

EDUCATING THE COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONAL FOR AN UNCERTAIN OCCUPATIONAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract: *The sharp downturn in the U.S. economy and the collapse of the economic model for media industries in the country had dramatic impact on the job market for communication workers in 2008-2009. Evidence exists that work has shifted away from organizational settings and become more individualized and that a type of deprofessionalization of the communication occupations is underway. Any such deprofessionalization of an occupation necessarily raises questions about the necessity for and components of educational training for entry to the occupation. Those questions are the central topic of this paper, which argues that curricula need to be reformulated and the role of the educational institutional institutions need to be reexamined.*

Key words: Professionalization, deprofessionalization, communication education, news routines, employment

1. INTRODUCTION

The sharp downturn in the U.S. economy and the collapse of the economic model for media industries in the country had dramatic impact on the job market for graduates of the nation's university-level professional journalism and mass communication education programs in 2008 and 2009.

The drop 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 has been used to track these statistics (Becker, Vlad, Olin, Hanisak and Wilcox, 2009).

The turmoil was not limited to the entry-level segment of the job market. By one estimate, 5,900 full-time jobs were cut in U.S. newspaper newsrooms in

2008 (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009). Television, radio and news magazines also trimmed their staffs, often by eliminating positions at the top.

Many of those journalists continued to practice their occupation by setting up their own web operations or joining others in doing the same. If successful, these activities mean that journalism no longer will be the province only of those working at or for established media companies.

Perhaps what is more important, the journalists continuing to work at the established media and those who have gone out on their own have found themselves in competition with another group of individuals, often labeled “citizen” journalists (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2009).

The terminology is important, for it suggests a transformation and deprofessionalization of the journalistic occupation itself (Nossek, 2009). Given the uncertainty of the financial models for the old journalistic organizations and for the start-up companies being formed by former journalists, it is even possible to question whether journalism will remain an occupation. Chris Anderson, editor in chief of Wired magazine, has speculated that journalism in the future may simply be a hobby (Hornig, 2009).

The competition of the “Professional” journalist with the “Citizen” journalist raises questions anew about the relationship between journalism and citizens. This is a relationship that many have questioned and challenged in the past. (See, for example, Carey, 1969).

While the focus has been on the journalistic occupation, other communication occupations are likely to be impacted 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 mean that everyone can become an advertising or public relations professional as well.

Formal education has always played a key role in the professionalization of an occupation, and the communication professions are no exception. Any deprofessionalization of an occupation necessarily raises questions about the necessity for and components of that education. Those questions are the central topic of this paper.

Although most of the empirical observations being used here to raise those questions come from one country, namely the United States, the questions are likely to generalize to other settings. While all media systems have their unique characteristics, as the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) shows, media systems also have characteristics in common. So the challenge is to try to figure out what to learn from the American experience that is applicable in Romania and elsewhere. That is something that will be left largely to the discussion to follow this paper.

2. PROFESSIONALIZATION

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 can be and frequently are compared 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.

Across time, however, this positive view of professions and their service orientation has come under challenge. As summarized by Freidson (1994), a more critical view has focused on the political influence of professions, on the relation of professions to political and economic elites and the state, and on the relations of professions to the market and the class system. Freidson's own work (1970, 1986, 1994), as well as that of Larson (1977), has been particularly important in examining the issues of market and class as they relate to the professional classification of occupations. Freidson (1994) also has argued that the professional model is a product of the Anglo-American work culture and may be limited to it.

Particularly influential in the critical discussions of professions has been Freidson's concept of a market shelter. In this view, professions gain control in the economic marketplace by building 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.

Despite the differences in approaches to professionalization, one common concern has been education. There is little dispute that education is an essential prerequisite for entry into occupations that are labeled as professions and that occupations that are seeking to become professions focus on educational training.

A concern with the professional status of journalism has long standing, as a recent review by Becker, Vlad, Gans, Edwards, Daniels and Park (2005) has made clear. Particularly influential was the work of Jack McLeod and his students, who drew on the sociological literature on professionals to develop a measure of the degree of professional orientation of journalists (McLeod and Hawley, 1964; McLeod and Rush, 1969a, 1969b). Related research has looked at the professional orientations of public relations and advertising workers as well as at efforts by both occupations to establish their professional credentials (Johansen, 2001; Kreshel, 1990; Sallot, Cameron and Weaver-Lariscy 1997, 1998).

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). By the most recent estimate, 85% of those entering daily newspaper newsrooms in the United States come from a university journalism and mass communication program (Becker, Vlad, Pelton & Papper, 2006). For television newsrooms, the figure was 92%.

