The past, present and future of the NOVA Times

Stefan Nikolaj

Introduction

The NOVA Times is the proudly official newspaper of Nova International Schools. Endorsed and supported by the school, it is lovingly created by the Nova Newspaper Club, where students of all ages and backgrounds can write articles on whatever topics they wish. Through this we also teach students the process of researching and writing long-form content outside of a strictly school class-based environment. In the past we have hosted, and will continue to host writing workshops where younger students are given the opportunity to practise their writing and get immediate, constructive feedback. Another essential part of the newspaper is its readership, a proactive community involved in reading, discussing and debating the content of each edition. Despite the past two turbulent school years, the Nova Newspaper Club has persisted and thrived thanks to the dedication of its members and support of the community.

This will outline the complete process of creating a newspaper, from start to finish, using the exact techniques, strategies and tools that the current team has been using from the 5th edition. Its purpose is to document the creative process, so that both current and future members of the newspaper club can build rapid, consistent and quality editions, while non-members can see our process and potentially learn a grass-roots way of organising a team with a creative purpose. Since the teams change often, with new members joining and older ones leaving, we also saw it necessary to move past the oral transmission of knowledge, and to provide a consistent outline of the processes of the school newspaper. From there came the idea behind this article, which is divided into the following sections:

- Introduction
- About the authors
- Birth of the newspaper
- Interview
- On facilitating meetings
- On editors
- Editing
- Designing

Since another purpose of this article is to be used as a reference guide, you are free to skip to whatever parts you find necessary, however reading it in its entirety is recommended, since it is both interesting and applicable to more than just the newspaper club - most other creative endeavours in teams will follow similar processes.

About the authors

I am Stefan Nikolaj, currently a senior in Nova, and a member of the NOVA Times team since the 5th edition was launched. I do the design of the newspaper and often assist in the other processes. I've also written some articles of my own, and generally help around with everything. I like programming and nerdy things like that, and I also like putting hidden messages in the newspaper, which only one person has ever found.

Some of the text here is provided by the current Editor-in-Chief of the NOVA Times and leader of the Nova Newspaper Club, Luka Pavikjevikj, who has tirelessly worked over the past two years to make the newspaper club into its greatest form yet. Without him, neither this document, nor the club itself, would exist as it is.

Birth of the newspaper

The first version of the newspaper, called Nova News, was created by Sofia Tanevska and Lili Zbogar. Many of the standards and ideas we still use were created by them, though many, like the design process, were completely overhauled. Yet, Sofi and Lili's original goal with the newspaper - to provide a space for students to express themselves, is still an essential part of our mission as well. Interestingly, though, we follow Nova News' edition numbering, continuing on after their final fourth edition. There existed a previous school newspaper, only fragments and legends of which still exist. This extravagant edition of the newspaper had a large team consisting of both students and teachers, yet for reasons beyond the scope of this project, it ended. Thus the latest edition at the time of writing, the 10th edition, may not be the 10th school newspaper ever made.

To further explore the history of the school newspaper and grasp the reasoning behind many decisions, I interviewed Luka Pavikjevikj, current Editor-in-Chief of the NOVA Times. He

provided a detailed history of the creation of the NOVA Times and answered many other questions in private, which was especially helpful for the *Editing* section. I would like to sincerely thank him for the in-depth answers.

Interview

Why did the old newspaper end?
Well, I do not think that we could say that the old newspaper ended; rather Elena [Karchicka] and I became editors of NOVA Times, directly succeeding Sofija Tanevska and Lili Zbogar. While we introduced many reforms to the content and the style of the newspaper, many of the practices started by them are what we uphold in continuity. For instance, the way we conduct our meetings and the presence of the anonymous box are characteristics of NOVA Times started by the previous editors.

How did the ideas behind the new newspaper, the new team and new style come up?
From my personal perspective, I have looked at The Times and The New York Times as sources of inspiration for improving the newspaper. To me, they are exemplars of exceptional journalism. Our newspaper should look at them as where we should be in many years' time. Stefan would know that the cover page takes from the London Times. On the other hand, the use of honorifics in articles and the title capitalisation style are features 'inherited' from The New York Times. My knowledge of the press also led to my decision to split the articles published by NOVA Times into three categories: news, opinion and arts featurettes. The introduction of editorials and letters to the editor are innovations not present in any other publication in our country as of now.

