

Across the Desk: A Study Of 16 Telegraph Editors

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A study of 16 daily newspaper telegraph editors in Wisconsin reveals that the average desk-man is "caught in a strait jacket of mechanical details," with the press association playing the major role as a selector of news. The author is assistant professor of journalism at the University of California.

THE PLACE OF TELEGRAPH NEWS IN the daily newspaper today is accepted and perhaps taken for granted. Journalistic researchers for some time have been measuring the variations in the "flow" of wire news from press associations into daily newspapers.¹ The amount of wire news appearing in the daily newspaper is the product of a selection process—telegraph editing.²

The job of the telegraph editor must be studied in order to determine why some items are published and why oth-

ers are rejected. Inasmuch as the industry assigns to an editorial employee the tasks of wire selection, the job may be said to be a "communication role."³ Ideally the role requires the telegraph editor to select wire items appropriate to the readers' "needs" and use skill and judgment in transmitting them to the reader.

It is possible to provide a job description of the *ideal* telegraph editor:

1. He should have an appreciation of his community and the communal-ity of interests held by and among his readers.
2. He must be an efficient manager of copy flow.
3. He must possess the sharpest of copyreading skills.
4. He has to have an alert understanding of what is in the news and be

*Based on data in "The Telegraph Editors: A Study of Communication Behavior," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1956 (Publication 16,164, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan).

¹Scott M. Cutlip, "Content and Flow of AP News—From Trunk to TTS to Reader," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 31:434-46 (Fall 1954); Walter Gieber, *The Impact of TTS: AP and UP* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1954, mimeographed).

²David M. White, "The 'Gate Keeper': A Case Study in the Selection of News," *JOURNALISM QUARTERLY*, 27:283-90 (Fall 1950). White's pioneering study closed some of the gap in research on the selection processes within news channels.

³Bruce H. Westley and Malcolm S. MacLean, Jr., "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research," *Audio-Visual Communications Review*, 3:3-12 (Winter 1955).

able to judge quickly which stories he shall use.

5. He has to apply tools of the "intellect" to make his stories "meaningful."

The purpose of this study was to determine how a group of telegraph editors actually carried out the role. Telegraph editing is seen as a decision-making process into which are incorporated the individual wire editor's perception of his community and readers, the traditions of his newspaper and the news policies of his superiors, and his own biases. Very much a part of the process are the daily problems of publication—what and how much news is being provided by the press associations, white space availability, composing room demands, copyreading and headline writing, and that most demanding taskmaster, time. These elements, variously related according to the situation and the individual, provide the data for a realistic understanding of the telegraph editor's job.

METHOD

Case studies were made of the operation of the wire desks in 16 afternoon daily newspapers in Wisconsin. These newspapers used the Associated Press (AP) wire only. Daily circulation ranged from 4,000 to 31,000.

The author interviewed the editorial employee assigned the task of editing the wire at least half-time.⁴ Field visits to the newsrooms were in two waves to permit an extensive interview with the deskman and observation of the editing process.

The 111-item interview schedule was divided, although not in numerical sequence, into these parts: (a) demo-

graphic data and personal history; (b) assigned duties and procedures of desk management; (c) inter-personal factors in the newsroom; (d) perception of the community and readers; (e) news policies and factors of news judgment and (f) comments on AP service.

Other instruments also were used:

1. A mock wire file was administered to the wire editors. They were asked to indicate news judgment independent of AP news budget content and white space availability.

2. The telegraph editors were asked to save all spiked copy for a single day and note reasons for rejection. This provided a check on criteria obtained in the interview.

3. The flow of items from AP wire into the newspaper was measured. Newspaper content arranged in content categories was regarded as a statistical sample of the AP wire. A special sample used publication days when space was at a premium.

4. A check list of news criteria obtained from the interview, the mock wire, and the spike file was established. Each incoming wire story was audited for agreement or disagreement with the individual's stated values and tested statistically.

THE INDIVIDUAL DESKMEN

Wire Editor A: This 28-year-old deskman worked as both sports and wire editor for a 5,000-circulation daily. Although he had been employed for more than five years, he expressed a great deal of insecurity. He described his working situation as haphazard and frenetic and reported a long list of policy strictures issued by an unpredictable employer. The wire editor had no rational routine for handling copy.

