Blaming the Boss: Newsroom Professionals See Managers as Public Enemy No. 1

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Blaming the Boss

Newsroom professionals see managers as Public Enemy No. 1

by Ted Pease

The 1,328 newspaper journalists responding to a national study place “inept managers” atop a list of reasons they think the industry is losing talent. “Bad managers have disillusioned more journalists than I can count,” one reporter said, “and I don’t see the industry doing anything about it.”

Who in the newspaper business doesn’t know someone who has left? Burnout, better money, stress, changing interests, new horizons beyond the newsroom all contribute to the industry’s revolving door. As David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit found in their 1982-83 American Journalist study¹ and as this study confirms, newspaper journalists older than their mid-40s are relatively scarce.² Most newspaper journalists don’t survive long enough to “retire” to other pursuits in their 40s or 50s; from these responses, many instead are driven from the industry. The 1,328 respondents to this 1990-91 survey of newspaper professionals suggest that if there’s villain in the newspaper newsroom of the 1990s, it’s the newsroom manager.

“Newsroom management – or mismanagement – causes more dissatisfaction and career abandonment than racism,” a white male metro reporter

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2. The number of journalists in their mid-40s is relatively scarce compared to other age groups. This is due to the early retirement trend in journalism.

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Pease is associate professor and chair of the Department of Journalism at St. Michael’s College. This article, based on data collected in the Newsroom Barometer Project at Ohio University, is taken from Pease’s dissertation.

**SPECIAL SECTION:** Evaluating the Newsroom
in his late 20s, working for a mid-sized Southern daily, said in responding to the survey.

In every business, boss-bashing surely is among the most popular indoor sports; at journalists' watering holes, complaining about working conditions and editors has been a time-honored pastime: "Journalists are professional kvetchers," as a white male features reporter for a California metro, mid-40s, pointed out in his response to the 1990-91 survey. Anyone who's spent time in a newsroom would agree.

On the other hand, there's often something behind chronically low morale and employee kvetching. And even the American Society of Newspaper Editors acknowledges in its own survey results that communication seems to be lacking in newspaper newsrooms. ASNE Executive Director Lee Stinnett wrote in a preface to The Changing Face of the Newsroom in 1989,

"Of particular concern to editors should be the disparity of opinion between newsroom managers and their staffs over the effectiveness of management and the quality of the newspaper."

- Lee Stinnett, Executive Director

1 survey. Anyone who's spent time in a newsroom would agree.

T his article reports responses of 1,328 newspaper journalists participating in a 1990-91 national survey measuring job satisfaction at U.S. daily newspapers. In many instances – as in the journalists' after-hours watering hole – survey respondents' complaints on a wide range of topics returned to problems of management and corporate policy. Newspaper work is high-pressure, and attrition under pressure is to be expected. On the other hand, burnout, salary, stress, hours, assignments, working conditions, feedback and institutional direction all are critical factors in staff morale and employee attrition that are affected by newsroom managers and management policies.

As Stinnett suggested in his 1989 ASNE report, there is a critical communication gap between newsroom managers and their employees. If the comments of respondents to this representative sample of newsroom
professionals are any indication, front-line managers and supervisors in the newspaper industry – already under critical economic and market pressures – may be shooting itself in the foot.

“Excellent achievement hasn’t guaranteed any employees anything,” a white male Sunday magazine editor in his late 30s wrote in response to the survey. He continued,

When a good editor or reporter runs into a bad editor/manager, there aren’t good ways around the impasse. The employee typically suffers silently, suffers out loud, finds other work or another newspaper. Somehow the profession needs to train better managers/editors, people who know something about personnel.

Arbitrary managers have poisoned her newsroom, a white female copy editor in her 40s said: “This newspaper’s decisions on assignments, promotion and lateral reassignments are unclear, unarticulated and feel punitive,” she said. “Morale here is very low and sinking.”

And a metro reporter from a Western metro daily said unhappiness with management and corporate preoccupation with journalism-as-profit is something everyone in the newsroom can agree on: “Newsroom management – or mismanagement – causes more dissatisfaction and career abandonment than racism,” he wrote. “Pressures from above (profits) may be placing more pressure on staff while management is faltering.”

