The Impact of the New Technologies on the Journalist's Status and on Mass Communication Education

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The broad field of journalism and mass communication has been affected in recent years by two powerful forces: the economic crisis and the new technologies. For almost two centuries, the legitimacy of the occupation of journalist had been a result of the printing and distribution of the journalists' products via mass media. The occupation of journalist had been legitimized through the media organization that the individual worked for or contributed to. Now, the new technologies have changed this situation and are challenging the status of professional journalists. This paper discusses how the emergence of new communicators, such as citizen journalists, bloggers and community journalists, has the potential to impact professionalization in the field of journalism.

In the same way that changes in the media landscape have created uncertainty for those who work in various communication occupations, those changes and their effects on the labor market have created uncertainties for journalism and mass communication education. In recent years, many U.S. schools of journalism and mass communication have operated changes in their curricula and in the recruitment of new faculty to address the evolving needs of their graduates. The efforts of those schools, as assessed in the most recent Survey of Journalism and Mass Communication Enrollments, are presented in this paper.

For a long time, the occupation of journalist was directly related to established media organizations. The journalists were people who worked in or contributed to newspapers, magazines, radio stations or televisions. The status of their occupation was legitimized by the

final product, which was the result of the collaboration between newsroom, business departments and channels of distribution.

The new communication technologies and the turmoil in the traditional media industry have raised questions about the future of the occupation of journalism. Graduates of journalism and mass communication programs in the United States were confronted with a tough job market at the end of the last decade. The drop in 2008 in the level of full-time employment six to eight months after graduation–from 70.2% of graduates in 2007 to 60.4% in 2008–was the largest change recorded in the 23 years that the same methodology had been used to track these statistics (Becker, Vlad, Olin, Hanisak & Wilcox, 2009). The turmoil was not limited to the entry-level segment of the job market. An estimated 5,900 full-time jobs were cut in U.S. newspaper newsrooms in both 2008 and 2009 (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009, 2010). Television, radio and news magazines also trimmed their staffs, often by eliminating positions at the top.

Many of those journalists and of more recent journalism graduates tried to use their communication skills by setting up their own web operations or joining others in doing the same. If successful, these activities mean that the occupation of journalism has a different meaning and does not necessarily suggest or imply a relationship with established media companies.

In addition, the journalists employed by established media and those who have gone out on their own have found themselves in competition with other groups of individuals, often labeled “citizen” journalists (Keen, 2008; Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009, 2010), “community journalists” or “bloggers.” Based on the model of journalists’ professional associations, new organizations such as Media Bloggers Association and the National Association of Citizen Journalists were created in the United states to protect the rights of their

members and to provide them with training materials.

All this process suggests a transformation and deprofessionalization of the journalistic occupation itself (Nossek, 2009). Given the collapse of the economic model of the old journalistic organizations and the emergence of other types of mass communication outlets that are managed by people with no formal journalism education, it is even possible to question whether journalism will remain an occupation. Chris Anderson, editor in chief of Wired magazine, speculated that journalism may simply become a hobby (Hornig, 2009).

The turmoil has affected other communication occupations as well. The easy access of amateurs to the tools of graphic design, data bases needed for sales, and the distribution capabilities of the web also mean that everyone can become an advertising or public relations professional.

In the same way that changes in the media landscape have created uncertainty for those who work in various communication occupations, those changes and their effects on the labor market have created uncertainties for journalism and mass communication education. For a long time, the curriculum in journalism and mass communication programs in the United States - which are heavily oriented toward undergraduate education - followed the industry. The research conducted in most of these programs was based on assessments and evaluations of various segments or operations within the media industry. The expectations of the industry managers from these programs were that they produce graduates who would become parts of the system, and not to lead the industry toward its future, by innovation or revolution. As a result, journalism and mass communication education reflects the crisis and the uncertainty of the industry: some schools are trying to adjust their curricula, others are trying to change them dramatically, while others do nothing.

Although most of the observations in this paper are about communication occupations and educational institutions in one country, namely the United States, the issues are likely to generalize to other settings. While all media systems have their unique characteristics, as the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) shows, they also have common characteristics. The same is probably true about educational institutions (Froehlich & Holtz-Bacha, 2003).

