

How the “Tyranny of Distance” Influences Science Editing in Australia

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Just as Geoffrey Blainey wrote in his 1966 book, *The Tyranny of Distance*, Australia’s isolation continues to be a defining characteristic of its politics, economics, and industry—scientific publishing included. Yet, it is the challenge of Australia’s isolation that has created opportunities to produce uniquely Australian content, spreading Australian identity and culture, through science, to the rest of the world.

The Tyranny of Distance

In 1966, Australian historian Geoffrey Blainey wrote his groundbreaking book, *The Tyranny of Distance*,¹ coining a phrase that is still used to describe how Australia’s isolation has shaped its history and continues to influence its future as a country. From affecting our politics, economics, and industry, to creating Australia’s “she’ll be right” attitude and rugged self-reliance, our distance from the rest of the world is not only a geographic but also a cultural difference. This can be felt in the arts but also in the way we approach business, including scientific publishing.

The Science Editor Community

It is difficult to find accurate information about the number of science editors in Australia. The Institute of Professional Editors (IPEd), the professional organization for editors in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, surveys its members every few years. IPEd also maintains an online directory of editors. These 2 sources help to build a rough picture of how many IPEd members work in science editing. However,

not all science editors in the country are members of IPEd, so this is not a full picture of the Australian science editor community.

IPEd Surveys

In 2021, IPEd conducted a survey of its members, which had a 36% response rate (497 respondents).² The survey found that of the 497 respondents to the question of categories of editing work, 226 (45%) edited academic work; 183 (37%) edited government, business, or technical reports; 125 (25%) edited training or educational material; 86 (17%) edited manuals, references, or guidebooks; and 38 (8%) edited tender or grant applications (Table 1). Respondents were able to choose more than one category. Not all work in these categories would be classified as scientific in nature. Additionally, some work in the other categories may well be scientific.

When asked about memberships of other organizations, 15 (6%) of the 261 respondents to this question said they were members of technical communication and science communication organizations, 9 (3%) were members of the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS), and 7 (3%) were members of medical writing organizations (Table 2).

When reporting sources of editing work, of the 362 respondents to the question, the vast majority (303, 84%) said the work they edit comes mostly from Australia, and 19 (5%) said their work is mostly from New Zealand. Only 33 editors (9%) sourced most of their editing work from outside Australia and New Zealand (Table 3).

IPEd Directory

IPEd maintains an online directory of editors to help potential clients find an editor with appropriate skills and experience to suit their requirements. However, not all IPEd members have a directory listing. Only professional members have the opportunity to advertise in the directory. In addition, the directory is generally used by self-employed editors to advertise their services, so editors who are employees will likely not be listed.

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Table 1. The Institute of Professional Editors 2021 survey responses to categories of editing work.*

Type of Editing Work	No.†	%
Academic work‡	226	45
Book: nonfiction, biography, autobiography, memoir	188	38
Report: government, business, or technical‡	183	37
Website, web page, or social media content	137	28
Training or educational material‡	125	25
Book: fiction	119	24
Newsletter, magazine content	95	19
Manual, reference, or guidebook‡	86	17
Advertising, marketing	68	14
Job application, letter or resume	65	13
Book: children’s	49	10
Short story or anthology	41	8
Tender or grant application‡	38	8
Multimedia content	29	6
None of the above	21	4
Poetry	11	2
Script: stage, film, television, radio	5	1
*Respondents could pick any number of types of editing work they wished, including nil. †Total responses: 1,486; total respondents: 497. The “No.” column will not add up to equal the total respondents because many respondents picked more than one category and 21 chose nil. For these reasons, the column “%” will also not add up to 100%. ‡Categories most likely to fit criteria for science editing.		

One search criterion in the directory is subject area (Table 4). The data shows that of the 391 IPEd members listed in the directory, 194 (50%) work in medicine and health sciences, 156 (40%) in environment and sustainability, 142 (36%) in science and mathematics, 137 (35%) in technology and engineering, 71 (18%) in the resources industry, and 42 (11%) in archaeology. As with the IPEd survey, not all work in these categories would be classified as scientific in nature. Further, some work in the other categories may well be scientific.

Number of Science Editors in Australia

The data from both the survey and the directory are not granular enough to derive a truly accurate census of the number of science editors in Australia. In addition, not all editors in Australia are members of IPEd.

Table 2. The Institute of Professional Editors 2021 survey responses to memberships in other related professional organizations.*

Memberships in Other Organizations	No.†	%
Editing, Indexing, and Translating Organizations		
Chartered Institute of Editing and Proof-reading, UK	28	11
Canberra Society of Editors	23	9
Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers	14	5
American Copy Editors Society, U.S.	9	3
Board of Editors in the Life Sciences, U.S.‡	9	3
Other	6	2
Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators	2	1
Writing and Communication Organizations		
Australia: State-based writers centres	64	25
Australian Society of Authors	33	13
Technical communicators and science communicators‡	15	6
Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (union membership)	13	5
Australia: Other writing and professional	8	3
Medical writers‡	7	3
Australian Publishers Association	6	2
Plain Language Association International	6	2
Romance Writers	6	2
New Zealand Society of Authors	4	2
Australian Library and Information Association	3	1
Other Organizations		
Individual organizations, unclassified, or unclear	79	30
Teaching, education, and research; history and life stories; business and local; Alumni	35	13
*Respondents could pick any number of memberships they wished, including nil. †Total memberships cited: 370; total respondents: 261. The “No.” column will not add up to equal the total respondents. because many respondents picked more than one category. For these reasons, the column “%” will also not add up to 100%. ‡Memberships most likely to fit criteria for science editing.		

