Report to the Pauley Task Force:

Survey of TV News Directors and Broadcast Journalism Educators

By

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Overview

To obtain the opinions of news directors and broadcast journalism educators, the Jane Pauley Task Force of the Society of Professional Journalists commissioned two original surveys to be fielded in early 1996. Through a news director survey, the Task Force sought to give news directors at commercial television stations around the country the opportunity to evaluate graduates seeking entry-level jobs in their news organizations. The survey of broadcast journalism educators provided the opportunity to these key educators to comment on the quality of the students their programs produce.

This preliminary report contains the results of key questions from those surveys. It is provided to Task Force members to assist them in reaching conclusions about key issues before them.

To many, the findings are not likely to be surprising. The news director survey confirms that key industry personnel are very critical of those seeking entry-level jobs in their news organizations. They find those applicants to be deficient in terms of their ability to write well. There is some concern about personality and attitude, about knowledge, particularly of current events, and about work habits.

The news directors do have some positive things to say about the graduates. They are complimented for their enthusiasm and eagerness for work and their willingness to work hard and for long hours.

Educators also recognize the weaknesses of their graduates. Writing is listed as a weakness by many. The educators say their ideal graduate would have keen writing skills and knowledge about the world around them.

Educators also think the ideal graduate of their programs would have technical knowledge appropriate for the job. Ironically, news directors don't mention technical competence as important. Perhaps it is assumed. On the surface, it seems, educators assign more importance to technical competence than do news directors.

A third of the news directors said they had no preference in terms of the major of their applicants, but a larger percentage—45.8%—listed one form or another of communication studies as preferred. In fact, two thirds of the news directors said communications students were better prepared than other graduates for television newsroom jobs. The educators feel strongly that their graduates are better prepared for those jobs.

Methods

A mailing list of 1131 commercial television stations was produced by combining entries in Bowker's Broadcasting and Cable Yearbook and Television & Cable Factbook published by Warren Publishing. In late January 1996, a three-page questionnaire containing items suggested by the Task Force was mailed to the news director of each of these stations. A follow-up questionnaire was sent to nonresponding stations in early March. A reformatted and shortened version of the questionnaire was sent to nonresponding stations in late May.

By the end of June, 308 news directors had completed one or the other versions of the questionnaire. Another 86 stations responded indicating that no news operation was present at the station. An additional 16 questionnaires were returned with no forwarding address, indicating the station no longer existed as listed. Response rate, computed as returned questionnaire or response indicating the lack of a news operation divided by total number of usable addresses, was 35.3%.

An examination of the completed questionnaires shows that they are distributed widely throughout the country, reflective of the distribution of stations in the list of 1131 stations. Network affiliation of the stations providing a
completed response closely matches the affiliation of the original list. The returns come disproportionately from VHF stations, which are more likely to have news operations, and from smaller ADIs, where entry-level positions are more common. In sum, the sample, despite the low return rate, seems to reflect the sentiments of news directors actually hiring entry-level television journalists.

A list of 195 universities with programs in broadcast journalism was created using the data base from the Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments conducted annually at the School of Journalism at The Ohio State University. Those universities indicating as part of their annual report form for that survey that they offered broadcast journalism programs in academic year 1994-95 were included on the list. Program heads at each of these units were sent a three-page questionnaire in March and asked either to complete the questionnaire themselves or, as appropriate, to ask a designee with more direct supervision of the broadcast program to do so. The questionnaire contained many of the same items as the questionnaire sent to news directors. A second mailing to nonresponding schools was completed in April.

By the end of June, 108 program heads had completed and returned the questionnaire. Another had indicated that the broadcast journalism program had been terminated. In sum, replies were received from 55.9% of the listed programs.

A comparison of data from the responding programs and data available on the population of 194 schools with broadcast programs shows that the sample matches the population in terms of geographic diversity. Schools returning the questionnaire also matched the population in terms of student enrollments, faculty size, public versus private status, and membership in the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication. The sample slightly overrepresents programs accredited by the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications.