In the sociology of work literature, an occupation is defined as a social role played by adult members of society that directly and indirectly yields social and financial consequences (Hall, 1994). Occupations frequently have been compared and sometimes confused with an ideal type, a profession. In Wilensky's (1964) classic characterization, occupations go through four key, defining steps in the process of becoming a profession. First, the occupation establishes training schools for admission. Second, the occupation forms professional associations. Next, it attempts to regulate the practice of the profession through legal protection. Finally, it adopts a formal code of ethics. In addition, professions have been viewed as occupations with a special service orientation toward society. The occupation of journalist has never reached the status of profession, either for economic reasons (lack of need of extended education to produce people who can report, write or edit) or for ideological reasons (freedom of speech). Some media experts have argued that this current phase in the evolution of mass media might be favorable for this transition from journalism as an occupation toward journalism as profession, but the reality seems to contradict this view.

Freidson's (1994) concept of a market shelter has been very important in the discussion of professions. Professions gain and then maintain control in the economic marketplace by creating such a shelter, which keeps out competitors and controls who qualifies for the profession. Once a market shelter is in place, professionals control both the supply and demand

of workers and the work they do. The control over qualification is based on presumed skills needed for practice in the profession, which include objectivity or neutrality. This is one reason why professional journalists disregard the work of citizen journalists: because they are engaged, that is, have a point of view. Citizen journalists are often drawn from the ranks of citizen activists, and it is these more activist journalists that the journalists being tossed out of traditional media organizations confront. It should not be so surprising that the traditional journalist, clinging to traditional notions of professionalism, is not enamored with the competition.

One of the problems with market shelters, as Timmermans (2008) argued, is that they can stifle innovation. The professionals thus find it difficult to adapt to a changing technological or economic landscape while being protected but also restricted by the shelter. Implicit in this notion is the recognition that occupations can deprofessionalize over time as well as professionalize.

Deuze (2007), in his study of media work in the era of the Internet, argued that responsibility has increasingly shifted from the organization to the individual. Cultural production employers and managers stress the importance of enterprise as an individual outcome, rather than as an organizational one. Work is much more flexible than in the past, he argues.

What seems clear is that occupations have confronted the current technological changes in work at different stages of professional development and are likely to respond to those changes in different ways. Journalism and the communication occupations have struggled to make the case that their practices were based on unique skills sets acquired through their education and training. Journalists have argued that they know news when they see it because of

their skills. Advertising and other promotional practitioners have argued that they could create messages based on artistic skills they possessed and honed. The creative producer could say she or he knew good art. But this also suggests that communication experts doubt the abilities of their sources and audiences. Many journalists, according to McQuail (1997) feel that the audience members lack the skills and qualifications needed to judge their work. The market shelter, with its emphasis on the characteristics and consequences of news, has isolated the professionals from their sources and the audience.

The members of the traditional occupation of journalists claim that they possess a set of skills that require specific training and are recognized through credentials. Education thus becomes an essential prerequisite for entry into occupations that are labeled as professions, and occupations that are seeking to become professions give prominence to educational training. The routines that produce news are what journalists learn in their university studies, where classrooms are often designed to mimic the real world environment of broadcast and print organizations. The students are taught how to work a beat, how to identify sources, and how to define what is news. This latter is what comes closest to the “esoteric” knowledge required of a profession, and it helps explain why journalists treat citizens with less respect than official sources, who are expected to have a better sense of what news is. University programs in journalism and mass communication play an important role in discussions about the communications occupations and their efforts at professionalization (Becker, Fruit & Caudill, 1987; Froehlich & Holtz-Bacha, 2003).

In recent years, U.S. schools of journalism and mass communication have shown signs of experimentation in their courses, spurred by turbulence and change in the media industries and professions, but still many programs are based on traditional structures and practices. A 2005

study showed that changes in the news industry such as “convergence” of media platforms were much on the minds of school administrators and faculty, but movement toward adapting knowledge areas and curricular tracks was slow and cautious. Change tended to derive from individual faculty initiative rather than from formal institutional shift (Lowrey, Daniels & Becker, 2005). According to a 2009 survey of U.S. programs, most maintain traditional “silo” structures, separating print journalism from telecom from advertising/public relations (Becker, Vlad & Desnoes, 2010).

