A SURVEY OF MIDWESTERN NEWSPAPER EDITORS
ON CURRENT LANGUAGE USE

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To Laura,
For her love, her patience and her wisdom
INTRODUCTION

Reporters often come away with a notebook full of quotable quotes, and what is the compelling osmosis that takes the casual, redundant F-word from the scribble to the printed page? They, and their editors, have a secret agenda. It is, on one level, the breaking of all linguistic taboos and thereby attaining liberation, self-fulfillment, and (so the creed goes) non-repressive and non-authoritarian naturalness. On another level, it may also serve to increase newspaper circulation in the media wars.

*** Melvin J. Lasky, The Language of Journalism

“Swearing up a blue streak” was the headline on a feature published by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on 21 May 2006. Its main point was to study the continued coarsening of interpersonal communications. But intentionally or not, the article also pointed out an inherent contradiction newspapers face: though they seek to include a diversity of voices in their reporting, they often must decide how much of that voice to allow in the traditional “family” newspaper.

Consider these euphemisms used in the Journal Sentinel feature about cursing: “a mean little word that rhymes with witch,” “the word that starts with ‘bull,’” and “f-bomb,” along with the more generic “choice terms synonymous with bodily waste, blasphemous oaths and having sex.”

Then contrast that with the use of the word snafu, which entered the vocabulary in the 1940s as a military acronym for “situation normal all fucked up.” In
the late 1970s, its mere utterance ### let alone its use in print ### would be enough to land an Ohio high school journalist a seat in detention. In the years since it has become such an accepted part of the language that many who use it (let alone read it) are likely unaware of its etymology. A cursory search of the archive of a typical Midwestern newspaper reveals more than 120 occurrences of the word *snafu* in the decade since the start of 1998; at least seventeen of those appearances have been in that newspaper’s headlines.

Newspapers like to consider themselves bastions of language use, employing banks of copy editors armed with stylebooks and other texts in an effort to uphold the highest of standards. Consider how the topic of “obscenity, profanity, vulgarity” is treated in the stylebook of that most venerated of American newspapers, *The New York Times*.

“The Times writes unblushingly about sexual behavior, arts censorship, science, health, crime and similar subjects, opening its columns to any newsworthy detail, however disturbing, provided the approach is dignified and the vocabulary clinical rather than coarse. In these situations, the paper rejects evasiveness and euphemism, which would be a disservice to readers who need to understand issues,” states *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*.

The manual goes on: “But the Times virtually never prints obscene words, and it maintains a steep threshold for vulgar ones. In part the concern is for the newspaper’s welcome in classrooms and on breakfast tables in diverse communities nationwide. But a larger concern is for the newspaper’s character. *The Times* differentiates itself by taking a stand for civility in public discourse, sometimes at an
acknowledged cost in the vividness of an article or two, and sometimes at the price of submitting to gibes.”

Thus when Jesse Jackson was overheard to say of Barack Obama: “I want to cut his nuts off,” the call for The Times was an easy one: Report what happened without using the actual vulgarism and move forward. Or, as Macy (2008) described the Jackson/Obama dustup, The Times “clutched its style manual firmly to its breast, simply describing Jackson's remarks as ‘critical and crude’ without quoting them.”

But as Macy goes on to say, the incident or, more accurately, The Times’ handling of the incident lingered in the newspaper’s pages and on its blog sites for three weeks after the two men had publicly settled their differences. The questions Macy poses in relation to the Jackson/Obama story cut to the heart of the dilemma facing newspapers today: “Was the Times’ demure approach yet more evidence of the growing irrelevance of old-school newspapers in the anything-goes Internet era? Had the Times, in its effort to protect readers, simply confused them? Or was this an admirable attempt to uphold standards in a coarsening world?”

The Times’ standards editor, Craig Whitney, tells Macy that, despite the earlier stylebook citation, the newspaper has relaxed its standards on questionable language use more than in the past. The paper, she reports, “has allowed the F-word onto its pages just one time in history when it reprinted the text of the Starr Report, which quoted Monica Lewinsky saying Bill Clinton needed to ‘acknowledge … that he helped fuck up my life.’”

The Times Manual of Style sheds light on the few other occasions on which vulgarities were deemed permissible: in transcripts of the White House tapes in the
run-up to President Nixon’s August 1974 resignation and in covering the sexual harassment allegations leveled against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991. “The cases provide this guide for when to print an extreme vulgarity: only when its use will give the reader an essential insight into matters of great moment, an insight that cannot be otherwise conveyed. Such a case would almost certainly involve the use of the term by a figure of commanding influence or in that person’s presence, in a situation likely to become momentous.”

So is it “momentous” when the sitting vice president utters perhaps the most profane word in the English language on the floor of the Senate? One of the Times’ largest competitors, the Washington Post, thought so, though it was in the vast minority. This is how the Post reported the 22 June 2004 exchange including Vice President Dick Cheney:

“On Tuesday, Cheney, serving in his role as president of the Senate, appeared in the chamber for a photo session. A chance meeting with Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (Vt.), the ranking Democrat on the Judiciary Committee, became an argument about Cheney’s ties to Haliburton Co., an international energy services corporation, and President Bush’s judicial nominees. The exchange ended when Cheney offered some crass advice.

“‘Fuck yourself,’ said the man who is a heartbeat from the presidency.”

Most other newspapers took a far less direct approach. “The New York Times described the 2004 incident by writing that Cheney had used ‘an obscenity’ in a clash with the senator while the Los Angeles Times opted for an ellipsis in place of the offending word,” Macy reported.
The *Post*, which also said it was the first time since the Starr report the word had appeared in its pages, justified its decision to print in a piece the following day. Kurtz (2004) quotes the *Post*’s executive editor, Leonard Downie Jr., as saying:

“When the vice president of the United States says it to a senator in the way he said it on the Senate floor, readers need to judge for themselves what the word is because we don’t play games at *The Washington Post* and use dashes.”

So the nation’s largest newspapers have largely come to grips with the profanity issue, and they have decided there are occasions when it is appropriate to print even the most profane of words. But what of those smaller newspapers toiling in the nation’s more conservative, more homogenous heartland? Lasky (2005) noted in an examination of profanity use in a cross-section of American newspapers during the Watergate era: “President Nixon’s deleted expletives may be restored in newspapers in New York or Los Angeles but they remained absent and unaccounted for in the hundreds of publications in America’s Bible Belt.” Have those newspapers’ standards changed in the intervening years?

At least one critic tells Macy that, in the early twenty-first century, the conservative approach of the *New York Times* (and, therefore, many other newspapers) is narrow-minded and unnecessarily pious. Temple University law professor Burton Caine says of the *Times*: “I take them at their word; they are the gold standard. They will not be censored as they would if they had a TV program, but what they're doing is much more deleterious than anything the government does. What they're saying is: ‘This is the proper way of communicating; this is the American way.’
“They told me that thousands of copies of their paper circulate in the high schools, as if there's something harmful in children reading certain words, when actually this is the language of children.”

