

# Revolution or Evolution? Thoughts on the Direct Membership Model

*Janet Mackenzie has contributed her thoughts on the proposed change to the structure of IPEd and the state societies.*

Let me begin by explaining what my angle is on this. I am an honorary life member of Editors Victoria and a Distinguished Editor of IPEd. My efforts at persuading editors to organise as a profession began in 1971 when I helped to found the Society of Editors, now Editors Victoria. For more than 10 years from 1998 I was active at the national level in IPEd's predecessor, the Council of Australian Societies of Editors, and later in IPEd, serving in various roles including councillor, liaison officer and convenor of the Accreditation Working Group.

## History

In setting up IPEd, we recognised that the strength of the profession was in the seven vibrant editors' societies, and we were determined not to endanger them. Therefore IPEd was designed as a structure that would support and enable the societies but not dominate or supplant them. As the then chair of IPEd pointed out three years ago, 'When IPEd was formed, assurances were given that the national organisation would not attempt any kind of takeover of the state and Canberra societies'.<sup>i</sup>

Although chronically underfunded, IPEd has enormous achievements to its credit, including *Australian Standards for Editing Practice*, the expanding accreditation scheme, a program of biennial national conferences, guidelines for editing theses, professional indemnity insurance, national surveys, and submissions to government and industry agencies. IPEd has delivered. What started all this kerfuffle? In 2013 the national membership was surveyed about the future of IPEd. Of the 23 per cent who responded, 61 per cent favoured direct membership in principle. In other words, so far fewer than 15 per cent of the total membership have shown support for this model. To date, \$18,000 and countless volunteer hours have been spent developing the proposal.<sup>ii</sup>

## What's in it for Editors Victoria?

As a founding member I have a sentimental attachment to Editors Victoria. Moreover, it seems to me that we, as the largest and wealthiest society, have little to gain from the proposed national model. The benefits are likely to flow mainly to the small societies. EV members are entitled to ask, 'If I pay three times my present fee, do I get triple the benefits?'<sup>iii</sup>

The claimed benefits include:

- increased access to professional development
- improved advocacy through a paid national officer

- less admin work for our committee
- tiered membership
- better communication, including news about job opportunities.<sup>iv</sup>

Editors Victoria already has an excellent, accessible program of professional development; it employs paid staff to take care of many administrative tasks; it already has tiered membership and can expand the scheme; and it circulates job advertisements to members. The only real advantage for Editors Victoria is in the appointment of a national executive officer to spruik the profession, and this could be achieved without any upheaval through IPEd's existing structure with a modest fee increase.

## Risks

This proposal will determine the future of our professional organisation and we must be clear-eyed about the possible dangers as well as the possible advantages.

- **Death spiral:** The proposal includes a suggested figure for fees that is double or triple what members presently pay. This enormous increase in fees will certainly lead to a loss of members, though we cannot say how many. The danger is that a yes vote could be the beginning of a death spiral: increased fees cause members to leave so that there are fewer members to support the organisation, leading to higher fees, leading to fewer members and so on. We risk destroying not only IPEd, but the societies.
- **Lack of unanimity:** Another danger is in the various interests at play. The small societies (who stand to gain most) might accept the new national organisation but one or more of the big societies (who pay the bills) might choose to stand aside. Victoria, for instance, has approximately one-third of IPEd's members, and with Queensland and New South Wales accounts for well over half. A no vote by any or all of them would fatally damage the proposed cost structure and make the proposal unworkable, leaving the profession in disarray. A win by a narrow margin would leave many members dissatisfied and inclined to depart.
- **Burden on volunteers:** Even if the yes vote is overwhelming, implementation will impose a further burden on already burnt-out volunteers. Enormous effort has already gone into preparing the proposal, consulting members and putting it to the vote, and deserves our gratitude. But somehow further effort will have to be made at the national level to set up the new system (financial arrangements, procedures manual, complaints system, revamped website, etc.) and at the branch level to restructure committees and learn the new methods of operation. I predict a long period of paralysis while both the national office and the branches continue to focus on process rather than on action to advance the profession.
- **Disconnection:** The imposition of another layer of administration in a national head office (especially a virtual one) risks alienating people from their present connection with their society. Centralised procedures administered by faceless functionaries are never popular and can be cumbersome and frustrating. It is worth noting that at the recent Write Edit Index conference in Canberra the indexers voted to dismantle just

such a model, eliminating direct membership, dissolving branches and setting up groups based on regions or special interests.

An Alternative

I am not opposed to direct membership. In fact, I think it is inevitable. But I doubt whether this is the way to go about it.

As careful, thoughtful people, editors are more likely to take one step at a time than to make a dizzy leap into the unknown. We should exploit all the possibilities offered by the existing structure of IPEd before we dump it. IPEd can continue to deliver.

I suggest we reject the proposed scheme and instead proceed cautiously and incrementally. The first step is to get agreement to a modest increase in fees, which will enable IPEd to employ an executive officer to undertake advocacy, among other things. Then set up a national freelance register, which should pay for itself. Establish a national newsletter. Increase coordination of professional development. When all these endeavours are working smoothly, it will be time to introduce new membership and financial arrangements with the help of paid staff. There is no need – and we do not have the resources – to do everything at once.

Janet Mackenzie IPEd Distinguished Editor Honorary Life Member Editors  
Victoria

### **End notes**

i. Rosemary Luke, 'What is the future for IPEd?' Paper prepared for planning teleconference to be held on Sunday 19 August 2012.

ii. IPEd WP4 Membership Team, 'Green Paper – Proposed Membership Structure', 27 April 2015, p. 5.

iii. Currently the annual fee for full membership of EV is \$95 and for, for example, Queensland and Tasmania it is \$150; the proposed fee is \$280, *ibid.*, p. 2. I have no axe to grind here because as a life member I do not pay fees under either system.

iv. Summarised from 'Questions Raised During the IPEd Plenary Session at National Conference May 2015'.