House rules apply . . .
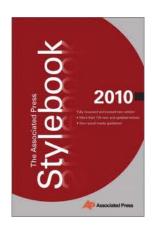
A study into online news styles in NZ and Australia

Greg Treadwell and Allan Lee

AUT University 2011

'That's tautology, you foolish ass!'

Telegraph Style Book

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Style, a definition:
House style sets out rulings on matters such as spelling, word usage, titles, foreign words, measurements, and the use of abbreviations and contractions. Its aim is to achieve consistency in a wide range of matters that are open to opinion, interpretation or prejudice. (Lee & Treadwell, 2009, p. 53)
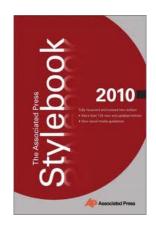
A broader context:
Online style can include story structure/length, hyperlinking, subheadings, caption format, teasers, bylines, publishing to social media like Facebook and Twitter

http://www.theage.com.au/

http://www.nationaltimes.com.au/

AP Stylebook includes:

Business Guidelines
A reference for reporters covering financial news. *It includes explanations of five different chapters of bankruptcy.*

Sports Guidelines and Style
Includes terminology, statistics, organization rules. *Eg: correct way to use basketball terminology e.g. half-court pass and goaltending.*

Guide to Punctuation

Briefing on Media Law

Photo Captions
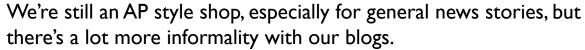A formula of what to include in a caption.

Editing Marks

Bibliography
Second reference materials for information not included in the book. *Example: Use* Webster's New World College Dictionary, *Fourth Edition, Wiley, Hoboken, N.J. as first reference after the AP Stylebook for spelling, style, usage and foreign geographic names.*

online news styles in NZ and Australia

AP Style rules at the HuffPost. We also have an internal style guide.
- Craig Kanalley, huffingtonpost.com

We're still an AP style shop, especially for general news stories, but there's a lot more informality with our blogs.
- Andy Carvin, National Public Radio

We use a blend of AP style and our own network's style
- Niketa Patel, cnn.com

The AP Stylebook is like my Bible… in both, there is some stuff I choose to ignore… like Web site, not website
- Robert Hernandez, Online News Assoc

Dude, AP Style matters. There should still be standards.
- Franklin Bains, dailyemerald.com

Our newsroom very much adheres to AP style. Very relevant, despite the dash they insist on keeping in the word "e-mail.
- Gene Park, staradvertiser.com
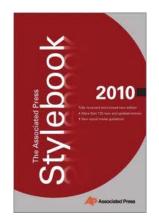
WJ Chat: *Web journalism on the Airwaves*

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Why research this?

• to inform integration of print and online editing courses
• an inkling that editors and subs are aware that style changes could improve the online reader's experience but don't have time to do much about it
• a strong sense that shovelware continues to dominate local news websites and a desire to study the implications of that

Anecdotal ➜ empirical
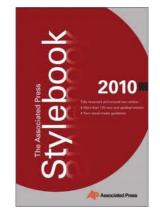
online news styles in NZ and Australia

Methodology:

- Survey of staff in senior editorial/production roles across Australasia
    - Survey a mix of closed (yes/no) and open (why, how?) questions
    - Quantitative data – some trends extracted
    - Qualitative data – thematic content analysis

- A videotaped interview with the multi-media editor of nzherald.co.nz
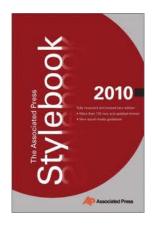
The survey

Participants were asked:

- do you have a newsroom stylebook?
- do you have specific online style guidelines?
- should online style be different in some cases?
- are you and your colleagues discussing online/offline style and what issues are emerging?
- should online headlines be written differently? If so, how?
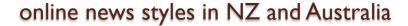- do you have/would you like guidelines for online headline writing?

