House rules apply . . .

a preliminary investigation into online news styles in NZ

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'That's tautology, you foolish ass!'

Telegraph Style Book

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THE GREAT SEA SERPENT CAUGHT AT LAST.

The *New York Tribune* publishes a long letter from Charles Seabury, master of the whale-ship *Monongahela*, giving an account of the capture of the sea serpent, in latitude 3 deg. 10 min. S., and long. 131 deg. 50 min. W., on the 13th of January. After describing the various manœuvres executed to kill and catch the monster hitherto deemed fabulous, the captain thus proceeds with his narrative :—

While we were at work he gradually rose to the surface, and around him floated what I took to be pieces of his lungs, which we had cut with our lances. To make our work sure we continued to lance, eagerly seeking for his life, when he drew himself up and we pulled away, and then witnessed the terrific dying struggles of the monster. None of the crew who witnessed that terrible scene will ever forget it ; the evolutions of the body were rapid as lightning, seeming like the revolving of a thousand enormous black wheels. The tail and head would occasionally appear in the surging bloody foam, and a sound was heard, so dead, unearthly, and expressive of acute agony, that a thrill of horror ran through our veins. The convulsive efforts lasted ten or fifteen minutes, when they suddenly stopped ; the head was partly raised—it fell—the body partly turned, and lay still. I took off my hat, and nine terrific cheers broke simultaneously from our throats. Our prey was dead.

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. House style is not designed to frustrate reporters trying to bring an individual style to their writing. 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)

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From the Daily Telegraph:

Why have a house style? We need one to provide conformity not just in our newspapers but on our website, and to ensure that we are all speaking the same language.
The style should help to imbue all our media with individuality.
To echo the introduction to a previous style book: "Its aims are accuracy, immediacy, clarity and readability. And the greatest of these is not clarity but accuracy."

And later:

For the most part . . . usages will be common to the whole of both newspapers and to the *Telegraph* website.

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As the foreword to *Waterhouse on Newspaper Style*, Keith Waterhouse quoted George Orwell:

> A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. (Waterhouse, 1989, p. 5)

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'The Internet world is an extremely fluid one, with users exploring its possibilities of expression . . . It seems to be in a permanent state of transition, lacking precedent, struggling for standards, and searching for direction.'
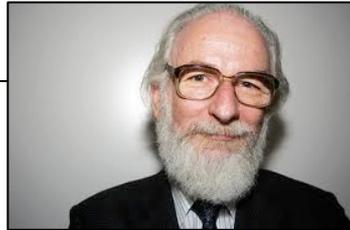
- David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*

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Why research this?

• the researchers are print and production journalists (turned academics) who have a keen interest in style
• a strong sense that shovelware continues to dominate NZ news websites and a desire to study the implications of that
• an inkling that editors and sub-editors are aware that style changes could improve the online reader's experience but don't have time to do much about it
• to inform our own integration of print and online editing courses (research-led teaching)

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Methodology:

• A videotaped interview with the multi-media editor of nzherald.co.nz, a leading NZ news site
• A targeted small-scale qualitative survey of those in a variety of key editorial positions
  • Thematically-centred content analysis of responses
  • Some implications extracted from the quantitative data collected

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Taped interview

Jeremy Rees, multimedia editor, nzherald.co.nz

Rees described five aspects to online style that he considers relevant for nzherald.co.nz:

1. Design style, 'how many pixels you use and where the line goes'
2. The Guide, 'how you load things onto the site and a few rules on using social media'
3. A few rudimentary guidelines on writing a caption and where the photo credit goes
4. 'The Editor's Banned Words' – Wanganui/Whanganui etc
5. A guide to writing in an 'online-centric way'
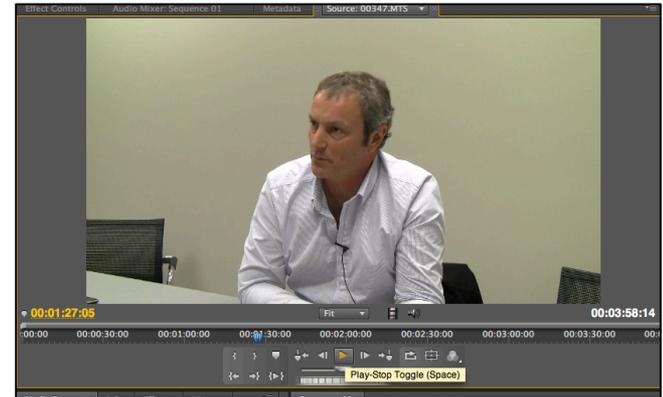
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Jeremy Rees:

The fifth bit is probably the bit that you are most interested in which I don't think we've grappled with correctly which is what you're talking about which is how do we change things from being print-centric to being online-centric. And I think that's where we're grappling with not in a decent sort of way. I think we do it ad hoc ... I think we have to accept sometimes that 98% of what we load may well remain print-centric – an AP story, a wire story, a Herald story that is not going to have high readership, can probably stay [as it is].

