

ASNE-API Leadership Survey: Editors blend hope, determination, resignation and some righteous indignation to lead their newsrooms and communities

If these editors represent the industry -- and there is every reason to believe they do -- then American newsrooms are rapidly moving past the awkward transition from print-centric newspapers and into a world where news, information, enterprise and watchdog journalism are the core content across multiple platforms.

More than 100 editors, newspaper executives and journalism educators across the country completed an online ASNE-API survey in June. Respondents included ASNE members and non-members, who represented a significant cross-section of daily newspapers in the U.S. Forty-eight percent of the respondents work at daily newspapers whose circulation is 50,000 or less -- a key statistic because most newspapers in the United States are under 50,000 circulation.

About 20 percent were from newspapers in the circulation range of 50,000 to 100,000, and about 20 percent were from newspapers with circulations of more than 100,000. About 11 percent of respondents were online-only news organizations.

Survey participants were asked to respond to 27 statements about newspaper industry challenges and opportunities related to content and audience, leadership and development, and organization and operations. They were asked to rate each statement as "not at all important," "somewhat important," "important" or "very important."

The themes running throughout their responses will be used by ASNE to customize training for top editors over the next 12-18 months.

These are editors focused on two things. Philosophically, they are committed to their fundamental, First Amendment roles. Pragmatically, they will do what it takes to weather the industry's transformation as it struggles in the new "print dollars to digital dimes" world.

In short, these editors embrace the future, rise to the challenges and are determined to succeed.

But make no mistake, they are frustrated and, at best, resigned to the implacable demands of doing more with less, the absence of time to think, the disconnect between financial demands and the realities of reduced newsgathering resources and assaults on credibility.

Both undercurrents are visible throughout the survey in almost equal measures. The question is which will prevail: the determination or the frustration?

The survey results provide some answers and point to potential solutions.

There are three consistent themes through the responses. Editors said these were their top three opportunities or challenges over the next 12-18 months:

1. Maintain quality writing and editing despite budget and staffing cuts
2. Redefine roles, strategies and tactics for moving newsrooms from once-a-day to continuously updated, 24/7 news and information
3. Exploit mobile opportunities as a way of distributing content and building audience

To accomplish those, editors are making the kinds of decisions that were unthinkable a decade ago.

Quality will win over quantity as editors protect First Amendment.

First, and perhaps most interesting is what could be interpreted as a growing readiness to lop off anything that does not specifically drive the core mission: gathering, sorting, analyzing

and delivering news — specifically hard news and enterprise. Doing more with less is no longer the newsroom mantra — nor is adding to the portfolio.

After more than a decade of adding products -- from newspaper sections to magazines and niche products in print and online -- these editors are identifying and separating what they must do and reducing or eliminating what they wanted to do when times were good.

"It's time," wrote one editor, "for newsrooms to focus on finding ways to do fewer things well, instead of doing everything poorly."

That sentiment was echoed throughout the survey.

"With cuts in staff, 24/7 is an impossible task that brings in few returns," wrote another editor. "My challenge is casting off that which consumes essential time for benefits that have less weight. ... I want quality over quantity. Trying to force everyone to be a Jill of all trades diminishes quality."

Editors are willing to cull the product line and focus on their core missions. They need help setting those priorities and they know that multiple platforms are important.

"Platforms to carry content in ways readers want them are important -- critically important," wrote one editor. "But, equally important is improving and expanding, rather than maintaining, core journalism, particularly compelling, revelatory watchdog and other enterprise that distinguishes local newsrooms from all the commodity and aggregated content out there."

"If we don't work on this," the editor continued, "we will die. To be sure, we need to figure better, more consistent ways to share this content with readers on all platforms, including making it interactive. But at the core of all that we do is high quality enterprise journalism, particularly watchdog."

It is reassuring, though not surprising, to know that editors continue to believe that maintaining quality writing and editing must remain their top priority, despite budget and staffing cuts. If that means sacrificing the "nice but not necessary" proliferation of products -- and the staff that came with them -- from the last decade, then they are going to do so.

"The platform doesn't matter so much as the content does," wrote one editor. "Content -- exclusive, high-quality content -- drives readers to any platform, on paper or online."