Method

Journalists’ opinions about management reported here come from a larger national study, the Newsroom Barometer Project, which investigated newsroom attitudes on a wide range of issues affecting job satisfaction and employee retention. The study drew a random sample of 30 daily newspapers with circulations of 50,000 and more from the universe of 1,545 daily newspapers then in business in the United States. The sample was stratified by both circulation and geography.

Twenty-seven of the 30 selected newspapers ultimately participated in the study. A random sample of fulltime newsroom professionals working at each participating newspaper was drawn from personnel rosters, with the sample size at individual newspapers ranging from 44 at the smallest
papers to 150 at the largest; the respondent sample pool was manipulated to reflect the national workforce in daily newspapers by circulation category. In addition, the study purposively oversampled minority journalists at the participating newspapers and conducted a separate mailing to the names of 210 journalists drawn at random from the membership lists of the four major national minority journalist associations. Respondents received a letter explaining the study, a six-page questionnaire and a postage-paid return envelope. The surveying took place in December 1990 and January 1991. The overall response rate was 60.1 percent; 871 (66.1 percent) of respondents were white and 446 (33.9 percent) were people of color.

Findings

Two-thirds of those responding to the study said they knew journalists who quit newspapering because of perceived or real obstacles to their career advancement, as Table 1 shows. Minority journalists were more likely than whites to say they had known such former co-workers, 76 percent to 62 percent; white journalists said they’ve known more whites who left, minorities knew more women and minority journalists who left. Many also were willing to describe the circumstances under which their former co-workers left the newsroom and discussed some of the roadblocks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-Workers Who Left</th>
<th>Yes %</th>
<th>Minorities %</th>
<th>All %</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whites</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>38.2</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>33.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Who Left</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>51.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Whites Who Left</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>24.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minorities Who Left</td>
<td>35.6</td>
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N=1322; Missing = 6
they encountered and what newspaper management might have done to keep them. From these frank, open-ended comments, a picture emerges of the reasons why newspaper journalists leave the industry. In many ways, of course, the reasons are as individual as each journalist, but several themes run through the comments of the 506 newspaper professionals still in the newsroom who watched their friends and colleagues depart.

Why They Leave the Profession

These comments constitute an indictment of newspaper management, since whether the reason was money or career advancement or burnout, newspaper managers in many cases might have done something to retain their employees. Said one respondent, a white male sports writer in his late 30s, “Lack of decent management from top to bottom has for years been the biggest reason for most who leave. Many of us enjoy what we do, but the operational aspect of the paper makes it a challenge to work here.”

The comments from the “survivors” range from matter-of-fact statements about structural and individual problems, to angry and frustrated complaints about differences of opportunity based on race or gender. The themes emerging from these comments fall into four general categories. Some of the themes overlap, and many of the comments point to multiple causes of newsroom frustration, but the general categories are:

1) **Structure** – Issues including workplace conditions, stress, salaries, changing individual goals and perceptions.

2) **Opportunity** – Training opportunities to aid career development.

3) **Race** – Frustrations and roadblocks arising from double standards in the way white male journalists are treated and the way minorities and women are treated in the newsroom.

4) **Management** – Mismanagement of human resources and inflexibility of newsroom supervisors and corporate executives.

This fourth category, combined with factors from the first three contributing to it, is most critical to the discussion of perceptions of employees about their managers and bosses. Complaints about working conditions, lack of professional development opportunities and racism in the newsroom can be bucked by newsroom managers and blamed on corporate policy or economic factors. But front-line managers who dodge personal accountability simply fuel unhappiness among the troops. Newsroom managers caught in the crossfire between industry and corporate objectives

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and the impact of those objectives on the rank-and-file in the newsrooms catch much of the heat from those they supervise. For them, it’s a painful spot.

One Hispanic reporter from Texas said he was thinking about leaving the newspaper business because of his “disgust for idiot managers.” Many respondents complained about the effect of corporatization on the newspaper mission and environment: “I’d just like to do more satisfying reporting that addresses the needs of my community instead of my paper’s marketing goals,” wrote a white male California reporter in his early 30s.

