

EDITORS GUILD

M A G A Z I N E

EDITORS & ASSISTANTS A STATUS REPORT

Are We Seeing a Fundamental Breakdown of Trust in the Editing Room?

by Steven J. Cohen

The job of the assistant editor has changed substantially over the last decade. Where assistants once synched film, found and rolled trims, took notes and created codebooks, today the work is far more technical and focuses on a machine, be it an Avid, a Lightworks,



The 1943 Universal Studios Editorial Department. (L to R): Philip Cahn (with film), Ralph Davis, Harry Kaufman (in suit) and Edgar Zane.

or a Final Cut Pro system. Some assistants, particularly in television, say privately that they feel frustrated, that they are no longer a part of the creative process of the editing room, that their job has been reduced to that of a machine operator. The Editors Guild saw some of this sentiment in written comments in the recent membership survey. Some editors might admit to a similar but opposite sentiment -- that assistants aren't as good as they used to be, that they now do a mechanical job and no longer understand how to serve an editor, that they, too, seem no longer part of a team. Are we seeing a breakdown in the fundamental trust that once existed between editor and assistant, of the shared goals and creative collaboration that were once the hallmark of the film cutting room? Or are these the sentiments of an unhappy minority? We interviewed over a dozen picture editors and assistants and learned a great deal -- about what each group is looking for in the other and how their interactions can become distorted by equipment and schedules.

Problems

Many of the people we talked to found it easy to describe the challenges of the digital environment. Speaking of the cutting rooms of a decade ago, assistant Scott Janush, currently finishing *Star Trek Nemesis*, commented, "I don't think there's much question that assistants

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Mary Jo Markey

were more connected to their editors -- were closer to their editors -- at that time." But now, according to editor Paul Dixon, whose project *Door to Door* recently aired on TNT, "Avid time is so critical that it often seems that the assistant's primary relationship is with the machine and not with the editor. The tedious nature of physically cutting the film took time, but offered more opportunities for contact and shared experiences. Because film

equipment was cheap, everyone had a workstation, which meant that everyone was engaged. We put in similar hours, went to dailies screenings, ate lunch together and went home at roughly the same time. That kind of human contact is absolutely essential and in many cases it's being chipped away by schedules and limited access to expensive gear. The Avid is too big a player in the cutting room right now. It hasn't receded to its proper place as a tool."

Most of the assistants we spoke with felt that they were making a significant creative impact on their shows. But they also recognized the potential for problems. One described the situation in particularly stark terms: "The assistant editor is a technician now, with no creative input. Their job is to get material into and out of the computer and to keep it running smoothly and do paperwork. You're not needed in any other role. The editors are working too hard. They're trying to keep up with camera, and if they take time out to tell you what they're doing, they're going to slow down and hurt themselves." Another described the situation this way: "The relationships I've had with editors have generally been pretty good. On the other hand, the assistant is rarely in the room with the editor. On my first show as an assistant, the editor was still learning the Avid and he relied on me to watch what he was doing and help, and I did learn a great deal from watching him edit. But that doesn't happen anymore."

"If you were working on a film show, you would be handing somebody trims, you'd be participating and your mind would be exercised," said Arge O'Neal, who worked as an assistant for many years and is now cutting. "I wonder what he or she is going to cut to. I've got this trim. I bet it's this.' You were involved in the creative process. But I think some people are now looking at the assistant as somebody who just keeps the machine running. Sometimes they won't even let the assistant in the room during notes. How are you ever going to learn?"

"Having the assistant in the room with the producer and director makes the point that the assistant is a collaborator," O'Neal continued. "Having them out of the room makes the point that they aren't needed. We have to educate people as to why the assistant is essential. But the assistant has to show initiative too, has to want to participate. I've seen assistants get lazy. Watching the dailies as you digitize is such an important part of the process, not only technically, but creatively. If you're working on a show with a lot of film it can be critical to have several people familiar with it. But some assistants have gotten into the bad habit of

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setting the machine to batch digitize and going to get a donut. It works both ways. If people treat you like the guy who runs the machine, then you don't really see yourself as a collaborator. You become what people think you are."

