The editor’s role in the digital revolution

Sean Kidney, of Social Change Online, spoke at the society’s April meeting about the changes—and opportunities—editors can expect as the Internet comes of age as a publishing medium.

When I first got involved in the Internet—about four years ago now—I spent the first months sorting through sites around the world late at night. I don’t spend much time doing that any more, but it got me thinking about the applications and future applications of the Internet.

The connection rate is doubling every year in the United States, Australia and European countries; in Australia it’s now in the order of 25 per cent, according to Australia Bureau of Statistics figures from late last year. This growth shows no sign of abating, and a range of technological developments in the coming year will make Internet access easier, leading to larger advertising campaigns to promote it. About 18 per cent of the population now has home access and those rates are climbing very rapidly, but they may level off as we get above 50 per cent.

I tend to see the Internet today as the late stages of a fairly major technological revolution which has been going on for 20 to 30 years. The Internet itself was first started in the late 1960s as a US Defence Department project but, to my mind, Citibank’s adoption of ATMs in New York in 1974 marked a more substantial beginning—the first mass application of digital technology and computers. Over the following 10 years, the finance industry began to be revolutionised by the use of digital language and computers. In the late 1970s, the New York interbank clearing house called CHIPS used to process about US$64 billion cash a day; the latest figure is US$1.3 trillion a day.

What’s driving the revolution?

There are three drivers to this revolution, which has also affected manufacturing and a number of other areas: developments in microchip technology, the continued on page 2
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lingu franca offered by digital language, and the trend towards connectivity—everything being wired together.

Smaller, cheaper
There is as much computing power in a Nintendo machine nowadays as there was in the old Apollo 13 spaceship. That’s the order of change. There are PCs on wristwatches in Japan. There is an Internet-connected PC in the side of a fridge in Japan, too. You just plug into the screen what food you put into the freezer and when, and it beeps an alarm two months later or whatever—a week before it’s overdue. If you want to use this particular piece of meat, you click a button which calls up appropriate recipes from the Internet. You are going to see a whole host of devices like this. According to a book called The Invisible Computer, the devices themselves are becoming relatively unimportant. We have an obsession with the computer as a box, whereas, in fact, computing technology is disappearing into hardware of all sorts. Eighty per cent of microchips are in household use already—and that percentage will actually go up.

There is a whole industry in Japan trying to invent applications for very very cheap microchips. Last month the US$399 PC came on sale. We will see very cheap devices here over the next couple of years.

Digital conversations
Binary is the lingua franca Esperanto never managed to be. Every sort of information is now convertible into digital language. Voice—that is, the telephone—is going digital. Pictures are digital. You may have heard that Bill Gates has bought up a large chunk of the world’s artworks to turn them into a digital library for sale at some vast cost to us in 10 years time.

The main point here is that the same data can be held or read by computers as by other sorts of electrical devices. In theory, a microwave could read digital data as well as a Cray supercomputer. The only difference is the power to process that data, and microchips have become so small and cheap that you will be able to build a super Cray into a microwave if you really want to.

Connectivity
The third big revolution is connectivity—everything being wired together. The start of this was the telephone system. That was the massive achievement of the 1920s—to wire all these countries together. Now, here in Australia we can look at moving pictures in New York via local area Internet sites. There are some particular aspects of connectivity on the Internet, though, that make the system particularly powerful.

One is a particular refinement of digital language called ‘IP protocol’, which is probably best understood as a way of addressing bits of data. A photograph, an email message, a piece of voice and a TV signal can all have a common addressing language. This is actually going to be as, or probably more, powerful than a common postal addressing system.

The way IP protocol is set up is uniquely designed to take advantage of the grid that connects wires around the world. We no longer have a spoke system. If I were to phone the United States, my signal could go via Japan and then across the Pacific or it could go directly to Los Angeles. With the Internet, my voice is no longer a single signal; it is actually broken up into a series of ‘packets’ of signals—like semaphore dots. There are pieces of code at the beginning and end, and a slice of information in the middle. This is called packet switching.

What is interesting about packet switching is that not all the packets go in a straight line. When I talk on an Internet phone, my local router in Sydney will decide, depending on the amount of traffic, to send one packet via Japan, one packet via Los Angeles and one packet via London. The first will arrive in New York and wait for the others to arrive at the speed of light; they will then reconnect and go to the person on the end of the phone or to the computer.

