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THE CONCEPTS OF CONTENT AND COPY EDITING IN BOOK PUBLISHING IN NIGERIA

By

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ABSTRACT

Editing is a highly technical activity in the book publishing process which is central to the overall success of a publication. Editing consists of sequential and interrelated activities which are geared towards the production of a worthwhile publication for readers. This paper takes a surgical look at the content editing and copy editing stages of the book editing process. Content editing ensures the veracity of the intellectual content of manuscripts while copy editing is concerned with the purification of manuscripts through the use of proofreaders' marks. The current trend of electronic editing in publishing was also highlighted in the paper.

Keywords: Editing, Content editing, Copy editing, Electronic editing

Word count: 100

Introduction

Editing is very vital to publishing. It is, as a matter of fact, indispensable. Editing is a highly technical function which is procedural, systematic and sequential. Broadly, these procedural activities are classified

into five namely: acquisition editing, content editing, copy editing, proofreading, and production editing. This paper focuses on two of these editorial activities which are content editing and copy editing. It should be remarked that the task of editing, which begins before the physical birth of the manuscript, spans through the entire book publishing processes. Editing is therefore critical and central to the overall

success of the publication. It determines and regulates the content, the layout and indeed the intrinsic and extrinsic values of the publication. Editing is carried out by the editor and an editor is a team-player. S/he collaborates with the other professionals in carrying out her/his functions. How well an editor does her/his job determines the quality, the richness, the acceptance, and indeed the level of success of the publication. This paper examines the intricacies of editing at the levels of content editing and copy editing, it dwells on the editorial pre-occupations at these two levels and emphasises how fundamental and germane these activities are to the overall success of the publication.

What is book editing?

Editing is a highly technical function which requires a high level of proficiency, a proficiency that is borne out of training, experience on the job, repeated performances, and exposure over the years. Editorial expertise is therefore acquired gradually and over time. However, despite its inherent technicalities, editing is perhaps the most misconstrued, the most dared, and as such, the most trivialised and abused profession, especially

in Nigeria. It is construed by laymen as mere correction of grammatical errors. With this belittling therefore, virtually everyone who is literate lays claim to editorial competence. It is assumed that once one can read and write and has a good or fair command of English language, one is automatically an editor. As captured by Aniyi (2008:179), "to look at editing from this limited angle is as naïve as seeing a doctor as a mere drug dispenser who does no more than to prescribe panadol for headache".

Akangbe (2009:58) maintained that editing is a professional operation of technically preparing a manuscript for publication. It is an act and art of selecting, arranging and presenting a written piece in a readable form. It is an art because it entails creativity and an act because it is operational. Editing therefore comprises all that is done from the time a book is conceived by the author or publisher to when it is produced and made obtainable on the shelf.

Editing is a process and it is procedural. In a sense, editing implies publishing because all the publishing processes are usually editing-induced and editor-

editor who is the undisputable midwife of all the publishing processes. From the foregoing, editing entails careful selection, sensible arrangement and logical presentation of raw ideas in a standard and acceptable format. This acceptable format follows a sequential process which permits correction, cancellation, evaluation, substitution, rearrangement, adjustment, reworking and reordering. In short, it is a technical operation that is tolerant of and permissible to any activity that will make an otherwise bad manuscript a good book.

It must be emphasised that as a process, editing predates the birth of manuscript. The operation of editing actually starts right from the idea conception stage and subsists through the manuscript birth, to content evaluation, origination and design, copy-editing, proofreading and production stages. Even at the production stage, the pre-press, press, and post-press also require editorial vigilance. This is thus a pointer to the fact that editing is an unending activity in a book publishing process just as its practitioner – editor – is a constant player at every stage.

Content Editing

Content editing occupies the second level of operation in the editorial continuum; the first being acquisition editing. As remarked earlier, editing levels are in five stages and in the following order: Acquisition editing, Content editing, Copy editing, Proof reading and Production editing. These five stages are sequential, interrelated and dependent upon one another. Acquisition editing which is the first and foremost of all editing activities preoccupies itself basically with manuscript acquisition. The job of an acquisition editor or commissioning editor is primarily to make a list building by acquiring manuscripts for the publishing house. S/he does this by developing a list of publishable manuscripts. Acquisition editor does her/his job in two ways via: Unsolicited manuscript and Solicited manuscript.

