

5-2017

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Recommended Citation

Shea, Nicholas M., "How to Edit Controversial Texts" (2017). *Book Publishing Final Research Paper*. 25.
https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/eng_bookpubpaper/25

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How to Edit Controversial Texts

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May 16, 2017

Abstract: In a time where political tensions are at an all-time high, this paper examines the role of editors when faced with potentially controversial works—whether it’s a manuscript with a few minor offensive elements or a manuscript with an overarching provocative theme. The responsibilities of developmental editors and copyeditors are evaluated to find a common interest, prior to delving into the intricacies of editing a polemical text. Topics include: What constitutes a controversial work, and who decides? How do the roles of developmental editors and copyeditors relate to audience? How can editors remain neutral? How can editors use their neutral positioning to shape a text? How can editors make informed decisions?

Keywords: audience, controversial, copyediting, developmental editing

Introduction

For publishing professionals, December 2016 represented a culmination of tension resulting from the ongoing dialogue about inclusivity in the industry and the social responsibility that comes with book publishing. The catalyst for this conversation was the announcement of Simon & Schuster's newly minted deal with Milo Yiannopoulos—a controversial alt-right personality known for making racist remarks on social media and speaking out against feminism and the LGBTQ community. This news received an onslaught of criticism from fellow professionals, authors, and concerned readers and citizens alike. One such voice was the editorial director of FSG Books for Young Readers, Joy Peskin, who said, “Milo is more than a provocateur. He is a terrorist, shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded theater. The fire is otherness—that which is not white, Christian, and male; the crowded theater is America” (*Publishers Weekly* 2017).

On the opposite side were those who decried the pushback against the book's publication as a violation of the First Amendment. For example, Yiannopoulos's literary agent, Thomas Flannery, said, “I've been continually shocked by the willingness of many in the publishing industry to stifle Milo's opinions. The right to speak freely, even if your opinions are unpopular, should be the bedrock of our industry” (*Publishers Weekly* 2017). Nevertheless, the deal was eventually cancelled, spurring further discussion regarding judgment within the acquisitions process and the types of writing that should be published.

However, a majority of the conversation has centered on best practices for acquiring potential projects and has done little to address what developmental editors and copyeditors should do when a controversial manuscript lands in their lap. Right or wrong, for better or worse, provocative manuscripts will make their way into publishing houses, and not every editor is in a position to turn down or hand off a project. So what's an editor to do when they've received a manuscript deemed polemical, if not outright belligerent? Moreover, as these types of works are

often promoted and condoned in equal measure, how does an editor tease apart editing as a social responsibility versus an act of censorship?

What constitutes a controversial text, and who decides?

The word “controversial,” with respect to literature, naturally propagates images of highly contested books (akin to Yiannopoulos’s manuscript) and banned books lists—but not all challenging material causes such large and newsworthy events. The material in question may only be a particular passage or scene in a book that is otherwise uncontested. For example, Oregon author Robin Cody’s novel, *Ricochet River*, was protested by some parents in North Clackamas School District for specific instances of profanity and one sexual situation (ACLU 2005). Controversial writing can run the gamut from universally abhorred texts (e.g., *Mein Kampf*) to novels that are considered classics (e.g., *To Kill a Mockingbird*), and everything in between.

All it takes for a work to be contentious is one reader. There are any number of issues that can alarm audiences, including terminology for racial/ethnic groups, gender-biased language, profanity, and depictions of sexual activity, among other things. The below recommendations work toward an informed style of editing for managing the most controversial texts—worst case scenarios—but these tools are applicable to all types of writing, as both the author and editor strive to expand their potential readership.

How does the role of developmental editors and copyeditors relate to audience?

Prior to investigating the ways in which editors can tame controversial material, it’s important to understand how developmental editors and copyeditors function and where their interests intersect for the good of the manuscript. To begin with, developmental editors are primarily focused on the story that’s being told, the content that’s being explained. Paul D. McCarthy (1993), former senior

editor of Pocket Books (an imprint of Simon & Schuster), understands developmental editing as an active conversation between editor and author with the goal of transforming a concept into a manuscript (135). Accordingly, developmental editors are more likely than not envisioning a particular audience for the future book. Wendy M. Wolf (1993), the former senior editor of HarperCollins and Pantheon Books, emphasizes the pivotal role of audience throughout the nonfiction developmental process, saying, “Even when I’m calculating a small readership for a book, I’m making an implicit assumption about a book’s potential readership—what readers it might reach, whom it should reach” (232). Regardless of the type of work that’s being edited (e.g., nonfiction, literary fiction, genre, poetry, etc.), asking questions about the intended audience early on will help establish preliminary boundaries for what will be considered (in)appropriate within a given work and within a given readership.