This means the system is extraordinarily robust. If a line goes down, or somebody breaks the cable across the Pacific, it actually doesn’t affect me as a user; I just get re-routed somewhere else. That is quite important in fuelling the growth of the Internet because a lot

Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.
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Membership
Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor for publication (print or electronic documents), and anyone who supports the society’s aims.

Membership runs for a calendar year. 1999 fees are $45 for new members ($25 if joining after 30 June) and $40 for renewals.

For a membership application form, phone (02) 9294 4999, or write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007.

Blue Pencil
The society’s newsletter, Blue Pencil, is published monthly, except for a combined January/February issue. Your comments and contributions are welcome. Mail them to Merry Pearson at 55 Collins St, North Narrabeen, NSW 2101, or fax or email them to her as per the contact details on the back page.

Deadline for the July issue is Monday 14 June.

Advertising rates:
Full page $90; Half page $50 (horizontal only); One-third page $35 (vertical or horizontal); Quarter page $25 (horizontal only); Sixth page $20 (half of one column). Inserts: $50 per hundred for DL-sized or A4 pre-folded to DL size. Circulation: approximately 275.

Committee meetings
All members are welcome to attend the society’s committee meetings. The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 8 June at 6 pm at the Graphic Arts Club, 12–26 Regent Street, Sydney. You are also welcome to join those committee members who stay on to enjoy a fine Chinese meal.
of its applications, like finance sector applications, require 100 per cent certain delivery.

**Coming together**

So the three things are coming together on the Internet—cheaper and smaller microchips, the common digital language and connectivity—and suddenly we have a massive boom in traffic.

All sorts of information sources can now be accessed using the same device. Via the PC, I can connect to the Library of Congress, or to the Environmental Protection Authorities’ detailed databases. I can connect to a large well of information, stored in a whole lot of separate computers that act like one computer—a whole lot of transistors stored in a box, except that the ‘box’ is the globe with many different windows opening into it.

Those windows transcend the computers, and now the front of a microwave or a fridge, one of those little palm pilot machines or a high-end mobile phone are all merely windows into the same pool of information. In a couple of years, you will see a dozen different kinds of devices, starting at $25 each, that allow people to connect to the Internet. This is important in terms of understanding the explosion of publishing we are about to see on the Internet—which is significant for you in your work as editors.

**Implications for society**

What does the Internet mean for us? According to the Secretary General of the OECD, Donald Johnston:

‘Our generation stands on the very cusp of the greatest technological revolution that mankind has ever faced. Some compare this age of electronic communication with the arrival of Gutenberg’s Press, or the Industrial Revolution. Yet this revolution, when it has run its course, may have greater impact on the planet than anything that has preceded it. No part of human enterprise will have been spared. Even our notions of sovereignty and governments could be profoundly affected.’

That’s the OECD—not a particularly radical body.

**Impacts: small and large**

What are some of the impacts that illustrate what Johnston is talking about?

**Small stuff:** baby pictures on the web. My dad in New Zealand can see photos of my children. Sure, I can send them by mail, but I never get around to it. The easier it becomes to publish on the web, the more I will use the web as a faster technology. Kodak predicts that 50 per cent of photography will be digital in a couple of years.

**Alternative news:** It is very difficult to control the Internet because it is essentially a telephone call. This means alternative news channels or alternative histories become possible in a way only dreamed of by the radicals of the 1960s.

For example, a US-based Internet site designed for overseas Chinese people from Hunan province on the coast of China broke the story of the rapes of Chinese people in Jakarta during Suharto’s departure last year. The site is a well done newspaper-type of site full of first-hand accounts, and it was actually very important in influencing the Indonesian government to start an inquiry into what happened in those riots and the inaction of the troops involved. The Internet presents an alternative history—another option to understanding what went on.

Another impact is the death of distance. In a book called *The Death of Distance*, Francis Caimerson, a former editor of the *Economist*, talks about global markets and services—call centres in Fiji, home loans from Japan, software development at Bangalore, India, and so on.

And massive movement of capital. Which is leading finally to tentative calls by the G7 for regulation for governments on a worldwide scale. It will force us as nations to consider global governance.

We have already had global economic governments in the form of multinationals for 20 years. Moving money between different countries is very easy. Rupert Murdoch makes all his profits in Bermuda; he makes virtually no profit in the United Kingdom.

