

Editors at Small Newspapers Say Error Problems Serious

by Donica Mensing and Merlyn Oliver

Three-quarters of editors at U.S. dailies with circulations of fewer than 25,000 thought that accuracy was a serious problem and more than half saw errors of fact in their own newspapers.

Journalists, as a rule, want to get it right. Yet the number of highly visible errors produced in America's newsrooms appears to be increasing, from the use of disputed documents in the story of Bush's National Guard Service televised by CBS to the five-part series on the addictive dangers of the commonly prescribed painkiller OxyContin published by *The Orlando Sentinel*, which turned out to be based on a disreputable source.¹

An unintended or a careless error in a published news story is a mistake that can cause severe repercussions, whether inside a community served by a small paper or throughout a country that reads a national edition. In a major survey examining credibility in newspapers conducted by The American Society of Newspaper Editors, accuracy was at the top of both journalists' and readers' concerns.² A 2002 Pew survey found that roughly half of the public thought reported news stories were frequently inaccurate and that news outlets often attempt to hide their mistakes.³ And at a conference put on by the *American Journalism Review* to discuss the findings of the ASNE study, Robert Haiman of the Freedom Forum put it bluntly: "There are errors in the paper, and they piss readers off."⁴

Research shows that, over time, high quality news content positively affects circulation.⁵ Moreover, small papers—those with a circulation less than 25,000—that put money back into their newsrooms to improve the quality of their news product end up realizing higher revenues.⁶ Meyer found a correlation between

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the degree of readers' confidence in their newspapers and the degree, or strength, of circulation rates.⁷ Credibility, then, is a precious business asset. Because accurate reporting and editing is the backbone of credibility, examining why mistakes occur are vital.

Problem Definition

This study investigates five key areas about accuracy at U.S. dailies with circulations less than 25,000.

- To determine whether desk editors think errors are increasing or decreasing
- To ascertain what kinds of errors editors think are most damaging to their newspaper's credibility
- To understand the principle reasons editors think mistakes are being made
- To identify the current safeguards
- To highlight future preventative measures recommended by editors.

Literature Review

Accuracy and credibility have been studied from many angles throughout the modern era of journalism research.⁸ The first academic study of accuracy in newspapers appeared in the 1930s, establishing a blueprint that researchers have used up to the present era.⁹ Most of the academic research on accuracy in newspapers has taken the form of case studies of newspaper news sources¹⁰ or studies that compared what working reporters and their readers thought of the local newspaper.¹¹ However, although accuracy research dates to 1936, no recent studies have examined the causes of errors, by type, in today's dailies.¹²

In addition, errors that get publicity usually have occurred on the national level in front of a national audience. Yet the majority of newspapers in the country fall into the small-to-medium size, with an average circulation of about 38,000.¹³ Small newspapers in particular have much at stake in communities where an editorial blunder can reverberate keenly inside a small town.¹⁴ This study focuses on newspapers with circulations of less than 25,000, because although this group represents more than half of all U.S. dailies,¹⁵ it remains understudied. Although these newspaper have small circulations, they wield a lot of influence in their areas and deserve attention.

The first, and now historic, studies on accuracy in newspapers show that completely error-free stories occur only about half of the time. Charnley sent out 1,000 straight-news stories to the sources cited in those stories, and 60 percent of the respondents indicated that only slightly more than half of the stories they examined—54 percent—were accurate.¹⁶ Berry used a similar method, and, excluding simple typos and ordinary misspellings, the news sources said that


nearly half (48 percent) of the stories contained errors.¹⁷ The most recent accuracy study was conducted by Maier, who used the same method as prior researchers.¹⁸ Sources reported that 59 percent of the stories contained errors, either factual or substantive, for a total accuracy rate of just 41 percent. According to former *Chicago Tribune* editor and publisher Jack Fuller, error rates are a longstanding problem that have often been shrugged off inside the newsroom as just the price of doing business.¹⁹