“Fourth graders, they know these words,” Caine says later. “They know they're not supposed to use them because they'll upset you, the adult. If we were allowed to use them, do you think anybody in his right mind would say the word ‘nuts’? Who would get excited about that? What these newspapers are doing is making themselves irrelevant.”

Relevance is expressed, at least in part, in terms of profits. And it is far from clear that profanity equals profits. Newspapers are witnessing unprecedented losses of their audience, even as they loosen their standards. Many daily newspapers are cutting back their staffs as readers desert them for the immediacy of television, and, more and more frequently, the Internet.

The Internet presents another layer of issues for traditional newspapers and their legions of copy editors. The new medium’s popularity along with related technologies such as e-mail, blogging, and text messaging have brought rapid, radical modifications to the English language. It also has changed the way newspapers approach the news. A Web site like YouTube let alone a news site like MSNBC or a partisan political site like the Huffington Post can spread a Cheney “f-bomb” video hours before a newspaper’s editors have decided how to report it in print. How are newspapers adapting as the world around them has so rapidly changed?

Can addressing younger readers in language more accessible to them be a key
to attracting those who now are choosing options other than newspapers? According to the latest numbers from the National Newspaper Association (regarded as the industry standard), readership among those age 18-24 has fallen nearly 10 percent in the decade between 1998 and 2007 (43.5 percent to 33.9 percent). The Internet and other forms of electronic communication have been in their ascendancy through the same time span.

Mindich (2004), in “Tuned Out: Why Americans Under 40 Don’t Follow the News,” points out that “while many point to new media as the best hope for rekindling interest in news, only 11% of 18- to 24-year-olds list news as a major reason for logging on. The Internet is a great source of news for some, but for most it is a great way of avoiding the news, to be used for e-mail, instant messages, and other personal information.”

But even if they employ the Internet as a means of “avoiding the news,” the news still has a way of reaching them. The home pages of many Internet service providers, as well as popular search engines such as Yahoo, carry at least the headlines of the day’s news events. So as newspapers migrate more of their original content onto their Web sites, they must also find a way to migrate those readers to their own sites as opposed to the headline services.

This study will examine the efforts newspapers have made in since the 1990s to adapt to the realities of rapidly changing times. Specifically, this thesis will address the following research questions:

RQ1: Have newspapers in the Midwestern United States altered their language-use standards in the last fifteen years or so? Specifically,
have those newspapers made changes in their policies regarding the
publication of obscenities?

RQ2: Have newspapers made adjustments to accommodate the
language of new media?

A survey of editors at twenty six Midwest newspapers will attempt to answer
these questions.
The literature, both academic and cultural, in regard to the study of language use and newspapers breaks down into five areas, each of which will be examined in greater detail in the pages to come. Those areas comprise 1.) Gatekeeping, agenda-setting and bias; 2.) The reporter’s framework; 3.) Profanities, obscenities and vulgarities; 4.) E-language and the evolution of language; and 5.) Staying current.

I. Gatekeeping, agenda-setting and bias

As researchers and linguists have studied the relationship between newspapers and their language use, the media’s gatekeeper role has been a frequent focus. Gatekeeping remains one of the cornerstones of communication theory. White (1950) made use of a Midwestern morning newspaper in a study that was among the earliest to document the effect. “It is only when we study the reasons given by Mr. Gates (that newspaper’s wire editor) for rejecting almost nine-tenths of the wire copy (in his search for the one-tenth for which he has space) that we begin to understand how highly subjective, how reliant upon value-judgments based on the ‘gate-keeper’s’ own set of experiences, attitudes and expectations of communication of ‘news’ really is,” White wrote.

White’s coining of the phrase “gatekeeper” was in reference to the decisions made by “Mr. Gates” as he selected stories for publication. Subsequent researchers came to realize the gatekeeper analogy could be expanded to include the media’s very use of the language. Bell (1991) points out: “… (M)edia language is heard not just by one or two people but by mass audiences. It is the few talking to the many. Media are
dominating presenters of language in our society at large.” He adds that every individual selection, both of what constitutes news and of the language used to tell that news, represents a choice. “News is determined by values,” Bell writes, “and the kind of language in which that news is told reflects and expresses those values.”

Baumgartner et. al. (2004) add to the discussion by pointing out that “newspapers do not only suit their language to the topics, but also to the readership they want to attract,” adding that “(n)ewspapers and its language also reflect the cultural values of a country. …Language expresses and reinforces attitudes … because newspaper texts operate within the value system of a particular culture,” they write.

So the authors conclude that “there is no such thing as typical (emphasis added) newspaper language, the language used in the printed news is adapted to its readership and it reflects the values of a culture. These values and with them the language change over time. Thus, the language used in the printed news is changing as well.”

Lasky (2000) takes the gatekeeper point a step further; at the same time, he combines it with agenda-setting theory. He points out: “Our newspapers … have the multiplier effect which put themes on the political agenda, set fashions and attitudes in speech, give currency to slogans and catchwords, … and altogether play a major role in shaping the way we talk, think, and generally make do in a civil society.”

With such power invested in them, it is not surprising that newspapers and other media are susceptible to claims of bias in their work. Allegations of bias whether in coverage or in the language used to frame that coverage have been
consistently studied by media researchers through the years. Bias claims also are relatively easily tracked, as both the allegations and the studies of those allegations are typically tied to election cycles. As Hofstetter (1978) observed: “Each candidate for office is certain that the major media in his area are not reporting his positions on issues and campaign events in the most favorable light and that his stature is suffering in comparison to that of his opponent. Opponents are equally certain that the converse is true.”

Stevenson and Greene (1980) focused more on the consumers of news. They argued that the observer is as important a consideration as the bias that observer alleges. The researchers attempted to create a framework to identify subjects’ reaction to a specific instance of perceived bias. They hypothesized that “what news consumers often see as bias in the news are cognitive discrepancies between what the news tells them about the political world around them and what they already believe about that world” as well as that “most people define as bias in the news information which is discrepant with the mental picture they already hold about the situation.” After conducting their study, Stevenson and Greene concluded that “what news consumers see as biased news is often material which is discrepant with the information already in their heads … , material which evokes an evaluative response. If so, news bias is less a function of reporters’ accuracy or fairness and more a function of what readers and viewers think the situation is or ought to be.”