The thing about the Internet, however, is that it no longer means only rich people can do this—which is essentially what occurred to the G7 in the last year or so. I think it will take 15 to 20 years before global governance starts happening, but my prediction is that in 20 years we won’t see the United States going into Grenada merely to win an election for Ronald Reagan in 1984. We will see the United States going into Grenada or to the Cayman Islands to enforce a universal tax regime because too many funds are disappearing out of the USA into a tax black hole.

**New communities are also emerging**. I have been rafting in Russia recently. I found a web site with a story about people who had taken a half-day train trip from Moscow—I had no idea Russia was so wild so close to Moscow—and went rafting. I have to say I feel much closer to the Russians as a result.

These different ways of creating communities have quite important impacts. Governance and institutionalism will change. We will get a rise in civil society. The increased access to information and ability to organise offered by the Internet will also mean a greater ability to challenge the power of major institutions, whether they are parties, dictatorships or simply banks. New forms of community will emerge—electronic tribalism, alternative institutions, small-scale financial institutions. Local governments in NSW are banding together to form a bank at the moment.

**Dangers**

Access by the poor is a problem. The world’s economy will be remade. There will be costless international trade for those who have access to the international trade mechanisms; for those who don’t, it will be more expensive and harder to get into the game. For those with education, the world will be your oyster; for those without, it will become harder to break into things.

**Privacy** is a real problem. The head of Sun Computers in the United States was quoted as saying, ‘Hey, forget about privacy; you don’t have any anyway. Just get used to it.’ I read an article on the Internet about a journalist who had done a search in New York on a friend. He just used all the various searching devices and was able to find, without any trouble, name, address, kids’ names, salary, recent purchases and credit cards—a bit unnerving, in my view.

**Power and responsibility** are big issues here. We already have, I believe, two forms of justice system in this country—the formal legal justice system and the media justice system—and the latter is often more powerful in terms of its ability to impact on the lives of individuals. Tom Mollomby argued recently on ABC Radio’s Law Report that the people who suffer most from defamation, and so should be getting the highest payouts, are people with no power—

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people not used to the ways of the world, who get picked on by A Current Affair or a politician, and whose lives turn into uproar in their neighbourhoods because they are accused of being a paedophile or whatever—unjustly, or possibly justly, but not proven. This kind of defamation will happen more on the web because gossip is more dangerous and more pervasive there.

We will see bombs. It is easy to find information on the web about how to build bombs. We will see extraordinary pornography; it will not be stopped by the will of Harradine in Canberra. We will also see dangers from the erosion of national power with global governance.

Implications for publishers and editors
Characteristics of the medium
The Internet is a very demanding medium. It is extraordinary how quickly you can leave a site. If you get bored with the Sydney Morning Herald site, one click and you’re gone, off to the New York Times or somewhere else. That makes it very hard for the headline writers, who don’t have the luxury of thinking people will at least flick through their newspaper to look for another headline before they go.

Another curious aspect about the Internet is that most people use it in a safe space—in a cubicle at work, or at home, or somewhere they feel comfortable—which is quite an empowering thing. If you are in a bank talking to a teller, you tend to be polite and perhaps subservient because the teller has got your money. But when you are on the Internet, you can be a bit more aggressive and assertive. That leads to some distinctly different interactions. It means that as a web publisher you need to be conscious that people will be very short with you if you don’t deliver what they want. They will get irritated and piss off fast.

They will also experiment, though. One of the tricks about building web sites is to give people something to play with, because people do things they don’t otherwise bother doing, especially if they can use a mouse and click away. So we put things like supernannuation calculators or games in the sites that we build. It’s a rich ‘relationship’ medium. It’s probably closer to database marketing—but better than database marketing—than it is to publishing of books and magazines. It is probably closer to being a booksop than a publishing device. If you are on a web site, being able to ask questions and to interact are very important.

The state of the software used to publish on the Internet also has an effect on the characteristics of the medium. Remember the early days of the desktop publishing revolution, with all those awfully designed leaflets and books that appeared because everyone had a PC and MacPaint or PageMaker?

The same thing is about to happen to the Internet. At the moment, the software is still a bit hard to use, but it is about to become modular and easy to use, which means we will see a massive explosion of relatively amateurish use of it. It also means, though, that if you have content skills you won’t need the technical skills as much because it will be easier to actually publish things without knowing geek code. It is becoming ‘plug-and-play’, as they call it in the industry.

