

RESOURCES

Schwa Fire: From Lazy Sound to Language Passion by Matthew Crowley

The schwa. The online magazine *Slate* has called it **English's laziest sound** and the **sound that tripped up** many Scripps National Spelling Bee contestants in 2013. It's the name of a restaurant in Chicago and a women's Ultimate Frisbee team in Portland, Oregon. And it's the inspiration for a new digital language magazine that includes copyeditors in its target audience.

The unstressed English sound, symbolized by an upside-down e, sounds like "uh" but makes fans, like Michael Erard, say "ooh." Erard, a journalist, linguist, and author of *Um ... : Slips, Stumbles, and Verbal Blunders, and What They Mean* (2008) and *Babel No More: The Search for the World's Most Extraordinary Language Learners* (2012), dubbed his new digital magazine, which went live on May 16, *Schwa Fire*.

Erard said *Schwa Fire* will use print, audio, video, and multimedia to deliver in-depth stories about language and linguistics. In his founder's note on the ***Schwa Fire* website**, Erard wrote that language journalism, the site's focus, stresses language and journalism equally.

"Ideally," he wrote, language journalism "uses linguistics to open up avenues in a topic, even when it's not ostensibly about language. Or maybe it is, but it has a depth that can yield the true treasure of human insight if you dig with linguistic tools."

Schwa Fire is on and of the Internet. A 35-day Kickstarter campaign in 2013 raised \$27,000 for startup costs, beating Erard's goal by \$2,000. To donors of \$1,000 or more, Erard offered seats on *Schwa Fire's* three content-shaping panels: stories, translations, and usage. He said the story panel consists of a couple of hundred people; there are fewer than a hundred each on the usage and translation panels.

As of late July, *Schwa Fire* had 906 subscribers, up from 670 at the end of the Kickstarter campaign. Erard said the website had attracted nearly 10,000 unique users since its launch.

Erard had long contemplated starting a language magazine. In 2005 and 2006, he'd talked with ***Language Log*** officials about what it might include. But the emergence of blogs, which observers thought would satisfy the linguistics content niche, temporarily derailed the idea.

Though blogs proliferated, Erard sensed there was an unsatisfied hunger for language-specific content. So in 2013, he again imagined a magazine. But the traditional print magazine model, with classifieds in the back and letters to the editor in the front, didn't appeal to him.

The Internet freed him. Social media comments, he said, could stand in for letters to the editor. And selling issue sponsorships could eliminate the need for classifieds. The first issue was sponsored by Interpret America, a national online forum for interpreters.

One magazine convention will stay: subscriptions. *Schwa Fire* offers half-year subscriptions for \$6.99 or an à la carte option at 99¢ per story. In the future, Erard said, some free content may be offered in exchange for an email address. An Apple operating system application is also planned as an extra *Schwa Fire* channel.

Digital publishing also freed *Schwa Fire* from traditional news cycles. Like television shows and some podcasts, *Schwa Fire* will have seasons, Erard said, each lasting six months, and with new issues every two months.

By featuring long-form journalism, Erard believes *Schwa Fire* can cover topics with a breadth, depth, and frequency other outlets can't match.

"I've seen [language] stories I admire in *The New Yorker* about forensic linguistics and corporate naming," he said. "But those are the only pieces *The New Yorker* will ever do on those topics ever."

Schwa Fire's first issue included articles on regional dialects in America, the recovery of once-lost Yiddish audiotapes, and dating while speaking Danish. The second issue, posted July 21, included stories on the art of Chinese names and projecting your voice to express authority. Each issue includes a language puzzle. Contest winners will receive *Schwa*-themed swag, Erard said, perhaps Etsy jewelry.

Erard said audiences have convinced him *Schwa Fire* can work. At book signings, he'd talk about his book for 20 minutes, and then attendees would spend 90 minutes sharing their reactions and language experiences. Language, he said, is something people want to examine and discuss.

Piercing the ever-noisier media din may be challenging. But Erard believes his hyperlink-free, fit-for-any-device stories will keep *Schwa Fire* above the shrinking-attention fray.

"I'm very conscious as a writer and editor and now a publisher that with any content you put online, you're fighting an attention war. Well, I'm an attention warrior," he said. "I understand people have a lot of choices out there and that there are lots of things they can get free, but I know what they can't get is quality long-form journalism about language. And if that content is presented in a consistent way that appeals, that's one of the best ways to be winning the war."

In *Schwa Fire*, Erard said, copyeditors will find deep, insider coverage of topics, including usage, that they wrestle with in their work. Also, he said, copyeditors will join a broad discussion with language professionals of different disciplines.

Erard said he'd wanted to avoid using *language* in his magazine's name, partly to distinguish it from rivals. He said he considered naming it *The Boarding House*, a sly reference to a Teddy Roosevelt quote about Americans needing to learn English:

We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polyglot boarding-house.

But Erard came back to the schwa, pairing it with *fire* to express people's passion for language. Erard said one of his son's preschool teachers liked the schwa enough to have it tattooed inside her arm. When the teacher was a linguistics major studying in France, she and some girlfriends got matching tattoos, forming a schwa sisterhood, Erard said.

"The schwa is something people are passionate about," he said. "And they are just as passionate about language."

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