Reluctance to change curricula is due to a variety of factors across different levels of analysis. Preferences of unit administrators may play a role, as may faculty’s focus on research rather than on fit between undergraduate curricula and changing media. Organizational factors such as unit size and level of unit resources likely have an impact. A survey of journalism and mass communication programs showed that academic departments’ operating budgets had dipped (Becker, Vlad & Desnoes, 2010). And influential alumni tied to specialized industries may encourage persistence of differentiated tracks.

The most recent survey of journalism and mass communication enrollments (Vlad, Becker, Kazragis, Toledo & Desnoes, 2011) showed that a vast majority of the program reported engaging in a number of strategies to update the digital media skills of their faculties, from sending them to training programs to hiring permanent and adjunct professors with those skills. Only 3.6% reporting doing nothing in this regard (**Chart 1**). More than eight in 10 of the administrators said that they made changes in their curricula (**Chart 2**). One in 10 had added a digital course or even emphasize, and the same ratio had added multimedia courses (**Chart 3**).

Many programs, but not all, have incorporated web layout and design, writing, reporting and editing for the web, and using audio and video for the web in their curricula (**Charts 4 & 5**).

Becker (2008) has suggested a number of possible activities that journalism and mass communication programs should consider undertaking in this new occupational environment. One important avenue is credentialing. Journalism and mass communication programs might put more emphasis on degrees and titles, and create easy verification of these degrees via Internet link and in easily accessible data bases.

In their report of the Carnegie-Knight Initiative of the future of journalism education, Donsbach and Fiedler (2008) suggested that stronger distinctions should be made between the American first degree, the bachelor's degree, and the second, the master's degree.

Research in the journalism and mass communication academic environment might focus more on anticipating how the industry will evolve and thus contributing more to the non-academic occupational world.

The communication curricula will need to include more courses on the skills of entrepreneurial operation. All communicators are going to need to know how to survive as small businesses. They are going to need to know the skills to maneuver in a very competitive environment in which their own skill sets will be challenged and mimicked by others. Here the public relations and advertising market experience is likely to be particularly informative.

In the past, journalists have not worried much about the audience for their products. They have relied on the organization where they did their work to assemble the audience. Without the organization, the journalists are going to need to understand how to create and manage an audience. Here, too, public relations and advertising have an advantage. They have not had ready access to an audience for their messages in the past. They already have a heightened sensitivity to audiences and the techniques for gaining access to them.

Journalism and mass communication programs in the United States have considered

journalism to be their core, since it is from that journalism heart that the curricula in public relations and, to a lesser extent, advertising have grown. It might well be the case that the academic enterprise needs to examine more fully the experiences of those who have been working in other communication areas and make some of those experiences the centerpiece of curricular reform and certification.

If all communication occupations are becoming more individualized, in at least some sense more deprofessionalized, and more open to amateurs, those parts of the field, specifically public relations, with more experience in such an environment could provide guidance for the future. The nature of communication work is changing dramatically, raising serious questions about the nature of the communication occupations themselves. The work in the future will be less likely to be carried out in large organizational settings. It will be more likely to be carried out in competition with amateurs, that is, individuals without any specialized training in the occupations.

In the current environment, where everyone can easily acquire and use the technical skills, communication education either helps to provide the knowledge skills for differentiation of the professional from the amateur, or it will contribute to the demise of the communication occupations as they exist today.