Wire Editor A basically was dependent on the AP budget for daily guid-

⁴The formal job titles of the employees were: editor, 1; managing editor, 4; telegraph editor, 9; telegraph and sports editor, 2. Henceforth the position will be termed telegraph or wire editor or deskman.

ance. Policy controlled placement and display of political news.

Wire Editor B: Wire Editor B was an "old-time" newspaperman who had allowed his skills to deteriorate. The newspaper (8,000 circulation) was oriented to local news and wire news was considered as "filler." The AP monitor often was turned off at noon, two hours before press time.

Selection of wire news was guided by the AP budget and display in morning metropolitans. Copy routine was haphazard and in several situations, inside page wire copy was inserted serially without regard to news value.

Wire Editor C: This 45-year-old journalist was a conscientious, hard-working deskman who enjoyed his work and felt close to his community. The deskman said his major problem was getting as much copy as possible off the wire and into the back shop. Paper C (9,000 circulation) used as much as 70% of AP state wire news items. His major task was to decide how to display the wire news and write the headlines. He had little time for any copyreading.

Wire Editor D: The telegraph editor of Paper D (5,000 circulation) was its sole editorial executive and he maintained strict management of his newsroom. He represented himself as the "voice of the newspaper" which, in turn, reflected the conservative outlook of a prosperous but relatively isolated community.

Wire Editor D said his perspective for the paper was parochial. Using less than half of the wire traffic, the wire editor carefully sifted his incoming copy. The primary characteristics of selection were conservative—"hard news" and proximity to the community.

Wire Editor E: This 22-year-old deskman disliked working on the telegraph

desk of a 4,000-circulation daily. Wire Editor E's major ambition was to be a sports writer. At the time of the study the deskman was restless, bitter over a low salary, antagonistic towards his editor and the community, and begrudgingly handling the wire. Perception of news values tended to be vague. Very little copyreading was done and on occasions erratic and careless handling of copy was observed.

Wire Editor F: This 27-year-old telegraph editor was dissatisfied with his job with Paper F (8,000 circulation) and disliked the community. The deskman said he would prefer to select only "important" national and international items. However, Paper F used as much as 80% of wire traffic. Thus, to Wire Editor F, the job held no challenge.

Wire Editor G: The telegraph editor of Paper G (16,000 circulation) was using his "first" job as a means of gaining training and experience before graduating to a larger daily or buying a weekly.

The newspaper, according to the deskman, used a large amount of wire copy. He was not concerned with selection. His major interest was front page make-up and he expressed some aesthetic appreciation for good display.

Wire Editor H: This 45-year-old deskman liked working for Paper H (19,000 circulation). His employers were not demanding and he had a fairly easy routine, he said. Wire Editor H was the only deskman who had a full-time assistant.

The deskman described his job as primarily one of selection for the various social and economic interest groups in the community. However, he had little or no contact with the community at large.

The wire editor worked at a low-pitched tempo in a "relaxed" newsroom

and he was inclined to be lackadaisical in handling the wire. His major guide to news was the AP budget and his assistant did all the "hard work."

Wire Editor I: This deskman was the managing editor of a 17,000-circulation daily. Wire Editor I said he was very close to his community and was active in civic affairs.

Wire Editor I was a competent hard-working newspaperman. His major value in wire selection was "proximity" but he also rated stories about politics and government as important news. If he had any personal idiosyncrasy it was a penchant for accident stories.

Wire Editor J: After three decades as telegraph editor for Paper J (21,000 circulation), the wire editor said he didn't need to seek or receive guidance on news policy or special handling of stories. He also had established a fairly set routine for handling copy. His news values were derived from years of experience on the desk rather than from any continuing contact within the community. He also had a personal idiosyncrasy—stories about railroads.

Wire Editor K: This 33-year-old deskman stood out as one of the more efficient desk managers interviewed. Having the responsibility of getting out two of three daily editions of a 30,000-circulation daily, he had developed a fast-paced routine. The deskman was enthusiastic about his work and was moderately active in his community.

He said his objective in selection was to give the reader "an accurate mirror of the news." He sampled well among political, governmental and economic news, which he considered important. He tried to select carefully among crime and accident stories and succeeded except on days when the wire hole was too large.

