

Editing

To edit is to choose: Cut this, add that, look at the unexpected angle. Many leaders complain that as they ascend the organizational ladder, they don't get to do enough editing. But on big stories and important practices, a leader's direction is vital. Here are a few additions to the practice of the craft:

Dick Wald

Of the donnas who are prima, the prima-est is Barbara Walters, and she's a cinch to edit. It is absolutely true. She has a wonderful sense of story and how it works, and if you can suggest a better way she'll do it. If you can be honest and say, "I want you to be successful, I am on your side, I think that it would go better this way," you can very often get people to listen to you and do what you want. Sometimes you can't. When you can't, settle. I'm a great believer in the social lie and giving up. If crying and begging won't work, the social lie and giving up can work.



I think that one of the problems of journalism, broadly speaking, is the unedited process. Unscreened and unmediated. That has always existed, but the possibility of the unedited stuff getting through is now much greater, especially on the Internet.

Having another set of eyes look at it is essential to those things that are the core of the values that we try to preserve like accuracy, timeliness, integrity, balance, some sense that the other side's story is being told.

Burl Osborne

The old AP motto, "Get it first, but first get it right," has often come back to help, sometimes accompanied by pain. During the incident at Three Mile Island in the late '70s, one Saturday night there were reports coming out of Pennsylvania that a nuclear meltdown was occurring and a "China Syndrome" was expected. And we could not confirm it. We just could not confirm it. So we did not file the story and we got a lot of grief that night. Some Sunday newspapers carried the meltdown story from other sources. But, as it turned out, there had not been a meltdown.

Arthur Sulzberger Jr.

Abe Rosenthal was a great editor of the *Times*. He made a number of tremendous innovations. ... For my money, his greatest was the editor's note. When we're at the end of the day (and) say, "Geez, the headline we ran just failed to capture the story entirely and gave it a spin it shouldn't have," we ought to be able to say that to our readers. And, thus, the creation of the editor's note — not a factual mistake, but an error in context. It takes great courage to push that in an organization.

I've been proud of the *Times* on many occasions, but never as much as the Wen Ho Lee note that we ran, when we had the courage to look back over our coverage (of the case of alleged espionage) in light of what transpired and say, here's where we got it wrong in a big way. That took a lot of courage for editors Joe Lelyveld and Bill Keller. And they were the movers on that, not me.

In fact, I'll confess that when they finally came up with it, after talking about it for quite a while, I had cold feet ... and they bucked me up and said, no, it was the right thing to do. And they were right.

Ben Bradlee

Editors can show glee when they are proved right, if somebody turns out to have lied ... and gets caught. As they always do.

One of the classic jargon expressions at the *Post*, is "if true." ... When some bright-eyed, bushy-tailed reporter comes in and gives you a terrific story, somebody is always going to say "if true." And that's not a bad thing to keep in mind: if it's true. If the guy is telling the truth, if the guy knows the truth ... which is, in this town, quite rare.

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I think it's so much more than a game. It's kind of fun to play, as a game. By the time you've been here a little while you know ... what the situations are, where a lie is likely, or a spin is likely. And at that time, it's fun to watch it.

Norman Pearlstine

Journalists have strange ways of treating sources. When someone says, for example, "Let's go off the record," we presume that the person is about to tell us the truth whereas everything said before then, since it was for attribution, is spin and hype. We should be very reluctant to let people give us stuff off the record, and when they do, we should be suspicious of their motive.

We also tend to assume that someone who is a great source on one story is equally credible on all stories. That is rarely the case.

Every top editor should be willing to insist on knowing the sources for a story.

The editor must represent the reader when dealing with a reporter's work.



The best editors send two messages to their reporters. First, they want the reporter to be passionate for the story, to take risks, to reach for that part of the story others might overlook. Then the editor has to shift gears, making sure that passion doesn't come at the expense of objectivity, making sure that risk doesn't lead to bad reporting and shoddy work. The editor must represent the reader when dealing with a reporter's work, even if the reporter brings in a story that purports to deliver on the assignment.

William Hearst III

(Magazine editor) Terry McDonnell taught me that sometimes there's a story inside of the story that's trying to get out. I wasn't trained that way. We were looking for the lead. Move that to the top. As somebody once explained it, the beauty of the inverted pyramid was that if you had an 18-inch hole and a 20-inch story, you only had to chop the last 2 inches off. But Terry taught me that sometimes you can move things to the front or leave things out. Or that you can draw from the kind of literary playbook to find a way to build the story, at the manuscript level, into something better.

Tom Johnson

I believe all media organizations [need] a strong head of standards and practices ... a very strong internal watchdog on accuracy, fairness, press responsibility. In the case of newspapers, [they need] a very good ombudsperson who can look at the state of the newspaper and criticize it independently.

But beyond all of that, it is up to the owners to determine the real quality and the standards and the practices of each organization. I am convinced that the owners are the ones who really determine quality by the budgets they authorize and the editors and staff they choose to run their newsrooms.

Accountability starts at the very top.

Jack Fuller

I keep being haunted by Edward R. Murrow's voice during the Battle of Britain. That voice is the voice we ought to be trying to speak with — calm, direct, honest, certainly not in any way understating what's going on and yet approaching it in a very mature, wise way. And that's what people come to us for, at our best.