which, as he said, came from a love of the world (“Philology” 17). (See Blackmur; Auerbach’s quotation of Hugo of St. Victor’s Didascalicon [“Philology” 11]; and Said’s use of this material [“Reflections” 185–86].)

While the proliferation of academic journals is an effect of the market, it is principally an effect of professionalization. Probably the number should be reduced, but number is not the problem. The problem is the willingness of academics to transform their practice into commodity. If we imagine that the university possesses some utopian possibility still, and if, as we know, there is remarkably good and original work done by academics, then it follows that hyper-commodification of academic intellectual life is and through its means of promotion and circulation need not go unchallenged. If thinking is to be valued in the amateur’s embrace, the variety and number of journals might stand for forming new communities and new lines of relation.

The ideal article would have the characteristics of the best editing. Since a journal can put forth only what writers have already produced, contributors need both to learn the negatives to be avoided and to invent the eccentric, loving, thinking alternative the current structures allow. It is too easy for editors to educate for publication. If editors hoping to dare must not lead, then they must not educate, and contributors must find ways to survive while refusing instruction. There is no formula for this maneuver. Certain minimal necessities exist: seriously acquired erudition far beyond narrow specialization; language freed of commonplaces that have become counters; suspicion of old knowledge and wariness of innovation; setting aside of polemical controversy in order to think through the problem; close attention to the object, closer than to any competing, already existing way of talking; and a vocational love for mind that dares and sometimes succeeds.

Ideals, of course, require survival. But survival does not depend on iteration and recognition. Editors must not sermonize or offer morals. The contributor must compel the editor to dare to put forth rather than to lead forth for education. Adams studied success to know how education for success took place; his studious refusal to become a success, once knowing how, is all the education he offered. Once he died to success, he put forth only anonymously and posthumously. There can be no example, merely predecessors whose exemplary value forms not a tradition but a promise that a hopeful mind must not bind itself to the safest and most familiar—even if agonistic—paths of thought. A necessary utopia demands that contributors know that grace affords possibilities to think in the limit between educating and editing.

Note

I want to thank my editorial colleagues, Ronald Judy and Daniel O’Hara, for talking with me about the topics in this essay. I could not have written it without their voices. I must also give credit to Meg Havran, the highly accomplished managing editor of boundary 2, who exemplifies the virtuous contradiction involved in improving someone else’s writing.

Works Cited


Crisis management examples are easy to find these days: We’ve seen Uber lose 200,000 users in the wake of #DeleteUber and United lose $800 million in value in just a few hours. That kind of response to brand crises is pretty remarkable, and it also says something about each brand’s crisis management strategies. Uber is a classic example of crisis management gone wrong. 2. Cracker Barrel. You never know what the internet is going to find and amplify, but for Cracker Barrel, it was Brad’s wife. Crisis management is the process by which an organization deals with any major unpredictable event that threatens to harm the organization, its stakeholders, or the general public. Three elements are common to most definitions of crisis: (a) a threat to the organization, (b) the element of surprise, and (c) a short decision time. Whereas risk management involves assessing potential threats and finding the best ways to avoid those threats, crisis management involves dealing with the disasters after The Separatist Crisis (24 BBY–22 BBY) was the period of tension that began a decade after the Invasion of Naboo, characterised by the secession of several thousand star systems from the Galactic Republic to form the Confederacy of Independent Systems, led by the charismatic ex-Jedi Master Count Dooku. The period was marked by growing violence between Separatist- and Republic-supporting factions, the displacement of many billions of refugees, and intense debate on the issue of restoring a centralized