One newsroom manager, caught in this changing environment, describes newsroom tensions this way: “If you want to look at powerful newsroom dynamics, consider the tensions and uncertainties created by the ascendancy of marketing values versus news/entertainment/honesty/guts values, and the steep decline in readership.”

Although it may be possible for newsroom managers to dismiss some causes of employee dissatisfaction as beyond their control, it is instructive to hear briefly from their staff on reasons they and their co-workers think about leaving the newspaper business.

1. Structural Reasons

Perhaps the most common environmental or organizational roadblock to newspaper journalists, newsroom professionals say, is a combination of working conditions, low salaries and inflated perceptions about one’s own potential. “Money, prestige and advancement are at the heart of all who left,” one reporter wrote.

In many ways, aside from increasing salaries, there’s not much to be done to keep people who leave the business for these reasons, journalists say. “All the ones I can think of [who left the business] had to do with conflicts with management (not racial, just couldn’t work together) or not enough pay or a combination of the two,” a white women features editor wrote. “Better pay would keep a lot of people from just passing through.

Managers in the crossfire between corporate objectives and practical impacts of those objectives on the rank-and-file in the newsrooms catch much of the heat from those they supervise. It’s a painful spot.
There's not much that can be done about personality conflicts or conflicting philosophies of journalism."

A Latino bureau reporter for a large California daily agreed: "It's a subjective business," she wrote. "If someone doesn't like you, there's not much you can do about it."

The nature of the profession tends to drive some to look to those greener pastures, journalists say; long hours, hard work and salary/benefit considerations discourage many in the industry as well as many prospective journalists who decide to take their talents elsewhere. The cover story in the Spring 1991 issue of Quill magazine concerns salary issues; after reading accounts of the peanuts some reporters receive for their work and dedication – the $15,000-a-year Pulitzer Prize winner comes to mind – it's hard to understand why anyone stays.7

"I know many people have left because they couldn't make a decent wage," wrote a staffer for a 50,000-circulation daily, where money issues are chronic. Many respondents just scrawled dollar signs as their answers to why journalists left the business, and conditions haven't changed at all for new staffers seeking to enter the industry in 1991. One student journalist with considerable talent, graduating from college in May 1991, found himself in an awful dilemma. Committed to the newspaper business, he was offered a job four weeks before graduation at a small daily near his home in Ohio. The starting wage is $200 a week.8

A black female reporter in her early 20s, working for a 100,000-circulation daily just a couple of years out of college, might be at risk, if her comments on what might have been done to retain former journalists are any indication: "1. Give them a promotion. 2. Make them feel like more than a spoke in the wheel. 3. Pay them enough money so they don't have to live in a tent," she wrote. Another young journalist, in her first years as a reporter for a paper in the Southeast, says she works a second job to keep heart and soul together.

"Money!" a white male copy editor in his 40s wrote, recalling a black male who left and "makes twice the salary with a corporation as a writer/editor." A black metro reporter from New York said the solutions are

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simple: “Better assignments, advancement, equal pay for equal work,” she wrote. But a white male columnist in his 60s, writing for an East Coast paper, recalled some who left the business because their expectations were too high: “They could have been more talented,” he said. “They simply wanted higher incomes.”

A white male feature writer for a California paper pointed out that many people just aren’t cut out for the business, although he acknowledged that money is always a factors. “Not everybody who tries journalism likes it, or likes it to the exclusion of all other fields,” he wrote. “I love it, but if someone offered to double my salary for a job in, say, waste management, I’d take it.”

Perceptions and expectations also were problems for many who left, journalists say. “The problem in all cases was perception,” wrote a white female city editor in her 50s, who said she’s seen all kinds of journalists decide to try other fields. “Probably advancement would have come but not on their timetable or not to the precise posts they were eyeing. Some were black women, one a white male. All believed that had they been another race or sex, their chances would have been better. All very talented and bound to go far, but perceptions are everything.”