Wolf’s line of inquiry forces editors to evaluate the potential reception of the text out in the world, in a context beyond the editor-author relationship, by asking how important it is for people to agree with the content. The answer is rooted in another question: How important is it for the book to sell? For all parties involved, then, producing content that agrees with the intended audience is a chief concern. Wolf underscores a pitfall of editors, whereby the imagined reader “all too often conforms for us to the demographics of the suburban mall” (233). Such a critical error is all the more reason to thoroughly consider the audience and understand that not everyone will be pleased with the end product, which is not the same thing as being outright offensive.

Whereas developmental editors are breaking down and building up the story with an acute awareness of the audience, copyeditors immerse themselves in the language itself to improve the experience for this same readership. Amy Einsohn (2011), author of *The Copyeditor’s Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications*, explains that “the copyeditor acts as the author’s second pair of eyes, pointing out—and usually correcting—mechanical errors and

inconsistencies; errors or infelicities of grammar, usage, and syntax; and errors or inconsistencies in content” (3). The aforementioned description highlights the duties most commonly associated with copyediting, and these tasks do in fact make up a significant part of this editorial procedure. But understanding and amending writing mechanics can affect the bigger picture (the story) as much as it affects the minute details that are constantly being poked and prodded for correctness.

Syntactical errors and corrections not only serve to achieve the Four Cs (clarity, coherency, consistency, and correctness) but they can be used as evaluative tools to address any size of controversial material. Einsohn refers to this potential when elaborating on the role of copyeditors, saying, “Ideally, copyeditors set right whatever is incorrect, unidiomatic, confusing, ambiguous, or inappropriate without attempting to impose their stylistic preferences or prejudices on the author” (7). In this way, while copyeditors may not be suggesting story overhauls, it’s still within their power to question the language and, in effect, the content itself.

Copyeditors spend more time with the manuscript at the language and punctuation level than any other editor, so it’s in their best interest to point out any dated terminology, any ambiguous passages that could lead to unfortunate and unintended interpretations, and any material that is flat-out offensive. Thus, developmental editors and copyeditors are making calculated decisions to shape a manuscript that will hopefully present a pleasing experience for its audience. It’s only logical, then, that the reader is the focal point for analyzing a text with controversial elements.

How can editors remain neutral?

Understanding Your Author

The knee-jerk reaction for an editor who receives a work with signs of controversy might be to go on the defensive with the author—especially if they personally object to said material—but there are more productive approaches. Although it may feel counterintuitive, trusting the author is the path of

least resistance with the highest chance for success. Carol Fisher Saller (2009), author of *The Subversive Copy Editor: Advice from Chicago* and senior manuscript editor at the University of Chicago Press, suggests giving authors the benefit of the doubt because they usually write with a reader in mind and will be familiar with the language that speaks directly to their readers (6). Gerald Gross (1993), the editor of *Editors on Editing: What Writers Need to Know About What Editors Do*, also sympathizes with the writer's plight. He emboldens editors to read the manuscript through the eyes of the author, to think like them and understand their perspective (xviii). Editors may disagree with what was written, but authors are presumably familiar with their audience and will know what appeals to them. If this holds true, then editors can treat the fully imagined reader as a reference point and a gauge for appropriateness—a neutral space for discussing any future revisions that are deemed necessary.

Understanding Your Audience

In having frank discussions with authors about the intended audience and the corresponding implications for the text, Wendy M. Wolf openly shares her personal beliefs as a method of comparison. More clearly, she points out where she disagrees with the author and where the author's weaknesses and "danger zones" may lie (237). While an editor's opinion alone is not a sufficient tool in measuring a book's level of appropriateness, contrasting personal beliefs with the audience's expectations will allow for a more expansive understanding of the book's potential reception. In turn, this will improve an editor's ability to dissect what elements are provocative and whether such provocation should be desired in an effort to make a point.

