

**Tomorrow's Values in Broadcast Journalism**

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Although the field of broadcast journalism is always changing, significant shifts have occurred since the advent of the all-news television format in the 1980's and in the wake of the Internet's popularization in the mid-1990's. A combination of factors has produced these shifts, including:

- Expectations that broadcast newsrooms return *profits* to their parent corporations
- Relentlessly greater deadline pressures, driven by the internet's facility for continual updating of publicly-available news and information
- Public resistance to traditional broadcast news formats
- Increasing premium on crisis, celebrity, sport and personality-driven news (as distinct from policy or thematic coverage)

These changes raise questions about whether broadcast newsrooms at the start of the third millennium have diverged from the classrooms in which journalism practitioners train.

The development of the 24/7 news cycle and changes in technology have created a volatile environment for broadcast news. At a time when American audiences are turning increasingly *away* from traditional print and broadcast journalism sources, many journalists and educators are asking questions about the future of the industry. One source of concern is the declining credibility of the news media, which has been attributed in part to audience perceptions about the values and standards used in news reporting (Urban, 1999). And yet, local TV news remains an important source of information for many Americans (RTNDF, 1999).

In this unpredictable environment, professional journalists raise questions about the profitability – and indeed, survivability – of broadcast news.<sup>1</sup> They may be asking if students are being adequately prepared for a news environment in which audiences are

fragmented and drawn away from broadcast sources and in which news organizations are increasingly expected to contribute to corporate profits in addition to – or perhaps instead of – performing a public service.

Television news directors have expressed concerns about the training of beginning television journalists, and have criticized the emphasis on form rather than substance in many journalism schools (Prato, 1998). Such criticism, reflecting a perceived divide between the newsroom and the classroom, is not new. Past research has examined the extent to which journalism curricula prepare students for their first job. Duhe and Zukowski (1997) found that newsroom executives and broadcast journalism educators agree that undergraduate curricula must strike a balance between professional skills training and traditional liberal arts courses. Fry (1989) conducted a survey of students completing internships in *print* newsrooms, and had them respond to a series of ethical dilemmas. He then asked a group of news editors to review the students' comments. He found that while the mainstream values of journalism were generally reflected among the interns, they expressed skepticism about the consistency of ethical standards in the industry. An earlier study (Fisher, 1978) found that broadcast journalists in Ohio believed a college-level education, internships and prior knowledge of social organization and relationships (including the role of broadcasters in the community) were essential elements in preparing young broadcast journalists.

This study builds on past research. First, it serves as an update to previous studies, reflecting dramatic developments in technology, competition and newsroom structure. Additionally, most previous research that has assessed newsroom *expectations* for entry-level journalists has focused on the perceptions of news directors. This study

provides additional contextual data, by including other newsroom personnel in our interviews. Finally, this study asks about desired skills for entry-level journalists, but emphasizes newsroom expectations in terms of “ideal” values and ethical standards.

Our research questions are as follows:

**RQ1: What attitudes, values, and skills are expected from young broadcast journalists in today’s local television newsrooms?**

**RQ2: What suggestions do local TV newsroom personnel have for improving the quality of broadcast journalism education at the college level?**

**Methods**

This research was conducted in two phases. The first involved in-depth interviews with personnel in local TV newsrooms in 7 markets.<sup>ii</sup> Those markets were selected to provide regional and market-size diversity:

<u>City</u>	<u>Region</u>	<u>TV Market rank</u>
Los Angeles, CA	West	2
Philadelphia, PA	Northeast	4
Minneapolis, MN	Midwest	15
Baltimore, MD	Northeast	22
Las Vegas, NV	Southwest	75
Lincoln, NE	Midwest	100
Salisbury, MD	Northeast	163

In-person interviews were conducted during the summer of 2001.<sup>iii</sup> Within each market, the researchers contacted every commercial television station to ask for interviews. Within each station where interviews were granted, the news director was

always interviewed. At most stations, we also interviewed personnel in other positions, including news producers, assignment editors, and anchors. In all, 36 interviews were conducted. Interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions, but were treated as exploratory so as to permit the conversations to go in unanticipated directions.

