

Copyeditingfortheblind

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Copyeditors have some concern for design, considering the appearance of the printed page and the space distributed over it. But there is a specialist form of copyediting for which no visual criteria apply, and indeed they must be deliberately discarded and counter-balanced. This is the preparation of material to be read aloud on cassettes for the blind.

I regularly edit selections from our local newspapers for 'Whatnews', a cassette distributed fortnightly to about a hundred people in this area who are registered as visually handicapped. The work is all voluntary: editing, reading, recording, copying the master-tape, distributing – and is funded as a charity.

Selection of items from the paper is the first step. There are 40 minutes of tape to fill with readings, including introductory music, vocal links, etc., and two weeks' papers to cut out from. Wielding the scissors and mounting the cuttings on A4 cardboard sheets for the readers to hold is just the manual stage. We then have to adapt the content for aural presentation.

Most obviously excised are references to photographs accompanying stories: 'Mabel, pictured, told our reporter...' 'Mr Jones, seen on the right, said ...'. Such throwaway substitutes for captions can lurk quite obscurely in a block of text, and need careful watching for. The story may begin, 'These happy youngsters ...' -- meaningless without the picture. Many a recording has had to be stopped when a reader is heard to draw attention to a picture down the microphone.

Headlines also go. These in fact make chiefly a visual contribution to a newspaper, breaking up the page and allotting degrees of importance by their size, rather than making any contribution to the stories. In local papers they try to be attention-grabbing, wanting the reader to choose to read on; our listeners have no power of selection. The headlines are joky, depending on the photographs alongside for their points -- often terrible puns, wasted in reading on tape, or comments by the reporters, meaningless till the subject of the story is known: readers know the subject from the photograph -- listeners don't.

Headlines' other function, that of introducing a new story, we achieve by switching voices. We have at least two readers for each tape, and each new item is read by a new voice. As for the announcement aspect of headlines -- newspaper reports are almost always summarized in the first sentence, where all the keywords will occur. Emphasizing these (by underlining on the cutting, to show the reader which words to stress) self-headlines each new report. If not, I write a short introduction and paste it above the cutting for the reader: more often a group heading, such as 'We now have three reports of local finances'.

So headlines and captions are cut; other items have to be added. Abbreviations in print, such as e.g., i.e., W.G.C. for Welwyn Garden City, our town, sound false read aloud, and in fact take no longer to say in full: 'for example', 'that is'. I ring such abbreviations to indicate to the readers the vocal

equivalent of 'spell out'. The strange, staccato, 'Mavis, 23, married John, 27' found in print needs constant insertion of 'aged' or even 'years old' to sound natural. (But there is not much room for copyediting marks on newsprint!)

Listeners do not have the control over the material, and choice of attention, that readers do. There is no form of indexing on our cassettes. The listeners can only skip what bores them if they know how long it will last; only fast-forward to their favourite regular feature if it is always in the same position on the cassette; only have any idea what to expect if the introduction to each tape outlines the contents and their order, and if the overall format is the same for each issue. With different volunteer teams taking turns to produce tapes, standardization can be very difficult to achieve, which is frustrating for listeners.

As well as changing what was composed for visual comprehension to an aural format, we have the problem of conflating two weeks' papers for one tape. The papers appear mid-week; we record on alternate Saturdays, post the tapes on Sunday, and generally they are delivered the Monday following the second paper's publication. This means we must eliminate nearly all dates; 'on Tuesday' or 'last week' are ambiguous, with a choice of two Tuesdays and weeks; and the tape is not received until nearly a week after the second paper is out. This in turn necessitates fine work with tenses. 'The firm announced a profit last week', terminated to a timeless 'the firm announced a profit', is very abrupt. Substitution of the perfect tense solves this every time: 'the firm has announced a profit'. Elegant, but a lot of work through each issue!

Other markings on the cuttings are guides for the readers. Telephone numbers should be read at the end of items, by which time listeners will know whether or not they want to note them; and, of course, must be read slowly, perhaps twice, after advice that they are coming.

Whether to exercise sensitive censorship of terminology is a disputed question in the Talking Newspaper world. 'People are asked to keep an eye on their neighbours'; 'The town garden is a sight for sore eyes': should we substitute less visual metaphors? Although we are often told how brave and accepting our blind listeners are, I feel that among a hundred some may find such thoughtless vocabulary of the sighted distressing, emphasizing their disadvantage. I replace such phrases.

One makes no attempt to rewrite the papers literately. That would be to open a whole new can of worms ...

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