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Respondents:

A total of 27 (16 Australia, 11 New Zealand)

- 11 editors
- 1 deputy editor
- 4 online editors
- 6 chief sub-editors
- 2 sub-editors
- 3 senior journalists

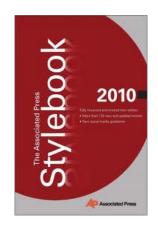(16 Australian responses from 140 surveys sent out)

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Australian respondents:

The Age
APN
The Australian
Bloomberg
Brisbane News
Fremantle Herald
Geraldton Newspapers
Kalgoorlie Miner
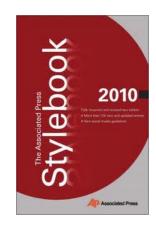The Mercury
Naracoorte Herald

News Queensland
Perth Sunday Times
Post Newspapers
Southern Highland News
West Australian

The Associated Press
Stylebook
2010
Fully reviewed and revised new edition:
• More than 125 new and updated entries
• New social media guidelines
AP Associated Press

online news styles in NZ and Australia

What Australian editors said:

Q: Do you believe some matters of style need to be treated differently online?
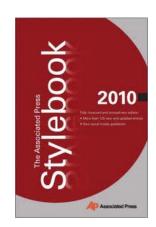
> *Yes   9   No   7*

Yes

- Key words need to be identified in the story, and the intro written to make it easier for search engines to find the story

- Online readers have shorter attention spans and so need sharp, short words to capture their attention

- Enforcing a rigorous print style won't work online because of time pressures

- Hyperlinking is important -- it gives readers a chance to see the 'proof' of your story rather than relying on your word. Stories need subheads to break them up as a large block of text is visually unappealing. I think it's still very important to maintain a sense of house 'style' and adherence to grammar, spelling etc when writing online. The reasons that style guides were invented in the first place -- ensuring consistency, accuracy, professionalism -- still apply online.

online news styles in NZ and Australia

What Australian editors said:

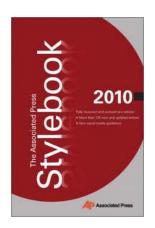Q: Do you believe some matters of style need to be treated differently online?

Yes 9 No 7

Yes
-There is a tension within the newsroom on this. Online journalists for www.theage.com.au are seeking clicks to generate advertising revenue and so this website has a more tabloid feel than the newspaper. This strategy is deliberate to create demand for banner ads. There's a more racy, informal feel to the prose and headlines, as well as the content. This tone has been criticised by newspaper staff
- Many journos have limited understanding of the difference between the web and their usual medium.

online news styles in NZ and Australia

What Australian editors said:

Q: Do you believe some matters of style need to be treated differently online?
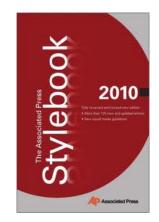
Yes   9   No   7

No
- The established style rules of traditional media need to be incorporated into serious online publishing. Our readers trust our content and are comforted by our adherence to our ethical, editorial and writing styles across the board. We see no reason to adopt one standard in print and another online. Why abandon 400 years of print development for a hyperactive format that 'blows minds' and leads to skimming behaviour by readers. We're forerunners of the 'Slow Newsreading Movement', world pioneers no less.

- As an online editor I pay less attention to small style details because I am usually in more of a hurry to get the content up. As a newspaper copy sub I could spend an hour combing a story for tiny inconsistencies. Online I probably spend more time looking for an attention grabbing, gorgeous picture than I do worrying about house style. Of course I still watch out for errors and literals.

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Q: Are you and colleagues discussing online/offline style? What issues are emerging?
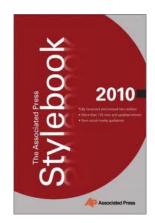
Yes   8   No   8

No
- We have only discussed our strict adherence to our established print practice styles in print and online.

Yes
- How to handle local references and nomenclature, abbreviations and in relation to Facebook, the unique shortened language eg lol, LMFAO etc

- Geographic locations, story subject matter, names of celebrities/people mentioned in the story, and how best to write the story to optimise it for web browsers.

- Spelling, capitalisation, story structure, headlines

- The use of double bylines (a problem for the technology we use), italics for all newspapers, artistic works etc

- Mainly the use of social media eg Twitter. This is not 'online style' as such but it is a major challenge facing all journalists -- ie, working out how to create an online platform for yourself, while conforming to your employer's social media policies (which can be quite onerous)
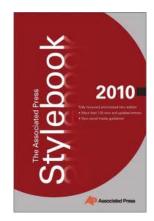
online news styles in NZ and Australia

Yes (cont)

- How poorly edited much of our unique-to-online copy is.