Wire Editor L: The telegraph editor

of Paper L (16,000 circulation) was concerned primarily with doing "the best" he could from day to day. Born in a metropolitan area, he disliked the community in which he worked. His contacts within the community were limited and he described his readers as "factory hands." On one hand he said he tried to give readers news they should read and on the other he used what they liked. As a result he stressed display of "important" as well as "sensational" news.

Overshadowing the above was Wire Editor L's concern with filling the wire news hole. Paper L had a "tight" newsroom. At work the deskman appeared harried but he was not an especially fast worker; he seemed nervous and his pace was fitful.

Wire Editor M: The concept of a wire editor carefully watching the wire gate did not apply to Paper M (8,000 circulation). The wire editor explained that he was under pressure to produce as much copy as possible to satisfy production needs. This was substantiated by measurements of news flow.

But the wire editor's personal criteria for news selection were relaxed. The deskman had two decades of newspaper experience with telegraph news and had learned to use what the "traffic would bear."

In effect the task of the wire editor was to write headlines. The majority of make-up was done by the back shop. Wire Editor M complained that the back shop was uncooperative.

Wire Editor N: According to the deskman, competition from a daily published in a neighboring city was the essential factor in Paper N's (20,000 circulation) news policy. The use of local sports news, local pictures, "news flashes" and a bold front page make-up were elements calculated to meet com-

petition. In handling telegraph copy, time was the important criterion. High value was given to stories that came in during the last three hours of the news cycle.

The wire editor, who also was Paper N's managing editor, was an energetic, hard-working deskman.

At the time of the interview he was attempting to reorganize and improve the newsroom by personally assuming all the tasks of managing, city and telegraph editors.

Wire Editor O: As managing editor of Paper O (7,000 circulation), the deskman was concerned with the preponderance of wire news over local. Page one and the best inside pages carried a heavy percentage of wire items. As telegraph editor he placed emphasis in selection on the "top" stories and followed the guide of the AP budget.

Wire Editor O expressed strong preference for the problems of make-up and devoted a great deal of time to planning his front page.

Wire Editor P: This telegraph editor of a 30,000-circulation daily typified his operation as being "mechanical." His implication was that perception of news values and community did not enter his selection process. The readers of Paper P had a plentiful supply of AP news. Wire Editor P gave them the "top" news—the AP budget and most of the top "hard news" stories. On the other hand, many of the less important stories were handled in a careless manner.

If wire editing means technical perfection—routing stories quickly and committing a minimum of style errors—then Wire Editor P was doing a good job. Wire Editor P said he achieved what he wanted after 25 years of newspaper work—a steady, non-demanding desk job.

THE TELEGRAPH EDITOR

The role of the telegraph editor is defined by his duties; his role behavior is individual. Wire Editor E was frustrated because the telegraph desk seemed an enforced condition for employment as sports editor. Wire Editor G regarded his job as a stepping stone to a better one. An older deskman, Wire Editor B, appeared no longer to have a spark of interest in his work. And a younger man, Wire Editor K, relished the bustle and rush of getting his columns filled.

The vision of an unpredictable boss evoked insecurity within Wire Editor A. Wire Editor M was frustrated in his relationships with the back shop. And Wire Editor L reacted poorly to a "tight shop."

Several wire editors adopted some of the characteristics of role "playing." Wire Editor P enjoyed being cynical. The tradition of the whip-cracking boss was used by Wire Editor N. Most of the deskmen complained that they were victims of a slipshod AP wire filer at the state bureau.

The ages of the 16 telegraph editors ranged from 22 to 65 years. Five were 30 years of age and under. These were the restless ones; they wanted to move on. Moreover they were experiencing their first daily newspaper jobs. Four had been working only one to two years; Wire Editor A was a five-year man. Only one, Wire Editor G, expressed satisfaction with his opportunity for training. The average weekly salary for these five wire editors was \$67.

Eleven telegraph editors were over 30 years of age. The average accumulated newspaper experience was 23 years. Four of the older deskmen were working in the newsroom in which they started their daily careers. The average

salary of 10 of the 11 older deskmen was \$84 (Wire Editor D did not quote a salary). None of the 11 expressed any desire to change jobs.