Robinson (1983) made a more direct study of the language choices made by newspaper reporters. Focusing on the presidential election of 1980, he performed content analysis on 6,000 stories from three newspapers ### the Boston Globe,
in an effort to detect deliberate slanting of stories on reporters’ part. “Bias that counts must be in the copy, not just in the minds of those who write it,” he argued. “And our own research shows that, at least in the politics of 1980, the same Eastern press that thinks ‘New Class’ and votes Democratic reports political news in a reasonably nonpolitical way.” In fact, Robinson’s analysis showed that “the press we monitored played it straight on the issues, wound up treating liberals and Democrats worse than the conservatives and Republicans. …”

Robinson also argued that as the nation drifted rightward in the election of 1980 (Republican Ronald Reagan unseated Democratic President Jimmy Carter), the dynamic of the nation’s “news agenda” changed. This was noticeable, Robinson said, in the topics the newspapers chose for deeper analysis. “(T)he press does slide somewhat on this slippery slope of news agenda does let ideology influence where they do their work, particularly their investigative work,” he said. But he concluded that, in the early 1980s, this concern paled in comparison to the superficiality and sensationalism brought on by increasing competition. One cannot help but marvel at Robinson’s prescience with the benefit of nearly 30 years of hindsight.

Keshishian (1997) studied issues of language use and bias in a context other than politics. She used earthquakes as her basis for analysis of coverage to see whether a disaster in a nation friendly to the United States would be covered any differently than one in a nation hostile to the United States. She analyzed coverage in the New York Times and the Washington Post for one year following a 1988
earthquake in Armenia and a 1990 earthquake in Iran. “(T)he newspapers treated the Armenian incident with sympathy in comparison to the Iranian earthquake, which erupted 18 months after, was almost twice as destructive a disaster, and which took almost twice toll in human lives,” she found. This ran counter to Keshishian’s hypothesis that the more devastating earthquake would be covered more sympathetically, and led her to posit a politico-economic theory of news coverage, which states that “favorable relations (between nations) would lead to favorable or sympathetic news reports and unfavorable relations, unfavorable or unsympathetic reportage.”

II. The reporter’s framework

As the above studies have shown, the words that journalists choose in their writing are vitally important. They can invite or deflect claims of biased coverage based on their mere selection. Even if carefully and properly selected, those words help shape a society’s value system. It would seem only prudent, then, to devise a framework from which journalists can comfortably draw.

Clark (1994) gives it a shot. Even if Baumgartner, et. al., say there is no such thing as “typical newspaper language,” Clark says there are specific principles that guide effective newspaper writing. In a breezy yet authoritative tone, Clark sets forth seven principles that he says characterize the language of a newspaper story and differentiate a story from the less well-crafted “article”:

1. The language of journalism is concrete and specific,
   especially when it comes to dogs and the names of
dogs.

2. The language of journalism is active.

3. The language of journalism, if I may create a hybrid, is front-heavy.

4. The language of journalism is democratic, and, if I may say so, American.

5. The language of journalism is different from speech, but more like speech than other forms of prose.

6. The language of journalism is plain.

7. The most valued quality of the language of journalism is clarity, and its most desired effect is to be understood.

“Storytellers, not article writers, will use language at its most active, concrete, and specific,” Clark says.

Chancellor and Mears (1983) add that the reporter must resist the temptation to overshadow the story itself; they argue language choice plays a role in that process. “There is truth in saying that the story tells itself,” they write. “The writer’s task is to get out of the way and write in plain, simple language what has happened. That can be done with style, and rhythm, and vivid phrasing. But it has to be done with simplicity too.” They add: “Writers are not salesmen for the events they recount. It is the description, not the shopworn adjective, that can make a lead (or story, they add by implication) extraordinary.”

As Clark (1994) points out, any newspaper consists of a collection of voices,
even as all those voices conform to his seven principles set forth above. “The voice of most news stories is neutral and authoritative,” he says. “Editorials are often written in institutional voice. Columnists, critics, and sports writers often develop distinctive voices that readers seek out over their breakfast cereal and interact with in an imagined form of conversation.”

Clark goes on to amplify on one of his seven characteristics. He says: “The language of journalism is not like speech, but it is closer to speech than most other forms of writing. This explains the journalistic obsession with quoting, the attempts to represent speech in prose. Too often, especially in government stories, this means experts speaking in code, or in meaningless sound bites. But when eyewitnesses, especially everyday folks, are given their voices in print, the effect can be powerful, moving, puzzling, funny, or outrageous.”

The eyewitness, particularly the “average Joe” with his presumed plain-spoken language, has always been the prize for every reporter. He also is the most likely to have his words stray into uncomfortable areas, profane or otherwise. This is one of many reasons journalists more frequently rely on “official” sources.

Fowler (1991) adopts a near-socialist stance in arguing media have grown too cozy with those officials they cover, and that media’s language choices reflect a relationship that has evolved into one that is more mutually beneficial than truly adversarial. “Newspapers in part adopt … language for their own and, in deploying it, reproduce the attitudes of the powerful.” He believes that “critical linguistics can show that the vaunted independence of the Press is an illusion. … Anyone who thinks about the economic position of the newspaper industry … or its political intimacy
with government … will rapidly come to the conclusion that a major newspaper cannot survive unless it toes the line, reproducing established ideas or at least ‘responsibly’ entering debate in the areas of established ideas.”

But Clark (1994) argues the opposite. He says: “… (T)he job of the political reporter can be said to be, in large measure, a linguistic one: translating the evasive passive (‘mistakes were made’) into the accountable active (‘the mayor knew of the plan and agreed to it’).”

As he further points out, journalism benefits from a diversity of voices, and all the varied expressions of language implied by that diversity. “The voices in American journalism for too long have been monotone and monochromatic, coming most often from white male authority figures,” Clark says. “The language of journalism has the flexibility to be more inclusive if journalists will expand their reporting strategies and let the voices of the young and the poor and the old be heard.”

III. Profanities, obscenities and vulgarities

One area in which newspapers constantly struggle with language-use standards is in the publication of profanities. The introduction to this thesis illustrated how the New York Times handles the issue (conservatively, most would agree). The Associated Press, the news cooperative that binds together the majority of American newspapers, maintains a stylebook that addresses, among numerous other issues, occasions on which it is acceptable to use profanity.

“Do not use (obscenities, profanities or vulgarities) in stories unless they are part of direct quotations and there is a compelling reason for them,” the current
The edition of AP’s stylebook advises. “Try to find a way to give the reader a sense of what was said without using the specific word or phrase. … If a full quote that contains a profanity, obscenity or vulgarity cannot be dropped but there is no compelling reason for the offensive language, replace the letters of the offensive word with hyphens, using only an initial letter.” Even if their treatment of profanities varies somewhat from these guidelines, every one of the newspapers responding to the survey that follows cited the Associated Press as its primary guide in ruling on matters of style.