Not all research indicts newspapers so strongly. Bergin, Lafky and Weaver questioned sources in news stories that appeared over a two-week period at three Midwestern dailies with a circulation of less than 30,000.²⁰ The researchers found the sources were “generally pleased with the accuracy and fairness” of their treatment at the hands of reporters, except in cases where they felt the reporter had omitted important information.²¹ Overall, 44 percent agreed that the stories mailed to them were very accurate. Fifty-two percent agreed strongly that they were quoted correctly, either directly or indirectly.²²

From the beginning of accuracy research, errors were classified according to type so that researchers could isolate which type of error occurred more frequently and thus make greater inroads toward understanding and improving accuracy. Charnley created three categories for possible errors:

- Mechanical or typographical
- Fact-based errors, or mistakes in names, titles, ages, addresses, places, times and dates
- Errors “of meaning,” which he defined as giving a wrong impression or implication or giving any point too much or too little emphasis.²³

Berry created two categories for errors, objective (typos, misspelled words, names, titles, ages, addresses, numbers, dates, locations, and misquotes) and subjective (misleading headlines, over- or underemphasis and omissions).²⁴



More than three-quarters of all respondents thought that accuracy was a very serious or somewhat serious problem for newspapers in general, and two-thirds of all editors thought accuracy was a very serious or somewhat serious problem at their own newspapers.

Maier followed the blueprint set out by Charnley and Berry, using the categories of factual errors and subjective errors.²⁵ Nemeth and Sanders differentiated between objective errors, defined as factual or mechanical mistakes, and subjective errors, defined as wrong interpretations or mistakes of judgment and substance.²⁶ To distinguish between these categories of errors as past research has defined them, the terms “mistakes of fact” and “mistakes of meaning” have been used throughout this study.

The literature defines credibility as a blend of accuracy, believability and fairness.²⁷ Accuracy is one measure used to judge the quality of news content, along with elements such as number of local stories, background pieces and investigative and issue-focused reporting.²⁸ Thus, the more accurate a newspaper is, the more credible it is seen to be by its readers.²⁹ Seasoned editors agree that the way a newspaper handles its corrections has a direct bearing on a newspaper’s credibility.³⁰ Putting the correction right up front—on page 1A, if warranted—reassures readers that the newspaper is serious about learning from its mistakes.³¹ Newspapers that contact news sources after the publication of a story to see if they felt the story was handled correctly also enhance their reputation with readers.³²

Charnley reported that errors of meaning occurred most often, accounting for 44 percent of the inaccuracies, with the remaining balance divided among factual and mechanical mistakes.³³ Berry also found that errors of meaning occurred more often, accounting for about 62 percent of his total error pool.³⁴ While objective (factual) errors were more common in breaking news stories, subjective errors (meaningful) turned out to be higher in budgeted, or planned, stories.³⁵

On the other hand, Maier reported that factual errors accounted for the majority of mistakes his subjects were able to point out.³⁶ But it must be noted that Maier’s factual error group included substantive mistakes of judgment, such as inaccurate headlines. Nevertheless, Maier’s respondents still rated subjective, or meaningful errors, as more serious than factual mistakes. The worst errors were hype, misrepresentation and failure to include information felt to be important to the story.³⁷ Nemeth and Sanders found that although objective (factual) errors made up the majority of published corrections, subjective (meaningful) mistakes were more difficult for the newspaper to explain and thus did not show up as often in a corrections box, column or retraction. The researchers concluded that readers were not getting the full story behind errors they saw in the newspaper, which may affect their confidence in newspapers.³⁸

Much has been written on the causes of newspaper errors. The material can be grouped into three key areas: reporting, editing and newsroom culture.

