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Layoffs, other changes ahead as AP readies for uncertain news world

Layoffs have begun at The Associated Press, with employees worldwide fearing extensive cuts that will be shared by editorial, administrative and overseas staff by the end of the third quarter.

Technicians in line bureaus have lost their jobs as the AP begins a move toward an Internet-based membership and away from the satellite delivery of news. Executive editor Kathleen Carroll, speaking during a meeting in July in Philadelphia, said decisions on layoffs on the editorial side likely would be made by the end of the third quarter.

“We can’t stop the AP from cutting jobs, but we can make the company adhere to the job security language we negotiated in the last contract, which is among the best in the industry,” said News Media Guild President Tony Winton.

Carroll said the AP must meet a 10 percent reduction in payroll costs by the end of the year. Attrition has slowed from 20 to 25 people a month to five to six. The news side needs to cut \$17 million in payroll but has achieved just \$1.8 million so far, she said.

Of the approximately 100 people who took early retirement, 49 were Guild members. In August – after the deadline for accepting early retirement has passed – the AP will begin looking at work that is “no longer essential,” and the first place to look will be “processing functions,” Carroll said. Regionalization was supposed to eliminate a lot of that work in line bureaus, and while that has happened in some places, it hasn’t happened everywhere.

During a joint staff meeting of the Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and Mid-Atlantic bureaus also held in July, news editors reported on what they had learned during a meeting of South desk news editors.

Managing editor Mike Oreskes assured the news editors that “all the change we’ve gone through is nothing compared to what’s to come,” according to one news editor. State reports still matter, but even state stories should be worthy of the national wire, along with exclusives and investigative stories. The AP is even more responsible for great statehouse coverage because members are cutting back in that area, Oreskes said.

John Dowling, director of domestic news training, said enterprise stories need a fresh approach because we “won’t be able to take a magazine approach to writing anymore.” Reporters need to turn features around faster, he said.

The future of the company is video because that’s a money-maker, even for video taken with a Flip camera. Slide shows, however, are passé, staffers in several bureaus were told after a meeting of South desk news editors.

And the desks in New York continue to change, with not only the national and international desks disappearing, as previously announced, but also the supervisory desk. Instead, the AP is setting up something called the “nerve center,” which has four components: The news center, production center, standards and customer center and a center for social networks.

The changes were announced in a four-page memo to New York staff. The memo also questioned how the top stories desk will function after the nerve center is running, saying, the company will review that operation after that happens.

“Change is coming fast and furious to the AP,”



The Associated Press has assembled several teams to gather information and ideas ahead of its meeting of top managers in Lake Placid, including one that is auditing each job in the company.

That information came from a staffer who was interviewed by an intern gathering information about verticals. The intern was not on the job audit team but said he had the impression that everyone’s productivity and performance were being evaluated ahead of layoffs planned in the fall.

Other teams have names such as the future of storytelling, verticals unleashed and game changers.

The intern said all comments are confidential and the company wanted honest answers that staffers were unlikely to give to a manager.

Guild presses for Facebook fairness

The News Media Guild has asked The Associated Press to rescind its new Facebook, Twitter and MySpace rules, which the company put into place without bargaining with the union.

The request was sparked by new rules posted by AP on June 18, including a requirement that employees delete the comments of friends that could run afoul of AP’s Ethics Policy. The new rules angered many employees who believe they’re intrusive and unbecoming of a news agency that promotes free speech.

“It’s regrettable that a news agency that promotes free speech and media freedom is attempting to chill speech by its own staff,” said Tony Winton, NMG president.

The union also told AP that some portions of its policy violate employees’ Section 7 rights under the National Labor Relations Act. The law, which protects concerted activity, is expressly recognized in the negotiated ethics policy.

The new company rules say employees cannot include discussions about AP personnel, policies or operations in their web sites or blogs. It adds that co-workers must be identified by name and that their permission must be obtained prior to posting of video, photographic or graphic form. It adds that material must be removed if requested.



“Guild activities can include images of members and the level of control exerted by AP over their protected activities through its proposed policy is unlawful,” Winton said. He added that the NLRA protects activities such as talking about AP personnel, policies or operations on Web sites or blogs.

The union believes it is not compelled to meet and discuss new Ethics Policy rules during the life of the contract because they were fully bargained during the negotiations, except for the gifts and the staging photo portions. It is willing to meet with AP on these matters in an effort to reach agreement without prejudice to that position.

The Guild raised these issues in a meeting with AP in August.

The union also discussed AP’s proposed changes to its “gifts” policies in which the company says

employees may not accept trinkets offered by sources, public relations agencies, corporations and others. Whether the gifts are modest or substantial, they must be turned down or given to charity. The policy now says gifts can be kept if they are of nominal value of \$25 or less.