An expert tells Price (2006) that the media’s “multiplier effect” (to borrow Lasky’s phrase), plays an enabling role in profanity’s proliferation across society. She quotes James Hala, an English language and literature professor at Drew University, as saying: “It’s not that these (profane) words weren’t being said before. It’s just that media has made them accessible.” This also harkens back to the earlier discussion of newspapers’ gatekeeping and agenda-setting roles. In the same article, an author tells Price that “the casual use of swearing makes language lazy.” James V. O’Connor, author of the book Cuss Control: The Complete Book on How to Curb Your Cursing, says this laziness is having a debilitating effect on the spoken and written word. “There are many good words in our language that are disappearing because we use the swear words instead,” he says.

IV. E-language and the evolution of language

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first have brought unprecedented change in the English language, as we are about to see.
Newspapers have struggled to keep pace with the accompanying language change. (This also could be said to be true of newspapers’ adaptation to the electronic technology itself; that is an issue for other studies.)

Crystal (2001) was among the earliest to study how newspapers use the language of the new media such as the Internet; seven years ago, he found the process to be a still-unfolding one. Fast as the rate of change has been, Crystal’s words still have resonance in 2008. “Journalistic headlines and captions often play with terms in search of eye-catching effects,” he writes, “so it is not surprising to find e-motivated lexical formations … in the general press. … ” He adds: “Netspeak has begun to evolve (and) is rapidly becoming a part of popular linguistic consciousness, and (is) evoking strong language attitudes.” But he cautioned at the time that it was too early to pass judgment on the effect of “e-speak.” “How many of these developments will become a permanent feature of the language it is impossible to say. We can never predict language change,” Crystal says, “only recognize it once it has happened.”

Baumgartner, et. al. (2004), make a similar observation on the evolution of language in the Internet age. “(Personal computers) and the Internet play an important role as we write and send our letters and our e-mails with their help, read news or articles and chat with each other online. A lot of the things we use our computers for have to do with writing or reading, with communication and (electronic) language. It would then not be surprising if along with our lives that have changed due to PCs and the Internet, also our language has changed.”

They go on to document some of that change, and they find that what they call CMC (computer mediated communication) has more in common with speech than
with the written word. (Recall that Clark made the same observation with regard to his “language of journalism.”) “CMC has also some features on its own,” Baumgartner, et. al. write. “The most well-known is probably the current use of abbreviations. … For example, lol, meaning laughing out loud, or IMHO, meaning In My Humble Opinion. (Note that in 2004, when their piece was written, text-messaging technology was in its infancy. For an example of the extent to which texting has accelerated the use of abbreviations, see the results section.) Something that is also typical of Computer Mediated Communication is emoticons, which you use if you want to show emotion with the help of a few characters. The most common emoticon is :-) , which indicates a smile.”

They conclude that, in a sense, Computer Mediated Communication has brought language use full circle. “The whole language started out as a very complicated and complex system of declinations and cases. As language was printed, broadcast and went online, it got ### in some aspects ### reduced until it was there, where it all started out: the drawing of pictures to convey meaning!”

V. Staying current

But since the days of the cavemen, pictures have given way to the written word. And as that list of words became ever longer, man found himself with the need for a convenient way of tracking them all. Thus was born the dictionary. As the “first draft of history,” journalism finds itself struggling merely to document the language change. For those who compile dictionaries, the issue is exponentially larger.

Gleick (2006) finds that that venerable authority on the language, the Oxford
English Dictionary, struggling to keep pace. Much of that rapid acceleration parallels the rapid evolution of both electronic media and the words to describe them. “Blog was recognized (as an O.E.D. entry) in 2003, dot-commer in 2004, … and the verb Google last June,” Gleick reports. He also describes the media’s vast reach as the dictionary’s staff combs the world in search of new words. “In its early days, the O.E.D. found words almost exclusively in books; it was a record of the formal written language. No longer. The language upon which the lexicographers eavesdrop is larger, wilder and more amorphous; it is a great, swirling, expanding cloud of messaging and speech: newspapers, magazines, pamphlets; menus and business memos; Internet news groups and chat-room conversations; and television and radio broadcasts.”

According to Gleick, the O.E.D. lexicographers “are adding new words wherever they find them, at an accelerating pace.” But their process remains simultaneously deliberative. “As a rule, a neologism needs five years of solid evidence for admission to the canon. ‘We need to be sure that a word has established a reasonable amount of longevity,’ ” says Fiona McPherson, a new-words editor for the Oxford English Dictionary. “Some things do stick around that you would never expect to stick around, and then other things, you think that will definitely be around, and everybody talks about it for six months, and then, … ” McPherson adds.

Local newspapers are increasingly a source of scrutiny as lexicographers trace both new words and the earliest-known appearances of older words. “… (The entry for) poison pen has just been antedated with a 1911 headline in The Evening Post in Frederick, Md. ‘You get the sense that this sort of language seeps into local
newspapers first. We would never in a million years have sent a reader to read a small newspaper like that,” Gleick quotes O.E.D. associate editor Bernadette Paton as saying.

Rapidly evolving electronic technology has made the job of one of the agreed-upon authorities on the English language that much tougher. “… (T)he Internet makes it possible not just for new words to be coined but for neologisms to spread like wildfire,” American University linguist Naomi S. Baron tells Gleick (Gleick refers to the Internet as “an engine driving change in the language”). “Like the printing press, the telegraph and the telephone before it, the Internet is transforming the language simply by transmitting information differently,” Gleick concludes. “And what makes cyberspace different from all other information technologies is its intermixing of scales from the largest to the smallest without prejudice, broadcasting to the millions, narrowcasting to groups, instant messaging one to one.”

As newspapers both exist in and report on this ever-shifting landscape, their standards must out of necessity evolve. But Lasky (2000) argues that newspapers would be short-sighted to abandon their traditional responsibility to their readership of upholding language standards. “The attrition of vocabulary … is rooted,” he writes, “in a kind of populism, a wise-guy pretense at being low-brow which is intended to be charming, comical, and above all easily readable and understandable by the maximum number of readers in a hopefully growing circulation. It amounts to a self-imposed intellectual down-sizing, or dumbing down.”

Lasky returned to that theme in his second volume; he tied it specifically to
the use of words commonly considered to be obscene. “The proliferation of profanity in the public prints … is in part method and in part mindless imitation in accordance with the compulsions of fashion and keeping up with the noisy neighbors,” Lasky wrote (2005).

In the same work, he pointed out that such interests are frequently at odds with the pressure for profits. “(Newspapers’) economic interests usually determine how much of the sexual revolution (and its accompanying frank language, he adds by implication) they can absorb in their pages,” he wrote. “If they consider themselves to be ‘a family newspaper’ it will be a minimum; if they feel themselves more and more ‘losing out’ in the media war, they too will have to compete in the dissemination of bawdiness, titillating their readers …” Lasky also reiterated the modifying effect of economic realities. “Cash flow and bottom-line profits, those hard pecuniary factors in the communications industry’s finances, are cautionary and, except for an occasional sensational breakthrough to an audience’s gross tastes, they induce a hesitant conservatism in the expansion of the vulgate.”