Kovach and Rosenstiel argue that accurate and reliable reporting derives more from using an objective and disciplined method of gathering information than it does from the personal stance of the reporter.³⁹ Scanlan confirms this view by stating that accuracy in reporting is a result of developing a consistent system and using it for every story. He notes that editors who tracked newsroom

errors at *The Oregonian* in Portland, Ore., found that the top three reasons errors occurred in their newsroom were working from memory, making assumptions and dealing with second-hand sources.⁴⁰

Overholser notes that layers of traditional editorial checks have disappeared as copy editors have turned into page designers, spending less time proofing for grammar and eyeing copy for missing information.⁴¹ The effects of failing to verify information or sourcing news stories adequately is pointed out by Sheppard, who notes that, if internal editorial safety nets fail, the newspaper runs the risk of being checked in the way it most dreads—through the public humiliation of retracting a bad story.⁴² A lack of skeptical editing can allow the less obvious but more serious errors of meaning to slip through the editorial net.⁴³

The unspoken but often pervasive pressure from editors to reporters about producing more stories can contribute to mistakes making it into print.⁴⁴ Promoting potentially promising reporters before they have had a chance to build a reliable and credible foundation for themselves puts the reporter on the productivity treadmill, perhaps tempting him or her to cut corners that result in major errors, either out of exhaustion or plain ignorance.⁴⁵

Researchers from other disciplines have suggested that journalism is a victim of its own ingrained culture. Doherty, an assistant editor at *Reason* magazine, traces the genesis of news errors to the way daily news is produced—on deadline, by people who are trained writers but generalists in everything else. Reporters “are ignorant of the topics on which they write and depend blindly on what others tell them—and what others tell them very frequently is biased.”⁴⁶ Overholser notes that newspapers ignore proven business practices such as investing significantly in skill training.⁴⁷ Fuller also argues that using quantified performance measures, as other industries do would catch more errors before they make it to editors and copy desks.⁴⁸ News staffs that come from similar cultural or class backgrounds can blunt the skepticism needed to recognize potential errors. Reid MacCluggage of the Associated Press argues that more diverse backgrounds and mindsets within the newsroom might foster a more questioning approach to the end product, stating:

*Maybe we should develop workshops in how to challenge a story, how to pick it apart, the way law schools train lawyers to do, the way the Ph.D. candidate learns to defend his dissertation. In the culture of our newsrooms, we need to raise more devil's advocates, more contrarians.*⁴⁹

Research Questions

- How serious a problem do the editors of newspapers with circulations less than 25,000 think accuracy is? Are errors increasing, decreasing or about the same?

- What kinds of errors do these editors believe cause the most damage to their newspaper's credibility? Which ones do they want to avoid the most?
- Of the errors deemed most damaging, what are the primary reasons editors think they are being made? What are the effects of those errors on credibility?
 - What safeguards do these newspapers currently have in place to guard against error?
 - What preventive measures would these editors recommend for further reducing the most damaging errors?
 - Are editors' answers to the preceding questions influenced by their age, by their gender or by the amount of experience they have working as print journalists?

Method

A five-page survey was mailed in January 2004 to desk editors at 300 daily newspapers in the United States with circulation sizes less than 25,000. The population for the survey was the total number of U.S. daily newspapers with a weekday circulation of less than 25,000, approximately 52 percent of the 1,457 dailies published in the United States.⁵⁰ A stratified random sample of 300 newspapers from the total population of 753 papers was chosen by selecting every second, then every third newspaper by state, about 40 percent of the study population. Surveys were personally addressed to the city desk editor, assistant managing editor, managing editor or editor by name, based on listings in the *Editor & Publisher Yearbook 2003*. Two follow-up mailings were sent to editors to encourage as many replies as possible. The response rate was 37.6 percent, with 113 responses received from the 300 mailed surveys.

Results

The majority of respondents to the survey were male (62.8 percent, 71 total). Slightly more than a quarter of the respondents (31) were female; 11 respondents did not indicate gender. While more than half of all the responding editors were 40 or older (59.2 percent), the largest age group was made up of editors in their 40s (32.7 percent). More than 70 percent had worked in print journalism for more than 10 years, and more than half of that group had spent more than 20 years in the business. A significant relationship existed ($X^2 = 15.7$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$) between the length of time editors had worked in journalism and their gender: as the length of time increased, the percentage of males also went up. Of those respondents who had logged more than 20 years in journalism, 42 were men, but only seven were women.