Interviews were then transcribed, and used to design a survey to be sent to a larger, more representative sample of newsroom personnel. The questions on the survey are largely closed-ended, although there are multiple opportunities for respondents to add their own thoughts.

Surveys were sent to 250 stations across the United States. A stratified sample was selected – within each broadcast market, one station was randomly selected to receive the surveys. The remaining stations were put into a general “pool” and drawn at random until 250 total stations were chosen. The news director at each station received two copies of the survey, with a request that they complete one, and give the other one to another person in their newsroom to complete. Two return envelopes were provided, so that each respondent's answers could be confidential and anonymous.

Unfortunately, the surveys were mailed immediately prior to the start of the anthrax-by-mail episode in the United States in fall, 2001. We believe our questionnaires landed in the mailrooms of television stations just as anthrax cases were being reported at news media and other locations on the east coast, when postal security measures were peaking. Although we followed-up with email encouragement to newsrooms which received our envelopes, we believe the response to our survey was dramatically and negatively affected by both the anthrax episode and by the intense newsgathering and production atmosphere which followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and

the subsequent “war on terrorism.” These events, regrettably but understandably, likely distracted newsroom professionals from responding to our survey.

Eighty-two surveys were returned (a 16% response rate). Despite the small response rate, however, there is a good mix of market sizes included. There were 21 surveys returned from large market stations, 22 from medium market stations, and 39 from small market stations.<sup>iv</sup> While the response rate requires us to be cautious in generalizing the results of the survey findings to the population of local TV newsrooms, the combination of survey answers and in-depth interviews do provide a useful starting point for understanding current expectations for entry-level broadcast journalists.

## **Findings**

To answer the first research question, survey respondents were asked to rank, in order from 1 to 3, the most important attitudes, values and skills that young broadcast journalists should have when they enter a newsroom.<sup>v</sup> Interview subjects were asked the same questions, but in an open-ended format.

### *What Attitudes are Expected?*

Survey respondents are looking for entry-level hires who realize TV news is not a 9-5 job. Fifty-six of the 82 respondents ranked this among their top-three desired attitudes. Our interviewees, who see many students looking for jobs without realizing what kind of life the news business means, also demonstrated this concern about work ethic.

- “I want people who have strong work ethics. If they want a 9-5 job, work at a bank, you know. They don’t understand that they are going to be working overnights and holidays...they need to have a clear understanding of the demands of this job before

they walk in the door” (news director, large market, July 19, 2001).

- “There’s going to be a lot of long hours and... they can’t be clock watchers, and they can’t worry so much about what is my shift going to be. And I hear that from everybody, primarily those coming fresh out of school that come through here, it’s ‘well, what’s my schedule? Do I have to work Christmas? How many weekend days so I have to work?’ You know, it’s crazy” (news director, medium market, June 21, 2001).
- “They want the face time but they don’t want the work that comes along with it. The work that comes along with it is hard work, I don’t care...we expect more out of them at this level than they do in the huge, big markets” (news director, medium market, June 22, 2001).
- “They’re going to work nights, they’re going to work weekends, and they really don’t understand what the business is all about. The whole 24 hours a day, 7 days a week thing seems to escape them” (assignment editor, large market, August 21, 2001).

The concept of shallow prospects seeking work in a complex and substantive business comes up in other ways. While survey respondents indicated a desire for employees who have an interest in news,<sup>vi</sup> a news executive complains that college interns in his newsroom graduate without essential knowledge of events, society and politics.

- “I think far too many of the interns come in, and it’s all dealing with appearance and imagery. You know, do they look good? Are they too fat or too thin on camera? Can I go ahead and do a stand up because I want to get my demo tape together? The interns that stand out are the ones that have a body of knowledge” (assistant news director, large market, July 25, 2001).