Newsroom managers should be aware of their staffers’ expectations and perceptions, one newsroom supervisor said. A little preventative maintenance can save good journalists who just want to hear that they’re appreciated. “Frank discussions rather than allowing the dissatisfaction to fester and develop into paranoia that puts the situation into an “us against them” scenario,” he suggested. “Perception can be more important than the truth when a journalist has self-doubt.”

The answer? Nothing can keep some journalists from leaving, survivors say. Not everyone is suited for the profession, and individual priorities and goals change regardless of anything a manager might do. Newsroom supervisors must, however, stay in touch with the troops, these journalists advise. Managers should know when their staffers are discouraged or frustrated, and understand that a little communication and encouragement sometimes works wonders. “One guy I remember might still be here if somebody had just talked to him, told him he was doing OK, given him a pat on the back once or twice,” a white sportswriter recalled. “He figured life was too short to write preps all his life, so he left. I think he sells real estate, and that’s a waste of his talent, I think.”

Salary issues continue to be a structural impediment to retaining talent
in the newsroom. It’s not just money, however; salary translates into appreciation, journalists say. Although if that’s entirely true, one has to wonder about the 36-year-old journalist for the small North Carolina daily who got a $25 raise for winning the Pulitzer Prize last year.  

2. Opportunity & Training

Comments in this category include complaints about perceived lack of advancement opportunity and training programs to help journalists improve and grow. Unlike the comments in the first category, these often carry racial overtones; journalists say opportunities too often are available on the basis of race. 

Overall, however, many journalists say mentoring programs, better management performance in helping staffers set goals and understand managers’ expectations, as well as training and coaching, would have gone far in retaining some former journalists who left. “They should invest some money in writing and editing workshops to build confidence,” a Hispanic business reporter from Ohio wrote. A Latino makeup editor for a West Coast paper agreed: “I believe more coaching, encouragement, could have helped the stubborn ones – like myself – stay.”

“Newspapers must commit themselves to adequate training programs; the practice prevalent in the industry is that one must sink or swim.”

– Asian female desk editor, late 30s, West Coast

weren’t getting the training they needed, regardless of race,” she said. “They were put in positions vacated by highly successful people and expected to immediately live up to standards. If they didn’t and were people of color, the attitude was, ‘shucks, we tried to hire a minority and it just didn’t work out.’”

In many instances, the problem may be compounded when those who manage the newsroom themselves lack the critical skills they need to help discouraged staffers from moving on. “The paper provides far too few opportunities for training except for some specialty reporters,” a white

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female city editor for a Midwestern metro daily wrote. "For example, managers are plucked from the reporters' ranks and given little or no management training."

What training managers do receive, others said, apparently is not in people skills; many say the pressures of newspaper corporatization trickle down through mid-level managers to the rank-and-file. One respondent, a white male reporter from California, had advice for newspapers that are truly concerned about retaining staff: "Provide better training for top managers in something other than the bottom line," he said. "Most people leave the business because they feel they are treated like clerks - expendable. When you can make more money doing almost anything else, it is hard to stay under insensitive management."

Others said their newspapers lack adequate training in all areas, and the lack of opportunities for advancement — into management and elsewhere — often prompt journalists to think about other careers. "The people I'm thinking of were white males frustrated because they didn't make management," a white woman colleague in her 40s recalled. "What management could have done was make them all managing editors — but what newspaper needs 10 white male managing editors?"

One Asian American journalist said miscommunication between editors and staffers sometimes is compounded when women — and especially minority women — don't understand management's expectations. "In the case of one black female reporter, management expected her to perform a certain way, but they did not give her the training to allow her to meet their expectations," she wrote. "They categorized her and the label could not be removed from their thinking. Not uncommon."

Which raises the issue of equal opportunity. Most of the journalists whose comments concern opportunities for advancement and training remember former co-workers who ran into double standards based on race or gender in the newsroom.

"Affirmative action hires must be trained adequately," a black East Coast reporter wrote. "It is not enough to simply hire them and expect them to match up to expected standards. It is a sink-or-swim policy. A newspaper
committed to racial diversity must also retain the minorities they have."