How did you, Luka and Elena, collectively decide to continue and revive the newspaper?
I must say that we did not reach a collective decision at all. In 2020, Sofi and Lili published a call for new editors, as both of them were seniors about to leave high school. After an initial round of selection, they ran individual interviews for successful candidates. In my interview, I was asked about my motivations for becoming editors, but also faced with a hypothetical problem of whether to publish a piece or not. It turned out that Elena and I were selected and from that point on, we worked together rather successfully for two full years, creating 6 editions in the process.

What were some of the initial difficulties you faced?

Perhaps it will sound too cliché to say this, but I firmly believe that when a team of dedicated people who really love what they are doing surrounds one, one does not face difficulties. Or, one does not perceive them as difficulties. In this sense, we do not face difficulties, even though time management seldom pops up here and there.

What does the process of editing look like, from the time you receive an article?
I usually ask the writers to submit their articles in either a Microsoft Word or a Google Docs format, because I need them to be easily editable. Afterwards, I make copies of them and put them in a folder titled 'Materials'. There is a separate folder like that for each edition. After the final deadline passes, I usually sit down during the weekend and assign each article to one of the three categories. Every article receives two readings: the first for its content, the second one for the language used. If a significant content-related issue arises, I contact the writer to resolve it. Pertaining to the language, I check grammar, vocabulary, syntax and style. After this is done, I create a list of articles on a shared Google Doc with the designer. An article marked as yellow is completely edited; an article marked in green is included in the design. Should an article require further editing or is of an important nature, after a few days, it is given a third reading. After all the articles are marked in yellow, the designer is informed, and he commences the design process.

How do you balance the opposing forces of a student body who wants to express itself freely, and the school administration?
The school administration has been incredibly supportive of the newspaper's efforts and they have been allowing students to express their right to free speech in NOVA Times freely, in the Voltairean sense, if you will. Our standards for professional reporting, the incorporation of facts and data in opinion articles and the willingness to resist the temptation of sensationalism ensure that we do not have issues surrounding publication.

Were there any issues related to having two editors?
Of course, disagreements will occur between two passionate people, sharing the same values, but in possession of differing viewpoints in regards to a particular decision. We usually solved our issues by conservation – either between ourselves or with the author of a piece – and reached a consensual agreement. If this did not happen, there always was the vote of the Designer to break the tie. You do know about whom I am talking.

What does the future of the newspaper look like after the departure of one of the editors?

The demands of the International Baccalaureate took their toll last year: we published only two editions as opposed to the previous four the year before that. I would very much like to continue the pace of sophomore year and publish four editions this school year, too. Therefore, we would hasten the pace. I am also planning on organising a call for two assistant editors and two assistant designers, so that once Stefan and I vacate our posts, there would be a whole team in-waiting ready to continue the marvellous work of NOVA Times from day one.

Now that we are finished with the interview, it is time to follow the team while we create a newspaper edition from scratch!

On facilitating meetings

Each edition first begins with a meeting. Writers gather at the school auditorium where everyone discusses their opinion on the last edition and the improvements they would have made. Through this we strive to make subsequent editions slightly better than previous ones, both in terms of design, editing and content. For example, one common complaint for the design was the lack of whitespace between articles leading to a general cramped feeling, which we fixed in the following editions. Once this discussion is done, the call for articles is opened. Everyone who has an idea for an article suggests it, gives a brief overview and then either gets a green light to continue with it or a suggestion to iterate on the idea. Suggested articles are only rejected when they explicitly aim to attack a person, group or organisation (excluding constructive criticism). All of the suggested articles get added to a document, and all writers are given a schedule to finish their article. The deadlines are not strict, rather they are simply a suggestion on when a writer should finish their own work. We understand that some articles may be harder to write than others and that inspiration does not follow a schedule. Until an edition is published, a writer can send in their article - if they miss even this deadline, there is always a next edition!

In the document with the articles, they all get labelled according to their category and their status: being written, being edited, being added into the design, and finally done. This also means that articles can be edited and designed independent of one another. To track all of these articles in different states, we have a Google Drive folder which contains original articles, edited articles and different drafts of the newspaper design. The editors handle the work with keeping the Google Drive consistently updated and this has been one of our most important processes for orderly handling and archival of articles. To allow multiple editors to work on an article simultaneously, we use Google Docs for all articles. When an article is

submitted it gets copied from its original form into a Drafts folder, and a copy is made in another folder where it can be edited. Editing is often collaborative and some difficult parts are shared between editors and consulted upon in depth. Sometimes these conversations can get longer than the original article itself!