3. DEPROFESSIONALIZATION

Consistent with Freidson (1994), the process of professionalization can be seen as an effort at claiming the right to erect market shelters. Timmermans (2008)

argues that a key claim in this process is that the profession possess a highly desirable skills set that requires protection through licensing, credentialing and restricted training. What is unclear, in Timmermans' view, is how the professions adapt to changes in the social and economic environment within which they operate. What is required, he says, is continuous legitimization of the profession so as to justify the market shelter. Implicit in this notion is the recognition that occupations can deprofessionalize over time as well as professionalize.

Haug (1975, 1988) is most closely linked to the deprofessionalization argument about occupations. She holds that professions are successful in their efforts at control when they have a monopoly on esoteric knowledge, maintain authority over clients, and have autonomy in work performance. Haug (1988) uses medicine as an example to illustrate how these threats to monopoly, authority and autonomy have weakened the profession. Though the medical profession has limited access to training, the media have popularized much of the medical knowledge and made it accessible to an increasingly well-educated public. The public increasingly demands participation in medical decision making, undercutting the authority of the physician. The autonomy of the doctor is increasingly undercut by group practice and health maintenance organizations, by medical review boards that involve lawyers as well as doctors, and by legally mandated peer-review systems. Ritzer and Walczak (1988) came to a similar conclusion based on a different argument. Their view is that medicine increasingly relies on rules, regulations, laws, bureaucracies and economies as a result of greater external control. Autonomy is lost in the process.

Critics of Haug's position, particularly as it relates to medicine, exist. Friedson (1994), prominent among them, says the case for demonopolization of knowledge is particularly weak as it relates to medicine. Muzio and Ackroyd (2005) argue that changes in the legal profession support Friedson's argument that professions find a way of adapt to maintain their special market shelters. Randall and Kindiak (2008) say that parts of social work have actually competed successfully with other professions by broadening the educational programs leading to admission. Hardley (1999), however, argues that the Internet in particular is the locus of renewed struggles in the medical professions over expertise.

Another argument about change in the professions is labeled by Freidson (1994) as proletarianization. This group holds that the location of the work of the professional has changed over time. Professionals are less likely to be working for themselves than in the past and more likely to be working in bureaucratic settings. Freidson says that the evidence that workers in the U.S. are less likely to be self-employed than in the past is contaminated by large changes in the number of people working in farming. With that group eliminated, there is stability in terms of level of self-employment. And those organizations for which professionals work are rarely highly bureaucratized, he contends. The organizations have made adaptations to reflect the fact that they hire professionals.

Deutz (2007), in his study of media work in the era of the Internet, argues 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 from this example is that occupations have confronted the current technological changes in work at different stages of professional development—whatever that terms means—and are likely to respond to those changes in different ways. Journalism in particular and the communication occupations in general have struggled with the argument that their practices were based on unique skills sets acquired through their education and training. To be sure, those preparing for the occupations did acquire specific technical skills as part of their training. They learned how to record and edit video and audio. They learned how to write headlines, shot and crop pictures, and create graphics. They learned how to create stories using the inverted pyramid style of writing.

The argument that the communication occupations relied on a knowledge base for their work has been more difficult to articulate. 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.

Often these statements of expertise were made in comparison with the audience, that is, the communication worker claimed expertise not shared by the general audience. Carey (1969) said this put the worker at odds with the audience. The journalist, Carey argued, mediates between the audience and the source and is pulled in both directions. The result often is contempt for both the audience and the source. The contempt for the audience is because it is apathetic and uninterested; the contempt for the source is because it is often dishonest.

4. ROUTINES OF NEWS CONSTRUCTION

In fact, quite a lot is known by inference about the relationship between the journalist and the audience from the literature on news construction and news making routines (Becker & Vlad, 2009). What that literature shows is that journalists rely on official sources for their news and give little attention to the articulated concerns of the general public.

Integrated into the discussion of news routines is the concept of news beats. News organizations generally organize themselves so as to be able to observe events and gather the raw materials that are used to produce news. Tuchman (1978) said that news organizations use a “news net” as a means of acquiring the raw materials that become news. Fishman (1980) noted that while there are multiple ways in which news organizations could organize themselves so as to gather materials for news, “for at least the past one hundred years American newspapers have settled on one predominant mode of coverage known as the beat (p. 27).” For Gans (1979), the key process in news creation is story suggestion. Reporters have the responsibility for thinking up story ideas. To this end, they are required to “keep up with what is going on in the beats they patrol or in the areas of the country assigned to their bureaus, and they are evaluated in part by their ability to suggest suitable stories (p. 87).” Beats are either geographic, such as a beat focused on the offices of government, or topical, such as a beat focused on health. For the most part, the beat

reinforces the idea that news is generated by official sources and reflects societal structure.