Unsolicited manuscripts are manuscripts that are not sought by the publishers. Here is a case of the writer voluntarily submitting his manuscripts to the publishing company for publication. Areo (1995) expatiates that unsolicited manuscripts are those, which come into the office through the post,

through the educational representative; or brought into the office personally by an enthusiastic; anxious but equally nervous author. Generally, the type of unsolicited manuscripts which records minimal success in getting published is fiction. Even in Europe and America, an unpublished fiction writer needs an aggressive and very effective literary agent and of course best of luck to get his/her work published. Areo (1995:50) remarks thus:

In Nigeria, the very few areas where unsolicited manuscripts succeed in getting published are questions and answers, revision series, notes and commentaries on literature texts, with publishers whose publishing policy accommodates such.

On the other hand, solicited manuscripts are those that publishers request directly from authors. For instance, a publishing house may want to be part of an author's fame and as such ask her/him to send any manuscript for publication e.g. Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Niyi Osundare, Ben Okri, etc. In another vein, a publishing house may commission authors to write on an identified area for the company. This is done through a writing workshop. This

happens frequently with school textbooks for pre-primary, primary, secondary, at times, post-secondary course books.

Content Editing

Acquisition editing is followed by content editing. Content editing is a process of taking a critical look at the manuscripts acquired for the house by the acquisition editor to ensure the correctness, up-to-dateness and quality of its content. A content editor seeks to confirm the accuracy of the author's submissions and how adequate s/he has been in conveying his message to his readers.

A content editor therefore must make sure that the conveyance of the author's message is accurate, precise, concise, and with clarity. Editing at this stage bother less about the error of grammar and tenses, it rather concerns itself with factual issues; validity of subject matter; correctness of policy statements; rightness and lucidity of mental submissions; veracity of claims; articulacy of arguments; maturity of criticisms; depth and intelligibility of discussions; truthfulness of information, data, literature, quotations, citations; etc. and creativity or craftiness in it. In other

word, content editing is an editorial assessment of the reliability, authenticity, depth of treatment and sensibility of a manuscript via the language, theme and structure. For educational titles, the curriculum is a vital yardstick for measuring the quality of a manuscript. According to Amori (1975), content editing preoccupies itself with:

- a) Ensuring factual accuracy – (e.g. names, dates, place names, sources of references, acknowledgements, dedications, copyright details, etc.) and completeness of copy.
- b) Ensuring that the subject – matter avoids ambiguity or repetition, and that its presentation is clearly intelligible to prospective readers, and avoids anything which could involve the publishing house (and/or the printers) in legal proceeding for libel, character defamation or obscenity.

The above corroborates that content editing deals majorly with the factors of substance, mutual intelligibility, currency of data, logicity of argument, and general cohesion of presentation. A content editor, like the acquisition editor, must be market-conscious and

profit-minded. S/he must therefore rescue his company from unprofitable investment by:

- Ensuring that the content of the manuscript he is putting forward is not only tenable but of a high standard that can match and beat the rival titles in the market.
- Raising editorial queries on every minute issue of contention. This may bother on dates, characters, personalities, locations, events, figures, data, etc. S/he needs to disagree with the author at this stage if necessary before reaching a mutual agreement.
- Eliminating every submission that may have semblance with character defamation, obscenity, assassination of character, factual inaccuracy, etc. which may provoke litigation and plunge the company into legal battles.
- Insisting that educational titles are in conformity with the curriculum and does not contain any obsolete or outdated submissions.
- Making use of words, expressions, and terms that are current and avoiding racial or gender sensitive words. For

instance, rather than using *he* as a generic pronoun for human beings, *she* should be used; words like *chairperson*, *manageress* are opposed to by feminists, while *dark age*, *dark continent*, *vernacular*, *blackmail*, etc. are considered racially offensive.

- Employing the right jargons for the right professions is highly essential in technical writings. Every profession has its acceptable diction and a content editor must adhere to this rule. For instance actors and actresses perform on stage before a live audience and not a crowd while spectators watch football matches and not crowd or congregation.

On the whole, the overall effort of content editing is to ensure that the intention of the author(s) is correctly and accurately conveyed to the readers with clarity.

Copy Editing

Copy editing is a critical stage in editorial processes where an editor displays his professional skill by removing the chaff from grains. A copy editor is an agent of perfection who brings thoroughness and

consistency to bear on a manuscript. S/he gives a manuscript a definition, a character, and unique identity. S/he is an agent of purification who filters the manuscript by eliminating all unwanted errors, making substitutions and changes where necessary, expunges offensive and substandard portions, re-working, reordering and recasting sentences where necessary; all in a bid to come up with a quality publication.

