GLOBAL EDITING COMMUNITIES— ARE THEY THE WAY OF THE FUTURE?

By Valerie Mobley AE, Society of Editors SA
email: val.mobley@gmail.com

The communication revolution is affecting us as editors in ways both expected and unexpected. In particular, we can see radical change in the ways that we obtain our work, carry out our work, consult about our work and deliver our work. The internet has given us email and other instant communication applications; it has also seen the advent of websites that can be designed to handle complex business and commercial applications. In terms of software we have Microsoft Word, which has evolved into a now highly efficient word processing tool within the Office suite of software applications. MS Word is certainly a sophisticated word processing tool—but it is perhaps its Tracked Changes feature that is currently responsible for a paradigm shift in the work of editors. The features of Tracked Changes, when exploited appropriately, offer a supremely effective way for editors to mark up texts in a way that can be clearly followed by the client. By carefully reviewing suggested changes, the client can retain a level of authorial control and also learn how to improve their own writing. The application also, through its comments feature, enables easy two-way communication with clients about issues in their writing and can support a consultation process between multiple editors or writers where appropriate. Many editors now routinely perform all of their work electronically via MS Word because it is such a powerful and efficient tool.

The internet has given us a wealth of online reference aids to supplement the *Style manual*, dictionaries and other paper-based tools. Unfamiliar words and phrases can be 'googled' and search results, carefully evaluated, can be a reliable guide to their accuracy and correct usage in context. This has, in effect, opened up the possibility of editing materials in science, technology and medicine to editors with non-scientific backgrounds by providing access to a virtual library of scientific reference aids: but that, perhaps, is a topic for another paper.

The business world is also going through revolutionary changes as e-commerce has become an established way of performing economic transactions. The internet can now be used to advertise businesses and sell services as well as products. Websites can incorporate sophisticated commercial tools that provide customer accounts, quotation for jobs, account payment, tracking of orders, as well as enabling web content creation targeted to draw in a specific audience. Some freelance editors have set up their own websites to advertise their services. Importantly, some are beginning to realise that editing services do not have to be confined to the local area, state, region or even nation. Editors are actually in a fine position to take advantage of global markets, as in the online world, where communication happens in a blink, clients can be based anywhere, as can editors.

Online editing services are also becoming a popular choice for clients who are looking for swift and trouble-free editing for their paper, thesis, website or personal document. Some freelance editors are also discovering advantages to working for an international service that sources work for you, liaises with clients and provides reliable, timely payment for work done. Some of these services have demonstrated that a website can be developed as a suitable business model that can provide a complete service for editors and clients wherever in the world they may be situated.

Every online editing service is different. Some target specific groups, such as secondary or tertiary students; some look for a niche market by catering for a specific area, such as technical writing or

self-publishers. Some attempt to match clients with editors on the basis of subject expertise; others make no attempt to do this. Some services are very large, employing 200+ editors and turning over dozens of jobs daily. These larger services are able to offer very fast service to clients (typically 24 or 48 hours, and 8 hours is possible). Other services may be offered by a sole trader who develops a website to promote a freelance editing service.

What is becoming clear is that the requirements of ESL writers are driving the growth of online editing services; that these services tend to be based in English-speaking countries (US, Canada, UK and Australia predominantly) and that they are exploiting the burgeoning market in ESL editing work, particularly from clients in Asian countries, such as China, Japan, India and Korea. Asian academics from all faculties (but especially technical, scientific and medical areas) are benefiting from generous research funding in their own countries and consequently are under considerable pressure to publish their research results in English. Many of them have their papers translated into English and then submit them to journals. The papers come back with reviewers' comments that the paper needs to be edited by a native English speaker. The paper may not only contain grammatical errors (generally tense, articles and prepositions) but may also be characterised by awkward syntactical constructions that make the paper hard to read and clearly reveal it to have been written by a non-English language speaker. In their own countries there will always be a shortage of native English speaking editors; so, for these academics, an online service where they can get their paper edited quickly and economically by such an editor is simply a godsend.

An online web-based service, operating from the host country (let us say, the US), can manage the entire editing transaction via a customised website using steps similar to those described below.

First, Client A goes to the website and selects an appropriate category for the work to be done (let us say ESL academic editing). The client requests an instant quote for the work based on word count and required delivery time frame. On accepting the quote they then upload the work to the website together with payment and any notes or special instructions for the editor.