The average circulation size of the responding newspapers was 10,429. The average number of editorial managers, which includes desk editors and their

Table 1
Comparison of Accuracy Views at Home and in the Industry

	<i>Editors who thought errors at their own paper were:</i>	<i>Editors who thought errors in the print industry overall were:</i>
Very serious	22.1% (25)	24.8% (28)
Somewhat serious	43.4% (49)	53.1% (60)
Not very serious	30.1% (34)	20.4% (23)
Not serious at all	4.4% (5)	1.8% (2)
Total N	113	113

immediate supervising editors, was about five. Slightly more than 10 percent of responding newspapers had circulations greater than 18,000, and eight possessed editorial management staffs numbering 10 to 13.

Seriousness of the accuracy problem

A majority of editors, 65.5 percent, thought accuracy was either a “somewhat serious” or “very serious” problem at their own newspapers. Editors were even more harsh when assessing the problem of accuracy in the print news industry overall. Fully 80 percent thought errors in the industry overall were either “somewhat serious” or “very serious.” [See Table 1]

Yet when queried about whether they felt accuracy had declined over time at their own newspaper, more than half of

Table 2
Comparison of Errors Over Time

	<i>Editors on whether errors have become a bigger problem over time at their paper:</i>	<i>Editors on whether errors have become a bigger problem over time in the print industry overall:</i>
Strongly agree	8.0% (9)	17.7% (20)
Somewhat agree	34.5% (39)	46% (52)
Somewhat disagree	36.3% (41)	31% (35)
Strongly disagree	21.2% (24)	5.3% (6)
Total N	113	113

editors (57.5 percent) disagreed that was the case. But a majority (63.7 percent) did agree, however, that errors had become a bigger problem over time throughout the print news industry in general. [See Table 2]

Editors do worry about errors getting into their own papers. Nearly all voiced concern about mistakes slipping past them, given all the duties they juggle daily. Of that group, fully 63.7 percent said they were “very concerned” to describe their mindset. Another third backed it down a notch, choosing “somewhat concerned.” Only four respondents did not express any significant concern.

Types of newspaper errors

The survey differentiated between the deliberate, unethical transgressions that also are classed as inaccuracies, such as plagiarism or fabrication, and the honest mistakes that occur in news stories for reasons other than intentional fraud. The survey was designed to examine only those

**Table 3
Comparison Between Type and Impact of Error**

	<i>Editors and types of mistakes they see most often:</i>		<i>Editors and types of mistakes that bother them the most:</i>	
Mistakes of fact	87.6%	(99)	50.4%	(57)
Mistakes of meaning	10.6%	(12)	38.9%	(44)
Both	NA		10.6%	(12)
Total N	111		113	

mistakes that were unintentional but nevertheless damaging in their own right. To that end, definitions and examples of those mistakes as delineated by Charnley, Berry and Maier were set out for the respondents as follows:⁵¹

- Mistakes of fact (for example, misspelled names, wrong dates, addresses or titles)
- Mistakes of meaning (for example, misrepresenting a source, failing to confirm specific information with a second, independent source or omitting relevant information)

The choices given to respondents in this section of the survey were taken directly from an American Society of Newspaper Editors credibility project survey question that was put to both the public and the newsroom staff.⁵² Editors reported that they saw more mistakes of fact than mistakes of meaning in their newspapers, but they were clearly concerned about both [Table 3]. Although 88 percent said they saw more factual mistakes in their paper than meaningful mistakes, more than a third (38.9 percent) said mistakes of meaning bothered them more.

