

The Curse of the Hungry Proofreader

This past holiday season, I bought a Christmas music CD at a local discount store. Considering that I spent all of \$5 on it, it wasn't a bad CD at all, featuring an orchestra and boy choir singing both older, traditional carols and a few more modern ones, including my absolute favorite at the moment, John Rutter's 1967 creation, "The Shepherd's Pipe Carol" (on the Web at www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfQISWFyzz8).

But I was more than amused to see that on the CD cover, as well as on the CD itself, this marvelous piece of music is referred to as "The Shepherd's *Pie* Carol." Now, there are many reasons why an error of this kind could have been made. One, the list of carols was related orally to some harried desktopper, who did the best he or she could to discern what was said, but ultimately failed. (I have committed this kind of mistake myself, so I can sympathize.) Or, some very politically correct proofreader, reading "Pipe" in the title, and thinking of tobacco and not flutes, may have thought, "That *can't* be right," and so changed it to something more "appropriate." (Food, after all, is a common denominator in holiday music; hence "The Cherry Tree Carol," "The Boar's Head Carol," "The Wassail Bowl," and even "Chestnuts

Roasting on an Open Fire.")

But my favorite scenario is that it was approaching lunchtime when the proofreader, having had a totally inadequate breakfast of coffee and then more coffee, saw "shepherd's pipe" and thought "shepherd's pie." Who can blame this hungry proofer, who probably didn't get paid enough to eat a decent breakfast anyway?

So, why am I taking your valuable time with this little tale? It's to confess to you that, try as hard as we might to produce a perfect issue of the magazine, we will always fall victim to what can be called "the curse of the hungry proofreader," otherwise known as "human error."

This year, I celebrate my 40th year in the publishing business—35 of those in *nuclear-related* publishing. In all that time, no matter how hard I have tried, I have never been able to produce the perfect, error-free publication. It just doesn't seem possible.

Errors happen. I mis-hear something, and a little while later, there, for all the world to see, is my error in stark black print on a white page. I misspell an author's name (the unforgivable sin in journalism), and I don't notice it until *after* the magazine is in print. Or, worse, I never notice it, until someone else brings it to



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my attention. I have even put the wrong page reference on the cover. (Meekly: More than once.)

Why is it that we can see a page a half a dozen times before it goes to

the printer, and then can see a set of printer's proofs for a final check, and we *still* don't see an error until the publication is in print? And then, like a zit on prom night, the error rises up from nowhere and becomes the only thing we see.

Early in my career, in the 1970s, typesetting and printing involved a lot more hard copy than today. Columns of text were literally pasted on boards, and spaces were left for photos to be inserted by the printer. These photos were sent along with the associated page, and the cropings were dutifully marked. But still, photos got lost, photos got inserted upside down, photos were incorrectly cropped, so that the object of importance was left out of the printed photo completely. Sure, we got a set of printer's proofs to check before publication, and many of these errors were caught, but a few always managed to sneak past us.

Worse yet, the columns of text, being literally pasted down on the boards, sometimes fell off on the way to the printer, leaving a nice blank space on the page. Sometimes you saw it, sometimes you didn't—until it was too late.

With the advent of desktop typesetting in the mid-1990s, those types of errors went away, but, amazingly enough, new kinds of errors took their place. We quickly learned that the digital text you approved just

before it went from the desktop to the printer will somehow "stream" differently at the printer's, so that fonts change, special characters (bullets, letters with umlauts, that sort of thing) morph into totally different special characters, and word splits at the ends of lines become utterly unreliable. So, instead of "co-worker," you get "cow-orker," or worse, instead of "friend-ship," you get "friends-hip." And, sometimes, during the streaming, whole chunks of text get lost. Just like in the old days.

Once in a while, however, even when you get it right, someone will accuse you of making a mistake (this happens rarely, but it *does* happen). A case in point: Last October, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a front-page headline about something or someone "running the gauntlet." Scores, perhaps hundreds of readers responded by pointing out the "spelling error" in the headline. Not so, the *Tribune* replied the next day. It turns out that "gauntlet" is the correct spelling for the armored glove, while "gantlet" (which is pronounced exactly the same) is the correct spelling for the parallel lines of people, armed with clubs, sticks, rocks, or whatever, between which a hapless felon/prisoner/captive must try to run. Who knew? (The *Tribune* writers and proofreaders, that's who!)

In our correction notices, we like to call these errors "printer's errors," but really, the printer is usually not the one at fault. We on the pre-printing end of the business are. However, once in a while, we really do suffer from a printer's error. Last January, I got a call from a subscriber informing me that his copy of the Jan./Feb. 2009 issue of *Radwaste Solutions* (an otherwise "perfect" issue—ha ha) was missing some pages. I quickly checked the copies I had on hand and found that some of them were all right, but one or two were missing the same pages. I alerted the printer, and we did a little check on all the copies at ANS Headquarters. It turned out that only a handful of copies were missing the pages, and we quickly sent replacement copies to all those who had received defective ones. In the bad copies, the missing pages had simply been omitted during the binding process.

I belabor this topic because I want to assure you, dear reader, that, regardless of the minimal chance of success, we at *Radwaste Solutions* are dedicated to producing that elusive perfect issue. Perhaps it's this very issue you have in hand. Perhaps it will be the next one. In the meantime, if you find an error, be sure to let me know (editor@radwastesolutions.org). Just break it to me gently—after 40 years, my psyche is getting pretty fragile.—Nancy J. Zacha, Editor ■