- The Age is attracting younger readers to the website with celebrity gossip etc. But this has not been approved of by some newspaper staff who believe that The Age's reputation as a quality broadsheet is being eroded. The message from Fairfax management is that online is the future and print journalists must adapt. However the National Times website is also being expanded to cater to readers who prefer The Age's traditional tone.

- Mainly relating to how to do bullet points and subheads and other aesthetic text tools. Website readers hunt for content that interests them, and if I can make our site easy to scan they're more likely to read my content than my rival's. Online style includes switchers and feature blocks and heroes at the top of the page so there is always discussion on the best way to use them as a style across the site and all its sections.

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Q: Do you have any style guidelines specifically for online journalism?
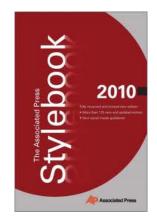   *Yes   5   No   11*

No
- Not deemed necessary. We use the general stylebook
- Our weekly magazine is uploaded to the web as is; we have no daily updates.
- With so many sources of content, much of which is handled outside our control, it is not worth the effort.
- Issue hasn't been raised. Most copy is 'cut and pasted' from the newspaper

Yes
- To optimise stories for easy discovery by search engines
- Online headlines are specifically written for search engine optimisation
- To ensure consistency across print and digital; to reflect the tone of the journalism

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Q: Do you have any style guidelines specifically for online journalism?
            Yes   5   No   11

- The Age has two online platforms. **www.theage.com.au** is staffed by a lean team of online journalists who in theory follow The Age style book, but in practice stories are uploaded so quickly that they often receive cursory subbing. The process is 'progressive subbing'. Spelling mistakes or errors in the first posting are picked up later. "If it's not right, it soon will be," is the ethos.
Whether online style mirrors Age style come down to the online staff members on the day. A story in the paper is checked by at least three people, but an online story may be checked by one person.
www.nationaltimes.com.au mirrors the content of the paper more. A senior editor on that website said that Age style is used and she would not like to see an erosion of those standards.

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Senior online editor at The Age

www.theage.com.au is under the same style book as The Age newspaper but online staff do not follow it as there is a staff shortage and almost no subediting takes place. There is no checksub which means mistakes often get through. If readers contact the newsdesk to report mistakes, we fix them.
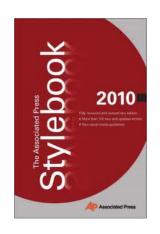
Readers often contact us to ask 'why did you put that rubbish story on the website?' But we find if we put up a trashy story we get hundreds if not thousands of hits an hour whereas if we put up a serious story we might get 50 hits per hour. So we pull it for a trashy one. Sadly that dictates what we put up.

Most of the staff on the Ipad and some on the website are casual university students so they have never worked with journalists and don't understand the issues re subediting and do not see the need for an online style book.

We have told management that people do notice the mistakes but they don't care that much. If they did, they might get people to check the copy. There are not enough people to do these things.
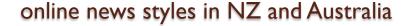
online news styles in NZ and Australia

Q: Do reporters and editors need in-house guidelines for online writing?
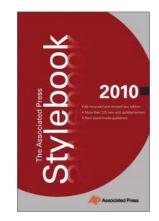
> *Yes   14   No   2*

-   Online is evolving very fast without the same checks and balances as the newspaper. We have inhouse guidelines for how to communicate on Twitter -- eg we are allowed to 'retweet' competitors' stories but not engage in any kind of denigration of other people's work.

- There should be a stylebook for reporters and editors. It could take in how to do time references and updates for the web, legal issues that need to be considered in an instant, a list of banned words, how to write copy and headings for the web.

All this is in addition to design style which journos moving to the web need to learn. Also, reporters are more frequently taking their own pictures which doesn't happen for the paper so they need to learn what works online and what doesn't. Increasingly, this will apply to audio and video too.