Gans' conceptualization is particularly informative, for it focuses on the generation of the idea that lies behind the story and links this generation of ideas to beats. In this view, raw material has the potential to become news only if it is recognized as having that potential by someone in the news construction business. Bantz, McCorkle and Baade (1980) called this process of story idea generation "story ideation." Because newsrooms use the beat system and other techniques that reflect societal structure, research has shown that story ideation is conservative as well (Phillips, Singer, Vlad & Becker, 2009). Journalists depend on people like themselves and those they encounter in their beats to help them generate the ideas that they turn into stories. This very conservative nature of reporting has been confirmed in a just-released study of sources of news in the Israeli press (Reich, 2009).

Citizens are not often treated as news sources except when they encounter the official structural outcroppings of society, such as when they meet up with authority figures such as police or when they are assigned some official duty, such as to chair a citizen advisory committee. A citizen with a complaint is not likely to be taken seriously by journalists until governmental officials respond. Citizens on their own lack authority, so they are not authoritative sources.

Citizen activists who thrust themselves forward are suspect to journalists for another reason: they are engaged, that is, have a point of view. Because journalists embrace the ideas of detachment that are central to the notion of a profession, they are at odds with activists who are not detached.

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.

5. EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

The changing nature of journalism and other communication work has implications for those entering the labor force for the first time. The disruption of the work brought about by technological change is now exacerbated by the disruption of work brought about by the severe international economic crisis.

In the U.S., these changes are reflected in data gathered as part of the *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates*, which is designed to monitor the employment rates and salaries of graduates of journalism and mass communication programs in the United States, including Puerto Rico, in the year after graduation (Becker, Vlad, Olin, Hanisak & Wilcox, 2009). In addition, the survey tracks the curricular activities of those graduates while in college, examines their job-seeking strategies, and provides measures of the professional attitudes and behaviors of the graduates upon completion of their college studies.

Each year a sample of schools is drawn from those listed in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Directory*, published annually by the Association for

Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and *The Journalist's Road to Success: A Career Guide*, formerly published and printed by the Dow Jones Newspaper Fund, Inc., and now available on the web. Schools list themselves in the AEJMC *Directory*. All U.S. programs accredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications and all U.S. members of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication are in the AEJMC *Directory*. To be included in the Newspaper Fund *Guide*, the college or university must offer at least 10 courses in news-editorial journalism and those courses must include core courses, such as an introduction to the mass media and press law and ethics, as well as basic skills courses such as reporting and editing. Selection of schools for the sample is probabilistic, so that those chosen represent the population of schools in the two directories. In 2008, 86 schools were drawn from the 480 unique entries of four-year programs in the U.S. (including Puerto Rico) in the two directories.

Administrators at the selected schools are asked to provide the names and addresses of their spring bachelor's and master's degree recipients as well as a cover letter endorsing the project to be mailed with the questionnaire. The questionnaire was mailed in November 2008 to all spring graduates receiving either a bachelor's or a master's degree from the selected programs. A second questionnaire was sent to nonrespondents in January 2009. A third mailing was sent in March 2009 to graduates who had not responded to the first two mailings. For 10 programs that had provided email addresses, the third mailing was supplemented by an email message as well. The graduates could either return the mailed instrument in a self-addressed, postage-paid envelope, or complete the instrument online. All graduates were given a unique password for access to the web survey and could use it only once. The respondents also were told they could win an iPod in a lottery by participating.

The questionnaire asked about the respondent's experiences both while a student and in the months since graduation. Included were questions about university experiences, job-seeking and employment, and salary and benefits.

In 2008, the survey was mailed to 9,526 individuals whose names and addresses were provided by the administrators of the 86 programs. A total of 2,840 returned the questionnaires by the middle of June of 2009. Of the returns, 2,542 were from students who reported they actually had completed their degrees during the April to June 2008 period. The remaining 298 had completed their degrees either before or after the specified period, despite their inclusion in the spring graduation lists. A total of 609 questionnaires was returned undelivered and without a forwarding address. Return rate, computed as the number of questionnaires returned divided by the number mailed, was 29.8%. Return rate, computed as the number returned divided by the number mailed minus the bad addresses, was 31.9%.

