

To Pod or Not to Pod: A debate on desk structures at a multizoned paper

Daily Herald

of Chicago's Northwest and West suburbs

One town; one paper; one staff. 20 towns; 20 papers; 20 staffs? Or 20 towns; 20 papers; one staff? For papers with multiple editions, it's clear that you need a several reporters to cover your towns. What's not so clear is do you need a separate copy desk for each town or one universal desk?

With the debates over universal desks and design desks far from settled, the growing success of papers with several editions has given birth to this new debate.

At the Herald, we do both. Our night news desk is structured as a traditional copy desk with rimmers, designers, slotters who oversee the production of the front section, which includes both wire and local copy. The day desk is divided into geographic pods with a group of copy editors who design, paginate and slot devoted to editions covering a select few towns.

A quick -- extremely unscientific -- survey of conference participants revealed the following:

Of the 25 newspapers that responded, 12 don't split their desks, 8 do and 5 split their designers but not rimmers and slotters.

Of the newspapers that do, one had a circulation of 200,000; the rest were 350,000 and over. Of the newspapers that don't, all but two were under 200,000. Those that split designers were 175,000 or higher.

Comparing zones to number of copy editors showed no trends with the lowest being 0.6 and the highest being 37.5 copy editors per zone.

For papers that split their desks, the number of zones varied from 3 to 16; the median number of zones is 4 and the average is 7.25 zones.

For papers that don't split their desks, the number of zones varied from 2 to 6; the median number of zones is 3 and the average is 2.6.

For papers that split their designers but not rimmers, the number of zones varied from 4 to 7; the median number is 5 and the average 5.2.

One interesting thing to note when circulation rates are factored in: Papers that divide their desks average one copy editor per 4,000 to 6,000 readers. Those that split their designers

only, average one copy editor per 5,000 to 7,000 readers. Those the keep their copy editors grouped as a whole, average one copy editor per 8,000 to 10,000 readers.

Given the complexities of zoned newspapers and an inability to measure the degree of change between editions, makes it nearly impossible to boil this issue down to a set of black and white numbers. The number of pages and/or the number of stories edited daily for the entire newspaper might be more accurate, but still won't capture the entire picture.