

Nudge Nudge

NUJ Daily Express, Sunday Express, Daily Star and Daily Star Sunday chapel newsletter

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A leap in the dark

Journalists at Express Newspapers are trying to come to terms with what life will be like for them after being threatened by a plan which wants 36 staffers, 33 long-term regular casuals and 17 casuals to be shown the door to make way for a new editorial system called Woodwing.

We are assured that some “highly responsible” sub-editors will survive into the Woodwing era but how exactly they will be working and when is still largely a mystery, three weeks into the official “consultation” with the management.

Amazingly, just as the chapel was in session last Thursday, a two-page email came from the management with several paragraphs headed “changing ways of working”.

Subs will, it seems, be fact checkers or re-writers and

reporters will be responsible for writing their own stories into boxes on the page, with the newsdesk taking on at least part of the role of the sub-editor.

Nothing has been said in the meetings with the management about whether reporters’ or news desk shift patterns will change to match production. Some reporters have told us they cannot see how practically they will be able to reconcile

the realities of news gathering with the demands of production. The management also proposes that sub-editors who currently finish work at midnight, one am or two am, will work a five-day week even though night workers currently work a four-night week.

It is not clear whether the company proposes that sub-editors will finish work earlier or news desk staff will work later. Nor is it clear who in the management team dreamed up the job cuts plan.

The figures on advertising revenue given to chapel officials certainly do not justify such drastic cuts, although the continuing circulation decline is worrying.

NUJ reps have been trying to improve the redundancy terms on offer and people have pointed to other Fleet Street managements providing redundancy payments at the rate of four weeks pay for every year of service and without a cap on the amount.

Others have pointed out that a few years ago the Express Newspapers’ cap was £50k (rather than the

present £30k proposed cap) and that the company used to allow severance money to be paid into the pension fund.

But increasingly people are asking: How will we manage to work as part of the new set-up?

Sub-editors have been proud of their skills in presenting threadbare material in a professional way and for all its lack of resources, the Daily Express has always looked good alongside its rivals. We all know how the shine has been put on the sh..

In practice, years of newspaper production experience created a regime where subs had the expertise to cut a 400-word story to a nib or embellish a barebones few paragraphs into a perfectly honed page lead or even a splash. One experienced journalist said: “I think we do an incredible job to get out the quality of paper that we

do, especially when you compare it with other papers produced with far greater resources. We might often be demoralised but we remain dedicated and it seems this is rarely recognised by those pulling the purse strings.

Subs are a vital part of the checks and balances that start with an experienced reporter, continue through the news desk and progress to the back

bench and subs, and end up at the editor’s door. I’m not against saving money but you have to get value for money. Any fool can turn off the lights but what’s the point if it leaves everyone in the dark.”

After believing that we were the leanest operation on Fleet Street, we are now told that new technology will paper over the cracks left by repeated cutbacks. We are told the new Woodwing system will allow reporters to write into the page. Of course, even under the Quark management system, reporters could have been asked to write for a slot. It just did not seem like a good idea.

NUJ official Barry Fitzpatrick told the chapel meeting: “The management admits it is managing decline. They appear to have given up on circulation and advertising revenue.”

A more enlightened management would perhaps have proposed a joint management-union team to ensure that the new technology was implemented in the most efficient and sensible way.

More ‘talks’

A further round of consultation “talks” are planned with the management on Thursday 2 October.

NUJ reps have asked for information on proposed rotas and working patterns.