The chapters that follow will present the results and analysis of a survey intended to add to the conversation by gauging the attitudes of Midwestern newspaper editors on the state of language use at the start of the twenty-first century. These results could also shed light on whether newspaper copy desks have made shifts in their attitudes toward profane language and the language of new electronic media.
METHODOLOGY

This study makes use of an online survey to gauge editors’ opinions of the current state of language use at Midwestern American newspapers. Its primary focus is the past fifteen years—a time period that corresponds roughly with the rise to prominence of the Internet and other forms of electronic communication. The same time period has seen a general relaxation of language standards across the society. A 2002 study by the group Public Agenda found that eight in ten Americans believe lack of respect and civility are a serious problem, with six in ten saying the situation has worsened in recent years. The intent of the survey is to elicit editors’ opinions on how newspapers have responded to (or, presumably less likely) led the charge on language-change issues—a manifestation of that respect and civility.

The questionnaire was managed through the Web site SurveyMonkey.com; the questions themselves were conceived and written by the author (see Appendix A for a complete list of questions and responses). Questions were phrased to elicit responses along a five-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, no opinion, disagree, strongly disagree) on a number of issues related to language use. Examples include how those newspapers deal with issues of profanity and obscenity, as well as how the evolving language of electronic technology has affected newspapers’ language choices. Respondents were also provided the opportunity to comment on their answers.

The survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Ball State University. Potential respondents were then invited to participate through an e-mail solicitation containing a link to the online survey. As part of the invitation,
participants were guaranteed confidentiality in this final report.

The e-mail inviting participation was sent to fifty seven newspapers in the twelve states comprising the Midwest: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin. The cutoff point for participation was set at a minimum daily circulation of 40,000, a number deemed large enough that the newspaper was likely to have faced some of the issues covered by the survey questions. Newspapers of that circulation level are located in more urban areas, and their staffs typically cover a wider array of topics than those at smaller, lower-circulation newspapers. They are, therefore, more likely to have encountered the issues covered by the survey questions (particularly obscenity). That 40,000 threshold also helped to keep the universe of newspapers involved in the study more manageable.

The Midwest was chosen as the focus of the survey because of its relative homogeneity. Such homogeneity presumes similarity in treatment of language issues.

The e-mail solicitation was sent to each newspaper’s managing editor; in cases in which no managing editor was listed among the newspaper’s managers, the person holding the title “news editor” was substituted. Current e-mail addresses were obtained through the individual newspapers’ Web sites. When the Web site did not provide a list of the newspaper’s personnel, names were obtained using the 2006 edition of the Editor & Publisher International Year Book then confirmed through a follow-up telephone call.

The e-mail containing the link was sent to each of the fifty seven newspapers on the morning of Tuesday, 28 October 2008. That e-mail was rejected by two of the
newspapers, leaving a universe of fifty-five newspapers for the study (see Appendix B for the list, as well as an indication of those newspapers that responded). A follow-up e-mail was sent as a reminder on the morning of Monday, 3 November 2008. Finally, telephone calls were made to contacts at non-responding newspapers on 20 November and 21 November 2008 in an effort to generate additional responses.

These efforts yielded a sample size of twenty six (including two from a single Chicago newspaper) for a response rate of 47.2 percent.

Research questions were determined to be the following:

RQ1: Have newspapers in the Midwestern United States altered their language-use standards in the last fifteen years or so? Specifically, have those newspapers made changes in their policies regarding the publication of obscenities?

RQ2: Have newspapers made adjustments to accommodate the language of new media?

The survey method was determined to be the best method of research in an effort to study these questions. The survey method provided both a numerical snapshot that lent itself to the detection of trends in the answers, as well as the opportunity for comments that would offer insight into and perspective on those trends.

The sections that follow will explicitly report the findings from the survey developed for this study and offer analysis of those results.
RESULTS

The results find Midwestern newspapers holding steadfast in their role as language guardians, as evidenced by their answers to survey questions on whether their papers standards are too strict or, conversely, not strict enough. This is further bolstered by editors’ answers to questions regarding their handling of expletives and in their dealing with the emerging language of new electronic technologies. The complete list of questions and the response breakdowns can be found in Appendix A.

As to the study’s first research question: Have newspapers in the Midwestern United States altered their language-use standards in the last fifteen years or so? Specifically, have those newspapers made changes in their policies regarding the publication of obscenities?, the survey results seem to indicate a trend toward a change in language-use standards, even as newspapers uphold that guardian role.

In regard to the second question: Have newspapers made adjustments to accommodate the language of new media?, the survey results found newspapers in a seeming struggle to cope with a quickly shifting language environment. As we shall see, “intergenerational tension” is the vehicle through which this struggle is most frequently manifested.

I. Standards and obscenity

Respondents were first asked whether their language-use standards have changed “significantly” over the past fifteen years, a time span that roughly corresponds with the rise of the Internet as a new medium with which newspapers must contend. That time span also roughly corresponds with the emergence of e-mail and text-messaging technologies. The results of that question can be seen in Chart 1.
### Chart 1
My newspaper’s language standards have become less formalized and more conversational in the last 15 years.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>81.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(27 respondents)

Respondents were offered the opportunity to comment on their selection. Said the managing editor at a suburban Chicago daily: “We encourage reporters and writers to write at a high level and develop sophisticated stories. At the same time, we want quotes and language that reflect how people really talk.” Added the managing editor of an Indiana daily: “This is somewhat a function of style, but also of format. As we have expanded to include more narrative stories and more alternative story forms, language use has also been affected.”

The Indiana editor raises an interesting point. Part of journalism’s drive to attract new readers to and include their voices in their pages has been the use of non-traditional or alternative story forms. Loosely defined, these are stories that follow a format other than the standard inverted pyramid style of traditional newspaper writing. They may include the use of photos, graphics and multimedia elements (if presented online) with perhaps very few actual written words to convey a story’s meaning. While the best of such stories are easily grasped by all segments of a newspaper’s readership, those that are poorly executed can come across as gimmicky.
and as emphasizing style over substance. Such a view is particularly likely to take
hold among a newspaper’s older, more established readers. And this intergenerational
tension (as expressed by editors) is a theme that recurs throughout this survey.

In Question 2, respondents were asked specifically about their newspaper’s
use of profanity. The results showed much less unanimity on whether standards had
changed over the same time period (See Chart 2).

Chart 2
My newspaper’s standards on use of profanity have changed
significantly in the last 15 years.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>53.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(27 respondents)

Accompanying comments reflected the split. From a large Indiana daily, an
editor reports: “The policy has actually gotten stricter. We used to be able to dash it
out, as with ‘sh--.’ Now we can’t do that, and the use of any obscenity or vulgarity
must be cleared with a top manager. Their use in quotes is allowed only when the
quote is deemed vital to telling the story.” Added the managing editor of a northeast
Ohio daily: “We have tough standards, but we have some passionate discussions
about whether or not to use such language.”