Establishing the readership early on ultimately informs an editor's judgment, allowing for impartiality by making them one step removed from the author via a mutual interest. In other words, there is less risk of editorial preference dictating decisions and placing an editor at odds with the manuscript. Initially, the audience may seem like the go-to solution for retaining contentious

content, but in reality, they're an editor's quickest and most efficient tool for gauging a book's reception.

How can editors use their neutral standpoint?

Saller merges these understandings of the author and the audience, grounding them in application. By acting as both author and reader, editors can hear the author's voice and connect the writing style with the message itself: "You will learn to want what she [the author] wants, and you will edit to keep her from wandering off the path. When you perceive that what she wants in the moment gets in the way of her greater goals, that's when you step in" (10). In this way, editors can address potentially controversial material by, again, envisioning the audience and assessing how they would respond to the text; if doubt still remains, then consider whether the author intended for the content to come across in such a way. Michael Denny (1993), former senior editor at St. Martin's Press and the general editor of the *Stonewall Inn Editions*, refers to a common hazard of the trade, where events assume even more meaning on the page and in fictional contexts. He argues that authors must take readers into account, saying, "A woman executive swearing in the office is common; a woman executive swearing in a novel will probably signal things to the reader that the author might not intend. As always, the editor's primary task is to clarify the author's intentions" (248).

If an issue does exist, editors can act. Wendy M. Wolf goes back to basics, explaining that choices of language and expression are spaces where editors can be of the most use; she further delineates that if the idea is truly well meaning, then revising the material accordingly should be a rather simple task (238). It's within an editor's rights to suggest potential rephrasing and to query any areas of concern; this standard practice will serve editors well when deciding how to treat material that may offend readers. Wolf recalls helping writers decide between words like *mankind* versus

humanity, or *Native American* versus *American Indian* (238). If a book is detailing a specific historical period or the story takes place in a different historical context, then language that is considered inappropriate in modern society may actually be suitable for the text. Wolf encourages editors to examine the political implications of controversial terminology rather than relying on what is casually presumed to be politically correct at a given moment or what is deemed acceptable by authoritative voices like the *New York Times* (238). Informed judgment by an editor—which comes from a neutral position—can go a long way in these sticky situations.

Denneny believes that editors serve to protect the author's imagination and that "the attempt to make any fiction politically correct is a misguided one; it is an attempt to police the imagination" (250). Although more straightforward in his language, Denneny's approach is not at odds with Wolf's philosophy. Revising for readership is not the same as censoring a text; revising for readership is presenting the story in a way that will maximize its effectiveness and retain the author's voice and message. And his argument that an editor should not revise for political correctness does not mean that anything goes. On the contrary, Denneny's implying that authors must write with the same degree of intent as they do in constructing the story itself, and it's the editor's job to help them achieve this goal.

When intent is taken into consideration, boundaries become clearer. For example, Denneny mentions his experience with recurring instances of unthinking homophobic language, where it's absolutely the editor's responsibility to highlight such offensive errors (248). On the other hand, if the language served a genuine purpose within the context of the story or argument, then that's another necessary conversation to have with the author, making them aware of the possible impact of their words on readers. Just because a manuscript has controversial elements that may provoke a reaction does not mean extensive revisions are necessary. What does matter, though, is whether the given material was intended to come across in the way it does and whether it's essential to the story

and argument as whole. Although it's an exceedingly blurry line, there's a difference between purposeful action and action resulting from ignorance. And the consequences for not understanding the difference can be quite significant.

A scenario that receives less attention—thereby underscoring what's at stake—is when white editors revise manuscripts by authors of color. Joan Pinkvoss, founder of multicultural women's press Aunt Lute, refers to the tendency of white editors to make writer's voices more “intelligible” or “acceptable” for white readers (Denneny, 247). Consciously or not, readers could consider writing by authors of color controversial simply because their voices and writing style may not conform to whatever supposed standards white writers have put forth. Michael Denneny notes, then, that “it is the integrity of the writer's voice and vision *alone* that can provide the editor with a true standard for the editing process” (247). Gauging political correctness is not as simple as looking to the opposing party. Sometimes breaking convention can add sociocultural value to a work, and it's up to the editor—with their knowledge of the author, the audience(s), and the work itself—to make these judgment calls. Per Denneny, “The goal of editing is to make the book better, not different” (247).

Author and audience aside, how can editors make informed choices?