More than half of the respon-

**Table 4
Comparison of Error Frequency, by Type**

	<i>How frequently editors see mistakes of fact in their newspaper:</i>		<i>How frequently editors see mistakes of meaning in their newspaper:</i>	
Almost never	0.9%	(1)	14.2%	(16)
A few times a year	5.3%	(6)	36.3%	(41)
A few times a month	35.4%	(40)	32.7%	(37)
More than once a week	43.4%	(49)	15%	(17)
Almost every day	15%	(17)	1.8%	(2)
Total N	113		113	

dents (58.4 percent) said they saw mistakes of fact in their papers either almost daily or more than once a week. Mistakes of meaning were witnessed less often, with 69 percent reporting they saw them either a few times a month or a few times a year. [See Table 4]

Causes of newspaper error

In general, editors faulted the reporting method more than they did the editing process, although they did not excuse themselves from the mix. Respondents reported the following missteps, in descending order, as being the main cause behind the worst errors they had seen at their newspaper:

- The reporter failed to independently verify information.
- The reporter left out information relevant to the story.
- The editor failed to check for substantive holes in the story.
- The editor failed to make sure standard newsgathering methods were followed.
- The editor failed to check for adequate sources in the story.
- The reporter misrepresented a source.

Table 5 shows how much respondents faulted reporting failures over editing failures. The left side of the table lists the failures.

Editors thought careless reporting was the single most common reason errors of meaning had gotten into their newspaper (29 percent of editors identified this factor as the most important cause of errors.) Other factors in the newsroom, such as staff shortages (23 percent) and deadline (20 percent) were also identified. Lack of editorial oversight and careless editing were only identified by 9 percent of the editors as the most common reason errors of meaning were made in their papers. Of the 17 respondents who used the “other” category to list their own assessment of why mistakes had taken place, most wrote in “inexperienced reporters” or “inexperienced staff.”

When respondents were asked to consider how much the last substantive error they could recall had hurt their paper’s credibility, more than half (53.9

Table 5
Comparison of Reporting Failures and Editing Failures

<i>Reporting Errors:</i>	<i>A major role</i>	<i>Somewhat of a role</i>	<i>No role</i>
Failed to verify	38.1% (43)	46% (52)	15.9% (18)
Left out information	27.4% (31)	56.6% (64)	15.9% (18)
Misrepresented source	11.5% (13)	32.7% (37)	55.8% (63)
Mean percentage:	25.6%	45.1%	29.2%
<i>Editing Errors:</i>	<i>Major role</i>	<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>No role</i>
Failed to check for substantive holes	17.7% (20)	55.8% (63)	26.5% (30)
Failed to check for adequate sourcing	16.8% (19)	48.7% (55)	34.5% (39)
Failed to ensure reporting method	15% (17)	54% (61)	31% (35)
Mean percentage:	16.5%	52.8%	30.6%

percent) agreed that it had to a certain degree. Of that group, most (50.4 percent) chose “somewhat seriously” to describe their impression, while just 3.5 percent felt the error had hurt them “very seriously.” Still, 38.9 percent of respondents felt their paper was “not seriously” impacted. Just 4.4 percent believed no damage was done at all.

The survey dug deeper into the issue of credibility at editors’ own newspapers by asking them why they thought that last substantive error had occurred. Again, most (35.4 percent) put the blame on unverified and incorrect information being published. Editors were evenly split between the next two reasons, which were either misrepresenting a source or not consulting all factions pertinent to the story (18.6 percent for each factor).

As for how that particular published error was discovered, nearly half the respondents said a news source brought it to their attention. The next most cited scenario was a reader calling in (26.5 percent). Respondents said a member of the newsroom staff was the third most likely person to recognize the error (23 percent).

When it came to how their newspaper chose to set the record straight, running a correction in the correction box was clearly the most common method (72.6 percent). Only 10 percent of respondents felt the need to run a retraction. Only four ran an editor’s note or column explaining the error.