In counterpoint, a twenty three-year veteran editor from a large Iowa daily
reports: “When I first started here, we would take out ‘hell’ or ‘damn’ and others without even adding an ellipsis to show that something had been deleted. Now words at that level are allowed, and some worse words are allowed in special cases. And if we do take something out, we let people know by adding ellipses or a substitute word in parentheses.”

Sums up the managing editor of an Indiana daily: “I remember when ‘hell’ used to produce a flag. Now, nobody notices.”

The question is whether newspapers are contributing to or merely reflecting the coarsening of the greater culture. The topic of society’s decreasing civility is one of ongoing, passionate debate (it was the premise of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel story cited in the introduction). On a theoretical level, the issue harkens back to the discussion of the media’s gate keeping and agenda-setting roles. This study was not designed to examine such questions; a follow-up study could be designed to do so.

The survey’s questions eight through ten in returned to the issue of profanity use. Only two of twenty seven respondents indicated that the use of profanity is forbidden in its pages; all twenty said that its use must be approved by the newspaper’s upper-level management. And all who commented said the decision would be made in connection with a direct quote by a news source. So while editors are comfortable discussing whether profanity is acceptable for their sources to use, they remain unwilling to grant that privilege to their own reporters and columnists.

Clark’s seven principles that guide the language of journalism state that the language be plain; they make no mention of profane.

“Sometimes profanity best expresses the depth of the speaker’s feelings,”
argued an upper-level editor for a Kansas daily newspaper, “which implies that its use might be justified in some serious stories but almost never in less-than-serious ones.”

Adds an upper-level copy editor for a major Illinois newspaper: “If there is a compelling reason to use profanity in a quote, if it is actually the substance of a story (like a public official cursing at a constituent, for example), we would discuss it with the managing editor and the editor in chief, and it is conceivable that we might publish it.”

The “public official” standard seemed to be a threshold for a number of responding newspapers. Those citing it as a compelling reason said it was a circumstance in which they would be comfortable printing a profanity. “We hold out hope that one of our area leaders will curse at their residents during a public meeting, thus we are not completely forbidding it. It's pretty close, though,” said an editor in eastern Ohio.

While the differentiation might seem somewhat arbitrary to some, at least one former editor who has been in position to make those calls argues it is anything but. “There are words that may be the same but the circumstances are different, and so the rulings may be different on the same word, depending on who said it, when or where they said it,” Gene Foreman, a longtime managing editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer and later a journalism professor at Penn State, told Macy (2008).

Only five of the twenty seven (18.4 percent) agreed with the statement: “Occurrences of profanity use draw significant numbers of reader complaints.” Five of the remaining twenty two said they were not in a position to have any knowledge of any possible complaints from their readers.
II. Standards and “E-language”

The language of electronic communication has been much slower to reach the pages of newspapers, the survey’s results show. There was broad agreement that both e-mail (sixteen of twenty seven, 59.3 percent) and text messaging (twenty of twenty seven, 74.1 percent) have made little difference in the language of daily newspapers. The feelings of most respondents were perhaps best summed up by an editor at a suburban Illinois daily: “E-mail-speak in general is horrendous, and we’ve been resistant to let the language slip that far,” she wrote. “Text-speak is even worse.”

Newspapers editors responding to the survey were not asked to elaborate on their level of involvement with their online product (every participating newspaper had some degree of online presence). Such a survey would make an interesting follow-up to this research. As we will soon see, the Internet is a key component as newspapers plot out their future. And as the preceding comments suggest, many of the editors taking part in the survey still exhibit a high degree of discomfort with the language of the medium, if not the medium itself. This could be a manifestation of that intergenerational tension referenced earlier, but additional research would be needed to reach a sound conclusion.

It is reasonable to say, that, according to the survey results, the following exchange will remain very much the exception on the printed page. This is excerpted from an editorial in the Duluth (Minn.) News Tribune on 14 March 2008.

“Rep. H,

“AIUI, u have a bill to ban txt msg wile drvg. So wots the BD? UG2BK if u think u cn enforce it. WBS - this is 4 tomorrow’s
“TXS, RW

“RW,

“Txs 4 ur txt. I’m DTRT w/ the bill cuz theres 2 much DWS! TTYL n TYVM.

“Rep. Hornstein

“(Translation into standard English)

“Rep. Hornstein,

“As I understand it, you have a bill to ban text messaging while driving. So what’s the big deal? You’ve got to be kidding if you think you can enforce it. Write back soon. This is for tomorrow’s paper.

“Thanks,
“Robin Washington

“Robin,

“Thanks for your text. I’m doing the right thing with the bill because there’s too much driving while stupid! Talk to you later and thank you very much.

Rep. Hornstein”

This exchange presents another example of the phenomenon of intergenerational tension on display. Leaving aside the safety implications of text messaging from behind the wheel of a car, the editorial uses the language of the texting generation to make a point about the language’s merits. Crystal (2008) has noted the resistance to this latest condensation of the language. “We seem to have a
problem,” he writes. “Has there ever been a linguistic phenomenon which has aroused such curiosity, suspicion, fear, confusion, antagonism, fascination, excitement, and enthusiasm, all at once?”

III. Language and guardianship

How well newspapers are doing in their traditional role as language guardians was another focus of the survey. There was general agreement among respondents that they are remaining true to their mission. They say, though, that the struggle to uphold their standards is becoming increasingly difficult. They say this is especially true as a new generation of journalists joins the ranks.

Said a representative of a Chicago-area newspaper: “We’ve had to bend over the years from the strictness of writing styles seen two decades ago. I think we’ve followed the rest of society. We have to speak to our readers the way they talk, or they won’t listen.” But a Detroit-area executive editor points out that for newsrooms the battle is internal, as well. He says: “… (E)nforcing style is almost impossible. Younger staffers can’t seem to learn it and we have fewer editors to enforce it.”

As to the numbers, only one respondent of twenty seven (3.7% percent) believed his newspaper’s language standards were too strict, while 81.5 percent (twenty two of twenty seven) disagreed with the statement: “My newspaper’s language standards are not restrictive enough.”

Intergenerational tension is more obvious in some of the above comments. Again it emerges as a recurring theme as newspapers adjust to life online where many of those younger staffers are posting news stories “off cycle” of their normal print
publication. Many also post to individualized Web logs. These “blogs” carry a much more personalized, conversational tone. Though these postings are subjected to an editing process as rigorous as any piece for print publication (typically by older, more experienced editors). Such pieces are the source of much of that tension. Those more “traditional” journalists typically in their 40s or older were much more likely in the survey to adhere to stricter standards on the use of both profanity and “e-language.” Summed up an upper-level manager in northeastern Ohio: “You can find anything, anytime, anywhere on the Web; our standards aren’t as strict on the Web as they are in print.” Added a manager in a similar position in South Dakota: “With diversification of products and immediacy of online, news style and usage has suffered, no doubt.”