News professionals say it’s about history and the substantive details of life, such as understanding how the courts work, or identifying important public figures:

- “An observation from people that I’ve come across coming out of school sometimes and getting into this business is how little

sometimes they know what's going on in the world. We had an intern here who a year and a half ago, two years ago I guess, did not know who Slobodan Milosevic was. That's a little bit of a roadblock when you're working in news... I've seen it happen enough times to think that somewhere out there, somebody needs to be keeping these people up on what's going on in the world so that when they come in here they're not asking questions like that" (news director, large market, July 25, 2001).

Some newsroom personnel attribute this to an emphasis on technique over substance in journalism schools:

- "[Entry level broadcast journalists] are very well equipped to deal with videotape editing and how to do a stand-up, but as far as other skills, as the philosophy of news, of having any knowledge about the world and their local community, it is woefully inadequate" (anchor, large market, July 26, 2001).

*What values are expected?*

Among survey respondents, commitment to accuracy and a sense of fairness are by far the most uniformly desired values in young broadcast journalists.<sup>vii</sup>

While interviewees certainly emphasized these values, they were most vehement about wanting new hires with a conviction that the news business is a mission of public service rather than a fast track to stardom.

- "There are way too many people coming into the business wanting to be on the air for the sake of being on the air than wanting to be on the air to effect change, to bring important issues, burning issues that affect our society and our lives... I got into the business 31 years ago... It was a time of tremendous change, and... it was almost a mission to get into the business. And the reasons of wanting to make sure people knew what was going on and were informed and were able to make informed decisions... And I think there's less of that emphasis and I think... a lot of the younger people that are coming into the business are maybe coming in for the wrong reasons" (news director, large market, July 26, 2001).

- “I wish that they had that feeling that journalism is important. So many of them are star struck. They just want to be on TV, and they don't take what they're doing seriously, really seriously... You don't get that burning desire... to inform the public or any sort of 'that's my life mission' anymore” (news director, large market, July 30, 2001).
- “They have to have a passion, and it may sound corny to some people, but it shouldn't for people in this business; they have to have a passion for the people's right to know, and that what they do is such a valuable service and that it's not just entertainment and it's not just going on TV” (news director, medium market, June 21, 2001).

*What skills are expected?*

Writing is the most desired skill for young broadcast journalists, according to our survey respondents. Sixty-three of the 82 completed surveys included this skill among their top three most important (and 42 ranked it the single *most* important skill).

- “I would like to see the colleges sort of prep students going into this business with a little more reality base of the work that goes into it, of the ethical questions, of the just nuts and bolts things that you've got to do to get a newscast on the air... I've talked to more people out of college who know more about hair and makeup than they do about writing” (assignment editor, large market, July 25, 2001)

Critical thinking skills, live reporting techniques, and news judgment are the other most sought after skills from broadcast journalism graduates.<sup>viii</sup> One news executive commented that critical thinking skills and solid writing often go hand-in-hand:

- “I think that the things that make good writers, the critical thinking skills that enable good writers to communicate effectively, come into play in a lot of other things – before you ever sit down or grab a notebook to write the first word of a story – those critical thinking skills that enable people to organize thoughts and analyze situations and distill information, are just essential from the very first step of story

selection up through newsgathering and writing and production and presentation”(news director, large market, June 29, 2001).

Newsroom professionals say they're appalled at the number of job candidates who don't watch or read the news daily, yet expect to make their careers in the field:

- “If you have to force yourself to read the paper and listen to the radio and watch the news, then this is not for you... It should be an innate sense that when you get in the car you turn on the news radio at the top of the hour... And you should be psyched to get your “Newsweek” every week. You know, something's missing in your day if you haven't gotten through the paper” (managing editor, large market, August 21, 2001).

Being able to carry off a “live” news report is seen as a critical skill for entry-level journalists hoping to do well in the broadcast news business. A major market news executive notes that this “live” skill is important to on-air and off-air personnel, including the TV crews who must make it happen and the producers who must supervise the editorial content (assistant news director, large market, July 30, 2001).