Get the right people in the right places with the right processes, priorities

These editors also agreed on the second most significant challenge: getting the right people, processes and priorities in place. Editors struggle to "refine roles, strategies and tactics for moving newsrooms from once-a-day print publishing to continuously updated 24/7 news and information." They have traded lamenting the past for the possibilities technology offers.

These are journalists increasingly comfortable across multiple platforms. They do, however, want to know how to build the underlying foundations, systems, processes and people skills to make reality easier to achieve -- in print and online.

Editors know the systems, work flow and resource needs of a traditional print newspaper. But there are few rules for the web world and its offspring technologies, like mobile and social media. What rules there may be shift, disappear or are overtaken often before an editor and the staff have had a chance to think through the possibilities.

Yes, these editors have embraced the digital world, and they are struggling to find best practices they can adopt, adapt, re-purpose or discard. There is so much coming at them and it changes so rapidly, said these editors, that they have no time to think, no time to search for solutions, to learn from others.

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"Too many interruptions, distractions," wrote one editor. "Not able to put together a stretch of time that's long enough to focus and complete anything that can't be accomplished in five minutes. Urgent (and critical) items roll in at a constant pace, derailing any opportunity to focus on strategic thinking, development and implementation. I can get a lot of things started, but it's becoming harder and harder to see them through to successful completion."

That response is echoed many times throughout the survey.

"Solid planning has gone out the window," wrote one, "because we are constantly triaging the operation."

"We accomplish our goals," wrote one editor, "but it takes far longer at 96 FTE than at 286 FTE. And at times, we lurch as a company from one mission to another -- sometimes abandoning items in midstream -- without double checking to see if the action item really aligns with our strategic plan."

Still, as one editor wrote, unless we change the processes and systems by which we do fulfill our core mission, we'll fail. "Print-centric thinking served us well for generations. But now it stymies us -- especially when it's time to create and market products for digital platforms. This slows us in most aspects of the operation, from the newsroom to production to advertising to marketing to circulation."

"The biggest impediment," wrote another, "has been to react to wave after wave of staff cuts by realigning coverage with existing resources. There also appears to be no way to financially back new innovations or strategies as a result."

And there is the challenge of getting the right people in the right places. The right-people-right-place discussion has familiar undertones: union versus management, veterans versus young turks, the need for profits versus the desire to invest in quality journalism across platforms.

What is different perhaps from past discussions is depth and breadth of resigned despair. These responses are indicative:

"Corporate powers need to understand that one size does not fit all. All markets are different and we all need to experiment with our products."

"Stabilize the news operation, which has been reeling from reductions and consolidations."

"With a veteran staff in a union newsroom and the economic situation, there will be little or no opportunity in the near future to find and recruit a technology-savvy, diverse workforce."

"Finding ways to move people up in the organization without having to worry about bean-counters deciding that the next round of layoffs will take any position that was not on the organizational chart as of a certain date. Yes, that has happened."

"Training seems to have gone away from traditional newsroom management, as though with all the new web responsibilities, editors no longer need firm grounding on motivating staff, developing news judgment, managing complex stories, ethics, etc."

"The massive amount of retraining for older employees while the technology and practices are changing quickly."

"The biggest obstacle we face is bringing youngsters into the business. There is no movement on my staff unless through a pink slip. We have a mature and experienced staff. I am lucky that way. But we are not bringing (in) new and less experienced people. I am concerned for all those college kids out there who cannot find jobs. As an industry, we need to find a way to keep them in the fold."

“Our most experienced journalists have skills of an era passing by; our most knowledgeable when it comes to technology and new ways of reaching audiences have the least experience with the subjects they cover.”

“We are all in this same leaky boat together and it’s time to let go of our old ideas about labor and management. We all need to start building a new ship -- and fast.”

These editors jumped the “digital divide”

Building that new ship means integrating the digital world. From basic websites to sophisticated multimedia and social networks, it’s the proliferation of platforms and how to best use them that keeps editors awake at night.

It’s time to adopt new technologies and “exploit mobile opportunities as a way of distributing content and building audience.”

It’s time, wrote one editor, for “investing cold, hard cash into digital. Can’t get there on the cheap or with legacy technology. Need wholesale reconsideration of technology as it is the core of everything we do.”