Key Findings

**News Director Survey**

Both survey instruments began with open-ended questions designed to obtain from respondents an assessment of the applicants for entry-level positions in television journalism. The news director survey asked the following three questions:

1. Please indicate in the space below the characteristics you are most interested in seeing in an applicant for an entry-level position in your newsroom.

2. Please indicate the deficiencies, if any, that you most often see in applicants for entry-level positions in your newsroom.

3. What are the positive characteristics you most often see in applicants for entry-level positions in your newsroom?

The purpose of these open-ended questions was to get news directors to list the characteristics they considered most important in an ideal applicant (Question 1) as well as the shortcomings (Question 2) and strengths (Question 3) of the applicants they actually encountered. Up to seven responses were coded for each of these three questions.

Referring to Chart 1, an analysis of the (multiple) responses to the first question shows that news directors are most concerned with writing skills. In fact, 41.9% mentioned writing skills specifically as a characteristic they sought in the ideal applicant. In addition, 13.3% mentioned the ability to communicate or tell stories, and 6.2% mentioned some other aspect of language use.

Of considerable importance to the news directors, however, are the personality and attitude of the applicant. In fact, 31.2% listed this general criterion, while 18.2% listed enthusiasm and 13.0% listed curiosity. Common sense was listed by 6.8% of the news directors.

The news directors also are concerned that the applicants are well informed. Of the respondents, 21.8% said they were interested in what the applicants knew generally, while 13.6% mentioned knowledge of current events...
specifically.

The news directors want applicants with good work habits generally (15.3%). There is a specific call for a willingness to learn (15.3%), willingness to work long and hard hours (10.7%), and a willingness to take initiative (9.7%).

These are the big four concerns of news directors: writing ability, a good attitude, knowledge and good work habits.

These also are the big complaints of news directors, as shown in Chart 2. They don't think the applicants they are seeing for entry-level jobs write well (44.5%). There is some concern about personality and attitude, about knowledge, particularly of current events, and about work habits. Clearly complaints about writing are dominant.

Chart 3 demonstrates that applicants get few compliments in terms of their writing ability. They are judged favorably in terms of their enthusiasm and eagerness for work (36.7%) and their willingness to work hard and for long hours (14.6%).

News directors also were asked to indicate what major in college the ideal applicant for an entry-level position in their organization would have. Chart 4 shows that one third said they had no preference, but 45.8% listed one form or another of communication studies with journalism or broadcast journalism clearly preferred among the communication options.

About two thirds (68.3%) of the news directors said communications students were better prepared than other graduates (Chart 5).

Among the various types of communications degrees, broadcast journalism (72.8%) was judged to be the one that best prepared students for entry-level jobs in their newsrooms (Chart 6).

The open-ended questions gave news directors the opportunity to indicate which characteristics of entry-level applications were most important to them. A series of closed-ended questions on the survey instrument directed their attention to specific characteristics and asked the news directors if most, some or almost none of the applicants they saw had these characteristics.

The news directors were very critical. For the most part, news directors did not judge the majority of the applicants to have the listed characteristics. Computer skills came close. Forty-six percent of the news directors said most of the applicants were adequately prepared in terms of their computer skills. More typical was the conclusion that applicants lacked knowledge of geography, of local government, of basic economics and of U.S. history. In fact, 15.5% of the news directors said none of the applicants for entry-level positions in their news organizations was adequately prepared in terms of knowledge of geography (Chart 7a). In addition, 40.6% said none of the applicants they were receiving had an adequate knowledge of how local government works. Similarly, 48.2% said none had an adequate knowledge of economics, and 20.7% said none was adequately prepared in terms of knowledge of U.S. history.

Chart 7b shows that a whopping 57.9% of the news directors said none of the applicants they were seeing was adequately prepared in terms of ability to understand statistical materials, such as a budget. Similarly, 51.3% of the news directors said none of the applicants had a knowledge of relevant communication law.

