

Future Shock: Editing for "Ad-hocracy"

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FUTURE STRUCTURE of organizations in government, education, and business will be characterized—if not already—by many task forces, project teams, interdisciplinary groups, multidisciplinary teams, multifunctional projects, and other impressively named, committee-like groups.

The name that Alvin Toffler gives to this development in *Future Shock* is "ad-hocracy." He sees this situation developing concurrently with the decline of bureaucracy, and instead of man "being trapped in some unchanging, personality-smashing niche, he will find himself liberated, a stranger in a new free-born world of kinetic organizations."

Most of us will say "yea" to the decline of bureaucracy, for it implies a promise of less red tape. But can we say "yea" to the rise of the committee and similar groups? Will this change mean all future publications issued by organizations will read as if they had been written by a committee?

Anyone who has tried to edit a task force report may wonder about the merits of the new trend. To illustrate, consider the following situation.

You are asked to edit a 300-page task force manuscript. Marginal notations indicate someone has noticed a few grammatical errors, careless misspellings, vague statements, and inconsistencies. Your supervisor emphasized that the manuscript should have been published a week ago to meet a deadline for submission to higher authority (such as Congress).

You promise to give the manuscript immediate attention. You

breeze through it for an hour or so to get a sense of the subject and the types of editing problems involved.

You note in an introductory section that it was written by a task force of 12 individuals. These 12 received guidance from a steering committee of three top-ranking officials.

As you read through the report, you mark for later analysis many statements that are vague, inconsistent, or irrelevant. These have, to mention a few, understandable causes:

1. Vague because the task force members sought harmony rather than clarity.

2. Inconsistent because of unresolved differences among task force members.

3. Irrelevant because each member has his own objectives to pursue as well as those of the task force.

You realize that you'll have to consult with the authors to improve the writing. However, there is no indication of who wrote what—only the names of a group of 12 who presumably wrote the report on a collective basis.

You learn from your supervisor that the task force has been disbanded. The members have returned home to their various offices throughout the country. Even if a member of the task force were nearby, he might not want to make any changes for fear other members or the steering committee would object.

You are left with three possible alternatives, all of which are likely to be *unsatisfactory*.

First, limit the editing to correcting grammar and spelling and explain to your supervisor that there is little time for anything else. He might not be satisfied, but perhaps he will be understanding—until the report is published and criticisms start flowing in. Even then he may blame the audience for lack of understanding rather than you and the authors for a poorly written report.

Second, organize a committee of editors drawn from other offices. Bring them to the central office for an urgent detail: editing and rewriting the task force report. Then, when the editors have completed their work, retype the manuscript copy so that the work of each editor cannot be identified (this is to protect them from the task force members). Finally, send the editors back to

their offices where they cannot be easily reached. This second alternative could, however, produce results as bad as those of the original task force.

Third, you completely rewrite and edit the report, but in doing so you are likely to subject yourself to the ire of the task force and you are assuming the responsibility of what is supposed to be a team effort.

This task force situation may seem to be an exaggeration from the “worst of worst possible worlds.” However, it illustrates several key points regarding editing:

1. Authors need to be clearly identified.
2. Editing traditionally is based on a one-to-one relationship.
3. Timing (when the editor is brought into the writing process) is a key element for successful editing.

Assuming these are valid observations, what can be done to promote well-written reports, even when they are written by a committee-like group?

One solution may be more obvious than feasible. That is, encourage author identification, preferably at the beginning of each section or chapter of the report. If it is not done there, mention the author names and the subjects on which they wrote in the preface or acknowledgement.

Identifying authors on all occasions serves several objectives.

1. *Gives credit where credit is due.* For scientists this is essential. Their professional status and future promotions depend on the quality and number of articles they have had published.

2. *Identifies people as information sources.* If we don't know who the experts are, how can we seek their advice?

