The Quarter-Hour Project

Early in 2006, The New York Times launched a project to find ways to give its copy desks 15 more minutes to work on stories. What follows is the newsroom memo from Bill Keller, executive editor of The New York Times, and an update on the project's status from Merrill Perlman, director of copy desks.

To the Staff:

On Monday, Feb. 6, 2006, a new and more detailed system of internal deadlines will go into effect across the News Department. They have one aim: to give copy editors 15 minutes more to edit stories. The new deadlines will have some other side benefits on copy flow and production, but these are not the point. The aim – very much in line with the recommendations of the Credibility Committee last year – is to give our copy editors additional time to do their crucial jobs of presenting our work at its best and heading off errors before they get in the paper.

For this to work, all of us are going to have to do our parts. Assignment editors will need to be conscious of production demands when assigning deadlines. Reporters will be given deadlines that – always subject to changing news demands – are to be met. Backfielders will need to be conscious of copy flow to the desk. Decisions about display pieces will have to be made in a timely manner.

Lots of folks around the newsroom have been involved in the planning of this effort; there is an editor in each department who has designed its own internal deadline schedule, and to whom questions can be addressed. If you have more general questions, please ask Peter Putrimas, Merrill Perlman or Mike Leahy.

Individual desks have accumulated baseline data so that we'll be able to make certain that the goal of 15 additional minutes has been met. We'll be reviewing how each department is doing as we go along, and adjustments in deadlines will be made when necessary. The Metro Desk went first on this effort, and reports that the extra time has been found.

Last year I promised that copy editors would get 15 additional minutes to work on stories. The system is now in place to deliver on that promise.

Bill

◆◆◆

Fast forward to August 2006. Merrill Perlman, director of copy desks at the Times, reports on what has happened since February:

The Quarter-Hour Committee (which included people from across the paper, including photo and news design) talked about ways of eking out a minute here, a minute there for copy editors, without having a negative impact on the quality of the other work going into the paper. We wanted this to go way beyond copy flow, to look at how so many things about copy editors' jobs

have changed since pagination was introduced. We stipulated that copy editors had many tasks that collided later in the shift (for example, a page paginated at 8 p.m. though the story had been edited at 5, which meant dropping the current story to go back and write the headline and caption for the earlier story and make any trims) and interrupted thought processes, thus adding time and more risk of error.

The idea was that if copy editors had more time to read stories, fewer errors would make it into the paper, thus bolstering (or rescuing) our credibility. While the goal was 15 minutes, we considered it to be a more metaphorical 15 minutes, meaning overall time captured, not necessarily 15 minutes extra for each story.

Each desk was asked to look at its entire production process, from story assignment to layout to photo editing and processing, to planning meeting times. Each desk was urged to construct its own timeline, laying out what tasks could be done simultaneously that were being done sequentially. The key, we emphasized to everyone, was to start the planning process early in the day, taking control of what could be controlled, but with individual desk autonomy.

As a result, each desk has its own plan. On Metro, for example, the goal is measured in percentage of stories moved to the desk on a timeline, with certain standing pages designated for early photo selection and pagination; on Business, the goal is measured in number of stories moved and pages paginated. In the Washington bureau, where late copy has been a frequent problem, reporters responded to the challenge by assigning themselves deadlines and promising parts of a story or a whole story by certain times. (And those times were staggered according to the need for late filing – reporters knew they could not always be the late filers.) They've been meeting the vast majority of those deadlines.

The plans themselves are very common sense, and people looking at them might scoff at how they treat basic journalistic tools as if they were just being discovered. But the truth is that in a place as big as this, sometimes a basic refresher is all it takes. Some reporters have no idea what is involved in producing a page; some photo editors like the idea of delaying photo decisions to allow for new photos to be scrutinized, without realizing that it holds up the whole process. We've urged slots to assign stories to editors even before they arrive, to allow the editor to do background research or watch the story progress through the backfield (the assignment editing) and thus be better prepared when the story arrives. We've asked editors to be aware of what's happening in their sections and the rest of the paper, so they don't have to do as much backgrounding.

We're now about six months into the project, and about to move to the next phase. We've had great success on some desks, which religiously assign deadlines and measure how well they are met. On those desks, copy editors say they feel they have more time to edit stories. On other desks, there has been some resistance to what's perceived as added bookkeeping duties. One desk has shown that it meets the goal of giving copy editors more time simply by assigning deadlines for columns and early stories, but the assignment editors keep forgetting to assign the deadlines. Some pressure from above is becoming necessary in those situations. But the first phase concentrated on copy flow; now we're working on the rest of the production process. How can we get photos edited and into the system earlier so editors can write captions while the story

is still fresh in their head? Should copy editors write captions at all, given how that task clashes with writing headlines and editing late-breaking (or late-delivered) stories as deadline approaches? How can pages be designed earlier?

One big breakthrough was having Page One decisions distributed by 5:15, instead of 5:30 or even 6, allowing desks to make section front decisions sooner, speeding some of the design process. Can we get advertising layouts sooner (we now get them about 4:30) so some inside pages can be designed earlier? We're also looking at some technological changes that could make the process more transparent. And, of course, there's training involved.

It's starting to work. Now we have to keep the momentum going and make these new thought processes routine.