Some professionals admit the industry itself sends conflicting messages to students about what is valued in the business. In smaller markets, especially, broadcast journalism strives for substance, but sometimes rewards less:

- “It just is heartbreaking, because for all the people who are working hard and are aggressive and what we want, and they're trying to do better ‘lives’ [“live reports”], and they're trying to be better reporters and writers, there always will be those beautiful people that just manage to make their way up because they're beautiful people” (assignment editor, medium market, June 21, 2001).

Some interviewees believed that young journalists are in some ways *better* prepared for the technological aspects of today's newsrooms. One news director says he sees today's graduates as faster learners, and more capable with computers than past entry-level

candidates (news director, medium market, June 22, 2001). In all, though, two-thirds of survey respondents do not believe that young broadcast journalists are being adequately prepared for the challenges they will face in the newsroom.<sup>ix</sup> What remedies do newsroom personnel suggest?

*Suggestions for Improvement*

The second research question addresses possible solutions for helping to prepare young broadcast journalists to meet the needs of today's television newsrooms. Our interview subjects suggested several ways in which broadcast journalism educators can improve the quality of their graduates. By and large, the survey respondents agreed with those suggestions (see Table 2).

**Table 2:**  
**Survey respondents' percentage agreement with suggestions for improvement of broadcast journalism programs<sup>x</sup>**

<b>Suggestion for improvement</b>	Quite a bit or a great deal of improvement	Good improvement	Some or a little improvement
Emphasize vocabulary & writing skills	92.7	3.7	2.4
Introduce students to newsroom jobs other than on-air work	90.2	7.3	1.2
Hire more pros who've worked in the business	87.8	4.9	7.3
College pros spend time in newsrooms	85.4	11.0	3.6
Require students to do more substantive stories for assignments	70.7	23.2	4.9
Teach more about the economics of the news business, including role of audience ratings & audience research	54.9	25.6	4.9

Additionally, in an open-ended question asking for other suggestions, many survey respondents stressed the importance of hands-on experience that students can gain through internships and part-time jobs. Several suggested that students look for placement in a small market, so that they can get substantive experience with newsroom jobs other than simply running errands. Survey respondents and interviewees alike agreed that there is only so much that broadcast journalism education can do to prepare students – much of what they need to know, they will learn on the job. But, professors play an important role in giving students the foundations from which to build a successful career in broadcast journalism:

- “I don’t know if it’s possible for people to come out of school completely prepared for the jobs that they want to do. That’s probably an unreasonably ambitious goal. But I would very much like to see them understand the need for critical thinking skills, for writing skills, the notion that ethical decision-making is a skill in itself, and I don’t know how you get there with students, but good luck!” (news director, large market, June 29, 2001).

## **Conclusions**

Most newsroom personnel are not satisfied with the majority of graduates they see from college-level broadcast journalism programs. They see many candidates more interested in a fast track to stardom than in working hard to produce quality news programs. Ideal candidates for entry-level jobs at local TV newsrooms are those who show their commitment to the profession through a sound work ethic and a broad knowledge base, including familiarity with current affairs. Additionally, newsrooms value those students with solid writing skills, and the ability to think critically.

News professionals believe that college journalism programs could improve the quality of their candidates through a variety of initiatives, including more crossover between the classroom and the newsroom for both professors and students. Quality internships are thought to be key in preparing students to succeed in the business. Other curricular suggestions are an increased emphasis on writing skills, and introducing students to the full range of job possibilities in the field (beyond the anchor desk). Although beyond the scope of the research presented in this study, we also explored with newsroom personnel a variety of management and ethical issues, standards and practices. For example, we reviewed newsroom practices in various conflict-of-interest situations, in publishing corrections, in the ethics of digital editing and modification of digital images, in relations between the newsroom and advertisers, and in the use and implementation of “live” reporting. These explorations could provide useful guidance to broadcast educators and could be compared to what is taught in broadcast journalism curricula. We believe analysis of these data may also reveal the extent of inconsistent standards in the industry, which pose new and continuing challenges to educators. We leave these analyses for future projects.