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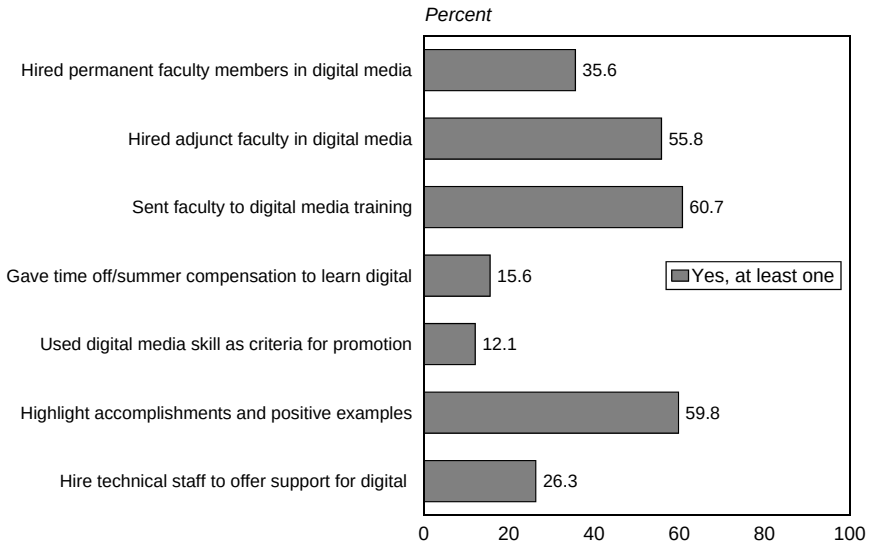
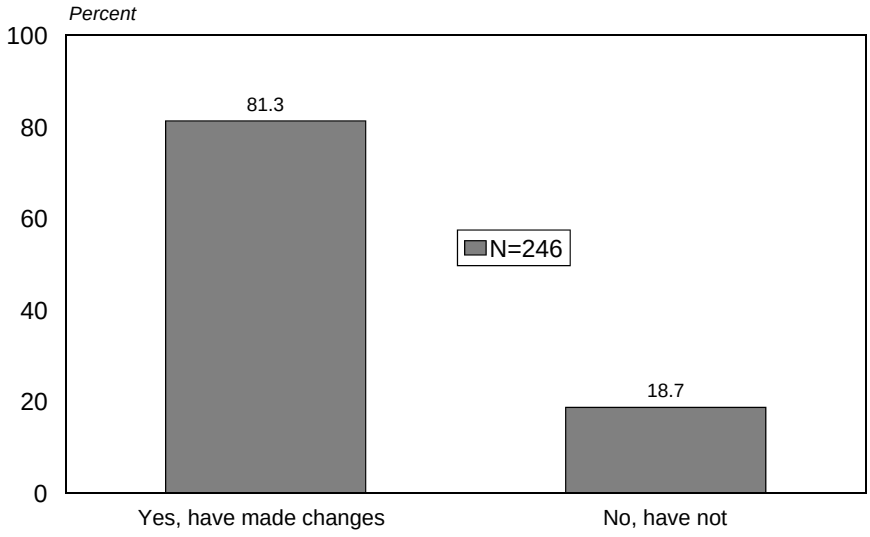
1. Personnel strategies for digital media



Source: Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments

2. Made changes in the curriculum

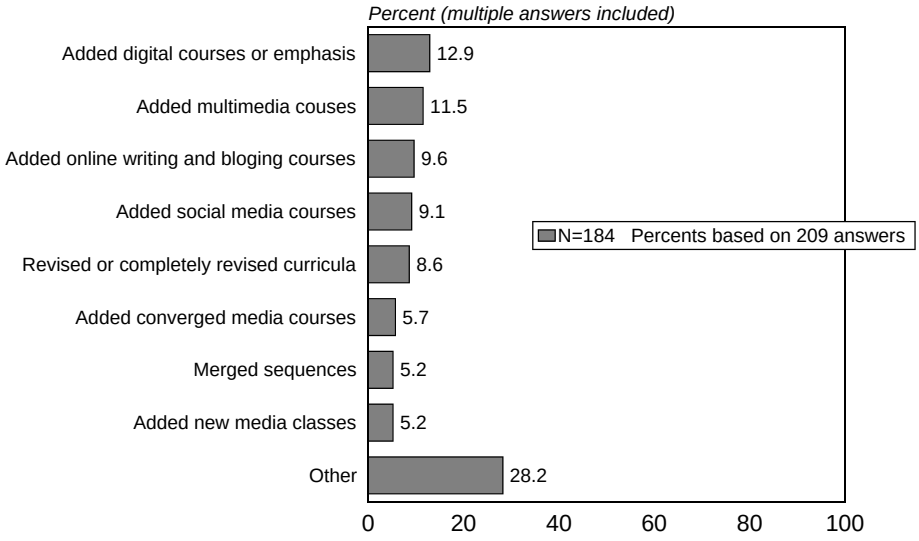
Administrators who answered if they made changes in their curricula