[But] if we come back to what we've referred to, laughingly a little bit internally here as the Superstory where we think this is important, this is what people want to read, then let's not just do it in the same way. So the 2% is what we're worried about.

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Other key comments:

You have beaten me to this question by a day because tomorrow the inaugural online styleguide committee meets to start thrashing out the styleguide.

The Herald *styleguide is on the intranet for the* Herald *newspaper and for the website and we at this stage use it as the main repository for online style as well. So a decision made about Wanganui or Whanganui will operate across both. Now that's not necessarily right. I think they should have different styles at times.*

[In 10 years] we'll certainly have different styles and different ways of doing things [online]. I think it is always underestimated by myself and media companies just how much there is to learn for each different medium, let alone to have people conversant across two or three.

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The survey

Participants were quizzed on

- their newsroom stylebook
- the existence or non-existence of specific online style guidelines in their newsroom
- their views on
    - the need for online style guidelines
    - online guidelines for headline writing

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Respondents:

A total of 11 made up of

• 6 newspaper editors – a mix of city and provincial papers
• a major news group stylebook co-ordinator
• an online editor at a provincial daily
• a chief sub at a major business weekly
• a chief sub for a provincial newspaper group
• a deputy editor at a city-based magazine with a strong online presence

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The numbers game

Quantitatively, the numbers may not be statistically very significant in that they are a small sample of the population of editors and production journalists in NZ
- necessarily small as part of a small-group, elite subjects survey
- but interesting as part of qualitative, thematic analysis

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Q: Do you believe some matters of style need to be treated differently online?
   Yes   *11*
   No   *0*

Q: Do you believe aspects of online writing that are different from print journalism need in-house guidelines?
   Yes   *11*
   No   *0*

Q: Do you have any style guidelines specifically for online journalism?
   Yes   *2*
   No   *9*

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Qualitative responses

On why they do or do not have online style guidelines:

Yes: *The immediacy element of internet news is forcing a huge pressure on the 'now' factor of internet writing. The notions of using the present tense, short sentences and language that engages interaction are all an important part of this. While these principles all find their roots in newspaper writing, their use online is different as they obtain a more 'conversational' approach and demand . This is to ensure ease and fast speed of reading as well as an 'information experience' as opposed to just 'reading the news'.*
Often the best online news writing is from journalists with a background in radio - not newspaper.

No: Fairfax style book covers stories filed by journalists who work for print and web. The copy is most often filed for a dual purpose, appearing on more than one platform.

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No: Because we don't have a large enough editorial team to produce a large amount of web content in house, so a portion of our online content is sourced from other media. This is then loaded directly to the website by our web technicians in its original form (which at times is not in line with our in house style guide - used for [the] magazine) so there isn't really a point having a special style guide for online until are able to produce all of our own web editorial. (we have a sort of guideline but no official style guide)

No: Our website material is cut and pasted from the print edition by the chief reporter / graphic artist in "downtime". We do add photo galleries, polls and have your say, but it comes down to resources at this time. We're aware that we should tailor our content to web readers rather than simply take the easy route.

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On why they do or do not think some matters of style need to be treated differently online:

Yes: *Headlines: space restrictions do not apply on the web. A heading that makes sense in a print context with a picture beside it may not work without the image immediately available; nor might a heading squeezed to fit a physical print space work on the web. Headings need to have "click-through" factor.*
Language may be more relaxed in a web context.
Honorifics - may not be used on the web but generally are in print news stories.
Length of stories.
Layering of extra information in packages.

Yes: *A less formal style of writing can be used online, depending on subject matter. For example honorifics should be dropped from most stories. First-person writing can be used more widely online. Stories need to be shorter than in print versions, it is harder to keep a reader's attention online.*

Yes: *Real time reporting, as per radio. No saids, or reported speech, or long quotes. No weighty background. Nothing as pedantic as Penfolds chief executive Brian Ross. Just Penfolds chief Brian Ross.*

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Yes: *Probably the key issue is in the writing of time. While in a newspaper the writer has a 'one hit wonder' type approach to an article, on the web that writer is producing content that will be viewed now, later, tomorrow, in a week's time and beyond. The author is also working in a capacity to roll a story, not just give it a once-over.*
This makes redundant style such as: "The man sat on the cat yesterday at 8pm."
The internet demands a more specific time frame as it is less obvious what day the article is written for:
"The man sat on the cat at 8pm on Tuesday, November 16."
Better yet for the internet (but not always possible); to provide the urgency needed, the style would be broken down to:
"The man is preparing to sit on the cat."
soon followed by:
"The man is crouched and close to making the move to sit on the cat."
then:
"The cat is screeching as the man sits on it."
and to finish - reported the next morning as an event analysis:
"The vet says the cat requires surgery to its tail after a man sat on it at 8pm on Tuesday, November 16."