All but three of the 16 wire editors had experience as reporters before taking over the wire desk.

Two wire editors did not complete high school and one attended college only one year. Thirteen were graduated from college. Of this last group 10 were majors in journalism and seven of them attributed some importance to their specialized education.

The deskmen, save Wire Editor E, said they liked and wanted desk work. Several pointed out they were spared the reporter's uncertain tempo of assignment.

The picture one has of his own role is actually a guide for behavior. When asked for their perception of the wire editor's job, the first response given by several deskmen seemed to lack any recognition of the newspaper's function of providing news.

Wire Editor E flatly said, "I don't like it." And his description of the newsroom and news selection had tones of stress. Wire Editors H, L and P emphasized the "day-to-day" nature of their tasks. Wire Editor A described his position as the "best job in town" and went on to indicate that he had achieved status.

Wire Editors G and O responded by giving a description of the aesthetics of make-up. Wire Editor F also mentioned make-up but with less emphasis.

THE WIRE EDITORS' SKILLS

On the majority of the wire desks of the small- and medium-sized dailies in this study, the demand for and the employment of rigorous copyreading and intelligent editing appeared to be at low ebb.

There was no direct evidence that the 16 deskmen were devoid of these abilities. From the data gathered it appeared that an important factor was the degree of supervision by editorial executives. The newsrooms of Papers D, I, N and P were "tight shops;" that is, there was little tolerance of errors. In the other 12 newsrooms supervision was lax.

The wire editors of Papers E, H, I, J and P had to mark copy for the style of their newspapers. Thus these five deskmen had some opportunity to review the copy before them. Yet only Wire Editor I said he still read the copy for "more than errors."

The other 11 telegraph editors depended on the AP to follow its own style and did little copyreading. Dependency on the proof readers for catching errors in original copy was noted in several instances.

Editing of copy—the effort to maximize the meaning of news—seemed to be all but absent. Only Wire Editors G, I, J, K and P said they sometimes deleted "inside" paragraphs to remove what they considered were unimportant details.

Editing really consisted of adjusting copy for length. Most deskmen frankly said they "butchered" copy by removing paragraphs from the bottom of the wire copy.

Lack of time was given almost universally as the explanation for the absence of editing and copyreading.

The wire editors said they had to scan copy under pressure and make a quick decision—pass or reject. Most of them admitted that the probability of error was great.

All the wire editors said that they were dependent in varying degrees upon the AP for the accuracy and tight editing of copy. They were quick to

criticize the AP for discrepancies in style, wordy sentences, repetition of details and other errors.

(Eleven wire editors were handling TTS tape. Ten said it made their jobs easier by sparing them the necessity of checking for style. Wire Editors C, G, M and K complained that tape caused the paper to lose individuality.)

The art of headline writing appeared to have suffered in much the same way as editing. With the exception of a ban on the use of color words most of the wire editors admitted they paid more attention to space count than to meaning. Likewise make-up generally was not a major concern. According to the deskmen, pressure and lack of time again were responsible.

The wire editor's concern for proper desk management was minimal. In 10 newspapers copy flow was controlled by the back shop and the wire editors were concerned with meeting this production demand. Six editors had advance information on wire space. Two deskmen, H and K, had complete dummies of all news pages and were able to retain control over their own copy flow.

WIRE NEWS HOLE

News judgment is not the only criterion of selection. The amount of space—the news hole—available to the wire editor also must be considered. The percentage of editorial space devoted to wire news in the 16 newspapers ranged from 17.4 to 31.2% (Papers H and O, respectively). The average was 21.9%.⁵

It was possible to study the relationship of wire news space to other editorial classifications (local, syndicated, and sports) and obtain a "pattern" of

production of telegraph news. Four patterns were found:

1. *Flat rate*: six papers—wire space was allotted to a fixed number of pages, usually most of page one and one or more inside pages.

2. *Adjusted to local volume*: five papers—the space given to wire copy was in inverse relationship to that for local news.

3. *Space filler*: four papers—the volume of wire items was related to the total amount of news space or inversely related to other editorial classifications.

4. *"Wild"*: one paper—wire and local were inserted into the paper until space was filled. (This was the pattern of Paper O.)

