

# Online news style—poking a hornet’s nest

A preliminary investigation into online styles in Australian and New Zealand newspapers

## ABSTRACT

Writing news for newspapers and websites typically demands conformity to a style that promotes clarity and ease of reading, and includes a publication’s house style, that inflexible set of rules that ensures things—from minutiae like monetary values to the great events of history—are expressed consistently every time they are mentioned. Against a background of disruptive technological changes in the wider world of journalism, this article grew out of the authors’ interest in the new style demands that arguably have arisen with the advent of online publishing. If online readers have a different set of habits—and researchers assure us they do—then how is house style being changed to accommodate this? Are newspapers with websites differentiating their online copy from their print copy? Or are they still stuck with so-called ‘shovelware’? Keen to ensure the university production journalism courses on which they teach are reflecting industry practice, the researchers surveyed and interviewed reporters, subeditors and editors from titles across Australia and New Zealand to find out, and interviewed the online editor of New Zealand’s largest newspaper. The research supports our hypothesis—that newsrooms are aware of a need to develop style guidelines for their online news stories but most have yet to truly grapple with the issue.

Keywords: house style, journalism, news reporting, online journalism, online editing, stylebook, subediting.

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THE BACKGROUND to this article lies in the authors' interest in the teaching of news reporting and production journalism and, in particular, the changes that are inevitably happening because of the internet's ever-increasing impact on the delivery of news. Almost nothing about journalism remains unchallenged by the so-called digital revolution (Hirst, 2011; McChesney & Nichols, 2010) and the resultant changes are clearly evident not just in the worlds of the reporter, photographer or columnist, but also in the world of production journalism. Here the key figures—the subeditor and his or her relatively new colleague, the web editor—are immersed in an industrial context that is increasingly fluid and unreliable. The job of production journalists has always been heavily determined by the technology available to them (Lee & Treadwell, 2009, p. 3). Where newspaper subs were once the fonts of all local knowledge, the institutional memory of their organisation's news agenda and the scourge of the cadets' desk, they now often find themselves, for efficiencies, working in remote situations, with editing and layout work outsourced to independent production companies or centralised subbing hubs that service numerous titles within one stable. In general, gone are the days where a sub at one end of a large newsroom may well have started as a junior reporter at the other end.

As well, the very nature of the day-to-day work by production journalists has changed, and continues to change, significantly. Excellence in online journalism, for a start, requires a new set of linguistic, technical and ethical parameters (Craig, 2011, pp. 7-24) and this very much involves the role of the subeditor. News cycles are revolving at ever-increasing speeds bringing less and less time for the work of editing. Content is being shared across print, online and mobile applications. Stories are now broken online with very little more information than something has happened. User-generated content needs management for ethical and legal reasons. Stories and their headlines are increasingly being shaped by the need to attract search engines. These news-workers are finding their job being reinvented in numerous ways thanks to the disruption of existing practice by technological change.

Within that relatively wide and shifting context it is reasonable to ask how this is affecting the minutiae of day-to-day news production. In other words how are the changes to the industrial and production contexts affecting the product of news itself and, in particular, online news? Within the environmental upheavals, is news itself changing and, if it is, is it changing *adequately*? For

example, despite on-going calls for newswriting that better suits an online environment, there is little evidence of mainstream news organisations doing other than transferring their print-writing styles to their websites. The authors set out to test a hypothesis they developed during teaching and research at AUT University—that so-called house style, developed over many decades to provide a surface consistency for the newspaper reader, was being used online, not because it was particularly suitable but because, like many other aspects of news, mainstream newsrooms had not got around to changing it yet.