If journalists generally don't get the training they need, journalists say, the situation is worst for minorities. "I believe that minorities and women are not given the mentoring that white journalists have," a black male picture editor wrote. A black colleague at the same paper agreed:

I have seen reporters with raw talent become frustrated because there were no black mentors in management to guide them along the same way that young white reporters are guided along. Subsequently, the sense of alienation deepened to the point where young journalists decided to pursue other careers.

A black reporter from New York agreed that newspapers generally do a poor job in following up with training the young minorities they hire to provide diversity: "They did not have a great deal of experience, but they were still hired and then allowed to languish with little opportunity for advancement or improvement," he said.

3. Race Issues

Double standards based on race and gender have driven many talented people away from newspapers, journalists say. The preferential treatment whites receive from white editors manifests itself in training opportunities, mentoring and assignments, but the sense of being second-class pervades the atmosphere for minority journalists and women in many newsrooms. Some decide life's too short to put up with it.

"Most left because they felt, rightly so, that if they were white males they would be taken more seriously and find better positions available," the white male foreign editor for a major East Coast paper wrote. "The paper could have promoted them strictly on merit."

Others recall minority and female journalists who were pigeonholed, typecast or passed over. A white female reporter for a mid-sized Texas paper wrote,

A woman reporter left because she felt she consistently was passed over for advancement by the white male bosses simply because she was a woman. A Hispanic male reporter left

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because he came to believe the bosses merely wanted him to be a translator instead of a reporter due to lack of Spanish-speaking reporters. Paper could change attitudes, but that’s not likely to happen.

And a black copy editor from the same paper recalled another colleague who felt herself assigned because of what she was, not what she could do. “An African American woman felt she was primarily assigned to cover stories in low-income neighborhoods where mostly minorities lived,” she wrote. “The paper should have assigned her to write various kinds of stories.”

A Latino feature department copy editor in her 30s had a similar story. “We’re pigeonholed in minority beats – education, social issues, minority affairs,” she wrote. “Give us the white boys’ beats!”

“It’s just a question of equity, journalists say. “Relax the good ol’ boy stuff,” a Native American reporter from the West Coast wrote. “Give us some opportunities for better stories, and pay some attention to us.” The same applies to women, many respondents said; this one is representative: “Editors should be willing to bend the rules to keep women and minorities just as they do for white men,” a white female metro desk manager wrote. “Jobs are created here for white men, but everyone else has to fit a pre-existing mold.”

A white male manager from Texas wrote that most of those he’s seen leave the newspaper business over more than 15 years in the newsroom have been journalists who couldn’t find ways to fit the mold. That’s getting worse in the 1990s, he says. “Mostly, they were square pegs unable to fit into the round holes that newspaper management, in its feverish drive for corporate uniformity, insists upon.”

The problem of not fitting a “pre-existing mold” that is passed down either as part of a newspaper management’s tradition or as part of a corporate directive from the central office crosses all race and gender lines.

“Double standards. Reporter got yelled at by management for refusing to go ‘all out’ on a story about a white female rape victim. The reporter, who was black, said minority women got raped daily in NYC with no coverage. He quit as a result.”

– Hispanic male reporter, late 20s, New York
"The women who left had no opportunity for advancement because management was almost entirely composed of white males," a white male makeup editor from the Midwest wrote. "The white men who left were frustrated by a lack of opportunity to advance because they were not part of the management clique." A white woman feature writer from Florida told a similar story: "White men left because they felt they'd never have a chance against the pro-female attitude from management -- it's true, too. Women have left because they were unable to crack certain jobs -- it was OK to be features editor but not ME, sports or other jobs," she said.

That defining institutional "mold" extends to newspapers' vision of what's news as well, others said. Some talented journalists become discouraged because their view of the world doesn't fit that of their bosses. "People who have a different voice than the mainstream have a hard time making it," a black female photo editor from the East Coast wrote. "They ask for diversity, but then can't deal with it."