In Chart 7c, half of the news directors (50.0%) said none of the applicants had an adequate knowledge of international affairs.

In Chart 7d, the percentage of news directors saying none of the applicants had adequate preparation for uses of public documents was 55.3%. Just more than a third (35.0%) of the news directors said none of the applicants had an understanding of their likelihood of success in the field, and 42.5% said none of the applicants was adequately prepared in terms of their depth of knowledge of a specialized area.

The survey instrument asked the news directors what they used to evaluate the applicants they received. Referring to Chart 8, the most checked item on the list was tapes (used by 86.5% of the news directors).
followed by nonacademic references (81.2% of the news directors), writing tests (71.0%), job tryouts (56.8%) and references from professors (54.5%). Only 2.3% of the news directors look at college transcripts. Grades are used by 17.8% of the news directors, while participation in campus professional organizations is considered by 18.2% of the news directors.

Three quarters (75.4%) of the news directors completing the survey were male. The vast majority (93.9%) were white, non-Hispanic. The median age was 40 years. All but 10.4% had at least a bachelor's degree; 15.1% had a master's degree. Seven of ten (71.8%) of the news directors had a communication degree of some sort. The most common type of degree was broadcast journalism (29.2%). Half of the news directors had been in that position four or fewer years. The median number of years in the field was just more than 16.

**Educator Survey**

The educator questionnaire began with the following four open-ended items:

1. Please indicate in the space below the characteristics you think are most sought by television news directors in an applicant for an entry-level position in a TV newsroom in the U.S.

2. Regardless of what is sought by television news directors today, what are the characteristics you most want graduates of your program seeking a job in television news to have?

3. Please indicate the deficiencies, if any, that you feel are most common in graduates of your broadcast journalism program who apply for entry-level positions in TV newsrooms today.

4. What are the positive characteristics of graduates of your broadcast journalism program who apply for entry-level positions in TV newsroom today?

The first item was designed to determine what the educator thinks news directors want. The second item was designed to measure the ideal from the point of view of the educator. The third and fourth items dealt with weaknesses and strengths of the graduates of the broadcast program of the respondent.

Chart 9 demonstrates educators understand quite well that news directors want applicants who can write. Overall, 63.9% of the educators indicated that news directors focused on writing. In addition, 23.1% said news directors were concerned with the general ability to communicate and tell a story. Educators also realize that news directors are concerned about the general knowledge the applicants bring to the job (21.3%), the work habits of the graduates (18.5%), and the personality and attitudes of the applicants (16.7%). Educators may be misjudging the relative importance of the latter for news directors, but they recognize it is of concern.

Chart 9 also shows educators believe that news directors are concerned about general technical skills associated with broadcast news operations (28.7%), with audio and video editing ability (18.5%), and with photographic skills (9.3%). These were not prominently mentioned by editors. Either the educators are overestimating the importance of these technical skills for the employers, or the news directors themselves are underestimating how much attention they give to these skills, perhaps because they are assumed. The data don't allow for an assessment of these alternative explanations of the discrepancy.

The educators say their ideal graduate should have keen writing skills (65.7%) and knowledge about the world around them (37.0%), as shown in Chart 10. Educators also think the ideal graduate of their programs would have technical knowledge appropriate for the job (28.7%).

A quarter (25.0%) of the educators listed writing skills as a weakness of their graduates (Chart 11). About the same percentage (28.7%) said writing was a strength of their graduates (Chart 12). Also listed prominently as a strength was technical skills (23.1%), and general knowledge (19.4%).

In the view of 91.5% of the broadcast journalism educators, students with some form of communication degree are better prepared for entry-level jobs in television than are other students (refer to Chart 5). The educator figure compares with the 68.3% of the news directors giving this response.
The educators were presented the same list of closed-ended questions given to news directors asking about specific characteristics of graduates. While the news directors were asked to classify applicants for entry-level positions in their newsrooms, the educators were asked to evaluate graduates of their own programs. For the most part, the educators evaluated their graduates much more favorably than the news directors evaluated the applicants they encountered.