Safeguards against future errors

Editors responded vigorously when asked what their newspapers do to reduce the error rate. Almost one-third of the respondents (31 percent) said they used more than one safeguarding method at their newspaper. The list, in descending order included:

- Used both verification guidelines / story checklists and in-house training
- Used both in-house training plus a method customized to their newsroom
- Used both in-house training and mandatory tracking of errors
- Used incentives for error-free staff members, in-house training and tracking forms
- Used both guidelines / story checklists plus method unique to their newsrooms
- Used all of the safeguards listed in the survey question

Reducing errors in the future

For the most part, respondents felt hiring more editorial staff members or getting more staff training would be the best hedge against future mistakes. The next most popular and less expensive solution was requiring that every reporter and editor use a story checklist on every story before it goes to press. When the *San Jose Mercury News* ran an experiment testing the effects of using such a checklist in their newsroom in 1999, it was able to show a 10 percent reduction in errors.⁵³ A small percentage of respondents (10.6 percent) thought using forms to track the origins of errors would help.

Effects of demographic variables

Neither the age of respondents nor their gender made any difference when it came to how editors viewed accuracy at their own newspaper or in the national press at large. Women, however, were more likely than men to attribute errors to reporting failures instead of editing failures ($t(100) = 1.97, p < .05$).

Length of experience did affect how often editors saw mistakes of fact in their papers. Editors who had worked in journalism for 10 years or longer were prone to see factual mistakes more often than were editors who had fewer than 10 years of experience, ($t(100) = 2.18, p < .05$).

Discussion

Editors at small newspapers are clearly concerned about mistakes in their newspapers. More than three-quarters of all respondents thought that accuracy was a very serious or somewhat serious problem for newspapers in general, and two-thirds of all editors thought accuracy was a very serious or somewhat serious problem at their own newspapers. Less than half of the editors thought accuracy had gotten worse over time at their own newspaper, but nearly two-thirds thought that accuracy had indeed declined over time in the print news media overall. Nearly all respondents said they were concerned or very concerned about errors getting in their own newspapers. Given the fact that 58 percent of the respondents said they saw errors of fact either daily or more than once a week in their own papers, accuracy is clearly a significant issue for many editors at small newspapers.

The literature shows that errors of some kind occur in roughly half of all news stories, at least at medium and major metro newspapers, and the rate appears to be going up.⁵⁴ One factor that may affect the rate of reported errors is that the newsgathering process has become more transparent because of Internet blogs and editorial explanations. This transparency may mean that news mistakes are noticed more publicly and with greater humiliation. One 54-year-old respondent who has worked as a journalist for 34 years said about his paper's error rate:

Not the frequency, but the sensitivity and response to the errors; that is what is bigger. The errors themselves are probably about as frequent, I'd guess.

Another explanation for editors' fears could be the very real repercussions of making a news mistake in a small town. A 49-year-old male editor who had worked in journalism for 24 years wrote:

Often readers of small newspapers are from small communities. The news is very personal, and thus so are errors. Also, our readers know a lot about many of our other readers. Errors thus are easier to spot. We, I believe, have fewer

errors than we did 5-10 years ago. However, the public wants us—and I mean all in the media—to do better. We must diligently work to improve.

Another interesting finding was that those editors whose seriousness about accuracy at home ran through their other responses. Editors who tended to notice more mistakes in their own newspapers also felt more keenly that accuracy was declining everywhere and that their own newspaper's credibility had been more severely tested by past mistakes. This sensitivity may be a result of spending years in the news business, as the data suggest. On the other hand, editors who express less concern may not be oblivious but rather just practical. They've fielded too many calls from complaining sources who were quoted correctly but were just sorry they said anything at all to the reporter. But the possibility remains that one group or the other has a more skewed view of how well their paper is actually doing.

Impressions of errors by type

It is telling that, although editors saw more factual errors than they did meaningful errors in their papers, they had a hard time choosing which type of error they dreaded more. While some respondents focused on factual errors, others pointed out the difficulty of identifying and fixing errors of meaning. One editor wrote:

All errors are a problem. Fixing errors of fact is relatively simple. Correcting errors of story perspective, tone of headline, emphasis on certain angles, getting full reporting and perspective is much harder. It requires better training and constant vigilance.