On editors

The editing process is essential, particularly with less experienced writers, which students naturally are - none of us have degrees in journalism yet! Most often, inexperienced writers have unique ideas and perspectives, however the impact of their point is softened by errors in spelling or phrasing. It is the job of the editor(s) to assist the writers by modifying their articles to fix these issues. Editors are further responsible for imposing standards in the appearance of the newspaper. Many dialects and ways of expression in English (the main language of the NOVA Times) exist, and if every article uses different standards, it would both take the reader out of their immersion, and show a lack of direction behind the newspaper.

It is important to note that the role of an editor is not only to fix beginners' mistakes - there are many other responsibilities. As Luka previously stated, some of these other responsibilities are to facilitate the writing of new articles and to organise meetings. Furthermore, any criticism and controversy is most often dealt with by the editors. This is why the job of the editor is much more than an glorified anthropomorphic Grammarly - in many ways it is the most important role in the whole team.

Editing

The editing process is similar for all articles, however the extent of the changes is different for each type of article in the newspaper. Currently, we have three types of articles which have different approaches to editing - *News (Nova/National/International)*, *Opinion*, and *Arts Featurette*. A core belief which we have, distinct from some other newspapers, is that the editor should never change the meaning of what a writer writes. This manifests itself differently based on the type of article.

Despite the different approaches, there are some changes that are applied to all articles. These are mostly fixing spelling and formatting errors. They further involve standardising dialectal features and changing some colloquialisms which might not fit the tone of the

newspaper. All articles get formatted with the same font size (9pt), font (Times New Roman), spacing (11pt) and tabulation (one tab stop).

For articles in the *News* section, the changes further involve checks for accuracy and the rephrasing of sections which might misrepresent the truth. Almost always, a writer's error in the facts is due to a misunderstanding of a source, or by getting facts from an unreliable or unverifiable source. The NOVA Times does not ask for a writer to send their sources, however it is recommended. Since we (unfortunately) have not had many investigative articles yet, most of the facts in news articles are verifiable. Apart from spelling, formatting and factual errors, the content of the article is never changed. If any changes are necessary, we prefer to ask the writers themselves to apply them, so as to never misrepresent their original point.

For articles in the *Opinion* section, the process of editing must be tread more carefully, since they involve the opinion of their writers. We usually refrain from changing their content, as that would result in misrepresenting their original point. Thus, changes to opinion articles are in most cases, as is with news articles, suggested to the writers of the articles themselves. There are, however, rare and specific cases where libellous statements must be changed - an opinion article should contain an opinion, not personal attacks. Still, opinion articles almost always attract some controversy. Interestingly, most of the time these controversies lead to constructive discussion, and many times we have been contacted by students who have feedback or comments on opinion articles. Naturally, due to their contents, they attract debate, which is why an editorial team must be careful with what it approves. It is important to not let the newspaper become majority opinion-based - that is not a newspaper anymore. Another important part of adding opinion articles is to have a disclaimer after the article saying that the views expressed in the article do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial staff. The "necessarily" part is important, as the opinion of the editorial team should be shown as irrelevant to the point of the article. The editors may agree or disagree, but that should not influence the point expressed by the writer.

For articles in the *Arts Supplement* section, the extent of the changes is somewhere between the other two types. Articles about arts are another way that students express themselves, and we try to not change the meaning of the articles. Regular edits like spelling and phrasing are applied, however similarly to opinion articles, ones about arts can be controversial, and there has been one article which was recently controversial. This article discussed sexuality, and though the editorial team approved it, there were some doubts with how younger students may be disturbed by descriptions of human sexuality.

One important factor in the editing process is the inclusion of the writers in the process. There are differing views on to what extent writers should be involved in editing, however in the NOVA Times we only make serious changes to an article with the writers' approval, or even allow them to edit their own articles with our suggestions.

Designing

In this section, the reason behind the design choices will be explored, followed by the history of how they were made, and finally the process of designing an article, from start to finish in the newspaper will be described.

The history and philosophy behind the design

Usually, once the articles have all been edited, the process of designing begins. It is important to note that the design and editing can happen simultaneously, with edited articles being added in their unfinished form and then the final edits being applied once the article is fully done. Thus the work of the designer(s) can happen either at the same time as, or after, the work of the editor(s).

The most essential part to the design is the software. Initially, the team of the newspaper club used Microsoft Word, however this limited the scope of how interesting and creative designs can be, especially in terms of format and layout. Even though this initial work with Microsoft Word was excellently given the limitations of the software, the shortcomings become evident after a few articles. For this reason, in the new newspaper club we use Adobe InDesign, a professional print design tool, to make the designs.