Source: Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments

3. Changes made in the curriculum

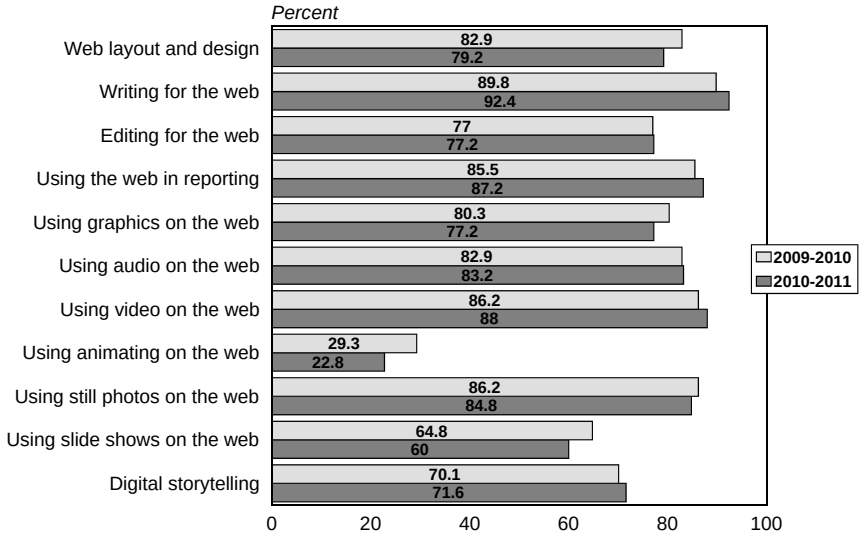
Types of curricular changes implemented in the last two years



Source: Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments

4. Skills taught in curricula I

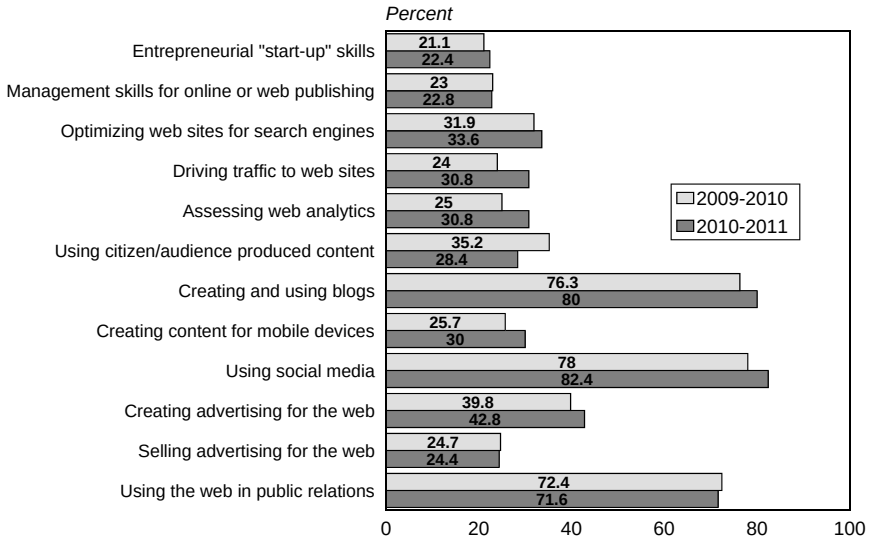
Types of skills now being taught in journalism and mass communication curricula



Source: Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments

5. Skills taught in curricula II

Types of skills now being taught in journalism and mass communication curricula



Source: Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Enrollments