

Editor

An editor is one who prepares the work of another for publication, through a process of selection, arrangement and revision. According to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, the term derives from Latin: “producer (of games), publisher’, from *edit-*, *edere* ‘put out’”(“Editor.”). The main function of a modern editor is to correct, condense and amend a textual production in order to make it appear to the best advantage and to make it readily understandable to its intended audience, thus, their position in the construction of a work is crucial. An editor serves as a representative of the reader and thus the primary responsibility of any editor should always extend towards the reader rather than the author. Editing essentially consists of a series of decisions; throughout this process, an editor must strive to serve the interests of the reader at all times, dictating the most suitable form for the work and ensuring the provision of any supplementary material necessary to inform the reader.

The experience of editing can differ greatly according to context and the type of source materials utilised. While some editors deal with a single manuscript, others compile editions from a variety of different sources. This is a frequent occurrence within medieval studies where a wide variety of scribal manuscripts of the same work may be in existence. Editors working with printed texts face similar difficulties in instances where various different editions of a work have appeared at the hands of publishers, adding considerable complexity to the decision-making process. Similarly, the experience of editing a live author must necessarily be vastly different from the process of editing the work of one who is no longer alive and capable of direct engagement with the editorial process. In recent times the meaning of the term ‘editor’ has widened and the editorial function is now recognised as an important component within film and media production. The widespread utility of electronic and internet resources apparent within contemporary culture has added new dimensions to editorial processes and has led to an increased awareness of the importance of digital editing and the part it plays in the dissemination of texts and knowledge. Clearly, editing takes place in a variety of forms and frameworks; disparity in the circumstances surrounding experiences of editing reveals each one to be in a degree unique, with editors facing both similar and distinct challenges.

While traditionally the role of the editor has been viewed as minor and secondary, recent studies in book history and editorial processes have led to increased critical discussion concerning the importance of the editor in literary production and ideas of the editor as a collaborator figure. Arthur Plotnik’s reflection that an author writes in order to communicate what is burning inside of them and that an editor is required “to let the fire show through the smoke” supplies a useful metaphor to describe the editorial task (Plotnik 31). However, Plotnik’s statement that “an editor’s job is to shape the *expression* of an author’s thoughts, not the thoughts themselves” proves somewhat problematic and links into contemporary debates surrounding editorial agency (Plotnik 32). Plotnik’s confidence

that a good editor will never intrude on the terrain of the author appears unrealistic and creates an idealised editorial figure, capable of transcending bias and maintaining a position of complete neutrality. Editors, in actuality, play a significant part in the creation of a work and its meaning through the decisions they make, yet their influence is often disregarded by critical analysis. Every editor occupies a dual position, that of editor and that of reader, operating in a sense, as a reader possessed of the power to amend and revise a work. In reality, no editorial process can ever be neutral, rather, these processes are shaped by unconscious biases and the finished text modified according to an editor's own interpretation and understanding of an author's work, which are in turn formed by their engagement with the text as individual readers shaped by cultural and ideological forces and myriad networks of intertextual relation. The extent to which an editor serves as an active and shaping force in literary production can perhaps never be fully determined but conceptions of editing need to expand in order to consider the significant formative influence editors exert on texts, the fundamental importance of the choices they make (and the motivations underpinning them) and the complex entanglement of the editor in the creative process.

Works Consulted

“Edit.” The Concise Oxford English Dictionary. 11th ed. 2006.

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Plotnik, Arthur. The Elements of Editing: A Modern Guide for Editors and Journalists. Macmillan: New York, 1982.

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