A black male business writer from the South said this question of worldview, which many journalists see as imposed from above by white male editors, is a major deterrent to retaining both women and journalists of color. He wrote,

Usually white and usually male managers are practically free to make subjective judgments about ideas and words produced by persons who come from worlds white managers don't know. The lack of objective standards in determining what makes performance good or bad is a severe handicap for the industry. Persons of color and women are forced to conform to subjective standards determined by and for white males. It is constantly demoralizing and frustrating for persons of color and women to work in such a system.

What can newspapers do? As many already have said, managers and editors must work to show everyone in the newsroom that there is no caste...
system, that minorities and women are not second-class citizens. Structural shortcomings such as training and mentoring programs are relatively easy to fix compared to attitudinal resistance, which, once in place, are very hard to dispel. For minority journalists, a sense of being window dressing, of being MBO-fillers, of being less equal and having less valid perspectives than white males in the newsroom all add up to a soul-killing despair. Managers must make their staffers understand they are valued.

“I do know some minorities who are on the verge of leaving the business,” a black female reporter from California, who says she herself is dissatisfied with her career choice. “A more supportive environment, opportunities for advancement, genuine interest on the part of editors in offering better coverage of minority communities and implementing such concepts as mainstreaming would help a great deal.”

4. Management

Newsroom managers take the heat for much of what’s wrong with newspaper workplaces in the 1990s. Regardless of race or gender, geography or circulation, age or outlook, journalists seem united in one thing: Their unhappiness with the performance of the people set to manage them.

Journalists also seem quite free with their advice on how to manage news staffs, and how not to. “Be fair!” “Being honest would help.” “Treat them as human beings, not liabilities.” “How about some patience, some encouragement, some basic support?” One reporter in his 40s said managers have contempt for their staffers. They should “treat individuals like human beings,” he said, “not like dog poop on the bottom of their shoes.”

All journalists complain about their bosses; for minorities, who suspect that their editors and supervisors harbor serious doubts about their abilities, the problems are compounded.

Many respondents point to managers’ failings as leading reasons for former colleagues having quit the profession. Even if the managers didn’t do anything specific to force staffers out, they get poor marks for working to retain those at risk. “Someone should have gotten to know these indi-
Individuals well enough to see that they were discouraged,” a black Texas desk editor wrote, adding,

Human skills are not the most valued qualities for newsroom managers. Consequently, troubled staff members are left to wallow when a little attention, sensitivity and a few words of encouragement would keep them going. The lack of positive reinforcement pushes them out of the business.

Newsrooms need leaders who pay attention to what’s going on with their staff, one white male reporter said. “At a former job in Massachusetts, I saw a Hispanic woman hired as a GA but left to founder in a newsroom full of editors but no leaders,” he wrote. A black male desk editor in his 40s agreed: “In all instances that come to mind” of journalists leaving the business, he said, “a lack of sensitivity in managing diversity has had an impact.”

At the heart of these kinds of criticisms is the sense among rank-and-file journalists that managers can’t or won’t communicate with them. “Chiefly it was lack of communication,” a black female reporter in Chicago wrote. “Those in power put people on tracks they had little or no interest in and ignored their real interests.” A white travel writer from the Southwest agreed: “Being attentive would have been an ideal first step,” she said. “Management just hasn’t been a group of good listeners.”

Managers don’t listen to themselves, either, others say. Do they know how they come across? “There was no acknowledgement of or engagement with their endeavors by daily newsroom managers. They often were just there,” a white feature writer from Texas recalled. He wrote,

In one case, a proven writing talent—a black woman—was told she was “immature” in her writing and “confrontational” for questioning the appropriateness of certain racial issues in
stories. This assessment came from a managing editor who expounded to me on “MLK Day as reverse discrimination.” He did not believe race influenced his assessment of the black woman writer. In all cases, editors expressed surprise when talented but clearly stagnating people left. I would suggest editors at all levels get themselves involved – continually – with women and minority journalists and “bring them onto the team.”

An Asian metro reporter from the Midwest agreed, saying that managers seem to forget that their staffers are people, too. “Management needs to develop a better relationship with its staff,” she said. “The morale is low, self-destruct level high. There’s little attention paid to individual professional development.”