Types of publishing
The web will allow an explosion of niche publishing. One of my clients, the Environment Protection Authority, is realising that publications it used to produce with print runs of only 20 copies can now be made available on the web. Before, there was a real barrier to even knowing such publications existed.

We’ve also been involved with setting up an Internet-only newspaper for the Labor Council, called Workers Online. They’d been talking about doing print newspapers for years and couldn’t because it cost too much. But now there it is, with a new edition out every Friday. Niche publishing will become quite important.

There is an academic-style journal called First Monday about the Internet. Every three months it publishes a new edition of very interesting, long web articles.

In terms of its relationship to print publishing, most publishers are currently taking a tease approach to putting text online; they are making snippets available, like a chapter out of the latest thriller, hoping you will buy the book.

One company, National Academy Press in the United States, has published full text—every one of its 1700 titles—and reports that sales went up 17 per cent the first year as a result. People had been able to read a chapter, check out what they really wanted, and then buy the book online.

When Fairfax went online, they started publishing their Internet editions after the print version to avoid losing out on sales. But people got irritated. I certainly got irritated. I don’t see it as direct competition. I still get the Financial Review to read over breakfast, but every so often I want to get a headline, so I look at the Internet version. I suppose there is a chance the Internet will eat into sales of print copies; we don’t know. There is also a chance, like with movies and videos, that it might boost sales.

For publishers, online sales will become important. Amazon, Borders, Barnes and Noble—the big multi-nationals—are becoming much bigger as a result of establishing brand names. That makes it imperative for small publishers like Pluto Press to have a distributor in the United States because Amazon and co. only accept locally available books. Pluto sells a few books, not a lot, from its own web site.

In Pluto’s case, email marketing has been very useful for specialist titles in particular. We published a book called Over Our Dead Bodies about the gun control campaign in Australia. It sold well in the United States using email marketing—through academic news groups and so on. Basically, someone

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www.labor.net.au/workers
www.firstmonday.dk
www.conferences.sociachange.net.au/openaustralia
www.reachout.asn.au
writes a review and posts out to a whole pile of friends or to an email group.

Multimedia ‘books’ will become possible, too—a mixture of pictures and text and so on—particularly for young people.

You are also going to get crossover publishing, involving different kinds of web usage. We published a book called Open Australia by Lindsay Tanner which was briefly on the best-seller list in March, and we also created a conferencing web site, with the address on the back of the book. People can log onto this site to read comments by other readers and follow the debates. It has been enormously powerful—I have to say, I get invigorated and deeply informed by the debate on the web site. We will see a lot more of that sort of thing, I think: it’s like being able to talk to the author by email or by chat. In fact, in the United States on America Online it’s quite common nowadays for authors to come onto the chat lines. They still have book signings in stores, but they also have two-hour online chat sessions and answer questions.

Did you do the Open Australia web site to increase sales of the book?

Lindsay Tanner was interested in fostering ongoing debate and using the Internet in this way, so he wanted to do it anyway. As publishers, we did it because we were interested in increasing the debate. Hopefully it will sell books too, but I doubt if it is going to be a major issue. I do think it extends the life of a book, though.

Working online

Collaborative work on the web is very easy. A neighbour of mine is an indexer and for the past four years all her clients have been in the United Kingdom. They just send her manuscripts, and she indexes them and sends them back with the bill.

People around the world can work on a publication. The ‘revision’ feature in wordprocessing software is quite useful for this. If you have a group of authors—one in Melbourne and another in London or wherever—they can see what you have changed when you send the document around. Simple tools like that are very important.

More useful tools are coming your way. There are device-independent writing machines, for example—bits of software which will work on your PC or your mobile phone or on a little tablet. I have a friend, Les Robinson, who wrote and illustrated the Illustrated Guide to the Flora of the Sydney Region in the 1980s. He laboriously wandered the countryside, drawing things and then scanning them. Now he can carry a little PDA into the bush with him and work as he goes. He could probably take a digital picture of the plant and use a bit of software to convert it into a baseline drawing. These productivity tools make it easier to do things will lead to an explosion of web publishing.

Simple word processing will be provided free online with ‘net TV’ and ‘web TV’ services, which are coming with digital broadcasting next year. You won’t have all the fantastic add-on features of programs such as Word, but you get all the basics. It’s a bit cheaper, a bit easier, and it doesn’t take up as much memory as Word does.

Those sorts of things will be useful for writers and editors because they will make the craft even more portable. I email myself documents if I am travelling around the country, for example. I find it less dangerous than trusting floppy disks, which corrupt all the time.