Writing news for newspapers and websites typically demands conformity to a style that is designed to make the writing—and the writer—largely invisible and the text very easy to read. The simplicity of the language, the relatively narrow range of tonal values shared by news stories, the archetypal sentence and story structures employed by print and online journalists, methods of attribution used to separate fact from opinion in the narrative and the regularity of the grammatical furniture and punctuation of the text are all key signifiers of this sparse, easy-to-read news style. Along with a strong focus on word economy and the use of concrete language, they form the core of a recognisable linguistic bed for text-based news. Within such a familiar and reliable environment, readers can more easily absorb the important information being presented in the story. The writing *doesn't get in the way*, goes the theory. Indeed Robert Gunning, whose mission was to improve the experience of newspaper readers, devised a 'Fog Index' in 1951 to measure readability. This was based on the simple but arguably incontrovertible notion that the longer the sentences and the bigger the words, the harder a story is to read (Harrower, 2007). 'Gassy academic papers and foggy government reports' score in the twenties, notes Harrower (p. 51), while Winston Churchill's famous, high-impact speech—*We shall fight on the beaches* etc ...—scores a miserly and impressive 3.4.

Within that simple, straightforward newswriting style sits house style—that set of rules that determines how a news publication or, indeed, a stable of publications, presents multiple facets of the language of news. House style has been a key tool in the creation of consistency in print news for more than a century. Most style guides have a mix of general advice and particular requirements. They both exhort contributors to the publication to use 'clear and direct writing' (*The Herald Stylebook*, 1951, p. 1) and set out rulings on specifics such as a preference for Ethiopia over Abyssinia (*Style Book*, 1969,

p. 20). In 1928 the *Manchester Guardian* prescribed, among many other things, perhaps the most common and enduring of style directives—the way to present numeric values to newspaper readers.

Spell single figures. This rule does not apply where there is a quantity or where figures and words would be intermixed (as 10, two, 20, nine), or sums of money or the numeration of paragraphs, sections, or sentences. Figures commencing a sentence to be spelled out, also indefinite and round numbers, as ‘About twenty years ago’ or ‘fifty miles away,’ &c. Numerals must be caps. or l.c. according as the words with which they are connected are caps. or l.c., as Book IV., chap iv. (*The Style Book of the Manchester Guardian*, 1928)

This was *The Guardian’s* first edition of its now-famous stylebook—perhaps only second in fame to the AP Stylebook—and was introduced by the legendary C. P. Snow during his sixth decade as editor (Marsh, 2003). Such guides were to become commonplace as newspapers strove to present a uniform surface to their readers, not only with consistently straightforward prose but with syntactic architecture of such regularity it becomes effectively invisible. This was not just about readability but about the very credibility of the news organisation.

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 on a wide range of matters that are open to opinion, interpretation or prejudice . . . Without a common style, one reporter will abbreviate the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation to APEC, another to Apec. One correspondent will use NATO, another Nato. Inconsistencies like this don’t belong in a well-edited newspaper. For a start this kind of erratic treatment is irritating to the reader. It chips away at a news organisation’s credibility. While APEC versus Apec may seem a small matter, it reflects the standards a newspaper is aiming for. A team that gets the small things right will likely get the big things right too. (Lee & Treadwell, 2009)

Consequently, house style is a key component of any print news reporting or news production course—student journalists must learn both the importance

of a consistent style and that the nature of any style is that it will change over time as new language and ways of presenting it become acceptable. Production journalists—editors, subeditors and, where they still exist, proof-readers—have a duty to both hold back the tide of linguistic offences that constantly challenge the accepted boundaries of formal discourse and to know when a new form has such currency that it should appear in our news columns (Lee & Treadwell, 2009). Changes may reflect wider sociological phenomena, such as the dropping of the use of Mrs as an honorific, or simply the preference of the editor-in-chief for more sparing use of capitals and hyphens. But what happens to that gradual rate of change if changes to the wider world of news are as fundamental as being experienced during the so-called digital revolution? Theorists assure us the needs of the online reader are different to the needs of the print reader (Nielsen, 1999; Downman, 2008). They are even more time-poor than the archetypal newspaper reader who at least had their daily train ride or morning coffee during which to absorb the day's news. Online readers are much more likely to scan web pages and snatch at bites of information. Sentences need to be short. Paragraphs too. They need more visual signposts, like bullet points and bolded text. And, of course, there are elements to online writing, like hyper-text links, that have no print counterparts at all. How should *they* be presented?