InDesign is the main reason behind the improved redesign of the school newspaper, allowing incredible flexibility and creativity, limited only by time and skill. A particularly important feature of InDesign is the ability to use templates, which makes subsequent editions significantly faster to make. The first edition of the NOVA Times, the 5th edition, took more than 10 hours to design, partly due to us having no prior InDesign experience, however all other editions took under four hours, with the latest ones taking around two, for the same result in quality. This also allowed flexibility in where articles are placed on the page, with choices being made to emphasise specific articles in order to achieve particular results.

InDesign further allows a vast array of different page sizes and formats, as well as a great system for adding in and resizing images. The part with the images is particularly important, as dealing with images in Microsoft Word and similar writing tools is difficult to get right, particularly for more complex and creative designs. Furthermore, images can be cropped and edited easily, particularly when combining Adobe InDesign with Adobe Photoshop. This allows for all types of page organisation to work well, which will be explored later.

The final great feature of InDesign is its flexible printing system, which allows for many kinds of page layouts to be printed in many formats. Even though we did not get to use these printing features due to COVID-19 confining us to our home, unable to distribute newspapers in print, there was a small number of prints done in order to see how well the newspaper looks like when it is printed as an actual newspaper.

Now that all the reasons for using InDesign have been outlined, it is time to begin with actually designing an article using the rules and designs that we have worked with so far.

Design of an article

As stated previously, the design of each article begins with the previous edition as a reference. The main goal of the design process is to put the articles in order, sorted by their category, while providing an easy reading experience and smooth transitions between articles.

One important part when doing any creative work with an audience in mind is taking into consideration the context in which the work will be viewed. Since the newspaper is sent through email, most people will read it on either a mobile device or laptop. On top of that, most people will read the article through the inbuilt Gmail PDF viewer, where they are used to having all pages aligned vertically. As a result, in comparison to a traditional newspaper design which is supposed to be read in "spreads" of two pages, here the design of the articles needs to make it as easy as possible for readers to transition from one vertical page to the next, while also keeping the newspaper print-friendly.

To achieve this, two strategies are used. First, an attempt is made to keep all the articles to a one-page maximum. This makes them easier to read since the reader does not have to move pages and risk losing focus. The addition of page numeration makes this maximum even more important, as this makes it easy for readers to skip to the article they might want to read first. However, often articles exceed or do not meet this one-page size, which is

where creative ordering must come into play. To this end, the designer is free to choose whatever format appears best at the time in the proper context.

Images are used to assist in the attempt to have all articles fit the formatting of the newspaper well. For a shorter article, multiple images may be added, while for a longer one smaller images are often used - sparingly. The images are usually related to the topic and sourced from Pexels or Google Images (with the Creative Commons filter enabled) to avoid copyright issues. It is extremely unlikely that the NOVA Times will be sued for copyright infringement, however for anyone who goes ahead with real journalism, finding appropriate and permitted images to use is essential. Images have two main purposes - either examples which function as a "background" and frame the context behind the article (such as an image of the messaging app Telegram when discussing Telegram) or a direct image of the event or object being discussed. We attempt to add at least one image per article, but oftentimes more are needed to illustrate the full picture (pun intended). In terms of image choice, we recommend that writers source their own images, however if they cannot find one with the proper permissions or do not mind us choosing, the editor or designer makes the choice for them.

Currently, the ordering of the topics is as follows:
- Title page
- Table of contents
- Info section
- News from NOVA
- National news
- International news
- Opinion
- Arts Featurette

There is no particular reason behind this ordering, however it is approximately based on other famous newspapers - the NOVA Times itself is strongly inspired by the New York Times.

Finishing touches and publishing

Once the design is finished, it is sent to a teacher approved by the school administration who does a final check for any inappropriate or erroneous content. After the teacher checks it, the school administration also takes a look at the newspaper and gives the final green light to

release the newspaper to the school. Currently we only release new editions through email, however in pre-COVID times the newspaper was physically printed. As there is a current shortage of paper everywhere, this situation is unlikely to change. Advertising is done on a word-of-mouth basis, and this has traditionally been the school newspaper's weakness, as many in the school do not yet know of the newspaper's existence or new editions as they get buried under the dozens of emails many students receive daily.

Still, we continue writing and releasing articles and new editions! I am very honored to be part of the newspaper club and to have made our idea of a quality school newspaper a current reality.