



# News, Improved

How America's Newsrooms Are Learning to Change

[www.newsimproved.org](http://www.newsimproved.org)

## Chapter 2

### Goals: Knowing Just Where You're Going

*Chapter 2 of News, Improved describes how newspapers can turn a vision into definable goals and a training plan, applying principles from top organizational development leaders.*

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*A vision "is only one of thousands of steps in a never-ending process of expressing the fundamental characteristics we identified (in) visionary companies."*

*-- James Collins and Jerry Porras,  
"Built to Last"<sup>1</sup>*

Goals are the everyday expression of long-term vision. They make it easier for editors to lead during times of change. They demystify an uncertain future. They give a newsroom a sense of progress, even comfort. "Most staffers are not afraid to change once they understand the goals," one executive editor told us.

But when we asked top editors about their newspaper's vision and goals, many referred us to their mission statements. Pretty vague stuff. They mentioned "improving writing" or "better beat coverage" or "expanding diversity."

Is a mission statement a goal? Not really. True, a good mission statement can provide the newsroom with a sense of journalistic purpose. But it is rarely a real vision crafted to address the unique conditions of that individual newspaper's market. And it's never a set of concrete goals to move the newspaper from Point A to Point B.

### Goal No. 1: Decide You Really Need Goals

Ill-defined goals contribute to the "us vs. them" culture in newsrooms. In some newspapers, we found, goals are either non-existent, vague, or too numerous. The most common problem: Top editors can recite the goals but the staff cannot.

Many frontline journalists viewed goals (when they knew them) with skeptical disregard. Empty slogans. Unsupported by budget, training, attitude or action. "We have a lot of these goals," one reporter said. "They seem to change every quarter."

Bob Zaltsberg, editor of The Herald-Times in Bloomington, Ind., says the journey from vision to goals demands continual attention and communication from top editors. "It's a lot harder to implement than it is just to talk about," he says. "What you really have to do is go one step at a time. You have to show people what the next step is going to be on the way to whatever the vision is."



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### Goals Don't Happen by Accident

A high-ranking editor of one of the country's top 20 newspapers mentioned to us that his newspaper's front page is "often a happy accident." In other words, what the readers of this newspaper saw resulted from an editorial process that was opportunistic rather than drawn from a long-term strategy.

The opposite of accidental journalism is intentional journalism. This approach is based on creating editorial goals that are supported by resources and training with the *intent* of serving a specific audience. It is journalism with a purpose – and it values the needs of the readers over the desires of journalists.

The "hey, it's news" approach served newspapers well when print media sat atop a fixed news hierarchy. But in a dynamic, digital news environment that doesn't put much value on yesterday's news – newspapers' main stock in trade – the hard-wired newsroom structure is out of date.

Editors intent on reorganizing their newsrooms around clear goals should ask themselves: If I could use the same people and money to create any news operation I wanted, in today's digital world, what would I do? Would I create the same beats, the same departments, the same production and decision-making processes? Would I fill the newsroom seats with the same people who are there now? Would I design the paper and its Web site in the same formats? The answer, almost always, is "of course not."

Intentional journalism is the product of clear goals and purposeful training. The era of accidental journalism is over. It worked well in the age of mass media, the time of the something-for-everyone newspaper. In the digital age, media is more personal and journalism must be, too.

### Urgency and Priorities: What's Important Now?

Many newsrooms have far too many goals. When there are more than a few, they aren't goals, but a giant to-do list, one that never gets done because no one knows where to start.

To help newspapers develop strategic learning plans, we first worked with senior editors and staff members to set goals and priorities. What usually emerged from these sessions was a list of lengthy, complex and often conflicting initiatives that had to be winnowed into something more manageable.

Goals have a shelf life. What's important now may not matter next year. And some goals can't be accomplished without doing something else first. Moving money and people communicates top priorities to staff. When an editor who sees the Web as critical to the newspaper's future begins to shift resources from print to online and finds a way to train people to take advantage of digital journalism tools, the signal is clear. The message is not mixed.



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## New Goals for a New Age of Journalism

Many newspapers that have goals limit them to the quality or quantity of the journalism – better writing, more stories, fewer errors. Goals like these can be easy to measure. In *Tomorrow's Workforce*, we used simple content audits to show editors what they actually printed each day. Quite often they were surprised. Newspapers that trumpeted a commitment to diversity were sometimes blatantly homogenous. Editors who said they pushed for more coverage of people oversaw newspapers engorged with stories about meetings, reports and politics. The newspapers had measurable goals. But no one was measuring them.

Content goals remain important because doing journalism is a newspaper's primary purpose, but they don't address issues like leadership, planning and understanding audience. For these, newspapers need new goals – and new ways to judge their success.

Unlike most businesses, newspapers don't pay much attention to the money or time devoted to professional development, nor do they measure the impact of training. Did the news product change as a result? The ultimate purpose of many goals is to change behavior. Are reporters writing differently? Are editors communicating better? Is everyone thinking more creatively? Are readers responding the way you want?

Melanie Sill, editor of the *News & Observer* in Raleigh, N.C., said training prepares journalists for change and raises the chance of meeting new goals. "We want people to perform new types of work, some of which are not yet defined," Sill said. "Offering training lowers the fear associated with changing job duties and roles and offers an incentive both for staff members and managers, as training promises to improve the work. Making such demands without offering training seems to guarantee opposition and failure."

*Chapter 2 of News, Improved includes:*

- *Key questions editors should ask of themselves, and of their newspaper.*
- *A smaller newspaper's experiment with intentional – rather than accidental – journalism.*
- *A mid-size newspaper's successful use of online blogs, before everyone was doing them.*
- *How linking goals, staff training, and organizational change can transform a newspaper.*

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, "*Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*", (HarperCollins, 1994), 11.