**Online reading is an experience that's different from reading text in print.** A big part of that difference is physical: For most people, online reading takes longer—or feels as though it does. A computer screen displays text at a lower resolution, with less detail and sharpness than a printed page, so letters are fuzzier. And many people feel that their eyes tire faster reading text on a screen (especially a smaller screen) than reading type on paper.

**Most online readers scan first.** According to computer usability expert Jakob Nielsen, 'People rarely read web pages word by word; instead, they scan the page, picking out individual words and sentences.' Eye-tracking studies, which examine where people's eyes roam on a webpage, reveal these basic truths about site visitors:

- They scan to see whether the content is relevant.
- They are more likely to scan the top of the page than the bottom.
- They look at headings, boldfaced terms, and images.

Scanning requires less brainpower than reading.

**Concise sentences that convey their point quickly are more likely to grab visitors** than long, complex sentences and are more likely to entice people to explore further. (*Yahoo! Style Guide*, n.d.)

If online texts should be ‘concise, scannable and objective’ (Morkes & Nielsen, 1997), what are the implications for newswriting style and, within that, the subset of style rules known as house style?

The challenge for the web writer is to overcome readers’ impatience by keeping things as brief as possible. It’s a big challenge. Writing 250 breezy words on a given topic is usually harder than writing 1000 ... The key difference between writing for the Web and writing for offline readers is that Web writing needs to be shorter. (McGovern, Norton & O’Dowd, 2002)

If the spartan nature of news writing is to become even more spartan for on-line delivery, what is the effect on house style? Are newsrooms adapting their in-house style guides for online journalism? If a generally-accepted style for the concept of percentage for more than a century has been ‘per cent’ (two words, usually, but in this journal is one word) in the relatively generous environment of newspapers, should we abbreviate this to ‘%’ for the sake of time and space in digital journalism? If it is widely acknowledged that headlines in online journalism have a significantly-different role because of the need to get readers to click through from the home page to the story (Lee & Treadwell, 2009), then what guidelines have been developed for web editors to achieve this? And what are the implications of all this for journalism education programmes that have faithfully drummed both the importance and details of accepted house style into the heads of their students for generations?

To start answering these questions, the authors, both senior lecturers at AUT University in Auckland, New Zealand, set out to survey newsrooms in both Australia and New Zealand. The initial intention was to try to discover if house style was being adapted to meet perceived needs of online readers and record the views of senior editorial staff on such matters. Perhaps with more foresight the parameters of the research would have been widened because delving into issues of online house style quickly had responding journalists providing views and information on what they saw as a raft of deficiencies

about the way their organisations were treating the delivery of news online. These ranged from opprobrium at the age and journalistic qualifications of web editors used to publish online news to disgust from older journalists at so-called ‘progressive subbing’, which reflects the willingness of news organisations today to publish online information they are not entirely sure of as long as they can and do correct mistakes with urgency when they are pointed out to them. These broader issues are covered in a section further on in this article but it is worth noting here that asking a few relatively simple questions on online style was akin to poking a stick at a hornets’ nest and that there is clearly much more research to be done on the views of New Zealand and Australian journalists on the professional practices of mainstream online journalism. Editorial staff clearly saw this as an opportunity to put on record multiple gripes they had about the way their news organisations were delivering their online product.

### **Methodology and results**

Data were gathered using a cross-sectional survey of newsrooms across New Zealand and Australia and a videotaped interview with Jeremy Rees, the multi-media editor of the award-winning [nzherald.co.nz](http://nzherald.co.nz).

In the taped interview, Rees described five aspects to online style that he considered relevant for [nzherald.co.nz](http://nzherald.co.nz): design style (‘how many pixels you use and where the line goes’), rules for loading onto the site and ‘a few rules on using social media’, rudimentary guidelines on how to present photos and write online captions, a list of editor’s banned words and ‘a guide to writing in an online-centric way’.