Roles for editors

The more significant thing about a publishing revolution, though, is that while we will see a lot more information created—a lot of it crap—we will also see a lot more information being digested. People will be thirsty for help in navigating through the information. They will be thirsty for interpreters; they will be thirsty for explainers and demystifiers.

These are traditional roles of editors and certain sorts of writers. I see an explosion of work in that area, and it is work that won’t need to be based particularly on technological skills. A report by Forrester Research, one of the major research companies for Internet industries, forecasts that there will actually be a drop in Internet site labour costs over the next five years. This is because ‘techies’ will become less important as publishing tools become off-the-shelf plug-and-play products, and sites will rely more on editors—and, of course, we all know editors get paid less than IT people.

So you can expect to see a very significant increase in demand for writing and editing skills for the web over the next 10 years. All sorts of people who are currently publishing terrible stuff are realising they can no longer afford to do that if they actually want people to read it. A vast number of corporate web sites, for example, are just as boring as a poor-quality annual report, and the companies are now realising that people have stopped looking at these sites. They can tell straight away from the number of hits. They can also tell when someone only stays in a site for two minutes instead of 10. That’s a pretty scary statistic if you’re a web site manager. You have to wait for sales figures from bookshops to come in to evaluate the success of printed products. But on the web, evaluation is suddenly a live tool.

Tools that track people’s usage are becoming more and more refined. You can evaluate by the amount of time people spend on a page, and you can evaluate by the way people go through a site.

For example, we developed a site called Reach Out—a youth suicide prevention site. It is anonymous for obvious reasons but, nevertheless, when someone logs on, it keeps a record of their movement through the site. We can then develop profiles of where people tend to go on the site. We have learnt, for instance, that nearly everyone looks at the help page first, so we know we need to give more prominence to the help information on the home page.

Future scenarios

For people interested in the web, I think the scenario is optimistic. Like any kind of major upheaval and change, the web creates opportunities, but also losses. We will see some losses of print media as a result.

The comment I would like to leave you with is the one about dangers, because in any economic or social or political revolution there is obviously a danger that it can go the wrong way for a while and lead to undue suffering. I think this is a revolution where there is enormous scope for individuals to have an impact, because there is scope for people to actually have their say—scope to be informed. News usually disappears in revolutions, but here it doesn’t.

One of my hopes for the Internet is that it will become a facilitator of citizen activity, and lead to a different kind of democracy. I think this is quite important for us if we are to make sure we don’t increase social division, continued on page 6
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especially in the next 10 years or so while the revolution slowly catches up with the rest of the world. We need to work together, not just nationally, but also globally, to help craft the future of this particular revolution.

There is a lot of concern about cultural identity when it comes to those issues of technology. For example, France has various committees designed to ensure that the French language isn’t undermined by the Internet. So how do we get the benefits of this universality without creating a bland hegemony of one culture?

I think we will see an acceleration of what has happened over the last 20 to 50 years. We will see Disney being bigger and better than ever. We will see Time magazine being more dominant than ever and in some concentrated form. But we will see something happening at the bottom too. I think we will see a very significant growth in niche publishing and niche communication—like OkalahomaScots.org, like various Basque country sites. So, in a sense, if maintenance of a culture is to do with the ability to be able to communicate within that culture, this is potentially a very powerful medium.

It is not necessarily merely a homogenising medium, just the medium people use to form communities—some local communities, some pan-global communities. I have an anthropologist friend, for example, who is an expert on the Malay people of southern Thailand. There are eight other people in the world who are similar experts. They rarely meet, but they all communicate very regularly through emails. They’ve got a community going.

That can happen in a variety of areas, but, obviously, this is all subject to people having access.

What about people who have an oral cultural experience, not one of reading? Do you know whether Australian Aboriginal people use the Internet in order to read towards their own cultural identity?

Access rates aren’t very good in the Central Desert, I would have to say, but there are quite a few Aboriginal web sites around. There are a few people doing interesting work, like Jason Woomberra at the Redfern Legal Centre. As with any community, if there are people who have access to the schools and access to the web, I think you will see people publishing in a way that they haven’t been able to publish in the past.

Financial disparity is a growing problem. Knowledge is power, and the information-poor have economic barriers to getting logged on, and probably social and experiential barriers as well. This augurs ill for a solution to economic disparity.