Thoughts on why mistakes happen

Editors generally felt reporting lapses accounted for more errors than did a lack of good editing, although they did recognize that their actions played a role.

This finding has important implications for improving accuracy. If editors cannot help their reporters recognize what is missing or not verified in their stories, those reporters may be missing out on vital help that could make the difference between a properly reported story and one that becomes an embarrassment. The tone of editors' open-ended responses to the survey reflected a genuine desire to help their reporters and a frustration about lack of time for proper guidance. A 27-year-old female editor who has worked as a journalist for six years wrote:

I think many of our errors are due to new reporters' needs for more guidance—a need that, sadly, us overworked editors sometimes don't have time to give.

Conversely, if reporters rely on editors to provide foolproof safety nets for every story, they will be putting the onus of reporting on editors instead of on themselves where it belongs. Newsrooms vulnerable to error need editors who can help guide inexperienced reporters. Unfortunately, short staffing can circumvent this ideal.

A 42-year-old female editor with 19 years experience had this to say:

Staffing (small) is a major problem, although management does not believe so. Also, reporters sometimes do not have high standards and are not well-trained—basic spelling, grammar, etc. Another problem (when it comes to mistakes of meaning) is that reporters don't have good interviewing skills.

Editors also had the insight to recognize that plain inexperience underlay many reporting mistakes. A 55-year-old male editor who had worked in journalism for 32 years said:

Most of our mistakes are caused by being a small newspaper that hires inexperienced people who generally are new to the area.

These comments suggest that whatever is causing the worst errors—poor reporting habits, superficial editing or inexperience—can be remedied by newspaper owners who invest more money in the newsroom. The comments of editors were consistent with this line of thinking. From a 31-year-old male editor who had been in the business just seven years:

The lower numbers of staff members being hired at smaller newspapers puts extra pressure on existing staff. Working many jobs in the newsroom by one person only allows that person to give a fraction of attention to each job. Most smaller papers owned by corporations are being strangled by bottom-line pressures. Most chains are more worried about money than journalistic integrity and the newspaper's credibility.

Ideas for improving accuracy

Even as editors were attributing many of their newsroom errors to a lack of investment and in-house training, they also named those same methods as the most common way their newspaper guarded against error. One explanation for this could be that, while they get some training, they need more and better training to really make a difference.

Their second most common safeguard was to use verification guidelines and/or story checklists to ensure a sound reporting method. The fact that editors listed these two safeguards indicates that those methods could be the most practical and cost-efficient way to reduce error. Two other named safe-

guards—mandatory forms for tracing an error's origin and incentives for error-free staff members—were not used much. One 36-year-old female editor who had been a journalist for 15 years noted:

I feel that the mandatory forms are demeaning and cause undue stress on staff members. I worked at a newspaper that had those forms (they were kept in your personnel file). While they are feared, I don't feel it really reduces errors.

Given these findings, it is no surprise that editors listed hiring more editorial staff members and getting more staff training as their first and second choices on how best to prevent future errors. But large metro dailies with many times the resources of these small papers make the same kinds of basic mistakes these editors have reported in this study. Indeed, some respondents attributed their newsroom's mistakes to factors other than a limited staff. One commented: "Lack of interest, concern, is our biggest problem," and another wrote, "It's just sloppiness—some caused by deadlines, but some not."

The third most popular recommendation for reducing errors was using story checklists. This suggests that if newspaper owners cannot or will not provide resources for hiring and training, perhaps another solution based on journalistic fundamentals might be just as effective. Research shows that using story checklists at major metro papers has cut down on errors.

The results of this study provide insights into how editors perceive and respond to errors in their papers. To develop additional strategies for narrowing the gap between high journalistic standards and day-to-day newsroom practices, future research could focus on the perceptions and suggestions of reporters working at small newspapers.

Notes

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