A copy editor must be an accomplished scholar in her/his chosen discipline whether humanities, social sciences, or sciences. S/he must be current and up-to-date in the subject areas so as to make valid judgment. In addition to his creditable knowledge of his subject, he must have a deep editorial skill in the art of book making. S/he must also be versed in his company's house-styles. In copy editing, the editor displays a presence of mind and flawless consciousness in marrying facts and corroborating data and submissions. He should be able to detect any minor contradiction of names, places, dates, events, figures and data generally. Again, he should be creative enough to act and swap roles as both the writer

and reader with a view to fishing out any anomaly either on the part of the writer or the reader. Of course, copy editing displays fidelity of language by eliminating every error.

A copy editor does so much to midwife a manuscript and bring a book to life. Her/his task is detailed, enormous and painstaking. S/he:

- * Briefs the designers on the size and format of the title.
- Marks the typescript for the typesetter to design.
- Generates illustration briefs, specifies kind of drawings (whether line drawing, half-tone or full color), generates, supervises and approves maps and graphs.
- Works on proofs, marks corrections, and checks corrected copies.
- Generates cover concept in conjunction with the author, designer, graph artist/illustrator.
- Applies the house styles consistently on the manuscript by enforcing the house rule on abbreviation, capitalization, cross-references, italics, punctuation, spelling, citations, copyright permission, etc.
- Adopts the house rule on book anatomy detailing the structural sequence of the early matters, the body text and the end matters. For instance, the preliminary pages may consist of any of the following items: half-title or bastard title, list of series editors, list of other books in the same series or by the same author, frontis-piece, title page, copyright page (detailing publication date, publisher's and printer's names and addresses, copyright notice, international standard book number, etc) dedication, epigraph, table of content, lists of plates, figures, maps and tables (usually in that order), list of contributors, foreword, preface, acknowledgements, list of abbreviations, and general map(s) relevant to the whole book usually in the order listed above. It should be noted that it is not compulsory and in fact not common for a particular book to have all these in its preliminary section. It is the kind of book in question that will choose its contents.
- Adopts the house-rule on bibliographical references, quotations, translations, science and mathematics books, etc.

- Arranges for indexer to compile the index in conformity with the house style and there after personally vets it and supervises its incorporation into the text.
- Carefully marks up the galleys with the application of the proof reader's marks for the typesetter's attention.
Copy editing, like acquisition and content editing; also take cognizance of the market factor, therefore a copy editor is market conscious and profit-minded in specifying his rules and characters for the book. For instance, being mindful of the competitive nature of the market and price modesty, he regulates the page volume of the title, the number of illustrations, the colour of illustrations, and adopts cost effective book size, paper type, binding style, machine size, etc. Copy-editing is preoccupied with cost-control at every stage.

Copy Editing and the use of proofreader's marks

Proofreader's marks are mark-up signs or editing marks that are applied by editors for manuscript preparation. They are universal signs that are widely used in editing

operations. They are technical symbols which editors use to pass editorial instructions to typesetters or compositors. Editing symbols have the following peculiarities:

- i. They are numerous in number.
- ii. They cannot all be made use of in one single operation.
- iii. Its mastery is gradual and over time.
- iv. Some are house-based and adopted as house style.
- v. Its use calls for fidelity of understanding between editor and typesetter.

Editor and Electronic Editing

In modern era of electronic publishing, computer occupies a prime position in editorial capacity building. The computer has taking over every aspect of editorial tasks. This makes it compelling for editors to continuously update their knowledge with the modern trend in information and communication technology (ICT) if they are to move with time.

- i. In modern dispensation, most editors are compelled by circumstances to use laptop, desktop or electronic publishing software, scanners, and other electronic communications equipment in carrying out their duties.

- ii. In addition, editors should be knowledgeable about graphic design, page layout, and multimedia software since today's publishing demands that publications have electronic versions and for access on the Internet. Editors should maintain blogs and explore mobile phones as ways of keeping in touch with writers and readers for providing information to them quickly.
- iii. Manuscript sourcing could be done on the Internet through search engines, email, websites, chat groups, short message service (sms), etc.
- iv. Computers can also be used for commissioning authors, negotiation, tracking of authors, editing the manuscript, etc.
- v. It is also an effective reference sources as editors can use the web to access dictionaries, thesauri, encyclopaedia, style guides, etc.
- vi. Graphics, illustration and design, proofreading, pre-press activities, networking, and many more are suitable on the computer.

The computer has taken over every aspect of editorial tasks. For editors to keep abreast with the global trend in publishing there is the need for capacity building in the area of computer application in editing and indeed publishing.

Conclusion

We have no doubt that our extensive discussion on content and copy editing in this paper has refreshed our memories about the preoccupations of these editorial activities and their significance to the overall success of a publication.

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