Well, hopefully this will just be for the short term, not the long term. If you can read, the next hardest thing is access to stuff to read. If you can’t read, it’s tougher. I don’t see any alternative but to try to address the massive global literacy problems.

Every aid agency will now tell you that the most important evolution in any kind of developing country is basic education. That is still absolutely required. However, literacy levels have gone up dramatically in the world in the last 30 years, partly because of a lot of aid programs.

If you can read, the next barrier to knowledge is access to information, access to stuff to read, like a library. Think about what a revolution community libraries have been in our culture. The promise of the web, of course, is of a global library.

We then have to ask: is there some way of delivering this global library to people in places that have community libraries? Well, there are a couple of technological answers which will provide solutions in the 20- to 30-year timeframe. Satellite consortiums are going up around the globe at the moment. Iridium is public, advertised already in the Financial Review and Good Weekend. My view is that the way some of those consortiums will make their money is by doing deals with national telecom systems to carry traffic locally and internationally.

This will mean that the creation of a telecom infrastructure in countries not currently connected at all, or very little at the moment, will suddenly become a lot cheaper, financed by New York capital and paid for over 40 years by quite cheap connection charges. Moving data around the world is very very cheap now.

In Lebanon, for example, the local landline phone system is not very reliable, so many people carry a mobile phone, or two mobile phones, from what I’ve been told—one for local connection, and one for New York connection. They get a New York telephone number and connect up via satellite. It’s reliable, unlike the local system, and although it costs a bit more, it’s not so expensive that a whole lot of ordinary people can’t do it in Lebanon.

Telecom charges are continuing to plummet for a variety of reasons, which means the option to connect in third-world countries is there and will be there in the future. So we will see quite a rapid logging on to the world grid from third world countries over the next 20 to 30 years.

When that happens, assuming we are able to keep working on basic literacy, then I think we will see large-scale logging on in the Third World, and economic benefits from the web in 40 to 50 years. The industrial revolution had this sort of impact over a 200-year timeframe. What we’re talking about is a massive compression of the catch-up wave. But, in the meantime, disparities will probably increase further.

New members
A warm welcome to the following, who have joined the society since mid-March:

- Victoria Cleal
- David Douglas
- Sarah-Jane Greenaway
- Julie Harders
- Valerie Haye
- Felicity James
- Clare Key
- Susan Lewis
- Jo MacKay
- Margaret Olds
- Ryan Tracy
- Jo Wall
- Carolyn Williams
- Phillipa Yelland

Blue Pencil, June 1999
COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

The 1999 committee met for the third time on Tuesday 11 May 1999.

Standards and accreditation issues
(Working group: Rhona Pike, Cathy Gray, Jo Healy-North, Bruce Howarth, Margaret Olds)

The NSW group is commenting on revised drafts of sections that have been received from the other societies: Copy editing (Canberra), Proofreading (WA), Knowledge of the Publishing Process (Queensland) and Management and Communication (SA). Each group will comment on the whole and a revised draft will then be compiled for discussion by the general membership in each state in July or August, followed by a meeting of the full national working group in September.

Register of Editorial Services
The 1999 edition is now at the printer. A searchable electronic version is currently available on disk or on the society’s Web site at www.users.bigpond.com/socednsw/esd

Training
(Working group: John Fleming, Terry Johnston, Cathy Gray, Rhona Pike)

The structural editing workshop held on 15 and 22 May was well received by participants. Grammar for Editors is being organised by convenor Terry Johnston for Saturday 24 July, and other workshops will be confirmed once the membership survey results have been analysed.

Other matters
- Jo Healy-North is proceeding with production of a publication based on the ‘Successful Freelancing’ seminars held in 1995 and 1998.
- Policies and procedures covering training activities have been added to the society’s corporate memory’ folder.

If you’d like to contribute in any of these areas, contact one of the committee members involved (see list page 8).

Membership survey
Thanks to all of you who responded to our 1999 membership survey, enclosed with last issue of Blue Pencil. There’s still time if you haven’t sent your form back. It won’t take you long to fill out but is an invaluable help to the committee in monitoring your satisfaction with the society and giving you the kind of services you want.

Tabula rasa, or out of limbo

This article is reprinted, with permission, from the April 1999 issue of Book Worm, the newsletter of the Society of Editors (WA).

An editor’s life is a limbo-like existence. We wander about, pondering the fate of the apostrophe, the whereabouts of the colon, the raison d’ètre of the subjunctive mood.