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 not grappling with [it]. I think we do it ad hoc . . .

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 [the spelling of] 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. (Rees, 2011)

The survey questionnaire included a mix of closed and open questions: the closed questions generated quantitative data on how editors were adapting notions of print style to their news websites; the open questions generated case study data on what newsrooms are doing, and also gave insights into editors' attitudes. Responses to open questions were not formally coded but were instead treated as insightful anecdotes that fleshed out and explained participants' responses to the yes/no questions.

The questionnaire was sent to staff in senior production journalism roles, typically the newsroom's chief sub-editor. Approximately 260 questionnaires were emailed to newsrooms across both countries. The result was 27 usable responses, made up of 16 from Australia and 11 from New Zealand, representing a response rate of about 10 percent. Denscombe (2010) says that for large scale questionnaires it is common to get a response rate as low as 10 percent. However Baruch's large-scale study (1999) of questionnaire response rates in papers published in the behavioural sciences literature found an average response rate of 55 percent. While the 10 percent response in the authors' survey limits the ability to generalise, on the face of it the respondents represent a reasonable cross-section of large and small print/online news organisations across Australasia.

The Australian respondents were based at media organisations including major titles such as Melbourne's *The Age*, *The Australian* and *The West Australian*, through to regional and smaller community newspapers. New Zealand respondents represented a similar cross section of the news industry, with participants based at *The New Zealand Herald*, *National Business Review* and several provincial newspaper newsrooms. Whatever policies their news organisations were following on the issue, most of the production journalists surveyed believed that style was important. As one chief sub expressed it, 'I think it's still very important to maintain a sense of house "style" and adherence to grammar, spelling etc when writing online. The reasons that style guides were invented in the first place—ensuring consistency, accuracy, professionalism—still apply online.'

The survey asked four central questions on issues of house style, and two questions on approaches to online headlines (see Table 1). The first



question—Have you been discussing online style with your colleagues?—aimed to establish whether the issue was important to sub-editors themselves as practising professionals, irrespective of their employers’ newsroom policies. The researchers felt the second question—Do style issues require different treatment online?—would generate examples of style differences emerging between the two platforms. Questions three and four, which asked whether separate style guides were necessary and whether newsrooms had them, aimed to establish a baseline in this preliminary study on both current attitudes and current practice. In a similar vein, the first question on headlines (see Table 3) sought the personal perspectives of professional sub-editors, while the second sought a baseline on newsroom practice.

Responses to the house style questions are summarised in Table 1.

	Yes	%	No	%
1. Have you been discussing online style with your colleagues?	13	48	14	52
2. Do style issues require different treatment online?	20	74	7	26
3. Do editors and reporters require online style guidelines?	25	93	2	7
4. Does your newsroom have a style book for online?	7	26	20	74

Note: A summary of the responses to the authors’ questionnaire, 2012.

### **1. Have you been discussing online style? (yes 13, no 14)**

Participants were asked whether they had been discussing approaches to online style with their colleagues, and about half of respondents confirmed online style was on the newsroom agenda. Among New Zealand respondents, one sub-editor said his team had been talking about appealing to online readers: ‘Does online have the same audience as the print edition? No, they are younger and more geeky.’ This had obvious implications for story selection and headline writing, he said. One respondent lamented that quality suffered when stories were rushed online: ‘Lack of attention to detail and lack of consistency when everything is sacrificed for speed.’ Another New Zealand participant said his newsroom had been exploring possibilities for a ‘less formal, less pompous’ approach to style, such as not insisting on surnames for artists and musicians.

A New Zealand editor argued that online journalism required a radical overhaul.

Rolling a story out in chunks is a key part of the style of internet writing. It is important that the work be written with a view to this and links to earlier related stories are included—preferably weaved [sic] into the body of the writing and not just dumped at the end. Internet news is about providing the latest content, updating as it happens and followed up within 24 hours of the event in an analysis article. The combination of these two approaches to news is what is required to make a news website both entertaining, active and informative.