Younger journalists, on the other hand, are more likely to adopt the attitude expressed by Rosa (2008), herself an online reporter. “This new kind of journalism,” she writes, “based on old-fashioned reporting but propelled by public participation and rooted in the inclusive nature of the Web, will continue to thrive as newsmakers begin to see information as less of a commodity and more of a continuing dialog with their readers.”

But with her very next sentence, Rosa shows herself to be rooted in the same principles as her print-only predecessors, suggesting that the gulf between the two camps is not as wide as responders’ comments imply. “Of course, those working as journalists online should continue to use the fundamental ethical principles invoked by their predecessors bylines, ethics policies, disclosing possible conflicts of interest, and publicly correcting their errors,” she writes. “With a new media ethos
that encourages public participation and empowerment, it is my hope that the newest
generation of reporters will succeed in rekindling the idea of journalism as public
service. That’s what I want to do.”

One area of the survey in which newspapers showed a wide divergence in
their standards was headlines (See Chart 3).

**Chart 3**

My newspaper has less restrictive standards for headlines than for
text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No opinion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>55.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(27 respondents)

Comments also were reflective of that split. An editor at a central Indiana
daily noted: “For several years we have made a concerted effort to be more
conversational in headlines, and the rules have loosened up quite a bit.” But a
managing editor of a northern Indiana daily said: “Actually, the opposite is true.
Words might be approved for the tenth graph of a courts story that would not be
considered appropriate for use in the headline.”

Responders were also offered the chance to add any general comments they
believed might be relevant. A respondent from suburban Chicago said: “There’s no
doubt English is eroding, but it’s hard to know whether newspapers are contributing
to that or reflecting it. Our effort to be conversational is no doubt fueled by our
Finally, an upper manager in central Michigan argues that economics are at the root of the concerns confronting editors. He writes: “The newspaper industry’s nose-dive this year has significantly hurt language standards.”

In our concluding chapter, we will examine the implications of these results for both newspapers and their readers.
CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS

This study has shown some reluctance on the part of editors at Midwestern newspapers to adapt their language use to reflect changing standards, even as those editors acknowledge the increasing presence of such language in the greater society. In fact, those editors seem willing to let “the greater society” take the lead in such matters. Said an editor at a northeast Ohio newspaper in response to the survey question of whether their standards had changed: “We’re more likely to let something appear in print if we concede this is the way people speak.” Added an editor from the Chicago area: “Our writers' voices are important, and sometimes that means allowing a less formal style. We also allow more slang and even curse words than fifteen years ago.”

All but two of the survey’s twenty-seven respondents say their newspapers have adopted a “less formalized and more conversational” tone over the last decade and a half. An editor at the Indianapolis Star provided a particularly telling example of just how much less formalized and more conversational the standards have become in that newsroom. “We no longer have to use the full proper name of certain agencies, companies or the Indy 500,” said the more than twenty-five year veteran of the Indianapolis newsroom. “We used to have to call it the Indianapolis 500-Mile Race on first reference; Allison Gas Turbine had to be Allison Gas Turbine Division of General Motors Corp.; Indianapolis Department of Parks and Recreation can now just be Indy Parks. Also, we couldn't use ‘Indy’ except in the most featurey circumstances.”

At the same time, large majorities agree that their newspapers remain
responsible guardians of the language. A large majority show flexibility in the allowance of profanity (again, only two of twenty seven say it is banned in their pages). But “e-language” has found substantially less acceptance among newspaper editors. Indeed, some of those editors’ comments on the topic of “e-language” reflect the intergenerational tension that emerges as an overall study theme. That intergenerational tension has implications for editors striving to attract both new readers and the younger reporters attempting to connect with those readers.

As Mindich argued in the introduction, many of those readers are deserting newspapers for the Internet, whether to seek out the news or to avoid it. And as this study has shown, newspapers’ efforts to speak the language of the Internet and, by extension, those readers attracted to the medium have been halting at best. On those efforts could hinge the continued viability of the medium.

Certainly other factors are in play as newspapers grope to find a way to recapture some of their former dominance. In addition to the ongoing pull of television, the Internet offers would-be readers countless opportunity for diversion. And for those who do seek out the news, many newspaper Web sites offer up for free the same content that is offered at a cost on the printed page. So as traditional newspapers seek a way to maintain their relevance by cultivating new readers, acknowledging the less traditional way in which many of them address one another would seem to be one way to generate positive results.

Rosa (2008) argues that society already has reached the point of “the irrelevancy of print.” She cites her experience at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver as an example of how a printed product has limited
effectiveness in a 24-hour news cycle. “The city’s dailies dutifully recounted convention events, but even the headlines that marked the newspaper kiosks each day seemed horribly dated by mid-morning,” she wrote. “Any breaking news during the event had been dutifully covered and rehashed on the Web hours before.”

Rosa finds an ally in an unlikely source. Rupert Murdoch, decidedly a member of the old guard, argues that newspapers ignore or neglect an online connection with readers at their peril. Cooper (2008) reports that in a recent lecture, the 77-year-old Australian media baron said he believes reporters and editors have forfeited their readers’ trust. Newspapers’ future, he argues, lies in training journalists who can regain that trust and loyalty. But as the survey results show, intergenerational tension is impeding many Midwestern editors in the effort to find and train such journalists. The chairman and chief executive of News Corp. agrees.

“My summary of the way some of the established media has responded to the Internet is this: It’s not newspapers that might become obsolete. It’s some of the editors, reporters, and proprietors who are forgetting a newspaper’s most precious asset: the bond with its readers,” Murdoch said.

As the survey has also shown, profanity is one area where editors have been more apt to relax their standards, particularly on words deemed less offensive. Recall the Indian editor who said: “I remember when ‘hell’ used to produce a flag. Now, nobody notices.” Nearly all survey respondents said publication of profanity requires the approval of a senior editor. But Kelly McBride, the Poynter Institutes’ ethics leader, argues that just because you can doesn’t necessarily mean you should. McBride tells Macy (2008) that coarse language is a cheap lure to attract younger
readers; any gains are likely to come, she cautions, at the expense of older, more loyal readers. Interestingly, McBride credit’s the standards of electronic media for lowering the bar of what is acceptable to publish in print.

“Reports Macy: “Rather than adopt expletives from the Web, McBride says, what papers can and should emulate is its tone by insisting on a more conversational style that avoids ‘complex sentence structures and often artificial intellectualism and obtuse writing that can alienate younger readers.’ ” The survey results capture a snapshot of a print medium in transition, struggling with how to effect such a change. Again, we see the manifestation of that struggle as intergenerational tension with editors trying to reconcile effecting that change without sacrificing their standards.