Many older editors never assisted electronically and often don't understand what their assistants are doing. "Some editors who haven't been assistants in the Avid world don't realize how much work it is to get a cut out at the end of the day,"

Arge O'Neal said one assistant. "They'll say things like, 'Go through this and clean up the sound levels and output it.' I've got to watch the

whole show in real time and fix the levels. I have to put the acts together and incorporate banners and bars and tone. I have to set levels on the mixer and the decks. I have to make a continuity. Then I can output it -- and hope nothing goes wrong, because if it does, I have to start over from the top of the show. I might have to do it several times because a lot of copies are going out and we don't have a dub rack. The editor naturally wants to work right up to the deadline. You get the call: 'The producer needs it now. When will he get it?' You start giving away your time and the dubs come out late, and you're the one who looks like the bad guy."

"There are probably fewer assistants in a typical cutting room now," says John Axelrad, who assisted for years on film and electronically and is now cutting, "but their importance is growing because most editors don't want the responsibility of keeping up with the tools. To stay on top of the job, you have to know a lot of things that you might not want to know. There's been a paradigm shift. The emphasis now is on what technologies you know. The mastery of how to put a story together is being devalued."

Overtime

Overtime pay is a sensitive issue in some cutting rooms today. Editors in Los Angeles work on call -- 12 hours a day before overtime. Assistants work a 45-hour guarantee. (In New York, editors and assistants both receive overtime after 40 hours and, as a result of being on the same schedule, have fewer problems.) Assistants must also arrange their time to maximize use of the equipment. That means editors' and assistants' hours are usually staggered, and that makes assistants vulnerable. Editors may be unaware of what the assistant is doing or when he or she goes into overtime.

"If the editor wants the assistant there while he works," says Peter Frank, a veteran New York editor and Guild board member, "then the assistant will put in many more hours than the editor and needs to be paid overtime, and producers don't like that. Editors must support their assistants. But I think the pressure should always be for having people work normal hours."

"The assistant goes into overtime quicker -- so there is this built-in period where the editor is supposed to work solo." says Mary Jo Markey, an editor on ABC's *Alias* and Bravo's *Breaking News*. "I think that has angered some assistants. They don't want to walk out if an editor needs help, but if a show won't pay them for it, they end up in a real bind. Do I go with my loyalty to the editor or my respect for my own labor? I haven't experienced that, but I've heard people complain about it. If the editors are hired for a 60-hour minimum, then the assistants should be hired for that same minimum."

A large majority of assistants we spoke to were being paid properly and did not have such problems. But a few were not. "I've worked with many kinds of editors," said an assistant who works primarily in television, "those who have come up from the world of film, old-school people who really took care of their assistants and who understood that it's a team effort and who empowered me. But I've worked for others who usually hadn't been in the business as long and who didn't protect me at all. There's so much fear. You end up working a lot of overtime, and it doesn't get paid for. And once you've set a precedent like that, it's hard to break."

"I hate this no overtime thing," said another assistant, "because it makes any overtime look like you screwed up. If you ask for your overtime and your editor won't back you, you look like a chiseler. The editor doesn't want to look bad to production. Maybe he feels it makes him look inefficient, or he wants to save his battles for creative issues. But he's insisting that you be there and yet might not go to bat for you. If you stand your ground, it's not just the production that has a problem. The editor isn't going

The idea that somebody would ask an assistant to work overtime and not back them up to get paid blows my mind. The editor expects their assistants to back them up. It should go both ways. Why wouldn't they work hard for their assistants and

back them up when they need it?

Robert Brakey

to hire you again, and he might tell his friends not to, either. Some people will suggest that you come in a few hours late the next day. I appreciate the flexibility,

but I've been doing this all week and if you want me to stay late, please pay me the money. And four hours tonight is not worth four hours tomorrow. It's overtime. That's the point."

There was wide agreement that it is up to editors to create a disciplined and fair environment, and all the editors we spoke with felt strongly about supporting their assistants. Robert Brakey, who has been a feature assistant for many years and has now begun to cut, said, "I've never been in a situation where an editor didn't back me up for overtime. The idea that somebody would ask an assistant to work overtime and not back them up to get paid blows my mind. The editor expects their assistants to back them up. It should go both ways."

"I've sometimes been told, 'There's no overtime on this show,'" said an assistant, "and my response is, 'Great, then I won't work it.' When things need to get done, I'll go home or they'll have to pay. And they usually pay. I was only asked to work without pay once, and I quit that job. I said to this editor, 'You and I are in the same union. We're supposed to be on the same team.'"

The Guild is currently focusing on unpaid overtime issues. "If you have been told, 'There's no overtime on this show,' or if you are working on a production that won't pay you properly for your time, or if you have been unable to get your assistant paid properly, call the Guild," said Executive Director Ron Kutak. "Unpaid overtime is not only a breach of our contracts, it's a violation of state law. Taking retaliatory action against someone for reporting contract infringements is also a violation of the law. Members' comments will be kept in strict confidence, if that's what they want. The union is determined to put unpaid overtime behind us. But if members don't report problems, there's not much we can do."