He went on to say that writing in the present tense and the active voice was essential for online news, as was giving the audience a true multimedia experience.

In a related comment, another New Zealand sub-editor said that while notions of using present tense, short sentences and engaging language all had their roots in newspaper writing, their use online was different:

Language online is more conversational 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 newspapers.

An Australian respondent said he was usually in a hurry to get content up online and as a result paid less attention to style details.

As a newspaper copy sub I could spend an hour combing a story for tiny inconsistencies. Online I probably spend more time looking for an attention-grabbing, gorgeous picture than I do worrying about house style. Of course I still watch out for errors and literals.

Another Australian editor was concerned about ‘how poorly edited much of our unique-to-online copy is’. He said his news organisation’s website was attracting younger readers with celebrity gossip which, when combined with minimal editing, was eroding his title’s reputation. ‘The message from management is that online is the future and print journalists must adapt.’

Several Australian respondents said they were developing styles for on-line treatment of bullet points and subheads; styles for local references and nomenclature, abbreviations, Facebook and Twitter references, and texting language; as well as online styles for spelling, capitalisation, use of italics,

story structure and headlines, geographic locations and names of celebrities. They were also exploring how best to present stories to optimise them for web browsers. This trend was creating tension in the newsroom, said a daily newspaper sub-editor:

Online journalists are seeking clicks to generate advertising revenue and so the website has a more tabloid feel than the newspaper. This strategy is deliberate to create demand for banner ads. There's a more racy, informal feel to the prose and headlines, as well as the content.

So the main themes under discussion in newsrooms are: identifying what works best for the online audience in terms of presentation and writing style; how the need for speed online is compromising accuracy and consistency; and how news selection online is less about media as fourth estate watchdog and more about appealing to Google keyword searches. Those responding that they were not discussing online style in their newsrooms said it was because they were using identical styles for both platforms and had no immediate plans to change.

## **2. Do style issues require different treatment online? (yes 20/no 7)**

Asked whether established print style conventions needed different treatment online, a clear majority of respondents said they did. Among the broad themes emerging from responses was a consistent argument for a less formal writing style online. Several respondents for example argued for dropping honorifics, writing more in the first person, and keeping stories shorter than is typical in print. Those wanting shorter stories said history could be dropped from news stories and replaced with links to earlier stories. One Australian sub-editor said newsrooms were not making best use of linking to original documents that provide evidence to back news stories, including reports and speeches. Breaking online stories into digestible chunks with liberal use of crossheads was another popular response. A New Zealand respondent said style was just part of the radical new approach demanded by the online platform: 'Different readership, different needs, different pattern of approaching and reading material, of absorbing and using information.'

Respondents also argued for: putting even more emphasis on writing sharp headlines and intros; using absolute date references on online stories, rather than 'last night' or 'yesterday', given that online stories live on in searchable

archives; dropping italics for book or film titles because italic type renders poorly on screen. One contentious issue was whether to use present tense online while sticking to past tense in the print edition.

One respondent saw dangers in encouraging reporters to adopt too informal a style: ‘Some journalists take “informal” as a starting point for rather loose writing and some cross the line from reportage to commentary.’

A minority of respondents said it was unnecessary to develop a different set of style guidelines for online news. One said the established style rules in the print media needed to be incorporated into ‘serious’ online publishing.

Our readers trust our content and are comforted by our adherence to our ethical, editorial and writing styles across the board. We see no reason to adopt one standard in print and another online. Why abandon 400 years of print development for a hyperactive format that ‘blows minds’ and leads to skimming behaviour by readers. We’re forerunners of the ‘Slow Newsreading Movement’, world pioneers no less.

Another Australian editor agreed:

Online styles should be the same as those adopted for the print format. This is even more important as readers, consumers, bloggers, texters, twitterers and press release purveyors seek to impose widely differing and often highly individualistic, self-indulgent styles in the online environment.