Murdoch argues that that tension plays out as complacency and condescension on the part of the current crop of newspaper editors. He believes those attitudes have cost newspapers both readers and their money. “The complacency stems from having enjoyed a monopoly and now finding they have to compete for an audience they once took for granted. The condescension that many show their readers is an even bigger problem,” Murdoch said. “It takes no special genius to point out that if you are contemptuous of your customers, you are going to have a hard time getting them to buy your product. Newspapers are no exception.”

Rosa adds that the newest generation of reporters and editors appeals to readers precisely because of its lack of complacency and condescension. “Journalism is becoming a more egalitarian profession and that’s a good thing,” she writes. “Although many media outlets will remain the property of a small bloc of parent
corporations, more and more members of the public who may not be traditionally consider journalists are becoming involved with news coverage.”

As the survey shows, newspapers are keenly aware of the need to adapt to their audience’s evolving needs. And while they say they have made efforts to do so 92.6 percent say their standards have changed over the last fifteen years they remain firm in their tradition as defenders of the written word. This sometimes translates to that condescension and contemptuousness. Murdoch agrees with Rosa that the Internet the area where the study shows newspapers have struggled most mightily to cope has had a democratizing effect on the practice of journalism.

“It used to be that a handful of editors could decide what was news and what was not. They acted as sort of demigods. If they ran a story, it became news. If they ignored an event, it never happened,” Murdoch said. “Today, editors are losing this power. The Internet, for example, provides access to thousands of new sources that cover things an editor might ignore. And if you aren't satisfied with that, you can start up your own blog, and cover and comment on the news yourself.”

The study found Midwest editors reluctant to let standards “slip that far” (in the words of one Chicago editor) by reporting in the language of the Internet and related technology. In truth, the Internet offers a template for the inclusion of an even wider diversity of voices with all their accompanying color. As Rosa says: “… (T)his power shift can actually end up helping established reporters if they let it. … For young reporters like me, the Internet is the primary medium for news content, and it is already leading to a new and inclusive form of journalism rooted in public participation.”
As an aside, it is interesting to note the sarcasm and vitriol with which some commenters treated Rosa’s conclusions in responding to her story. “… (D)o you kids plan do this, say, for a few years (until your (sic) tired of ramen) and then get a ‘real’ job?,” wrote one. “Boy, I can't wait until that moment when a massive snow storm hits Colorado and the power goes out ... and then what? Oh, you can't distribute your online stuff anymore. …,” wrote another. Intergenerational tension, as established by this survey, remains alive and thriving in such comments.

The immediacy and the leveling effect of the Internet present traditional newspaper journalists with a unique challenge. That challenge, according to Murdoch, will be to “use a newspaper's brand while allowing readers to personalize the news for themselves ### and then deliver it in the ways that they want.”

“The newspaper, or a very close electronic cousin, will always be around,” Murdoch concludes. “It may not be thrown on your front doorstep the way it is today. But the thud it makes as it lands will continue to echo around society and the world.”
APPENDIX A
SURVEY QUESTIONS

Name:
Age:
Newspaper:
Telephone number:

Does your copy desk have an in-house stylebook?
Yes 27 (100%)

What is your primary style guide?
Associated Press 22
In-house stylebook 4
(3 list the Associated Press as a secondary source)

Do you have a senior copy editor/copy desk chief who would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview?

NOTE: For these questions, respondents were asked to rate their agreement based on a five-point scale: Strongly agree/agree/no opinion/disagree/strongly disagree.

1. My newspaper’s language standards have become less formalized and more conversational in the last 15 years.
   Strongly agree 3 (11.1%)
   Agree 22 (81.5%)
   Disagree 2 (7.4%)

2. My newspaper’s standards on use of profanity have changed significantly in the last 15 years.
   Strongly agree 2 (7.7%)
   Agree 9 (34.6%)
   Disagree 14 (53.8%)
   Strongly disagree 1 (3.8%)

3. E-mail terminology has significantly changed my newspaper’s language-use standards.
   Agree 7 (25.9%)
   No opinion 4 (14.8%)
   Disagree 16 (59.3%)

46
4. Text messaging terminology has significantly changed my newspaper’s language standards.
   - Agree 4 (14.8%)
   - No opinion 3 (11.1%)
   - Disagree 17 (63.0%)
   - Strongly disagree 3 (11.1%)

5. My newspaper’s language standards are too restrictive.
   - Agree 1 (3.7%)
   - Disagree 25 (92.6%)
   - Strongly disagree 1 (3.7%)

6. My newspaper’s language standards are not restrictive enough.
   - Agree 3 (11.1%)
   - No opinion 2 (7.4%)
   - Disagree 20 (74.1%)
   - Strongly disagree 2 (7.4%)

7. My newspaper has less restrictive standards for headlines than for text.
   - Strongly agree 1 (3.7%)
   - Agree 8 (29.6%)
   - No opinion 2 (7.4%)
   - Disagree 15 (55.6%)
   - Strongly disagree 1 (3.7%)

8. My newspaper forbids the use of profanity under any circumstances.
   - Strongly agree 1 (3.7%)
   - Agree 1 (3.7%)
   - Disagree 19 (70.4%)
   - Strongly disagree 6 (22.2%)

9. Instances of profanity use must be approved by a manager at my newspaper.
   - Strongly agree 12 (44.4%)
   - Agree 15 (55.6%)

10. Occurrences of profanity use draw significant reader complaints.
    - Strongly agree 2 (7.4%)
    - Agree 3 (11.1%)
    - No opinion 5 (18.5%)
    - Disagree 17 (63.0%)

APPENDIX B
NEWSPAPERS SURVEYED
**ILINOIS**
Belleville News-Democrat
(Bloomington) Pantograph
Chicago Sun-Times
(Chicago) Daily Herald*(2)
Southtown Star*
(Joliet) Herald News
(Peoria) Journal Star
Rockford Register Star
(Springfield) State Journal-Register
Chicago Tribune*

**INDIANA**
Evansville Courier and Press*
(Fort Wayne) Journal Gazette*
(Gary) Post-Tribune*
Indianapolis Star*
(Munster) Times
South Bend Tribune

**IOWA**
(Cedar Rapids) Gazette*
Quad-City Times
Des Moines Register*
Sioux City Journal
Waterloo Courier

**KANSAS**
Topeka Capital-Journal
Wichita Eagle*

**MICHIGAN**
Ann Arbor News*
Detroit Free Press*
Detroit News
Flint Journal*
Grand Rapids Press
Kalamazoo Gazette*
Lansing State Journal
Macomb Daily
Muskegon Chronicle
Oakland Press*
Saginaw News

**MINNESOTA**
Duluth News Tribune
(Minneapolis) Star Tribune
(Rochester) Post-Bulletin
Saint Paul Pioneer Press

**MISSOURI**
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