The company said it needs the stringent policy so employees will no longer be burdened with determining if the gift is worth \$23 or \$27. The union proposed that the language be changed to “about \$25,” to address the company’s concern.

Some employees found the policy insulting, saying coverage is not influenced by unsolicited books, Planters nuts, pens and gifts from political conventions or major sporting events. One employee said AP itself gives out gifts. Others found the timing of the new policing disconcerting as AP announced the need to cut staff costs by 10 percent.

The union wants AP to report on its “whistleblower” policy under which employees can report inappropriate activities in the company’s news or business activities to the “Ethics Point” integrity hot line. The union said it wanted copies of all contacts to date with any company responses understanding the need to redact some information to protect the confidentiality of those involved.

President’s report: Guild will enforce job security language

By Tony Winton, NMG President

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS has already started layoffs in the U.S. to meet its goal of a 10 percent payroll reduction by the end of the year. So far, most of the layoffs have been the Technology unit, although there have been isolated reductions in the editorial unit. At this writing, the “VERP,” the voluntary early retirement offer is still in progress, so it’s too early to know how much it will soften the cut. It’s not the first time AP has laid off staff, but it’s the largest company-wide staff reduction in decades.

What’s different now is that new job-security provisions of our contract will come into play, terms we believe are far stronger than in previous contracts. Our new contract specifies a detailed, seniority-driven process for staff reductions, designed to reduce (as much as possible) “involuntary layoffs” that force a staffer out of a job.

The next steps in the process are transfers to vacancies and *possible* buyouts. It’s important to note how buyouts work. First, AP has to decide *whether* it will offer any buyouts. AP is not required to offer buyouts, but, if it does, the buyouts may be targeted to a specific location under seniority rules. In other words, AP may ask for say, a certain number of volunteers in a specific location. If there are more volunteers than slots, then the buyouts go in order of seniority. Again, there is no guarantee that AP will offer a buyout in any particular location – but if it does, there are rules.

After the volunteer and transfer-to-vacancy steps are complete, that’s when involuntary buyouts start. In this step, seniority generally prevails, providing a person is qualified to perform the remaining work. The new contract has a detailed procedure for determining qualifications, including training under certain circumstances, to protect the seniority right to the greatest extent possible. However, it is not “strict seniority.” Seniority applies when a staffer is qualified to perform the remaining work.

Layoffs are incredibly painful and AP, while in a better financial position than other media employers, is not immune to financial pressures. Our contract – especially the new terms -- offers a level of protection that is nonexistent in non-union workplaces that are being hit with wave after wave of staff reductions. The Guild, with your help, will enforce the contract to do its best to lessen the pain.



NMG NOTEBOOK



Adoption issue resolved

The News Media Guild resolved a dispute with The Associated Press involving the right to one week of paid leave when adopting a child.

Bill McCall, a newsman in the Portland, Ore., bureau, requested the leave based on this contract language: “After nine months of continuous employment, employees may take up to 18 months of parental leave-with pay for one week-surrounding the birth or adoption of a child.”

The adoption involves a step-parent adoption of his wife’s 7-year-old biological son, Cammy. McCall was married in June 2008.

AP rejected the leave request, saying the child was not an infant and that the leave wasn’t intended to allow for bonding with an adoptee with whom the employee has lived with for a year.

The Guild said AP was to be commended for agreeing to the pro-adoption term years ago and that the contract’s clear language should be honored.

Winning WiReport

WiReport won three awards at the annual convention of the Communications Workers of America.

The News Media Guild’s publication won second place in general excellence in Category 2 for locals with 501 to 1,000 members; third place for best human interest feature; and honorable mention for best original photo.

The human interest story was a story by Raleigh newsman Emery Dalesio about taking a two-year sabbatical, while the photo was taken by Jacquelyn Martin of the Mid-Atlantic bureau.

Although no money is offered, you, too, could win an award at next year’s convention. So feel free to offer your photos; stories and cartoons for WiReport.

Sick leave grievance resolved

The News Media Guild and The Associated Press resolved a grievance involving the sick leave rights of employees who return from leaves of absences.

Emery Dalesio, a newsman in the Raleigh bureau with 17 years service, was told he had to wait one year for paid sick time because he returned in September 2008 from a two-year sabbatical.

He had won a Fulbright grant to teach journalism at two Romanian universities for a year and one-half of his two-year leave.

The union disagreed with AP, saying leaves are not considered breaks in the continuity of service in the calculation of all benefits. Dalesio was entitled to paid sick leave before his leave so he was entitled to it after his return.