There was a chorus of similar responses as editors wrestle with the challenges of identifying, selecting, training and exploiting new technology as a foundation for hard news journalism. Whether defining credibility principles for the web or wrestling with readers who post lewd or slanderous online comments, these editors are squarely focused on finding and integrating best practices for digital delivery of news and information.

They are concerned, too, about bringing all departments to a shared table. One editor explained it this way: “The largest challenge for us as a newspaper is that we are not all playing together – not in the newsroom where some people are doing great work both online and preserving print readership but too many others are hiding in old habits – not between the newsroom and advertising or circulation. The disparity in our readiness to change diminishes the work of our best people.”

Which will prevail: determination or resignation?

An overwhelming majority of these editors agree on the top three challenges or opportunities they face over the next 18 months. They share a pragmatic determination to succeed and they share a frustrated resignation about the obstacles to that success. They want pragmatic solutions and best practices -- and they want them fast and easy to access. They believe in the First Amendment and they’ve not lost their passion for what they do.

The question remains: Which will prevail? The determination to succeed, to beat back the naysayers? Or the resignation that comes with fear, inertia and a mourning of the loss of the past?

Perhaps this response offers insight: “This is a perplexing time. I am not a believer that print will endure in the near term, as in five years. This is moving very rapidly. Tablet ownership is growing tremendously. This is our future. So we tread two worlds. We will soon say goodbye to one world and hello to a totally different world. This is the generation of transition. The challenge is to keep your eyes on the end game. It’s here.”

The 10 Themes

Editors who completed the survey were asked to rank from “not important at all” to “very important” challenges and opportunities related to three categories: (1) content and audience; (2) leadership and development; and (3) organization and operations. They also were asked: “What slows you down or stops you from accomplishing your most important priorities?”

Ten consistent messages emerged across all four survey sections:

- The top three ranked opportunities or challenges for the next 18 months:
 1. Maintain quality writing and editing despite budget and staffing cuts
 2. Redefine roles, strategies and tactics for moving newsrooms from once-a-day to continuously updated, 24/7 news and information
 3. Exploit mobile opportunities as a way of distributing content and building audience
- The cornerstones of what journalists do remain our single clearest consensus: quality writing and editing; watchdog and investigative reporting; serving the community and defending the First Amendment.
- The pace of change -- not the changes themselves -- leaves no time for thinking -- much less strategic planning and implementing.
- These editors have crossed the “digital divide.” The culture that embraces digital delivery has supplanted print-centric delivery of news and information.
- There are two subtle undercurrents running through the survey responses: a sense of frustrated resignation caused by relentless cuts, uncontrollable mandates and constantly shifting goals; and, a determination to weather the storm, do good journalism and come out stronger on the other side. The question is which one will prevail?
- Getting the right people with the right skills in the right places keeps editors up at night. From union-management conflicts, staff reductions and shifting priorities to a dearth of basic skills and leadership training, editors are hard pressed to grow and develop competent, motivated journalists and offer them successful, stable career paths.
- Editors know the costs in time, staff and resources to gather, sort, analyze and deliver news and information -- and they are confounded at many turns by financial decisions beyond their control. Editors are spending an inordinate amount of time with spreadsheets.
- These editors are in search of work processes and organizational structures that will take them past the sense of lurching triage as they “get the paper out” -- as well as the web, social media and digital tablet content. There is a strong sense that if they could nail down the processes and systems, they could do much better journalism -- regardless of the resource levels or the platforms.
- These editors will sacrifice quantity for quality. Protecting journalism and the First Amendment will come first over sheer quantity of content. The movement toward doing much better quality work with far fewer resources is already well established.

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- Editors are frustrated at what they see as foot-dragging on the parts of other newspaper departments. What slows us down, wrote one editor, is waiting for the culture in the rest of the company to change.

