

On the Modification of Reprints

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I do not wash my hands more than usual, but I have on occasion thrown away a stack of reprints I have received from a publisher and replaced it with reproductions that I have painstakingly corrected by hand. I have gotten better at making modifications. Transfer letters are available that match standard typefaces (10-point Times Roman is especially common), and with a razor knife and some patience, I find that I can now make changes that are virtually invisible.¹

¹ As I understand the third edition of the APA *Publication Manual* (p. 169), authors of articles under APA copyright are allowed to reproduce their own articles for the purpose of preparing reprints that are not for commercial use.

I mentioned this rather casually over lunch recently with three senior members of the field of psychology—each from a different university. To my amazement, they all said that they had never modified their own reprints, that they had never heard of anyone doing so (at least in the rather anal/professional manner I described), and that they objected to the practice. I was told that to modify a reprint is to destroy its “archival value.”

I had no idea that the practice needed defending, but I did my best to defend it. I offer here a more considerable defense, primarily to provoke discussion that might lead to the development of pertinent standards.

No matter what precautions are taken, both trivial and nontrivial typographical errors often make their way into the final published version of an article. The opportunity to correct page proofs or galleys invariably helps, but one's corrections are occasionally ignored, or more commonly, in correcting one error the typesetter creates one or two more. An especially creative individual added 11 errors to the final published version of an article I published a few years ago. The kinds of errors that turn up can change the meaning and cause embarrassment. A printer in Holland recently invented a new institution by combining two of my affiliations, though I had marked the error on the page proofs. In an essay about B. F. Skinner, I wrote, “One forgets in casual conversation that he is the quintessential behaviorist,” and so the page proofs read, “But in the published version the sentence became, ‘One forgets casual conversation that is in the quintessential behaviorist.’”

My elder colleagues and I agreed that readers should be spared or at least alerted to such errors, but the question is *how*. When an error is profound, one can contact the editor, who will usually graciously offer to print an erratum in an upcoming issue of the journal—say, six months hence. This covers one's behind but is otherwise a useless practice. In normal scholarly research, one seeks out the original article, errors and all, and the article gives no clues about subsequently published errata (nor, of course, does it tell you that that 150.0 should be 15.00).

The suggestion was made that

one should mark one's corrections rather conspicuously—say, in blue ink—on each reprint to alert the reader not only that the printer made an error but that *you* have corrected it. One could object that such corrections might be illegible or, worse yet, just plain ugly—or that the process sounds too tiresome. A more cogent objection has to do with the “archival value” of the change. Could a reader tell, looking at a reprint of someone else's article that he or she may have received 15 years earlier, who moved that decimal point or switched the order of those words? Was it the reader, a zealous research assistant, or the author? Could it have been a remorseful typesetter?

Another suggestion, which I find more appealing, is to attach to the reprint a list of errata. The APA enclosed a list of this sort, as I recall, with the second edition of the *Publication Manual*. This method is unappealing only in that it places the burden on the reader to make the corrections. But why, I wonder, should I subject my reader even once to “the boy was 18 cm high and 22 cm wide” when I wrote the “box”?

Putting the archival issue aside for the moment, is there anything unethical about making alterations in a reprint and not alerting a reader to them? I can think of extreme cases in which the answer is either clearly no or clearly yes. I see nothing unethical about changing “boy” to “box.” But whether it is ethical to change the dimensions of the box is less clear, and it would surely be unethical to alter a *p* value without alerting the reader, even if the new value is the correct one. Changing substantive data would invariably cause confusion and could easily damage an author's reputation. (I have *never* changed data.)

One of the psychologists I was chatting with suggested that if I insisted on sending out flawless reprints, I should at least stamp them with a message like “Typesetting errors have been eliminated from this reprint.” That seemed reasonable to me until she added that she would be reluctant to quote anything from a reprint that came to her so stamped.

No matter how one makes one's corrections—by publishing errata in the journal, by correcting by hand with blue ink, by attaching a sheet, or by what I like to think of as more



artistic means—one creates an irritating problem for scholars: Which version should one *quote*—the flawed original journal version or the corrected reprint version? I vote for the latter, because it presumably is the most accurate record of what the author wanted to say. But then should one cite the journal or the reprint? How does one cite a reprint—Jones (1984 reprint)? The same problem exists with respect to published errata. How does one quote and cite a quotation that has been modified by a published erratum? The answer might be simply to quote whichever version one wants to quote (I still vote for the author's best) and then to explain the details in a footnote.

I still believe that authors should have the prerogative of sending out professionally corrected reprints that look like what the typesetter was supposed to set—perhaps rubber stamped as I have indicated above. When printers reprint books, they make many corrections and do not flag them for readers. Errors in newspapers, I am told, are corrected continuously throughout the day, so that late editions are more correct than early editions. And when journal articles are reprinted in books, not only corrections but also improvements are often made. Ideal scenarios for journals are easy to envision. After the journal is published, the author sends the printer a list of corrections. The printer republishes the journal and mails it out all over again, or perhaps sends out gummed labels that list errata, or at least sends corrected reprints to the author.

The point I am making is simply that the so-called "archival value" of the journal article is a myth created by a lack of resources—a grandiose rationale for the fact that we are stuck with whatever version of our article the printer happens to give us. Neither we, nor the printer, nor the market will bear the expense of fixing the errors. The sacredness of the first published version would disappear if journals were continuously corrected. We would speak routinely then about versions of an article (we do so now when an article has been revised to appear in a book) and would probably assume that the first is the most flawed. When large shared data bases become more common as vehicles for scholarly exchange, authors will probably up-

date and correct their papers frequently. One might cite the 1991.1.3 version of a scholarly work, just as one now buys the 1984.1.3 version of a computer program.

Technology may soon help in another way. I have had several documents typeset in recent months by telecommunicating text directly from the word processor on which I now write manuscripts to a typesetting machine at a nearby printing firm. The cost is low, and the only errors I have found have been mine. The human typesetter is out of the loop (and, alas, out of a job). Existing journals would profit (indeed, they would save a great deal of money) by allowing authors to telecommunicate their text to an editor or printer as a last step before publication.

I look forward to seeing some guidelines on these issues in the next modification of the *APA Publication Manual*.

REFERENCE

- American Psychological Association. (1983). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (3rd ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

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