Managers, or perhaps newsrooms’ corporate atmosphere in the 1990s, also are blamed for driving the creative and the free-spirits from the profession. Managers should “be more receptive to staffers’ extraordinary talents, rather than focusing on their personality quirks,” a Southern white male wrote. A Southern editorial writer agreed: “Unfortunately, newspapers have a tendency to run off non-conformists, regardless of their sex or ethnicity.” Journalists scorn conformists in the newsroom, co-workers one white California reporter referred disparagingly to as “suits.” She added,

Generally I’ve seen the most intelligent, common-sensible and human people get passed over in favor of corporate ass-kissing mediocre types. Thus, management is extremely short-sighted, lacking perception and imagination and guts. At every level of the business, I’ve seen excellent people passed over for idiots.

But a white male reporter from a Midwestern paper said that if half the blame for journalists leaving the industry lies with managers, the other half must rest with the journalists themselves; both are capricious, he said, and the new managers – “the MBA suits” – view everyone as immature. Which is accurate, he says:

All journalists are children. Most of those I know who left had personality clashes with their superiors, with both sides to blame. The old-line “Front Page” editors that still exist are just as capricious as many of the reporters who clash with them –
and just as talented in their own ways. I think the new generation of newspaper managers – the MBA suits – really view all of us on the editorial side as children as well, so that any complaints are viewed as immature carping, and anyone who does leave is seen as not being able to cut it among the adults.

It's true that part of the zany creativity that makes for a good, insightful, inquisitive news person may be seen as immaturity, but those traits are what keep the good ones good and fresh and engaged in their jobs. There aren't many managers – either in the old school or the new "suit" generation – who have the insight and finesse to deal well with such *enfants terribles*, to give them the leeway they need to stay at their creative best and to keep them from burning the newsroom down at the same time.

But much of the joy that used to be newspaper journalism has evaporated, he concluded. "Doesn't anyone know how to teach people-managers to manage people instead of just managing dollars and equipment and things?" he said.

A white male reporter from the West Coast made a similar point: "There are few 'leaders' or 'molders' of talent anymore, only 'managers.' As a wise person once said, 'You lead people and you manage things.'"

**Women – "Ultimately, white men fare best"**

Finally, many white female respondents say they have common cause with their minority co-workers, regardless of gender; white men conspire, one said, to hold onto power and to keep women and minorities out. "Women are just as discriminated against as minorities," a white woman reporter from the West Coast wrote. "What are newspapers doing to keep us happy as we hit mid-career crises?"

A black woman sports reporter said male newspaper managers haven't stopped to consider that lifestyle changes generally are costing newspapers some of their most qualified women staffers, who are forced to choose between family considerations and their careers. "Newspapers have to realize that the baby boomers now have families and want a more balanced lifestyle," she said. "They should change with the times by providing or subsidizing child care."

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A white female feature writer from Ohio agreed: “Please don’t overlook the fact that many talented women are leaving newspapers because news corporations are inflexible on child care issues,” she said.

And a reporter from the Midwest called newspapers hypocritical for not recognizing that staffers have a right to expect to be able to have lives outside the newsroom.

“The personal choices, especially for women, are too tough,” she wrote. “It’s almost impossible to have a healthy emotional life and work here. Family, mental health, friendships, creativity, integrity – all the values which have become important to me in my late 30s – are not priorities in the newspaper hierarchy even though we spout them from our editorial and feature pages.”

“I feel strongly about the need to make room for minorities in positions of influence. But sometimes I feel more hopeless about the standing of women in newspapers.”

– White female graphic artist, 30s, South

Women and minorities find themselves in the same boat in the newsroom. “White males are promoted,” a Midwestern copy editor wrote, “women and minorities remain at entry and lower levels.” Another agreed, drawing a parallel between newspaper coverage of women’s and minority issues: “How well – or seriously – have male journalists covered the women’s movement?” she asked. “An analogy can be made to covering – really covering – events in minority communities.”