An editor (B) logs in to the website and is taken to an administration section where he/she can browse the current jobs available for editing. Each job as it is received is posted to a noticeboard with information about the relevant fee and requested delivery time. Let us say Editor B downloads and peruses the work just posted by Client A. Editor B decides to take the job, so accepts it and saves a copy to his own computer. (Once accepted, the job disappears from the noticeboard, so it can be taken by only one editor.) Editor B reads the deliverables for the work category concerned and also notes any special instructions from Client A. Editor B then turns on Tracked Changes and works on the document, using the comments feature to put questions, note problematic text, or provide explanations to the client.

On completion, Editor B will return the work by uploading the edited file back to the website together with some notes for the client summarising or explaining the work done.

Client A receives an email message advising that his job is finished. He/she returns to the website and logs in to retrieve the edited work. Client A is encouraged to check all editing changes before accepting them. Although Editor B remains anonymous, the client can rate the editor's work and can also request the same editor for subsequent work by quoting the editor's unique ID number.

Editor B can see a log of his/her work for the service and the work just done is recorded for the current month. At the beginning of each month the service sends payment to the editor in US dollars via PayPal for all of the work done in the previous month.

Advantages for clients are that their editing can be done quickly and painlessly and also that they know upfront what fee they will pay. ESL clients know their work will be adjusted and polished by a native English-speaking editor. The downside is that with some services they cannot choose their editor and also their ability to communicate freely with the editor is to some extent curtailed compared with the traditional editor/client relationship.

Advantages for editors are: (i) freedom from the hassles of sourcing, quoting and billing for their freelance work; (ii) variety of work. Editors can select work according to their interests or choose to try editing across many disciplines to build up their experience and confidence. (iii) flexibility to work as much or as little as you like, and whenever or wherever you like. The main disadvantage for editors is that unquestionably pay is low and can fluctuate with the strength of the Australian dollar. Business success of a large online service depends on volume of work flowing in. In order to keep volume high, rates charged to clients are low (at least by our first world standards) and of course editors only receive a proportion of the fee charged to the client.

There are other controversial issues. Some editors may feel uncomfortable about working anonymously, with little or no direct contact with clients. Some may have ethical reservations about taking certain types of work, such as student term papers or even theses. Seeing their work well edited might have some educational benefit for the client, but it is perhaps too easy for the client to accept all changes without using the edited version as an opportunity to improve their own writing. If there is a choice, many editors will prefer to avoid this type of work.

Some editors may perceive a degree of exploitation with the fees paid for online work, especially if they translate them to an hourly rate; they may believe that by accepting a lower rate of pay for online editing commissions they are somehow undermining a local fee structure that gives editors a fair recompense for their professional work. However, there is an argument that most of the online work is coming from an overseas market that would not otherwise be available to Australian editors. It is not, therefore, in direct alignment with local work coming from Australian private, government or corporate clients, and perhaps should be viewed as belonging to an alternative economic 'basket'. There is also an argument that, by assisting ESL academics to publish in English, editors are contributing to the creation and sharing of new knowledge world-wide.

There is another problematic area for editors: most remote clients ordering online work need their work to conform to American English usage. For Australian editors this can present a hurdle, as there are many variations to be learnt. As well as the obvious spelling variations, there are some subtle differences in punctuation that can trip up an unwary editor. For example, US style requires the serial comma, abbreviations e.g. and i.e. take a comma after them and of course, double quotes (single quotes within quotes) are used rather than the British/Australian single quotes. Be aware also that 'minimum capitalisation' is not as prevalent in American usage and 'headline style' is often preferred for headings and sub-headings. The *Chicago Manual of Style* can be accessed online for a subscription of US$30 annually, and this is a very useful investment if you are planning to work for an international editing service.

Online editing services seem to have a high turnover of editors, a fact that suggests that many editors try this for a while, when other work is scarce, or to gain needed experience, but phase it out when they obtain better paying commissions. It is certainly a great way for a beginning editor to gain experience and confidence and could even be regarded as a type of apprenticeship. One can quickly build up an impressive bank of experience through online editing that would take many years to acquire in the traditional way. From a business point of view, online services seem to be going from strength to strength, as there appears to be no shortage of work and no shortage of editors willing to give it a try. It will be interesting to see whether in the future global online editing will become an established and sufficiently respected commercial and professional opportunity for Australian editors.