C. P. Stylebook:
A Guide for Writers and Editors
Toronto: The Canadian Press 1983. $10.00

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Does the seemingly innocuous Canadian Press Stylebook wield much influence on general writing style in Canada? And if -- as this writer contends -- it does, how can such influence be measured and, if necessary, contained?

The questions are provoked by the recent publication of a new edition of the Stylebook, wholly revised and revamped. Overnight, the little blue (1966 and 1968 editions) or green (1974 and 1978) staff manual has expanded to a fat, fancy production with a $10.00 price tag.

My own first exposure to the CP bible came when I joined the agency as a reporter in the Halifax bureau, in 1960. The 120-page manual that I was told to memorize contained a lot of mundane instructions on filing wire-copy via teletype, some fillers on the history of the agency and some rules on CP copy style. To a high school drop-out, many of these were useful and enlightening, like the difference between
"career" and "careen" (which the rest of the world still persists in ignoring). Some, even then, were archaic or arcane. For instance, peremptorily listed as "Under the Ban" were "chorine", "dieselized", "natator", and "temblor" -- words that I had never encountered and which in the intervening decades I have never, ever felt any inclination to use.

I also quickly found -- and treasured -- that immortal rule dictated by the battle-scarred general manager, Gillis Purcell:

"Specify whether amputations are above or below knee or elbow -- it makes considerable difference."

Subsequent editions of the Stylebook (or Style Book, as it then was written) appeared spasmodically, with very (forgive me, CP, but despite "very" being banned, sometimes I cannot resist) few changes.

The 1978 edition still only had about 130 pages, having acquired a few extra imprimaturs on metrification and Ms (and what furore that provoked!), and a few more words Under the Ban ("lawman" and "meaningful").

But the new edition is vastly different, and being bigger and brighter, it has attracted more attention, even getting reviews of sorts in some papers (notably two in the Edmonton Journal), resulting in a steady stream of orders from laypersons across the country. Specific numbers are changing all the time, but 10,000 copies were printed in late 1983, with 500 immediately going out to CP staff and one each to the 103 - odd Canadian dailies which subscribe
to CP. By May 1984 another 6,200 had been sold by mail order across the country, some to daily newspapers for staff, but many to colleges, universities and private business. (CP Business Office, interview April 1984)

Just how pervasive is CP style? CP staffers lightly refer to it as "the bible" and are expected to adhere to it unswervingly. So unless someone's asleep at the pencil, you'll never see a "chorine" or "natator" or even a "very" in CP copy. And almost every Canadian, one way or another, some time or another during the day, is exposed to CP copy.

Carman Cumming, in his thoughtful essay "The Canadian Press: A Force for Consensus?" sees the news agency as a prime agenda-setter and describes its influence as "both pervasive and anonymous". And how can it be otherwise, when 103 of Canada's 112 daily papers are CP subscribers? Those papers, according to CP account for 4,874,825 copies daily or more than 90% of the total Canadian daily paper circulation.

Arthur Siegeldevotes a chapter to CP in his study of politics and the media in Canada, and reaffirms this:

CP provides enormous quantities of political, social, economic and entertainment news -- much more than even the largest newspapers can handle -- but the news agency is hardly noticed by the public... CP remains anonymous to a large segment of the population. (Siegel, 185)
This mass of material amounts to some 250,000 words a day moved by CP and another 150,000 words generated by its broadcast subsidiary, Broadcast News. The thrust of both Siegel's and Cumming's studies is towards the influence CP has on news gate-keeping and the total news content of Canada's papers. Cumming also cites colleague Joe Scanlon's study for the Davey Commission showing that 34.8 per cent of the newshole in papers surveyed was filled with copy provided by Canadian Press and its associated agencies. In some cases, the figure was 50 per cent or higher.

Beyond this, there is a second layer of influence: that on the 103 member papers. Because it would look extremely untidy to -- say -- spell "color" that way in wire copy in a daily paper, but to spell it "colour" in copy generated by staff writers, so member papers largely accept CP's recommendations for their own material, too. Many, many dailies simply have CP Style Books available for all staff. (In a few of the larger dailies, internal memos or individual stylebooks override or expand on CP style).

At a third level, many of Canada's community weeklies also follow CP style, because the dailies do, and because it's simpler than developing their own discrete manual. As a result, it is probably safe to say that most English-language newspapers in Canada follow CP and thus, for instance, use the American style of spelling in the -or/-our debate.

The question of "-our" ending versus "-or" is not a simple one, and there certainly is not space to argue it here. The Concise Oxford
English Dictionary effectively states the history of the variants and it is the Concise which CP espouses. There is a temptation to think of "-our" endings simply as "British" and see the others as American (but what about horror, pal-lor, tremor and governor?). But the OED demonstrates the way in which this "British" usage has evolved over the centuries, and even Fowler -- not known for fomenting linguistic revolution -- suggests that this trend will continue, and "we shall see word after word in -our go the way of governor" (Fowler, 415).

"It is not worth while either to resist such a gradual change or to fly in the face of national (i.e. British) sentiment by trying to hurry it", he says.

