Implementing editors' ideas — lots of fun, sometimes even more trouble

Andrzej Tomaszewski

Abstract

Almost every one among us works with texts and prepares publications for print. We have to manipulate materials from various sources. We are bound to work with different authors, editors and decision makers. Sometimes they are great professionals but not seldom they fail to have even basic knowledge of printing techniques. In this article I will present typical problems and attempts to overcome them.

Seasoned editors are becoming a rarity. Only with difficulty, usually in renowned publishing houses, can one meet editors who learned their trade before the time of computerization. Solicitude, purpose, and the beauty of the Polish language are ingrained in them. The slowly dwindling generation of aged bookmakers knows inside-out text typesetting rules and grammar nuances. Their alert eye will spot any lax language usage or inconsequential notation. Sometimes they are rewarded with a good word from authors who notice that their text becomes smoother and more communicative during revision. This of course applies only to wise authors. There exist also unwise ones — often professorial — with such a swelled head that it leads them to act against their own interest during the preparation of their publication. Almost all seasoned editors think about the future reader during their work, they understand the educational or informative function of the book and treat their work almost as a mission.

Cooperating with such editors is a real pleasure though there might be a darker side to it. One of the most important is that they lack the knowledge of the contemporary publishing technology. They are unable to use even simple programs for entering and manipulating texts. They have a false notion that they are unable to acquire such abilities. It also happens that they are emotionally opposed to computers, which they regard as evil. Then — psychologically blocked — they do not accept (or even will not listen to) even the simplest explanations regard-

ing the necessity to submit to some contemporary rules.

Here is an example: Suppose you convinced a person who was for many years using a typewriter to use a computer keyboard. It turns out that the person types quickly and ably but does not know about the spectrum of available characters, not to mention how to enter the needed one on the new keyboard.

Old typewriters had a very limited number of available characters. In almost all models it was possible to insert needed characters in place of those which were unused. For example, instead of '1' (one), one could often type lower case 'l' or even 'I'; with uppercase 'O' present, '0' (zero) was replaced with '+' or '%'. Such manipulations were supported by the similarity of some shapes of typewriter characters. Typesetters setting the texts in the printing house at lino-types or mono-types were not disturbed by such character replacements as they were reading texts "contextually" and knew well which characters to use. Firmly ingrained typewriter habits are very difficult to eradicate and in the resulting texts one has to hunt meticulously for some characters and digits, differentiate dashes (minuses, en-dashes, em-dashes), delete unnecessary "enters", substitute paragraph indentations made with several spaces, as well as other things resulting from the typewriter technique. These additional actions, often labour consuming and troublesome, could be avoided by the author or editor entering the text being more disciplined. This is important, as a typesetter poking about too much in the text increases the chance of introducing additional errors.

It is easy to stumble onto a different type of editor. He acquired some patchy knowledge about typesetting using computers and is firmly convinced that this knowledge is of the finest quality. Quite often this person is very good at his trade, is familiar with the subject of the book, initiates a good cooperation with the author, and collects materials for the publication. His ambition however is to record everything electronically and … if this ambition is restricted only to texts, then not much trouble ensues. Problems begin when the need arises to select and collect photographs, graphics, plots or other elements for an illustrated book.

Having access to an office scanner, Microsoft Office and the Internet, the editor tries to substitute for the typographer, graphics designer, DTP operator or other specialists preparing the publication for print. He scans photographs losing halftones, crops them not knowing where on the page

they will be placed, copies from the Internet unusable GIF and JPEG files, produces nightmare graphs from spreadsheets, awkwardly tries to copy materials from prints, and so on and so forth. Most of the material is unsuitable for reproduction or further processing, and every critical remark on this subject is taken by the editor as an insult or questioning of his competence.

Often, however, the editor is as innocent as a newborn child. He was given the materials by the author. The author, a renowned specialist in his discipline, collected the materials over several years. With the help of his friends and family members, step by step, he prepared his illustrations of various quality and provenance, pasted them into his Word document, and finally deleted the now "obsolete" original files to clean up the mess on his hard disk. They are already in Word!

Who is going to tell the respectable author that what he prepared is only good for printing coarse handouts but not as his *magnum opus*?

Preparation of illustrations is perhaps the single biggest problem in the collaboration with the publishers and their editors, but the biggest of the biggest is the ubiquitous mania for JPEG-ing everything in sight. Evangelisation directed at publishers by experienced graphics designers does not help. It does not help to show examples of irrevocably destroyed drawing edges, spotty backgrounds, washed-out faces, clouds in the sky resembling dirty snow, and similar effects of compressing pixel graphics. Editors in publishing houses know that a TIFF has to be JPEG-ed — to weigh as little as possible.

This is a true story from my experience. At one of the publishing houses a Polish language edition of a book well known in Europe was being prepared. The foreign publisher sent four CDs with illustrations. When and how were these CDs turned into 100 MB of RGB JPEG files? Nobody pled guilty. The original CDs of course vanished into thin air. When I declined to work on the book a general aura of astonishment and distaste ensued. But the

pictures look so good on the screen! And Mrs. Director says that the colors are better than in the foreign edition! Fortunately Mrs. Director's husband said that if Tomaszewski doesn't know how, then he himself will try to merge the illustrations with the text. And so the day was thus saved.

When doing contract work for a renowned higher education institution I have to work with a proofreader who ennobles texts with precise punctuation. He has so well mastered the Polish language that at one point in time he won a national spell-checking contest and now walks in well-deserved glory. So what about him? Well, there is a problem. Like all ambitious and scrupulous people he always and everywhere thinks about work. Even when falling asleep he comes up with better grammatical constructs, brilliant figures of speech or the way to spell a word of foreign origin. So he jumps up to the keyboard where he amends and refines the text which I have already had on my machine for several days, since it is a part of an important publication which I am sculpturing for print. For sure, a day before the deadline I will receive a diskette or an email with a Word file with the refined text as a replacement.

So what can you do? Phone calls, email messages, SMS-es — for three years nothing worked until I met him at a conference. In the evening, over beer, I explained to him distinctly and picturesquely what is wrong. In the morning he swore over scrambled eggs (with onions) that from now on he will do his marking only on paper. On galley proofs, which — as God commanded — should circulate between the editors and typesetters.

So much for now.

Be it known that any resemblance of persons and situations described herein to real persons and situations is coincidental. The author does not assume responsibility for the reader's delusions and associations.

⋄ Andrzej Tomaszewski
Warsaw, Poland