3. *Forces accountability.* Anonymity is often the forerunner of mediocrity. No author wants to sign his name to a bad job, but he signs with pride that which is well written. If he doesn't know the difference, he will soon learn—if he signs his name to the work.

4. *Sets up the editor-author relationship.* The one-to-one relationship is traditional to the editing process, and in most cases serves to improve the quality of writing.

Regardless of the merits of individual authorship, the group process may make it impractical to give individual credit. The

modesty of participants during group discussions usually inhibits their desire for specific credit. Sometimes it is contended that credit for specific contributions in a team effort is not proper.

The latter argument may not be any more valid for a task force report than it is for the individually authored article. We know that by the time an individually authored report has been through an editor's office and reviewed by technical reviewers, it often contains many ideas not those of the original author. Yet, the original author is usually given primary credit.

Perhaps, if the truth be known, the greatest deterrent to giving credit to individual authors of committee reports (especially reports created by management-type task forces) is that the authors do not want credit.

If it is not practical to work with the authors individually, should we join them? That is, should the editor be made a member of the group? Usually not. Most of us have too little time to sit in on a lot of committee meetings and still fulfill obligations to other clientele.

Part-time membership on the task force could be a practical answer in many instances, but this may have some of the same pitfalls as full-time membership. The editor should ask himself these questions:

1. Will I be seen as an outsider threatening the group's cohesiveness?
2. Will my grade level or title (most likely lower than that of the committee members) serve as a barrier to frank and open discussion?
3. Will my comments be brushed aside because I am not a technical expert on the subject under deliberation?
4. Will I be "stepping on toes" if I criticize the writing during a meeting of task force members?

Adequate orientation of the task force can help avoid these pitfalls. If the editor is brought early into the process, he can explain to the group specifically what his role will be. He can also offer suggestions on how the group should proceed in writing the report. This can be reinforced by the chairman when the charter and objectives of the group are first discussed.

The editor can also organize his work in the same manner as does the task force. He can work on a one-to-one basis with authors or small sub-committees within the scope of specific assignments. He can work in conference with the members for those phases of the writing process that are done on a group basis. This calls for an understanding of the writing process, which for the purposes of this discussion can be described as a process involving five phases:

1. Defining the audience and determining the communication objective.
2. Collecting information.
3. Refining the information through selection for relevancy.
4. Organizing the information.
5. Phrasing for syntax, grammar, and spelling.

The uninformed person often associates editing only with the last phase of the process. Problems occurring in this phase are relatively easy to correct, and they frequently can be resolved without close consultation with the author.

Collecting information (phase 2) is largely a mechanical operation that need not involve the editor since it is not a phase during which writing problems often occur.

Group writing usually involves phases 1, 3, and 4. Whether a manuscript is written individually or by a group, writing problems that develop in these three phases usually must be resolved in consultation with the author—an easy arrangement when there is an identified available author with whom you can discuss the manuscript on a one-to-one basis.

In group writing, an editor should participate with the task force when these three phases (1, 3 and 4) of the process occur. If an editor is not available to participate, a member of the group should at least serve as an editor-functionary. Unlike when working with an individual author, it usually is impractical to reconvene a task force just to review those phases of the work where basic writing problems have developed.

It is worth mentioning too that one objective of any task force is to write an effective report, but this is seldom given thorough consideration.

Editor participation at the onset of committee deliberations could help to assure that there will be commitment to the objective of "writing an effective report" throughout the group process.

Editing for ad-hocracy need not be a source of future shock for editors, but it will require editors to develop a strategy for handling the group-written report. Basic to such a strategy, the editor will need to:

1. Recognize that editing a group report requires a different strategy than customary for the individually authored manuscript.
2. Define clearly his role in relation to the group.
3. Encourage author identification.
4. Assure that the group accepts "writing an effective report" as an objective.
5. Participate in the group-writing process.

With the adoption of such a strategy, perhaps we someday will be able to say "yea" to the rise of committees and the quality of reports which they produce.