Another white woman copy editor, in her early 30s, working for a major East Coast paper, said succinctly, “Ultimately, white men fare best,” suggesting, “Bring minorities along with one-on-one training, and stop leaving women on the bottom two rungs of the ladder.” An Asian woman, a reporter for a West Coast paper, added: “I think doubts arise more often over gender than race.” And a white woman reporter from the same paper concluded, “Management is prejudiced against women.”

Many male managers carry 1950s-style sexism around with them, some women said: “They always ask me who’s caring for my kids,” a white woman reporter wrote. “They never ask my husband who’s caring for the kids when he’s on an assignment.”

Female journalists of all colors say they are second-class citizens in salary, assignments, promotions and expectation, just like their minority coworkers. It’s demoralizing, one said, “looking around the newsroom and...”
seeing nothing but white men making the decisions and the rest of us carrying them out.”

For the same reasons as minorities, women in newspaper newsrooms feel excluded and undervalued. “It’s a cliche, but I think it’s true that women have to be much better than men at what they do to be taken half as seriously. And that authoritarian, chain-of-command male style of management is a pain.”

And even when women do break into upper management, other female journalists say, life doesn’t necessarily get easier for other women lower on the ladder. “Until more women are promoted to top levels - by merit, not political pals who are tokens - advancement for women will be slow,” wrote a supervisor of a suburban section for a West Coast metro. “It’s getting better, but it’s hard to crack the glass ceiling, and women up there now are more sexist than the men.”

Clearly, many factors go into the decisions of journalists who elect to abandon the newsroom for other opportunities. Much of the blame is directed at newsroom managers, whom staffers say often are callous, uncaring, inept, out-of-touch and both sexist and racist. Undoubtedly, that cannot be the whole story. But most of the managers of American newspapers have in common their gender and race (85 percent are male, 96 percent white); even if journalists are “professional kvetchers,” the breadth of perspective among management ranks may leave something to be desired.

One manager, a white female city editor from the Midwest, was the first to concede that point. She, too, is critical of the cavalier and haphazard way in which most newspapers manage their staffers. The problem, she said, is part inertia and part lack of know-how. She wrote,

My comments seem harsh and critical of management. I’m part of that management. I really don’t think minorities, including women, are systematically or deliberately excluded. I just think we’re not very good managers or very good at being inclusive. It’s something I’ve resolved to change, but I haven’t taken the first step yet.

A business reporter from a mid-sized Southern paper, comparing newspaper industry management practices to those in other industries, says newspapers come up short. “The keys are good management and fair standards for employment, evaluation and advancement,” he wrote.

**SPECIAL SECTION: Evaluating the Newsroom**
"Newspapers lag far behind other industries, such as automobile manufacturers, that are discarding bad management structures because competition has forced them to.

"Bad managers have disillusioned more journalists than I can count," he concluded, "and I don't see the industry doing anything about it."

Notes

1. David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). This study found the number of journalists over 45 was dropping sharply, prompting a concern that the newspaper industry might be losing some of its best and most experienced people, who appeared to be leaving the profession after about 20 years for other fields.

2. According to these data, 19% of newspaper professionals in 1990 were age 41-49; 7% were 50-59.


4. The circulation categories, adopted from those employed by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, were Category I: 500,000+; Category II: 250,000-500,000; Category III: 100,000-250,000; Category IV: 50,000-100,000.

5. For more information on the method and sampling procedure, contact the author or see Ted Pease & J. Frazier Smith, "The Newsroom Barometer: Job satisfaction and the impact of racial diversity at U.S. daily newspapers," *Ohio Journalism Monographs,* (E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University), No. 1, July 1991.

6. The National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Asian American Journalists Association and the Native American Journalists Association.


8. Personal communication with finalist for the Midwest Newspaper Workshop for Minorities, May 1, 1991.

9. Evans, op. cit., pp. 11, 12. Betty Gray, a 36-year-old reporter for the *Washington Daily News* in North Carolina, won a Pulitzer Prize in 1989 for her reporting on carcinogens in the local water supply. The Pulitzer committee gave Gray the most coveted prize in journalism; her publisher gave her a $25 raise, to $15,000 a year.