Recent technological and economic changes in the broadcast news industry may have intensified demand for young journalists with strong backgrounds in the kinds of attitudes, skills and values that have always been at the core of journalism. But newsroom leaders perceive those same technological and economic changes to be driving young journalists toward an image of the business that ignores those values. Our study confirms that broadcast professionals - even amid the competitive, higher-pressure environment of today's newsrooms - find traditional values more important than ever.

Notes & References

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<sup>i</sup> The decision by Disney Corporation, owners of the ABC network, to attempt replacement of ABC News Nightline with late-night comedy and the attendant uproar within the news community in March 2002 \_ illustrates the seriousness of the threat at the network level. Disney executives did not disguise their desire to seek a younger viewership demographic for greater profitability, and even "Nightline" creator and host Ted Koppel acknowledged the challenge posed by his older-than-entertainment audience.

When Disney's first attempt to replace "Nightline" failed, executives made clear they have not given up the idea, even though, at this writing, "Nightline" remains in its slot. Other examples include the reduction of international newsgathering staffs and offices by print and broadcast news organizations worldwide. (The Shorenstein Center for Press and Public Policy has documented this trend in a report entitled "The Decline, But Not Yet Total Fall, of Foreign News in the U.S. Media" by Washington Post reporter Jonathan Randal. Shorenstein Working Paper Series 2002-2, based on research conducted

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in fall, 1998. Available at

<http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/presspol/publications/pdfs/randal.PDF>)

For the moment, there is little evidence of this news-replacement effect at the local news level, but local TV news directors, including those interviewed for this project, often cite network trends influencing their own operations.

<sup>ii</sup> Scheduled interviews in an 8<sup>th</sup> market (Nashville, TN) were cancelled due to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The interviews were scheduled to coincide with a meeting of the Society of Professional Journalists (IS THAT RIGHT, RALPH?) in September, 2001. The meeting was cancelled.

<sup>iii</sup> One interview, with a news director in Philadelphia, was conducted by phone.

<sup>iv</sup> Large size markets are defined as those in the 1-50 range. Medium size markets are defined as those in the 51-100 range, while the remaining markets are defined as small. This breakdown is duplicated from Wulfemeyer (1990).

<sup>v</sup> For attitudes, the possible responses were: understand news isn't a 9-5 job; be a self-starter; be a team player; don't just want to be "on TV"; don't expect big salaries; have interest in news & events; have a sense of mission about the profession; have sense of inquisitiveness; or other (with room to write their own responses).

For values, the possible responses were: passion for people's right to know; commitment to accuracy; aggressiveness; sense of fairness; empathy/compassion; or other (with room to write their own responses).

For skills, the possible responses were: writing; writing to video; news judgment; critical thinking skills; knowledge of world events; multitasking; interviewing; command of language; ability to ad-lib; familiarity with newsroom jargon; familiarity with First Amendment rights & responsibilities of journalists; or other (with room to write their own responses). In a separate yes/no question, respondents were asked whether they expect young journalists to have live reporting/production skills when they reach (the) newsroom.

<sup>vi</sup> 45 of the 82 survey respondents ranked this among the top three most important attitudes.

<sup>vii</sup> 79 of the 82 respondents ranked "commitment to accuracy" among their top three most important values; 70 ranked "sense of fairness" among their top three.

<sup>viii</sup> The following number of respondents ranked these skills among their top three most important: critical thinking, 51; news judgment, 82. In a separate question, respondents were asked if they expected live reporting skills from new young hires – 53 of the 82 indicated that they do expect such skills.

<sup>ix</sup> Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with this statement: "Young broadcast journalists are prepared for the ethical challenges they will face in the newsroom." 54 of the 82 respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement, with another 13 selecting the "neutral" option. Only 15 survey respondents agreed with the statement to any degree.

<sup>x</sup> The relevant survey question reads, "In answering the following questions, think about how college broadcast journalism programs could prepare students for TV newsroom work. Circle the degree to which you believe these steps would *improve the quality of*

*broadcast journalism graduates* ranging from '0' for 'no improvement' to '5' for 'a great deal of improvement.'