THE PRESS ASSOCIATION AS A NEWS VALUE

The wire editors accepted the AP as a reliable *recommender* of news and consistently used budget stories. The telegraph editors were dependent on the AP. In one sense the dependency was *qualitative*. The wire editors, working in a day-to-day frame of reference, rarely judged an item in the context of current events.

In another sense the dependency was *mechanical*. First, the economic realities of publication placed mechanical controls over the wire desk. The deskmen said they lacked the time to evaluate the content of a news story. Wire news was a production tool.

Second, the 16 newspapers received only one press association report and the wire editors' range of selection arbitrarily was limited. The 16 newspapers used 51% of the items sent by the AP for the sample period used in this study. Paper D used 36.7% and Paper C used 69.4%. When the content of the newspapers was compared to the AP file, measurements according to news categories indicated that the wire

⁵ The study showed that only five papers gave the largest percentage of editorial space to local news. Syndicated matter ranked first in the other 11.

editors generally were using a statistically "good sample" of wire traffic.

THE WIRE EDITORS' NEWS VALUES

The news values held by the editors generally formed a broad and diffuse pattern that permitted easy entry of wire items into newspaper pages. It was easier to derive statements of negative values—what should not be printed—than it was to obtain clear concepts of what the deskmen held to be the function of news.

They did consider their essential function to be providing the reader with "top news" of the day. The pertinent value was "consequence"—the factor of importance to the largest number of persons.

But the wire editors were little more than secondary recommenders. The AP made the primary selection. The wire editors added whatever display cues were necessary and passed the stories on to the readers.

Many wire editors said they preferred and emphasized "hard news." Interpretive stories and color sidebars were not well regarded as news items.

News also may be defined as "what comes in." The wire editors were asked what kinds of news they wanted the AP to send. Their responses indicated a concern not with news, per se, but with the mechanics of wire traffic. They were asked what kinds of news they would emphasize. The overwhelming response was one of neutrality—"none."

When discussing their perception of news the wire editors eventually referred to what is axiomatic in all news rooms: "all news is local." They said they attempted to select items containing information that would interest segments of their reader audience. In operation this appeared to be translated

into selection for members of specific economic interest groups. However, they were selecting items *about* specific groups, not what news did *to* or *for* the reader. The wire editors were not interested in providing news stories which explain the meaning of events.

But the evaluation of news according to interest groups was not a reliable filter of incoming AP items. Content audit revealed in many cases a discrepancy between the stated news values and performance.

The Wire Editors' Biases: Expression of bias for or against any persons and social and political groups was remarkably low among the 16 wire editors. A number of antagonistic remarks were volunteered concerning Wisconsin public figures. Several deskmen named their preferences among political candidates but evidence of influence on selection was meager.

There was a remarkable frequency of antagonistic comments about telegraph copy and the events reported therein. Derogatory remarks, such as "junk," "childish," "silly," "one man's opinion" and "bickering," were often applied to stories. There was complete dislike for items that appeared to the wire editors to be "handouts."

The Wire Editors and Politics: Only Wire Editor D actively interested himself in political affairs.⁶ The other 15 said they knew politics only from what they read. They admitted that they had no way of judging whether the AP was doing an adequate job of political coverage. Only two wire editors expressed any cynicism about politics.

Fifteen newspapers were published in communities which voted preponderantly Republican in 1952. Only Paper N

⁶ The nominal party affiliations of the 16 deskmen were: Republican, 8; Democrat, 4; and independent, 4.

published in a Democratic stronghold. The newspapers varied editorially in their stands on politics. Wire Editors B, C, F, H and I said their newspapers attempted to avoid political controversy. Paper A had a strong pro-Republican bias and Paper P actively was supporting Senator McCarthy. The other newspapers had what their wire editors called a mild pro-Republican editorial policy.

The influence of political policy in Wire Editor A's selection was strong enough to cause him to reject stories concerning Democrats.

Six other wire editors (E, J, K, O, N and P) reported the use of display cues to emphasize news about Republicans and content audit confirmed this. The deskmen indicated that they tended to "go along" with their papers' political outlooks.

The wire editors of the other nine newspapers said they were not influenced; several said policy was to insure "fair" treatment of both parties.