A couple of respondents reiterated the need for online news organisations to have one eye on the reader and the other eye on search engine optimisation. This is clearly becoming a significant commercial pressure in the newsroom that some journalists are accepting as inevitable if their news organisation is to stay in business.

### **3. Do editors and reporters need online style guidelines? (yes 25, no 2)**

Respondents were heavily in favour of their news organisations producing a stylebook or style guidelines specifically for their online editing teams. Most said specific online guidelines would ensure consistency. ‘Consistency and structure,’ said one.

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.

While one New Zealand sub-editor said style rules were essential, regardless of platform, another commented: 'Consistency is important though it's not something the audience raises as an issue.'

An Australian sub-editor said reporters and editors definitely needed online stylebooks.

It could take in how to do time references and updates for the web, legal issues that need to be considered in an instant, a list of banned words, how to write copy and headings for the web. All this is in addition to design style which journos moving to the web need to learn. Also, reporters are more frequently taking their own pictures which don't happen for the paper so they need to learn what works online and what doesn't. Increasingly, this will apply to audio and video too.

#### **4. Does your news organisation have an online style book? (yes7, no20)**

A clear majority of news organisations did not have style guides for their news websites. Most said their 'general stylebook' or their 'print stylebook' was covering both platforms, or their online copy was cut and pasted from the newspaper, while others wanted to ensure consistency across platforms. For example: 'The 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.' Another editor said:

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.

Those who had online style guidelines said they were additions to/variations on print style, mostly aimed at ensuring content could easily be picked up by search engines. One respondent was using guidelines developed for the social media interface:

Online is evolving very fast without the same checks and balances as the newspaper. We have in-house guidelines for how to communicate

on Twitter—eg we are allowed to ‘retweet’ competitors’ stories but not engage in any kind of denigration of other people’s work.

Others had guidelines for headline writing, again to attract the attention of search engines.

### **Differences between responses from either side of the Tasman?**

Given that many of the larger newsrooms responding were owned by Fairfax and APN, the researchers expected the responses from both countries to be broadly similar. This turned out to be largely the case (see Table 2) with one exception: while New Zealand respondents were unanimous that websites required different approaches to style, Australian editors were divided on the issue.

**Table 2: Australian and New Zealand online style responses**

	Australian editors		NZ editors	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
1. Have you been discussing online style with your colleagues?	8	8	5	6
2. Do style issues require different treatment online?	9	7	11	0
3. Do editors and reporters require online style guidelines?	14	2	11	0
4. Does your newsroom have a style book for online?	5	11	2	9

Note: The Australian and New Zealand responses to to the online style questionnaire, 2012.

### **Broader issues emerging in responses**

In their responses, many participants went well beyond the specifics of the survey’s four central questions, clearly indicating that style is part of some broader issues currently impacting on newsrooms and production journalists in particular. These issues include broader approaches to writing for an online audience, and the need for speed taking precedence over detailed subbing and proofing work. Below are some additional comments not directly pinned to ‘style’ questions.

Online has a different audience 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 tailor the website edition for them.

In practice stories are uploaded so quickly that they often receive cursory subbing. The process is 'progressive subbing'. Spelling mistakes or errors in the first posting are picked up later. 'If it's not right, it soon will be,' is the ethos. A story in the paper is checked by at least three people, but an online story may be checked by one person.

This metro newsroom respondent's website is meant to be under the same stylebook as its newspaper.

But online staff do not follow it as there is a staff shortage and almost no subediting takes place. There is no checksub which means mistakes often get through. If readers contact the newsdesk to report mistakes, we fix them.

Readers often contact us to ask 'Why did you put that rubbish story on the website?' But we find if we put up a trashy story we get hundreds if not thousands of hits an hour whereas if we put up a serious story we might get 50 hits per hour. So we pull it for a trashy one. Sadly that dictates what we put up.

