



Chapter 5

Frontline Editors: Guardians of the culture

Chapter 5 of News, Improved considers the job of the frontline editor and how radically it has changed in the last decade. It also reviews the findings of the Frontline Editor Project, in which journalists and journalism educators identified the key qualities of this demanding job.

Frontline editors can make or break a newsroom. This editor's primary job – which encompasses job titles including assignment editor, team leader, graphics or photo editor, and assistant city editor – is to manage the newsgathering, design and production staffs. More than anyone else, these editors translate their understanding of a newsroom's mission into its daily work. They can open the door to culture change and creative risk, or close it.

Few of the more than 100 frontline editors we interviewed highlighted the roles listed above. Instead they talked about daily struggles “to put out fires” and “to wear many hats.” When newsroom executives overlook the lament of the frontline editor, they're overlooking a strong potential ally in the drive to change.

The Frontline Role: Take A Spin

Long gone are the days when frontline editors answered to one boss, simply collecting stories from reporters and passing them on. Mae Cheng of Newsday, who moved from reporting to frontline editing three years ago, explains, “There are a lot more demands.... You're talking about photo, graphics, visual elements, you're talking about Web feeds, discussions about what goes on the Web now and what can be held for (the newspaper) tomorrow.... And also there's a greater administrative responsibility. We're trying to take a more comprehensive view of the people who work in the newsroom.”

At metropolitan daily newspapers, these many demands include:

- A more diverse workforce in a more professional newsroom,
- The rise of visuals,
- More direct contact with readers,
- An increasing emphasis on readership strategies and (often) decreasing resources to implement them, and
- The 24-hour appetite for on-line news.

“Frontline editors tend to be the functional dumping ground of the newsrooms,” says Monica Markel, president of the Society of Metro Editors and deputy metro editor at the San Antonio Express-News. Nowhere else in newsrooms could we find people expected to do so much with so little preparation. Of all who work in newsrooms, the reaction of frontline editors to the value

of training and the need for newsroom change has the greatest influence on the attitudes of their colleagues.

Defining the Role

The Frontline Editor Project conducted six conferences in 2005-2006 with the participation of more than 60 frontline editors as well as journalism educators. The goal was to study the skills required of the most effective frontline editors, and then use that understanding to design training for them.

The result was a Frontline Editor Development Profile, an inventory of 23 key skills ranked as “essential,” “important,” or “relevant.” Les Krieger, a psychologist and job-profiling consultant who advised the Frontline Project, noted the skill list is “unusually long” with an “unusually broad range” of requirements.

Essential Skills of the Frontline Editor, the Top Tier:

1. Evaluative
2. Persuasive
3. Self-confident
4. Collaborative
5. Curious
6. Innovative
7. Optimistic
8. Trusting
9. Caring
10. Fact-based

Krieger noted that many of the essential skills in the profile are not management skills, but sales skills. Management and administration skills are also part of the frontline role, as reflected in the “important” and “relevant” tiers.

Important Skills:

11. Achievement-oriented
12. Detail conscious
13. Rule conscious
14. Forward-thinking
15. Affiliative
16. Willing to take charge

At this point, it seems the list contains contradictory skills: A take-charge person and a collaborative one, who follows the rules and is willing to break them, who is both caring and a critical thinker. The next tier features similar nuances.

Relevant Skills:

17. Candid
18. Independent-minded
19. Modest
20. Consistent
21. Tough-minded
22. Emotionally controlled
23. Self aware

The typical workplace pattern holds: Mid-level jobs are more complex than the top management jobs.

The Group “on the Fence”

Industrial psychologist Pierre Meyer sees frontline editors as key to newsroom change. “This is the group that is on the fence,” he says. “This group can prevent change or endorse change.” Frontline editors, Meyer explains, are often the first to resist the idea of a more collaborative culture. He observes that middle managers often came up through the ranks under authoritarian leaders who demanded high output, and resent being told – when they finally reach positions of power – that they must collaborate with everyone.

A demoralized and overbooked frontline editor might crawl into the defensive shell, while an optimistic, organized one helps the newsroom learn to change. The only way to get the latter, not the former, is with good training.

Where and How Middle Managers Can Help

Frontline editors should get a lot of training, but they don’t. One survey found that only one in five frontline editors received any training before or during their transition to the desk. Nonetheless, we found near universal desire in newsrooms for more training for mid-level editors.

In recent years, the American Press and Poynter institutes have developed sessions that focus on frontline editors. In 2004-2006, NewsTrain’s traveling curriculum (www.newstrain.org) offered mid-level editors a mix of craft and management training. News University (www.newsu.org) offers free or low-cost online courses of interest to frontline editors. NewsU also is developing an online “job fit tool” based on the Frontline Editor Development Profile.

The frontline job, connected to all others, can become an echo chamber for larger organizational issues and problems. If the newsroom does not allow supervisors to hold employees accountable, with clear lines of authority, this will show up most noticeably on the frontline level.

Frontline editors are “the ones who have to carry out the change,” says Meyer. “The boss can identify more ideas and opportunities than any staff can carry out.”

Chapter 5 of News, Improved includes:

- *The results of a series of interviews and surveys by John Greenman, journalism professor at the University of Georgia and a former newspaper publisher, on the nature of middle-management problems in newsrooms.*
- *An application of research by middle-management expert Quy Nguyen Huy to the role of the frontline editor.*
- *Advice on how to coach this crucial group.*