For example, only 8.3% of the educators said none of their students had an understanding of how local government actually works, while 40.6% of the news directors said none of the applicants they encountered had no understanding of how local government works. Only 16.7% said none of their graduates had an adequate understanding of basic economics, while 48.2% of the news directors said none of their applicants had an adequate understanding of basic economics (refer to Chart 7a).

Technically, of course, these responses are not necessarily in conflict. The educators who said none of their graduates had these characteristics could be providing the graduates to the news directors who said none of their applicants had these skills. Educators not responding to the survey may also have provided the deficient applicants. News directors also receive applications from graduates of programs other than broadcast journalism. Clearly, however, there is a difference of assessment of the graduates of the broadcast journalism programs by those who teach these students and by the news directors.

In general, educators are most critical of their students for not understanding statistical material, for not understanding international affairs, for lacking knowledge of basic economics, for not having a second language, for their inability to do math, and for their lack of an understanding of how to use public documents (Charts 7a, b, c & d).

Graduates are evaluated highly by educators for their knowledge of the technical components of broadcast journalism, their knowledge about the broadcast news business, their ability to use the equipment in the newsroom, their knowledge of communication law, their computer skills, their ability to gather information, their ability to write to video, and their sense of ethics. As noted above, the educators feel technical competence is being sought by news directors, and many of them feel their graduates have these skills (Charts 7b, c, & d).

The educators were asked what they thought news directors should do to evaluate applicants. Educators were presented with the same list as was given to the news directors. Chart 13 shows that educators prominently checked writing tests (97.2%), tapes (89.7%), current events tests (76.6%), academic references (74.8%), job tryouts (67.3%), and grammar tests (56.1%). Educators and news directors are in agreement on the importance of tapes, writing tests and job tryouts. Educators would give more weight to academic references and less to nonacademic references than do news directors. Educators would give considerably more weight to grades (29.9%), academic transcripts (37.4%), and campus organization participation (39.3%) than do news directors.

Educators were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements about television news and broadcast journalism education. The educators subscribed to a number of common criticisms of television news: pay in television news is too low (70.8%); there is too much focus in television news on trivial stories (69.8%); there is too much interest in profit (62.3%), and there is too much focus on glamour (58.5%). Among the educators, 17.9% said broadcast journalism programs attract weaker students, while 58.5% disagreed with this statement. Similarly, 14.2% said television news turns off the best students, while 57.5% disagreed. There is concern among educators about internships, with 44.3% saying that interns often are assigned trivial tasks in newsrooms (21.7% disagreed).

About three quarters of the broadcast journalism educators completing the survey were male (77.4%). The vast majority (92.4%) were white, non-Hispanic. The median age was 48 years. Just less than two thirds (63.8%) held a doctorate. The most common undergraduate degree was broadcast journalism (21.1%). The median number of years at the current university was 10. The median number of years in journalism education was 13.

**Concluding Comments**

The news director and educator surveys raise some questions regarding the amount of and quality of communication taking place between these two groups, each sharing an interest in the quality of graduates of broadcast journalism programs. There is some evidence that the educators overestimate the amount of technical competence sought in applicants for broadcast journalism jobs. Or it may be that news directors are simply
looking past this requirement in stating their requirements—and criticisms of job applicants.

Television is an extremely attractive occupation to many in America today. The consequence is that news directors are flooded with applicants for jobs they don't have. No doubt many of those applicants are minimally qualified.

Do news directors, in voicing their criticisms of these applicants, differentiate between those with broadcast journalism training and those with other degrees? Certainly there are differences in assessments the news directors make of their applicants and the assessments educators make of their graduates. This could be the result of the use of different criteria, though the survey data here suggest that is not entirely the case. It could be that educators are weak judges of the quality of their graduates. Or it could be that news directors are not talking about the same students the educators are assessing.

How can the amount of communication between news directors and broadcast journalism educators be improved? Perhaps that should be one of the biggest questions to be addressed by the Task Force.