The company relented. He says he is due about 70 days of full sick leave and 70 days of half pay, if needed.

The Guild asked the company to provide a list of similarly-situated employees so they can be reimbursed for their unpaid sick days. That information has not been provided to date.

TNG president: Union ‘agnostic’ on solutions to save papers but one must be found

By Steve Karnowski

MINNEAPOLIS -- The future of the news business rests with front-line journalists no matter what new ownership and revenue models emerge for the industry, Newspaper Guild President Bernie Lunzer says.

“We need to be talking about solutions that work,” Lunzer said at a conference here on New Economic Models for News. “The Guild is agnostic at this point on particular solutions, but we very much want to be out there in a constructive discussion.”

No panaceas came out of the day-long forum sponsored by The Newspaper Guild and the University of Minnesota School of Journalism and Mass Communication on June 16. The picture that emerged was of a news industry that employs fewer people -- and at lower wages.



Bernie Lunzer, president of The Newspaper Guild, discusses the future of newspapers with John Sturm, president and CEO of the Newspaper Association of America.

But Lunzer stressed that something needs to be done to preserve larger news organizations. He didn’t say what that might be, but that quality journalism requires a “critical mass” of enough journalists working in a market.

Lunzer appeared on a panel discussion on the changing regulatory environment with John Sturm, president and CEO of the Newspaper Association of America, who said the government needs to take a new look at easing restrictions on media mergers and cross-ownership of news outlets.

“We’ve lost 10- to 12,000 journalists over the last couple of years,” Sturm said. “If we continue to do what we’re doing now, we’re not going to change the equation at all.”

In the discussion on new ownership models, Jennifer Towery, president of the Peoria Newspaper Guild and community news editor of the Journal Star of Peoria, Ill, said a newspaper is not just a business, it’s a public trust worth saving. She said the “silver lining in the industry crisis” is the opportunity for communities to get their

newspapers back under their control, under “hundreds or even thousands of owners” who may be willing to pay to preserve their local news outlet.

A model that has yet to be tried in the news industry, the low-profit limited liability corporation, or L3C, was promoted by Robert Lang, CEO of the Manweiller Foundation. An L3C is a hybrid that can make a profit, but its primary purpose is to provide a social benefit.

Lang said an L3C would give businesses with a stake in the survival of their local newspapers a chance to invest. Foundations don’t have enough money to keep a significant number of newspapers going, he said, especially when homeless shelters and food banks are going broke.

Since power in an L3C can be shared however stakeholders want, a news L3C could give Guild members greater control than, say, a participating foundation, Lang said.

Joel Kramer, editor and CEO of MinnPost.com, said his Minneapolis-based Web-only nonprofit plans to eventually get “at least half or maybe most” of its revenue from readers, with most of the rest coming from advertising and sponsorships.

“I absolutely, firmly believe that the reader has to pay for us to have significant journalism in the future,” Kramer said.

Steve Yelvington, a strategist with Morris Communications, said American newspapers always have been subsidized by something else. Once it was political parties. In modern times they’ve been in the business of helping other businesses sell their goods and services.

“The truth that journalism has never had a business model of its own,” Yelvington said. “It’s always been a ‘useful component’ in some other kind of business model.”

None of the speakers offered a clear vision for how to stop the job losses or the erosion in wages and benefits, which suggested a future when many journalists will need subsidies of their own.

Kramer said he expects an Internet environment dominated by multiple, small players, and he doesn’t think all of them combined will hire and pay as many journalists as before.

“I think one reality is that we will have a journalism world in the future that is heading more toward the direction of where the art world is in America,” Kramer said. “We have a thriving art community in America. But most of the participants in it don’t make a living at it.”

Summaries and videos of the discussions at: <http://www.njc.unm.edu/seminar1.html>

News Media Guild offers scholarships

The News Media Guild will award two \$2,000 scholarships and one \$1,000 wild card scholarship. Responses must be RECEIVED no later than 2 p.m. on Sept. 2, 2009, to qualify. The drawings will be made the following day.

The scholarships will be awarded by lottery to the following: Any Guild member or his/her spouse or partner, children, parents, grandparent or grand child, or other member of the nominating Guild member’s immediate household. In the event of a change in status, the relationship at the time of the drawing will prevail.

Scholarship candidates must be Guild members in good standing, or sponsored by a member in good standing. Members may sponsor only one candidate. **Prior winners cannot reapply.**

If an individual is sponsored more than once, his/her name will be placed in the lottery only once. The name of each candidate’s sponsors will be listed on the back of the lottery ticket.