And yet there may be several arguments to resist this change in Canada: 1) Sheer nationalism; 2) Current practice in Canadian schools; 3) Canadian government practice; 4) It is logical, if we follow the OED; 5) Historic practice.

To summarize these arguments:

1) As Canadians become increasingly aware of their own distinctive culture, it is worth considering the preservation of what -our endings we have left, to help retain that peculiar identity.

2) It is difficult to generalize, but many Canadian schools -- teach the -our style; if that is seen as good enough for children, why then not for newspaper readers? (See Robert Ireland's 1979 dissertation, "Canadian Spelling....")
3) The federal government has never repealed, and thus still follows, an 1871 Order-in-Council which dictated the -our usage.

4) As CP insists that the Oxford Dictionary is the principle source for spelling reference, why immediately make a major exception? And then there are exceptions to the exceptions: The Globe and Mail Style Book prefers the -or endings, but not for "armour" or "paramour", and refers to Harborfront Park but Harbour Castle and Harbour Square (Globe Style Book, 121). The Vancouver Sun Style Guide subscribes to -or endings, except for "devour" but adds to the Globe's exceptions "tambourine", "pompadour", "troubadour", and "Saviour". (Sun, 22). And the Toronto Star is even more pigheaded: "savior unless it's Saviour", it dictates (Star Stylebook, 118).

5) Early English-language newspapers in Canada appear to have automatically followed British style on -our endings. A highly unscientific survey of early Canadian newspapers (based on what happened to be in my closet) showed the following: The Montreal Herald of 1843, The Globe of Toronto in 1848, and the Family Herald of 1905 all use -our. But the Druid (Sask.) Enterprise of 1920 and the Selkirk (Man.) Weekly Record of 1927 use -or. It may only be coincidence, but the implication seems to be that the disappearance of -our endings in Canadian papers coincided with the rise of CP (founded 1917).

Bob Taylor, long-time CP staffer and editor of the news style book, maintains that Canada's style on -or/-our has never been consistent.
"We've never had a universal style, historically. CP is often accused of lopping off the -our endings. But it depended on the province or even the region", he said in an interview. Users have to adjust the book for their own requirements, he suggested.

"I would say ordinary people tend to spell -our in Ontario...But I would say that willy-nilly we're going to be stuck with -or endings because of the all-pervasive influence of TV."

Taylor points out that CP follows British style rather than American (as with "kidnapped", "tranquillizer" and "cigarette"), but suggested that originally many newspapers -- as CP subscribers -- may have pressed for -or endings simply because, being fractionally shorter, these are easier to fit into headlines.

Taylor is naturally delighted with the success of his little volume.

"We haven't advertised the thing at all," he said gleefully. "We should have taken out an ad. in the Globe and Mail. It only costs us $4.00 to produce."

Taylor confirmed that many larger dailies bought bundles of the book for their entire news staffs, but many copies went out to the lay public. A section on punctuation, in the new version, was added, he said, "largely at the request of outsiders."

Some schools are using the book as a text, and the Ontario government is planning to adopt it, he said.
Even to the layperson, the new edition is undeniably useful. Totally unpretentious, it simply lays down unequivocal rules for Canadian usage. A selection of the alphabetic headings tells the story: Abbreviations and Acronyms, Capitalization, Metric, Names, Numbers, Place Names, Plurals of Nouns, Possessives, Titles, Words. These are interlaced with useful little essays such as Common Faults, Editing, Story Construction and Writing.

Unfortunately for the layperson, the volume is unnecessarily bulked out with waddy chunks of CP housekeeping instructions, such as a large section temptingly titled "Slugs". And in its transmogrification from the in-house staff manual to more "public" document some material has been lost. The new edition, for instance, actually neglects to overtly state which dictionary is followed (where earlier versions firmly espoused OED), though it does refer to it in passing (once to say the OED is followed for hyphenation, and once to say it is not followed for capitalization).

Typical of this obsessive attention to picayune detail is the ruling on whether 1:00 a.m., or 1 a.m. or 1.00 a.m. is correct, or how to spell N'djamena.

And that curiosity, the "Under The Ban" list, has disappeared, so it's difficult to ascertain whether in fact we may now -- with a sigh of relief -- use "temblor" and "natator" -- not to mention "authored", "awfully", "deactivate", "educator", "gotten", "gutted", "hospitalize", "mortician", "socialite", "stomp", to name but a few. (And the 1978 edition added, after this list, with great deliberation: "But
'officered' is proper.")

Evidently, however, like Topsy, the CP Stylebook has just quietly grown, and now influences a large amount of the material that Canadians read, both at home and at work.

In the United States, no such pervasive influence has been created, mainly because the Associate Press certainly does not have a monopoly of U.S. media, and there is a consensus among Americans and American dictionaries about what spelling style to pursue.

In contrast, the Canadian Press Stylebook seems to have achieved an almost unstoppable momentum and -- as there appears to be no drive from CP itself to preserve -our endings -- Canada can expect to see a continued slide in the future towards "color", "favor", "honor", "neighbor" and some 30 others.

Eventually what began as a collection of in-house news agency maxims may end up as The All-Canadian Stylebook.

REFERENCES


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