Learning to Edit

In film cutting rooms, assistants often worked alongside their editors, and they drew important lessons from that interaction. But watching an editor work on an Avid can be even more valuable. "I think the thought processes are more visible on the Avid," says Frank. "If you sit and watch somebody cut a scene on an Avid it happens much more quickly than on film. You're going to see how they go about it more clearly."



Eda Warren, A.C.E. (with glasses) and her crew editing *John Paul Jones*, Madrid, 1958. Courtesy of American Cinema Editors

But today's schedules often make such observation impossible. "Editors want to pass on what

they know, but there's so little time to teach," says Dixon. "I really feel for assistants now. It's hard, and it's not as gratifying as it used to be. They have access to the dailies, and they can cut the show without any risk. But if they cut something they do it in a sort of parallel universe, on their own. In the past, we had to collaborate because there was only one copy of the workprint."

Increased competition for jobs, especially in today's environment, also plays a part. "In the past," adds Markey, "you worked as an assistant, and there was an expectation that if you paid your dues, eventually somebody would help you move up. Now I think there's so much competition out there. That may make some editors less generous than they once were."

"I've worked for a lot of good editors, who have asked for my opinion, who have talked about arc, scene structure -- about editing," said an assistant. "And they'd throw me scenes. But when there are two assistants working for three editors you just don't have time to cut, let alone be in the room and see what people are talking about. One assistant working for two editors is even worse -- a total burnout. And assistants who come up that way often aren't trained well and don't know how to deal with directors and producers when it comes time for them to cut. Where do you learn how to stand up for yourself and have an opinion and yet not piss people off? Where do you learn that, if not from the editors you worked for?"

Assistants must share responsibility for their training and bring to it an appropriate attitude and a willingness to put their egos aside. "It may not be politic to say," says Markey, "but some assistants that have cut for me just want to cut. They don't want to come in and rework the material with me. They don't want to have their stuff critiqued. And that's not going to wash for me, because I critique my own material constantly. To think that you could turn out a first pass and that's the scene is ridiculous."

I want an assistant who is as passionate about the process and the show as I am. This is a great job — a very hard job — but a great one. It's not about the equipment. It's about the film, the show — shaping a story and affecting an audience. That's the magic, that's what gets me excited.

Paul Dixon

"When you're young, you think you can tackle the world -- and I hope you never lose that," said Dan Hanley, who has co-edited most of Ron Howard's films. "But you can present it so you come off as rude

and cocky, or you can have a little humility. An apprentice of mine once did a scene and I sat down to critique it. It was okay. He proved he could use the Avid -- mark-in, mark-out, make cuts. It was a construction of shots that looked fine to the casual observer. But there were no performance choices. No structure choices. No subtlety as to when to go wide or close. No sense of rhythm. He was just stringing shots together. I went over it with him and I think I was able to help him see it differently."

Many editors are committed to helping their assistants and see the mentoring relationship as an especially fulfilling part of the job. Some vividly remember their first cutting experience. "I was starting to assist Bob Kern on *Laverne and Shirley* at Paramount," Hanley recounted. "On my first day he said, 'Okay, you're going to start cutting this little scene.' 'Cut?' I said, 'I barely know how to assist!' But he was very tough. 'If you can't do it, then go back to the shipping room! And tell them to send me somebody who knows what they're doing!' He was kidding, of course, but the point was made -- I had to jump in with both feet. I was scared but I learned a lot and I got even more from all the time he took to sit down with me and go over my work."

Dixon recalls cutting his first scene, working with editor John Woodcock. "I murdered it. I put so many splices in it, it was incredible. When I showed it to another editor down the hall, what little color was in his face disappeared. When I showed it to John, all I could hear were the splices clattering through the Moviola like a freight train. But he was very kind -- I could have been crushed so easily at that moment. He just laughed and said, 'I think we ought to order some reprints.' And he continued to give me opportunities and make suggestions and put me in positions where I could grow and shine."

But some weren't so lucky. "I always wanted to have someone take me under their wing and say, 'Stick with me kid, and you'll go far,'" said Axelrad. "But I never really found a mentor like that. So I had to make my own opportunities. Assisting eventually becomes second nature and you can focus and listen and observe -- even if it means having to stop outside the editor's door to tie your shoe when he is on the phone with the director discussing the cut. You have the power to be mentored -- by working with good people and creating opportunities for yourself. You're in charge of the quality of your mentorship."