Key Statistics by Question:

INDUSTRY CHALLENGES/OPPORTUNITIES:

- Overwhelmingly, respondents cited that “maintaining quality writing and editing, despite budget cuts” is the number one issue that needs to be addressed within the next 12-18 months. Almost 84 percent (83.8) said this was “very important.”
- The second issue at 55 percent “very important” is “refine roles, strategies and tactics for moving newsrooms from once-a-day print publishing to continuously updated, 24/7 news and information.
- Develop and execute a mobile strategy was third, but only by a half percentage point (54.5)

LEADERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT:

- Half of the respondents said that “balancing short-term vs. long-term actions/initiatives/expectations” was “important.”
- “Preparing new and future newsroom leaders” was deemed “very important” by 42.1 percent of the respondents.

ORGANIZATION AND OPERATIONS:

- Almost 80 percent (78.3) said it was “important/very important” to “redesign work processes and organizational structure to improve productivity and align with new staffing and resource realities.”

About the survey:

Invitations were e-mailed to 1,830 editors at about 1,400 daily newspapers in the United States and 50 online-only news websites. The invitation was sent to several major newspaper groups, which were asked to distribute it to their newsroom leaders. Deans of 100 accredited journalism schools also were asked to participate.

The survey was completed by 105 respondents.

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Draft press release

RESTON, VA – Editors around the country put good journalism -- quality writing and editing, investigative and enterprise reporting, serving the community and defending the First Amendment -- squarely at the top of their leadership priorities.

The American Press Institute and the American Society of News Editors released results today of a joint research survey that will be used to shape customized training for top news executives over the next year.

"The affirmation that editors can stay focused on good journalism as they wrestle with spreadsheets and new technology isn't unexpected," said Linda Grist Cunningham, vice chair of ASNE's Leadership Committee. "But it certainly is reassuring."

The top-ranked challenge facing editors is maintaining quality writing and editing despite budget and staffing cuts. Almost 84 percent ranked it as "very important" over the next year to 18 months. Add those who said it was "important" and the total is almost 100 percent of news executives.

"These journalism leaders' top priority dovetails perfectly with that of other industry executives," said Carol Ann Riordan, interim executive director of the American Press Institute, which partnered with ASNE on the survey. "That should bode well for our industry future."

Newsroom leadership and company leadership share that top priority, Riordan added, referring to surveys of top industry executives conducted by API in 2009 and 2010. In 2009, maintaining quality writing and editing was the highest ranked priority among publishers of North American dailies. In 2010, it placed second, coming behind the challenge to "improve sales force effectiveness and performance."

There was a strong sense of pragmatism running through the ASNE-API survey responses. These were news editors who are acutely aware of the fiscal challenges facing the industry and the competitive and transformative platforms in play.

They are searching for new systems and processes to get the jobs done, and they know they need the right people with the right skills in place.

"The survey demonstrates that the nation's news editors are forging a sustainable path for local journalism and community service," said Mizell Stewart III, editor of the Evansville (Ind.) Courier & Press and chair of ASNE's Leadership Committee.

Executives outside newsrooms historically have been removed from what journalists do, and the respondents felt that the disconnect is greater today. Editors know the costs in time, staff and resources to gather, sort, analyze and deliver news and information -- and they are troubled, according to survey results, by financial decisions beyond their control.

The news leaders said their number two priority was to "redefine roles, strategies and tactics for moving newsrooms from once-a-day print publishing to continuously updated, 24/7 news and information." Fifty-five percent rated that as "very important," and 89.7 percent said it was "important" or "very important."

At number three was the challenge to "exploit mobile opportunities as a way of distributing content and building audience." Fifty-two percent rated that as "very important" and another 32.4 percent said it was "important."

There are two subtle undercurrents in the survey results, Cunningham said. First, there's a frustrated sense of resignation caused by relentless cuts, mandates beyond editors' control and constantly shifting goals. Second, there is a determination to weather the storm, do good journalism and come out stronger on the other side.

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"The question is which one will prevail," said Cunningham, who retired as executive editor from the Rockford (Ill.) Register Star in May to develop and launch a media company called Key West Watch.

The API-ASNE survey was distributed to ASNE members and non-member editors. About 60 percent of respondents were ASNE members. Forty-eight percent of respondents represented news organizations with a daily circulation of 50,000 or less. Most newspapers in the United States are under 50,000 circulation.

More detailed results are available at: www.asne.org and API's www.newspapernext.org.

ASNE's Leadership Committee will use the results to shape regional workshops for top news executives. The first will be held in Lexington, Ky., in October.