Ask the Right Questions

Even with a solid grasp of the author's perspective and the intended audience, the work itself may still present problems. For instance, it's possible that problematic language may be the norm for the author and their audience. This was a legitimate concern with Milo Yiannopoulos and his readers. But editors have tools to safeguard against such issues. In addition to questioning author and reader interpretations, ask basic questions: Is the argument well documented? Is there evidence to support it? Is the language sensitive and accurate (Wolf, 239)? While the audience is one indicator of appropriateness, they are not judge, jury, and executioner.

Regardless of the subject, the work has to hold up and the language and content must be purposeful when veering from socially agreed upon terminology. Editors must “dog, torment, torture, question, challenge, pry, invade, coax, cajole, praise, and attack that work and its creator until its argument is airtight, or until it has reached the goal of acceptability you mutually have determined upon embarkation” (Wolf, 238). An editor interrogating the work is different than an editor going on the defensive. Such brutal questioning will benefit the author and their work, ultimately establishing them as an authoritative voice.

Ask the Right People

Before attempting to analyze a work, or even in the middle of the process, it’s possible that editors may realize they are out of their depth. And that’s okay. There is no rule that says editors must work in a subject that they know and love; on the contrary, some editors suggest working with books outside of their pleasure reading. Thus editors are not necessarily experts on their manuscript’s subject, and deciding whether material will evoke a negative reaction is a matter of resourcefulness. If you don’t have an answer, then reach out to fellow editors or experts on the given subject. And if you don’t have the network, then prepare to do the dirty work of fact checking and research. Amy Einsohn says, “the best course is to read widely enough to know about historical usage and current conventions, preferences, and controversies,” so become your own expert (415). If you don’t know whether an individual (or group) prefers to be called differently abled or person with disabilities, then find out. Editors who are truly invested in turning a manuscript into a respectable work for its audience will compensate for what they lack.

Know Your Job

For editors to make truly informed decisions and be truly invested in a manuscript, they need to be knowledgeable of their roles and all that editing entails. Amy Einsohn lays out a

foundational description for copyeditors—a description that’s equally applicable to developmental editors—which dips into the real nuts and bolts of revising a controversial text:

Copyeditors [and editors in general] are expected to query or revise any material . . . that promotes stereotyping (based on sex, ethnicity, religion, age, or other group designation), that needlessly excludes groups of people, or that is insensitive to cultural differences. The principle here is not to censor authors who wish to enunciate “politically incorrect” views but rather to prevent authors from unwittingly offending, marginalizing, or excluding groups of people. (404, 405)

So unless a work is presenting truly objectionable views (e.g., an author is actually racist, homophobic, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, etc.), picking apart a text to remove or alter material that is unintentionally or gratuitously offensive only serves to help the author establish their legitimacy as a professional. *The Chicago Manual of Style, 16th edition* (section 5.221) rationalizes that discussions on terminology—bias-free language, in particular—often descend into political debates and that, instead, prioritizing the preservation of a work’s credibility with an expansive audience will allow editors to swiftly handle these ostensibly tricky issues. Once again, if the language in question is not central to the piece, then it’s probably creating a distraction, which will damage a text’s credibility.

Know Your Author’s Job . . . and Compensate for That Too

Lastly, editors should disillusion themselves of the notion that author responsibility somehow takes away from editorial obligations, because although a text is reflective of its author, it’s equally representative of the publisher—and the editor. Therefore, it’s important to understand the basics of a contractual agreement between author and publisher that are specific to issues of acceptability and controversy. Per *The Chicago Manual of Style (CMS)*, authors guarantee that “the

work does not libel anyone or infringe any person’s right of privacy . . . [and] if the work contains scientific formulas or practical advice, the author should also be asked to warrant that no instructions in the work will, if accurately followed, cause injury to anyone” (section 4.68). The *CMS* further explains that publishers can ask for assurances that any statements of fact in the text are accurate (section 4.68). None of this, though, means editors are off the hook—not a clause on libel, nor a clause on practical advice or statements of fact. Editors can and should question the material aggressively, leaving nothing up to chance. This will protect all parties involved. And to do this, editors must have a passing familiarity with publishing law pertaining to libel, copyright, privacy, and obscenity.