The fact remains that the volume of AP traffic paced the insertion of political items in the newspapers. Among the telegraph editors the real differences concerned evaluation of non-budget items; what was trivia to one wire editor was news to another.

Other Types of Policy: The wire editors were asked if any special interest groups in their communities exerted pressure on the paper, and, if so, was their work affected.

Nine wire editors replied no influence was transmitted. In fact, they said it was policy to provide all groups with "equal" coverage regardless of the nature of the news item.

Wire Editors A, B, C, D, F, G and P said their superiors were sensitive to any news that would antagonize local businessmen. This policy applied direct-

ly to local coverage but the deskmen said it caused them to reject or give low display to "gloomy" economic stories.

Most of the 16 newspapers had labor groups in the communities and union members were regarded as an important reader group. During the survey, the AP was carrying items on a nation-wide steel strike. Most of the wire editors would pass the item only if it was a budget item.

However, Wire Editors I, J and P passed labor stories reporting "flareups" and rejected those reporting normal negotiations.

Most wire editors said they worked for "family" newspapers. That is, there was a policy against sensational or salacious crime news. However, time did not permit the wire editors to police copy and often objectionable copy got through. This was confirmed by the content audit.

The Wire Editor Sees His Readers: The reader, the ultimate consumer of the news, was not perceived clearly by most of the wire editors; some were not concerned whether or not the output of the wire desk was read by their audience. Only four of the wire editors were active in civic affairs. The others did have normal social contacts, of course, but there was no evidence that these affected their perception of the reader.

Wire Editors B and M said they knew nothing about their readers and could only "guess."

Wire Editor A was blunt: "I don't give a damn for the public."

In contrast, Wire Editors F and H credited their readers with "ability and intelligence." Wire Editor F, however, said his readers liked sensational news and he thought part of his job was to educate them.

Wire Editor E knew his readers only as sports fans. Wire Editor D described both his community and his readers as "solid, conservative people."

Wire Editors K, L and P said their readers had low and average intelligence and liked sensational and startling items. Wire Editor G said his audience was made up of "indifferent" readers.

All the wire editors saw their readers as members of special interest groups. This was related to the perception of the community as an amalgam of interest groups.

Wire Editors I, J, K and O also placed their readers as members of a family. The recognition of the latter role was an adjunct to the concept of a "family newspaper"—no salacious content.

CONCLUSIONS

The telegraph editor described in this study is caught in a strait jacket of mechanical details. To him, the most significant force in processing the news is getting copy into the newspaper. He is concerned with the immediate details of his work rather than the social arena in which news is made and given meaning. In this situation the wire editor can do little more than the most meager copyreading and editing. Craftsmanship takes time and the wire editors said they were rushed.

The wire editor is not a "participant" as is the reporter. He is desk bound and has little contact with the community. He perceives his readers as members of special interest groups, stereotyped classifications for the sorting of news items.

As a "gatekeeper" in the channel of telegraph news, the wire editor appears to be passive. His news values are ele-

mentary and broadly structured. He operates within the temporal orientation of a publishing cycle. Only rarely was he willing to discuss news as a communication possessing social utility; indeed, he sometimes scoffed at the thought. The wire editor clearly felt he had discharged his duty when he inserted important news selected from "what came in." The automaton has not yet taken over the wire desk. But selection of news from the press association wire appears to have become a mechanical process. The skills of telegraph editing have disintegrated into wire-copy fixing.

The wire editor often expressed his own opinion of the events and persons reported in the news. Generally these opinions had no effect on the selection of wire news. If the wire editor expressed sharp irritation it was directed against persons in the shop and technical details of his routine.

Policy pressure exerted by the publisher or editorial supervisors generally was not an important factor. The wire editor more likely than not accepted his newspaper's bias as another detail in the operation of the desk. Some editors agreed with policy.

The press association has become the recommender of news to the wire editor and thus the real *selector* of telegraph news. The wire editor evaluated the news according to what the AP sent him.

If the reader got vital information about the working of his democratic political system one day and a plethora of crime and accident news the next, it was due to the nature of the channels of press association news and the "open gateway" of the newspaper.

"King over all the children of Pride is the Press."—RUDYARD KIPLING.