Mark Levine, who has assisted for many years and who has also worked as an editor, remembered his experiences with Carol Littleton. "I've only worked with one editor who actually extended her hand and, without me asking, voluntarily explained what she was doing. That was Carol. And it was the one experience where I learned the most. She brought you into the process and made you feel like part of a team. She was fearless about teaching the craft."

Solutions

Despite the structural changes in today's cutting rooms, most people we spoke with had found ways to humanize the digital environment and wanted to pass on ideas that had worked for them.

"The way to cut is to be a great assistant and have people like and trust you, not to push your editor to *let* you cut," says Brakey. "Become part of the process -- not the Avid process, but the show process. Demonstrate that you can do all your work and also understand and help solve the editor's problems, too. I always try to anticipate the editor's needs. The less the editor has to worry about, the better they feel about their assistants, and that trickles down. But if something goes wrong and it makes them break their concentration, that's kind of a mark -- and those marks add up. All the editor wants to do is come in and have the film and the script ready and start cutting. Everything else is superfluous -- and I try to protect them from that, so they can concentrate.

"I always felt that if I finished my Avid work," he continued, "I could go to the editor and ask to watch them cut. In fact, I make it part of the interview: I ask if there will be an opportunity for me to learn, to watch them work, to cut scenes. I make it clear that I want to be part of the process. Maybe I'm just lucky, but every editor I've ever worked for has been really responsive to that."

"I want to see a sense of commitment," says Dixon. "I want an assistant who is as passionate about the process and the show as I am. This is a great job -- a very hard job -- but a great one. It's not about the equipment. It's about the film, about making a change and then seeing its effect on the structure of the show and on the people who see it. That's the magic."

"Now that I'm cutting," says O'Neal, "I want somebody who can multitask -- who is quiet in the sense of not getting in the way, but powerful in the sense of making things operate smoothly. And I'd prefer to work with an assistant who is a little less experienced, but who has a lot of ability -- even though I know I'll lose them eventually. But nothing replaces experience. It takes so long to learn how to do this job really well."

"The bottom line is this," Dixon continues. "Be generous. If you give, you'll get. Editors should stop for a minute and say to their assistants, 'By the way, I think you're doing a great job and I appreciate it.' And frankly, editors like to hear from their assistants that the show is well cut, too."

Assistants had very specific notions of what they wished for from their editors. "The editor I want to work for," said one assistant, "is someone who knows how to use a computer, who has a sense of humor, and who understands that there are times when everybody needs to be a human being and not just an employee. Someone who will look out for you, who will say, 'I don't think my assistant needs to be working now.' Who tells you when they will be done with things, so you can plan. And who will say, 'I've got this little itty bitty scene -- do you

want to take a shot at it?' Somebody who, when they teach, explains why. And best of all, of course, the ideal editor is somebody who will say, 'It's time for this person to move up.'"

Orlando Duenas, an assistant who has worked closely with editor Artie Schmidt, added: "On Artie's shows the atmosphere is very inclusive. You really are a contributor, you're a part of the team. Ideally, the editor would run material for you, ask your opinion, take the time to explain things. He would let you make a second pass on a scene before turning it back over to him -- rather than simply recutting your work and never explaining why."

As equipment gets less expensive, assistants may see their roles change again. "If you're working on a hit show, they're much more willing to spring for an Avid for the assistants," says Rich Rossi, currently working on *The Sopranos*. "If they're not sure if it will be successful they may not. But the competition of Final Cut Pro has already brought down Avid prices. That's good -- the cheaper it gets, the better off we'll all be."

In the end, most of what we heard from editors and assistants alike was that though much has changed in cutting rooms over the last decade, the essential values of the craft have not been lost. It may take more vigilance in today's environment to humanize the workplace, but most were more than willing to make that effort.

"The only thing that can fight against technology, against turning people, editors and assistants, into commodities," says Markey, "is a relationship between humans. It's the responsibility of the editor to help establish a relationship with their assistants where everybody feels like they're part of the process. This technology is not going away -- it's going to get bigger and we're going to be asked to do more. The only thing that is going to counteract that is building a relationship between editor and assistant."

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*Special thanks to all those Guild
members who contributed so
generously to this article.*

*Reprinted from
The Editors Guild Magazine
Vol. 23, No. 5 - September/October 2002*

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