Libel is defined as “the publication of a defamatory false statement about an identifiable living person” (Einsohn, 417). Hence an author who is presenting a highly objectionable view is not committing a libelous act unless they are making false statements of fact about living, identifiable individuals. Issues of libel are not specific to the nonfiction realm, as a quick name change or character description alteration may not be enough to save a work of fiction, either. So editors should ask their authors about their character-creation process, and request permissions where necessary.

Furthermore, even if a statement were true in a nonfiction book (controversy aside), it could still be considered an invasion of privacy. Einsohn defines privacy as “an individual’s right to not be subjected to undeserved publicity, regardless of whether the published material is true” (417). Privacy concerns are not about whether a statement is right or wrong; instead, they are concerned with whether a person’s privacy was violated. If the person in question has not been in any newsworthy scandals or provided permissions, then chances are the author invaded somebody’s privacy. And as far as copyrights are concerned, authors must receive written permission to reprint

any quoted material. Theoretically, this will safeguard the author against any unwanted attention that will discredit them, in addition to preventing the (un)intentional misuse of quotes (418).

The most significant and salient issue to a controversial work, regardless of subject, is the obscenity clause, which “refers to published materials . . . that offend current community standards and have no redeeming literary, artistic, political, or scientific value. ‘Community standards’ vary, of course” (419). For the unsure editor, this statement provides actual legal support for removing those elements of text that are controversial, to the extent they’re violating standards of correctness—not to equate polemic material with unacceptable or offensive material. Harkening back to Wendy M. Wolf’s editorial philosophy, editors must rely on their informed knowledge when the supposed community standard feels tenuous.

Conclusion

Editing a work that is deemed controversial is really not all that different from editing any other manuscript. The key point, though, is that editors must be completely in sync with their author and the intended audience. The time for arguing ended after the acquisitions process; it’s up to editors to put aside their preconceptions and jump in headfirst.

From the second a manuscript is in the hands of a developmental editor or copyeditor, they must become its fiercest advocate. To accomplish this, developmental editors and copyeditors must strive for the same goal and have a deep appreciation of how different stages of editing work together to create a cohesive whole. A copyeditor is never solely dealing with language and punctuation, and a developmental editor is never just examining the story. The elements of a text are all interrelated.

Moreover, an editor’s job involves wearing many lenses. They have to act as editor, author, and reader—all of which will help with establishing those ever-illusory boundaries of what is

considered acceptable for a given work and a given audience. And editors must accept that they will not be able to please every reader, nor should that be the goal. The goal is to establish the most expansive audience possible while not excluding or offending groups of people via cultural ignorance and insensitivity. And to be clear, this is not censorship. Never once has this analysis led to discussions on silencing an author's voice. Never once has this conversation led to the revising of an author's ideas. This is social responsibility.

Social responsibility is revising a work to the extent that it builds upon and supports the author's existing message while also improving the reader's experience, regardless of if they are the intended audience. Not everyone must agree with the perspective being presented, but it's the editor's responsibility to the author, the audience, and the work itself to emend any fallacious details and point out any elements that could be misinterpreted by the audience. More often than not the author won't have ill intentions, either. As Carol Fisher Saller rightfully points out, authors are invested in the audience too.

Even if there's a significant difference of opinion, an editor can be an author's best friend by being unrelenting in their analysis of the text, by constantly asking whom the text is serving and how it's accomplishing that goal. Wolf is a fierce proponent of this methodology, stating, "Difficult ideas have to pass scrutiny so that their arguments hold up against the evinced mass" (242). And while maintaining the author's voice and message is first and foremost an editor's goal, she's right in her assertion. Questioning every instance of terminology use or profanity is not meant to undermine the author; in fact, it's the exact opposite. By the time a text makes its way through the editorial process, it should be able to withstand public scrutiny and represent the author as the authoritative voice that they are.

In the words of Gerald Gross:

The best editing is not the least or the most; it is whatever measure of editing evokes the writer's greatest talent, that presents the writer's work in the best possible light so that it garners great reviews, enhances the writer's professional reputation and personal self-esteem, and reaches the audience the writer wrote for in numbers large enough so that the writer can live comfortably to write again and further develop his or her creative powers. (xv, xvi)

So editors should not be afraid to have open and honest discussions with the author about problematic material within the text, because understanding their intent is crucial to helping them achieve their goals. Both sides want what's best for the book. So no matter how controversial the text, leave no stone unturned.

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