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Table 3. The Institute of Professional Editors 2021 survey responses to source of editing work (by country).

Source	No.*	%
Mostly within Australia	303	84
Mostly outside Australia and New Zealand	33	9
Mostly within New Zealand	19	5
Not answered	7	2
*Total respondents: 362.		

Often, government organizations draw from editorial pools when seeking editorial services.

Australia-based editors have a competitive advantage in quoting for some of this work, particularly for the federal, state, and territory governments, because many tendering processes prefer local suppliers.

Consultants and research organizations often prefer Australia-based editors as well. We are more likely to be close to the client and work in the same time zone, which makes it easier to resolve queries in a timely manner. The tyranny of distance is still at play, but to the advantage of editors within Australia, because the rest of the world is perceived to be far away.

Does Distance Cause Tyranny or Freedom?

Blainey said, "Much of Australia's history had been shaped by the contradiction that it depended intimately and comprehensively on a country which was further away than almost any other in the world. Now the dependence had slackened, the distance had diminished. The Antipodes were drifting, though where they were drifting no one knew."¹

Australia has now grown into its own identity, separate from Britain but with echoes of its colonial past still defining its culture. For instance, Australian spellings and grammar retain many aspects of British English.

Australia's geographic distance serves to encourage strong professional networks within the country. IPEd acts as a hub for these editing networks. The organization has a Standing Committee on Academic Editing, which promotes the IPEd Guidelines for Editing Theses on behalf of academic editors. IPEd also publishes guidance on the indicative costs of academic editing, and on indicative hourly rates for self-employed editors, supporting members' efforts to maintain a living wage.

Geography may discourage overseas clients from hiring Australia-based editors, but, conversely, our geography helps to encourage clients who are based in Australia to hire Australian editors.

Table 4. Editors working within each subject area as listed in the Institute of Professional Editors directory.*

Subject Area	No.†	%
Humanities	294	75
Lifestyle and wellbeing	244	62
Arts, crafts, and design	221	57
Business, economics, and industry	215	55
Medicine and health sciences‡	194	50
Social sciences	190	49
Philosophy and religion	174	45
History	164	42
Environment and sustainability‡	156	40
Science and mathematics‡	142	36
Technology and engineering‡	137	35
English language and literature	134	34
Law	131	34
Self-development	125	32
Computing, information and communications technology	115	29
Government and politics	115	29
Resources industry‡	71	18
LGBTQIA+	64	16
New age	64	16
Nil (did not pick any subject areas)	53	14
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander subjects	46	12
Accounting	46	12
Archaeology‡	42	11
Māori subjects	0	0
*Editors could pick any number of subject areas they wished, including nil. †Total subject areas chosen among listings: 3,137; total editors with listings: 391. The "No." column will not add up to equal the total editors with listings because many editors picked more than one subject area, and 53 chose nil. For these reasons, the column "%" will also not add up to 100%. ‡Subject areas most likely to fit criteria for science editing.		

In the same manner, exchange-rate conversion may discourage overseas contracts, but it also encourages local creators to hire editors within Australia, particularly because Australia's exchange rate may result in higher costs when hiring editors from outside the country.

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Complications with time zones may also contribute to the reluctance of overseas clients to hire Australian editors and, conversely, for Australia-based clients to favor editors from within the country.

Australia-based editors are prized for our ability to work with Australian content. For example, we are more likely to have the in-depth knowledge, sensitivity, and cultural awareness needed to work with First Nations content from Australia, which differs substantially from First Nations content from other countries.⁶

Our subject specialists are skilled in working with Australian content, adjusting it to ensure its relevance is understood by a global audience. My own work with the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research is an example of working with a local agency to disseminate collaborative research of global importance across the Pacific, East and Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa.

Australia's scientific book and journal publishing may be dominated by the big players from overseas, but within their frameworks, we are able to share scientific content that affects not only Australians but society as a whole. The "long tail" of small independent publishers is a demonstration of how distinctively Australian science is published for a broad audience. A humorous example of this is Australian science communicator and media personality Dr Karl Kruszelnicki's Ig Nobel Prize in 2002 for his research survey on human belly button fluff.⁷

My personal opinion is that scientific publishing in Australia is hardly drifting. We are leading the way by

promoting uniquely Australian content, especially through our small publishers.

In many ways, Australia's distance from overseas markets, and competitors, is both a curse and a blessing. We have become adept at navigating these challenges and turning them to our advantage, reflecting the rugged self-reliance Blainey wrote about in *The Tyranny of Distance*.

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