Scrapping Copy Desk Risks Times’ Credibility

The New York Times announcement that it would offer buyouts and eliminate editors prompted the response below from the president of The NewsGuild of New York.

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ewsGuild of New York journalists have been continuously breaking news for months. The first on the scene in many national and international stories, our members have meticulously handed their respective news organizations scoops with potentially huge consequences for our democracy.

But when readers hear the inevitable cries of “fake news,” how do they know what to believe?

It comes down to accuracy, to a news organization’s track record of getting even the smallest details right. When typos and misspellings jump off a page, readers are more likely to wonder what else is wrong.

So why would the New York Times want to join the sorry parade of other American newsrooms that have cut out the last, best line of defense against errors: the newsroom copy desk and the eagle-eyed editors who staff it?

“What we now know as the copy desk will no longer exist” is how management’s memo put it, words that are still reverberating in the newsroom. Media writers were stunned, too.

A Poynter Institute analyst said when citing President Trump’s war on the media and his claims about “the failing New York Times”: “The elimination of extra sets of eyes at the nation’s leading newspaper news organization couldn’t come at a more sensitive moment — when the credibility of the Fourth Estate is being challenged by the president and his loyalists.”

The Times is not, of course, eliminating editing. But it is radically restructuring how it is done — in a way that has not been clearly explained — and is removing a critical layer. Management argues that the process will be more efficient, and that the cuts will allow them to add as many as 100 people to the reporting staff.

If the paper is serious about new hires, we’re all for it. But credibility has to come first. For months, since the announcement that the Times planned to “streamline” its editing process, Guild reporters and editors have been offering suggestions to management about how to accomplish this. These journalists are on the front lines. They know how the Times is produced. They are clear-eyed about how to speed up the process without sacrificing accuracy. But those suggestions were ignored.

Beyond losing the copy desk itself, the Times’s plan includes a voluntary buyout — but there is nothing optional about it since layoffs will happen if those targeted don’t leave. The elimination of copy editors will cost the newsroom hundreds of years of collected knowledge, experience and institutional memory.

Publishers across the country have been inflicting similar damage on their newsrooms, and readers, for more than a decade. Some have done away with the copy desk entirely; others are using consolidated copy desks in faraway cities where editors don’t know when a reporter accidentally mixes up two streets or incorrectly identifies who was mayor 30 years ago.

Readers spot those mistakes instantly and sound off in comment sections and letters to the editor. It doesn’t take long for minor irritations — let alone errors of fact — to erode trust.

No newsroom is immune from errors, no matter how many editors go over a story. Human beings make mistakes. But the New York Times’ commitment to avoiding them has always been a point of pride.

Eliminating its public editor position at this time is no small coincidence. The “Paper of Record” clearly does not want someone on its own payroll criticizing them for the numerous errors that will regularly appear in their news reports due to their flawed editing process.

The Guild has asked for a meeting with Times management before the restructuring plan moves forward. Our members’ reputations are on the line. They deserve to be heard.

In journalism, nothing matters more than the public’s trust, which has never been so fragile. The Times couldn’t have picked a worse moment to gamble with its credibility.

Author credit:

By Grant Glickson