He said that most of the online production staff were casual university students who had never worked with journalists and did not understand the issues re subediting or see the need for an online style book. 'We have told management that people do notice the mistakes but they don't care that much. If they did, they might get people to check the copy. There are not enough people to do these things.' Another Australian editor remarked that in a world of bloggers, it was important for experienced journalists with knowledge borne of decades of learning and working 'to maintain the rage'.

The commercial pressures on news organisations—including the need to cut costs, appeal to younger readers and attract the attention of search engines—are clearly compromising editorial standards and causing frustration among the more senior members of newsrooms' sub-editing staff. Specifically on matters of style, while there is some consensus across Australasian newsrooms on the need to take advantage of the online platform's strengths, it is also clear that journalists are not lining up behind a 'one size fits all' approach to news presentation online.

### **Approaches to online headlines**

Respondents were also asked two questions on online headlines: Should they receive different treatment to print headlines, and did their newsroom have

a set of guidelines for online headline writing? Responses are summarised in Table 3 below. There was little difference between Australian and New Zealand responses.

**Table 3: Headline writing question responses**

	Yes	%	No	%
1. Should online headlines receive different treatment to print headlines?	21	78	6	22
2. Does your newsroom have guidelines for online headlines?	14	52	13	48

Note: A summary of the responses to headline writing questions from the authors' questionnaire, 2012.

So while a clear majority believes the two platforms cannot be treated alike when it comes to headlines, only about half of the responding newsrooms have established headline-writing guidelines. Respondents articulated a number of ways in which online headlines were different to print: they stand alone as links to their stories so headlines need to be more descriptive and explanatory; puns and alliteration do not work if the aim is to attract search engines; online headlines need to be more precise, short and snappy, and there is rarely an option of a 'second deck'; the 'now' needs to be emphasised more online; online headlines tend to use more acronyms and abbreviations; there is more flexibility as headlines can be less confined by space.

An Australian respondent said he still likes a headline that sings.

I worked so long on newspapers and have that sub's love of language, rhythm, cadence, poetry, haiku, etymology, mythology. But I can't see this as being important to many others in the same job. Now we have a new kind of phrasing ideal, one that shows up high on search results and boosts unique browsers and page hits. You don't need to know Shakespeare to do that.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The survey results support our hypothesis that newsrooms are only slowly responding to the needs of online readers identified in web-reading research. Among our conclusions we find that news organisations in New Zealand and Australia are tending to rely on print style conventions for the publication of even their online news. However, we also conclude journalists within those newsrooms are clearly aware that developing online-specific style



rulings would improve the news-reading experience for their online readers and many are discussing it. (Of 27 respondents, only seven said they did not see a need to differentiate between print and online styles. Only two said there was no need for online style guidelines in their newsroom. While the majority saw such a need, 74 percent said there was no such thing in their workplace.) Clearly, the issue is acknowledged at the coalface of news production but editorial managers, under increasing pressure from budget-slashing media companies (Ellis, 2010), have yet to respond with the resources needed to address it. Our two major findings—that more guidance from editorial managers in the online area is desperately needed and that a cross-platform style guide would be a good place to start—may come as relatively unsurprising because of pre-existing anecdotal evidence. But it is important to start documenting these issues empirically. Then perhaps it will be only time until the pressure from newsrooms in this area brings a positive response.

At AUT University, our response to our data analysis includes a proposal to develop our own stylebook—used for stories published both in our student journalism publications (*Te Waha Nui* and [www.tewahanui.info](http://www.tewahanui.info))—to increasingly differentiate between print and online styles. Opportunities for further research in this area will materialise, no doubt, as newsrooms in Australasia further develop their approaches to the publishing of news on the web. The differences between today's news websites and those in the early days of the internet clearly show ongoing development, even if not in the development of online style particularly. Broader issues of online journalism raised by respondents to this survey show there are innumerable entry points to research about journalism in this, the age of digital news delivery.

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