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Yes: *Italics are traditionally used for newspapers, film, books and artworks. However, we have found that Italics are harder to read online and have therefore stopped using them. We have also adopted an informal language style. In print we only allow the use of the royal we to refer to the newspaper but online we use it often as part of our cheeky, informal approach. Our headlines reflect this too. We do this to appeal to the much younger audience online.*

We struggled with tenses and with honorifics. In the paper we use honorifics and the past tense. There was a strong argument for no honorifics and present tense online but, finally, our publisher decided to stick with honorifics and past tense across platforms.

One problem we have observed and are having to convince writers about is the clutter of acronyms and abbreviations online that would never appear in the paper. Reporters argue that the younger audience is happy with acronyms. We argue that it is hard to read acronymns online.

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... cont.
Although the word government is always spelled out in [XXX print], we accept govt in online headlines because it is an accepted online contraction. I suspect more will be accepted as time goes by.
Instead of writing paragraphs about the history of the story, we add lots of hyperlinks. In addition we offer raw data stories - a transcript from a press conference or a speech which is run near the main story.
We do send out Twitter messages ahead of big stories.
Stories online are permitted to be longer than those in print but they must be broken up with crossheads.

Yes: Not many at this stage. Just exploring possibilities; how print stories can be presented online. I would imagine some online stories to be less formal/pompous style-wise, such as surnames for artists, musicians, etc.

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On why they do or do not think online writing that is different from print journalism needs in-house guidelines?

Yes: Different readership, different needs, different pattern of approaching and reading material, of absorbing and using information.

Yes: Online needs INVOLVEMENT. Embedded links. Emotional grab words. Through every paragraph. Blocks of text need to portray at a glance the notion, hey, wow, there's something going on here that I need to get involved in. in a fifty word block the writer should really be working for me... bombarding me with links i can share with my mates at the pub... eg wow did you see what Fairfax did with the Aggassi biography: steff looked so INTENT! up there in the stand.

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Yes: To ensure consistency, guidelines are always necessary.

Yes: Consistency and structure - there is a huge danger of the speed wobbles with web filing because there is so much emphasis on speed and many inexperienced people filing. There's also an incorrect belief that the standards of language, grammar and accuracy required are less on the web.

Yes: Stories, particularly intros need to shorter online. Eye catching headlines/intros are more important than in print.

Yes: ability to link affects need to add history/context; story length needs to be restricted

Yes: Consistency is important, although it is not something that the audience seems to raise as an issue.

Yes: Some journalists take "informal" as a starting point for rather loose writing and some cross the line from reportage to commentary.

Yes: Consistency and integrity. Content defines us.

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On why they do or do not think think the writing of online headlines should be treated differently from print headlines?

Yes: They need to be shorter. Long headlines don't tend to fit on a web page, whereas they are often needed to fill column width in a paper. The concept of hooking a reader and hyperlink as dual role is one and the same. If it hooks a reader - they will click on it

Yes: Because it's a different audience than the print reader, and we haven't altogether appreciated the subtle differences yet. Just as we pride ourselves on tailoring our print editions to the hard-copy reader, we should take the time and trouble to learn about the web audience and its wants / needs, and tailor the website edition for them.

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Yes: Our print headlines are intended to attract an old-fashioned print reader; they often use word-play and an offbeat, feature tone that's not appropriate for the hyperlinked, more info-seeking web reader.

Yes: eg Guitarist Seth Whyte trapped underground. Embedded link to his faceboox or website, with the word underground linked or the line Read more. Peripheral vision reigns on the net. Casual, fleeting. Headlines online must push more buttons than in newspapers or magazines, which are more in your face.

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On whether they think guidelines for online headline writing would be useful:

No: It's no different to newspaper headline writing - just a bit tighter.

Yes: Often stories filed to the web are handled by people not experienced in heading writing or subbing.
Need to maximise serach engine accessibility in headings

No: because we would follow the guidelines of writing print headlines so in our particualar situation it wouldn't be needed

Yes: Because it's a different audience than the print reader, and we haven't altogether appreciated the subtle differences yet. Just as we pride ourselves on tailoring our print editions to the hard-copy reader, we should take the time and trouble to learn about the web audience and its wants / needs, and tailor the website edition for them.

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Conclusions:

1. NZ print production journalists are aware of the growing differential between print and online journalism in terms of the style in which to best present news information
2. NZ print production journalists are clearly of the view online style guidelines need to be developed
3. Most newspaper newsrooms that also supply content to a website do not have guidelines for the style in which to best do that
4. Issues that were raised included italics, honorifics, abbreviations, tenses, voice, names and headline writing
5. The range of issues normally associated with house style may need to be broadened to encompass internet-specific issues like story length, tonal choices, hyperlinks, social media contributions etc

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Future research:

• Proposal to broaden this initial foray to include Australian newsrooms

• A focus group of editors combined with a case study of the development of an online stylebook, possibly at nzherald.co.nz

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