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Online headlines – they hook the reader and also serve as a link to the full story

Q: Should online headlines be handled differently from print headlines?
         Yes   13   No   3

Q: Do you have guidelines for online headline writing?
         Yes   10   No   6
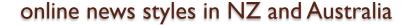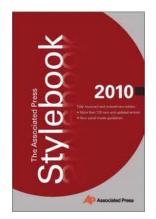
Q: Would guidelines be useful here?
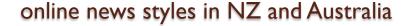   *Yes   15   No   0*

- Shorter headlines suit the medium. Puns and alliteration don't work in online headlines as they don't grab the attention of search engines

- A print headline is seen in context. An online headline is seen in different ways on different pages, often out of context

 - Online headlines need to be more precise, in print you can generally fit more in and use a head deck as well. Online needs to be short and snappy
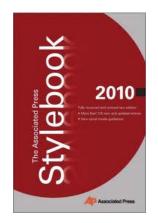
online news styles in NZ and Australia

Online headlines

- Location/subject on certain stories should be added. This will also be picked up by search engines. The "now" often needs to be emphasised; the technology allows greater freedom but this needs to be used carefully.

- While the official line is that online headlines are the same as for the newspaper, the online staff do use more humour etc to give what one editor described as a more "jaunty" feel to headlines

- On important newspaper stories I could spend half an hour on the right four words that would fit. In online the formula is different - make it snappy, attention grabbing and likely to catch the eye of Mr Google. I don't want it to date in search engines. I try to fit keywords in and I don't get clever or cute.
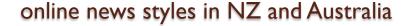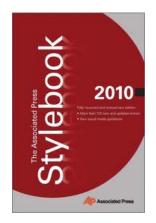
online news styles in NZ and Australia

Online headlines

- Online readers are different to traditional newspaper readers as they don't appreciate clever headlines.

- I still like a heading that sings. I have a sub's love of language, rhythm, cadence, poetry, haiku, etymology, mythology. Online, it's crucial to have the facts in the heading, or for it to be enticing - clickbait - in some other way.

Our online subs don't just sub words, they are section editors too. Some have been newspaper subs. Increasingly the new staff have not.

Each is responsible for liaising with reporters, copytasting wire copy, subbing, finding and cropping pictures, doing site layout, changing heroes and switchers and so on.

Now we have a new kind of phrasing ideal, one that shows up high on search results and boosts unique browsers and page hits. You don't need to know Shakespeare to do that.
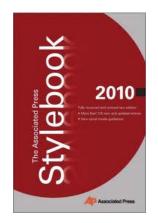
online news styles in NZ and Australia

Conclusions:

1. On matters of style, Australian editors and subs are divided over whether their websites need different treatment and separate guidelines

2. Some say no change is needed to their existing style book, while others want to see additional guidelines on: linking and social media, key words, subheads, bullet points, abbreviations etc (mix of policies and aesthetics)

3. Some see 'style' as a proxy for broader standards and want to hold the line on accuracy, consistency, grammar, spelling etc; others accept that time constraints mean these standards are inevitably compromised.

4. The Age is presenting two faces to the world – the racy age.com.au and the more cerebral nationaltimes.com.au – with different attitudes to style.

5. Online headlines – most say they need different treatment and most have developed guidelines.

6. Headline differences include: shorter, more prosaic, contain key words (for search engines) including who and where. Also, they need to work alone, ie with no context.

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Comparisons with New Zealand responses:

1. Kiwis editors were unanimous that websites required different approaches to style and separate guidelines

2. They raised specific issues that online guidelines needed to cover:
   italics, honorifics, abbreviations,
   tenses, voice, names, story length,
   tonal choice, hyperlinks, social
   media contributions

online news styles in NZ and Australia

Future research options:

• A more detailed look at newsrooms that are updating their stylebook
 - using a focus group of editors plus a case study of the development of
an online stylebook, possibly at nzherald.co.nz

• How ignoring/relegating style is impacting on the credibility of news
websites

• Further integration of Te Waha Nui, print and online

online news styles in NZ and Australia

References:

Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the internet.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lee, A., & Treadwell, G. (2009). *Newspaper editing and design: A guide to production journalism.* Auckland: Pearson Education.