Scholarship candidates must be enrolled full-time or part-time in an accredited degree or certification program in an accredited, post-secondary educational institution for the 2009-2010 academic year.

All winning candidates must provide proof of enrollment, such as a copy of a paid receipt for a current tuition bill before scholarship monies will be remitted. (For students on a multiple payment plan, proof of the initial payment is sufficient).

In the event a non-qualifying candidate is selected, the Guild member making the nomination will be given the opportunity to substitute the name of an individual who does qualify. If a qualified candidate cannot be substituted there will be a new drawing from the remaining nominations.

WiReport

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Exiting with style



Walter Putnam, left in left picture, receives pen from outgoing Atlanta COB Gary Clark when he retired after 32 years with the AP. Putnam worked in Philadelphia, then was the correspondent in Jacksonville, Fla., before moving to Dallas. After that it was on the International Desk in New York before he was appointed Middle East correspondent based in Nicosia, Cyprus. His work in the Atlanta bureau began in July 1993.

In the picture at right, Estes Thompson (seated) files his last story as fellow Raleigh staffers Mike Baker and Martha Waggoner (feigning tears) watch. Thompson worked for the AP for 32 years. He first worked in Richmond, then as the correspondent in Roanoke, Va., before being named news editor in Raleigh in 1993. He returned to reporting in 1991.



EFE members receive video training, courtesy of new contract

Five News Media Guild members at EFE News Service and two correspondents covered by a Spanish labor union have completed an online/hands on training provided by Communication Workers of America.

The training was one of the benefits agreed between EFE -the world's largest Spanish-language news agency- and NMG during contract negotiations last January. All the training was during working hours.

"The union worked hard to get this training included in our contract with EFE News Service," said Jorge Bañales, who participated in the training and is a member of the News Media Guild's

Representative Assembly. "Both workers and the company recognize the need to have reporters trained to use the new tools in journalism."

EFE covered the cost of the training and classes. "The assistance, material and instructor provided by CWA were all first class," he said.

Under the auspices of CWA/Nett Academy, staffers received training on Adobe Premiere Elements, the video software used by EFE offices worldwide, as well as online training via lynda.com

After that, CWA equipped a classroom with six laptops, four video cameras identical to those used by EFE, and accessories such as tripods, microphones, cables, and a projector.

The levels of experience were very different among the trainees: some of them had had done already videos, learning by doing, and others didn't have any practice with cameras. Instructor Jim Talluto guided the group, individualizing his instruction according to each participant's proficiency.

CWA will continue providing the NMG members at EFE with access to the online resource, so that they can either review the training for video or take up on other subjects such as photography.



Instructor Jim Talluto helps EFE members Maria Peña and Teresa Bouza with training.

Important News

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WiReport

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Why I Joined The GUILD

By Linda Deutsch, Los Angeles



When I joined The Associated Press in Los Angeles in 1967, I had no idea that I was making a lifelong commitment. I thought I might be stopping by in between newspaper jobs. I had taken a cut in pay from my previous job at a modest size daily in order to join the world's largest wire service. I thought it was worth it, and it was. But paying union dues from my modest salary was difficult. I never saw it as a choice.

I learned almost immediately about The Guild and I was told how important it was for me to join forces with my colleagues to make sure that all of us were receiving the best opportunity for good working conditions as well as a proper wage. Mind you this was a time when wire machines clattered at astounding decibels, newsrooms were smoke filled and the acronym OSHA had not yet been invented. For awhile, I was the only woman in the bureau.

I knew the history of the labor union movement and felt it was a a noble idea. I knew that people had risked their very lives for it. But it was all quite theoretical until the following year when I found myself walking a picket line in January 1969. Yes, I lived through the only strike that I and the AP would experience during my decades with the organization. It was a soul-searing experience that I hope

will never happen again. Friendships were broken forever when some chose to cross the picket line. Some of the issues in that strike were resolved and some including the fight for a union shop linger to this day.

Mercifully, it was a short strike -- about a week -- but long enough to teach me the important lesson of solidarity.

In 1983, I saw the AP, the Guild and a brave group of women settle a historic lawsuit which gave women equal status and equal pay with men in the organization. Until then, we had always been referred to as "newsmen" and were treated differently. Times changed and so did the AP. Women now make up a large percentage of the staff. Computers came along and replaced those loud wire machines but bringing other problems of their own.

Over the years, I covered some incredibly historic stories and carved out a beat unlike any other reporting on high profile trials. My loyalty to the AP grew stronger by the year and some suggested to me that maybe I didn't need The Guild anymore. To that I would reply with a quote from the famed Rabbi Hillel who wrote : "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? And if not now, when?"