And then there are the questions. Acquaintances and those recently introduced at parties ask, ‘Really? What does an editor do?’ when told of your shadowy existence.

Others mumble, ‘How interesting,’ and move on to those with more physical pursuits. Little do they know how hot and sweaty, how agitating, how absolutely energy-sapping our profession is. Little do they know how strenuous are our efforts, how rigorous our gymnastics (never mind that they are mental).

We wonder ourselves whether we are a dying race, like farriers or milliners. But we do not wonder long, because there’s work to do. A return to literacy of the masses is on the cards. Well, on the screens and monitors. then. The Internet is bringing about a return to writing. Never before have so many written so much to, and for, so many others. Yes, the content may be pathetically mundane, the spelling awful, the syntax non-existent, but it is written. A desire to communicate other than by grunts and hand-signals has once again taken the world by storm. Or by Gates, but many would disagree with that.

So editors everywhere are looking up. They are sharpening their blue pencils with gusto. Elizabeth Jolley may exclaim here, and say they would probably use a sharpener, but the message comes across. Editors are pulling up their socks, clearing their desks to accommodate the new wave of work that will assault them, the work created by this immense new return to writing by the general populace.

The general populace, on the other hand, is of course unaware that their exploits and shenanigans on the Net have caused such excitement among those to whom the placement of an adverbial phrase or a preposition is of the essence. Having in the main never even heard of such things, they tap out their messages and create their web sites with little fear of doing the wrong thing.

‘Hey, Kev,’ says one bespectacled insect-like nerd to another, ‘this writing is not as hard as it’s cracked up to be, y’know.’

‘Nuh?’ responds Kev, temporarily deaf, having removed his spectacles to rub them on his mouse pad.

‘No. It’s a bit like HTML, only uh . . . naked.’

‘Naked? Lemme see,’ says Kev, pushing his colleague away.

And so it goes. The discovery of writing as a prerequisite to playing, exploring, browsing, surfing and so forth is almost a shocking surprise to those who even bother to muse about it a little. That it is a prerequisite for communication is even being hailed by some others as positively earth-shattering.

No, don’t think in terms of reinventing the wheel. Metaphors of such ilk should be left to those who will be rediscovering them via each others’ writing. And those of us who have read it all before will be reading it all again. And marking it up.

Rosanne Dingli
**Grammar for editors workshop**

The society's popular (and useful!) day-long grammar for editors workshop, presented by Robert Veel (BA, DipEd, MEd), is set for Saturday 24 July. Robert is an editor and language education consultant who coordinates and teaches in the professional development program run by the University of Sydney's Centre for Continuing Education.

Use the enclosed form to book by Friday 16 July. For more information contact the convenor, Terry Johnston (phone/fax 9337 4126; mobile 0413 801 948; email: terry.johnston@tafensw.edu.au).

**Galley Club meetings**

Alison Aphrys, director of Bookstaff, human resource consultants to the publishing industry, will speak at a Galley Club training seminar on Wednesday 16 June about career opportunities in book publishing. Besides hiring staff for all publishing-related positions, Bookstaff ran the inaugural Booktrade Salary Survey in 1998. This study provides a benchmark of the financial and other benefits people get from working with books.

Location and cost to be advised. For information, contact Anders Hagberg (phone 0414 851 437). RSVP to Hari Ho (fax 9878 8122 or email hari.ho@gbptib.com.au).

Future meetings include the Galley Club Awards ball on 23 July and the AGM on 18 August.

**APA seminars**

The Australian Publishers Association is presenting a twilight seminar—Design update: What's hot, what's not—from 6 to 8:30 p.m. on 8 June at a venue to be announced. Top designers will discuss the latest in design, how they create their concepts and how to take designs to film easily and successfully. For information and registration, contact Midge McCall (phone 9281 9788; fax 9281 1073).

**ASTC meeting**

At the next meeting of the Australian Society for Technical Communication, Allan Charlton will answer all your questions about the bewildering array of graphic formats. He'll help you figure out which format is the most appropriate for your task; when to use a JPG rather than a BMP; why a GIF might be better than a TIF; why your graphics application won't recognise your WMF; and why some formats get mangled in Postscript. Cost $15 for ASTC members who book and $20 for non-members and ASTC members who do not book. Location to be advised. For information, email ASTC@bigpond.com or contact Bruce White (phone 9955 0344; email white@msn.com.au).