Of the 2,542 usable questionnaires, 2,360 (92.8%) were from bachelor's degree recipients and 182 were from those who received a master's degree. The findings reported for the *Annual Survey of Journalism & Mass Communication Graduates* are projectable to the estimated 50,560 students who earned bachelor's degrees and the 4,270 students who earned master's degrees in academic year 2007-2008 from the 480 colleges and universities across the United States and Puerto Rico offering programs in journalism and mass communication.

Detailed findings have been reported elsewhere (Becker, Vlad, Olin, Hanisak & Wilcox, 2009). What follows is simply a summary.

For several years, as the negative news swirled about the changes in the media industries, and particularly in the daily newspaper industry, graduates of journalism and mass communication programs around the country seemed protected. The dramatic weakening of the job market after 2000 seemed to have halted in 2003, and recovery seemed to be on the way. There was evidence of a slowing of that recovery in 2007, but little evidence yet that the entry-level part of the job market for journalism and mass communication graduates was in decline. In the second half of 2008 and the first half of 2009, all that changed.

By almost all indications, the 2008 graduates of the nation's journalism and mass communications programs found themselves in a disastrous job market. Job offers on graduation were down. Opportunities of job interviews had declined. The level of full-time employment at the benchmark Oct. 31 reference point was eight percentage points lower than a year earlier. Full-time employment based on a second measure—when the respondents returned the survey instrument—was at its lowest point going back at least to 1986, and the drop from a year earlier was unprecedented.

Salaries were stagnant at best. Those graduates who found full-time employment outside the field had a higher median annual salary than those who had work in the field. Even graduates who were lucky enough to find a job working for a web publishing company had an annual salary significantly below the annual salary of those who found similar jobs a year earlier. And the news in terms of benefits was even more discouraging. Across nine different comparisons, graduates in 2008 reported fewer benefits, and fewer of those were fully employer paid.

Graduates who found work were more likely to report they took their job because it was the only one available and less likely to say they were doing what they wanted to do. Job satisfaction was down, and regrets about the career chosen were up.

Maybe because the traditional industries didn't offer them jobs, and maybe as yet one more indicant of the weak tie between the traditional media industries and their audiences, journalism and mass communication graduates in 2008 were less likely to read newspapers and magazines than graduates even a year before. They get their news from the Internet, and they frequently check social media web sites. Many are regular users of blogs and video sharing sites. And they are not very optimistic about the future of many of the traditional media or about job prospects in their field in the future.

While the picture is dreary for journalism and mass communication graduates, with an unemployment rate for graduates of journalism and mass communication programs that is higher than for the 20-24 year-old cohort of which they are a part, there is evidence that some felt the pain more than others. And this difference may say much about the future of the journalism and mass communication occupations.

Those students who studied public relations at the university found the job market in 2008 to be considerably less hostile than did those who studied for print media job, for telecommunications jobs, or even for advertising jobs. Of the public relations graduates, nearly 71% had a full-time job when they returned the survey instrument, compared with 65% of the advertising graduates, 59% of the print journalism graduates, and 57% of the telecommunications graduates. The public relations students also earned above average salaries—something the graduates who

took jobs in advertising, at dailies and weeklies, and with television (except for cable) could not say.

Public relations graduates are different from others in a key way. They don't necessarily seek and find jobs in public relations. In fact, in 2008, only 17% of them took a job in traditional public relations, compared with 24% of the advertising students who went into advertising agencies and departments, 30% of the telecommunications students who went into that field, and 23% of the print journalism students who went into newspapers or wire services. Public relations students are more likely to say they are doing communications of some sort in jobs outside traditional employment circles than are any of the other students. In 2008, 38% of the public relations students said they found "communications" work that was not with a public relations department or agency, not with an advertising department or agency, not with a newspaper or wire service, and not with a telecommunications company.

The evidence is that the public relations students are more entrepreneurial, less tied to traditional definitions of what is communication work, and more flexible about what kinds of work they actually do. They did better in the job market in 2008, and that may say a lot about the future of employment for graduates of the nation's journalism and mass communications programs.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

As Deutz (2007) has observed, the literature on news construction, with its heavy emphasis on organizational constraints, is likely to have limited relevance to a future in which journalistic work is less likely to be carried out in organizational settings. Recent empirical studies of newswork have remained focused largely on established media settings (Phillips, Singer, Vlad & Becker, 2009; Reich, 2009). Future research will need to shift to the more entrepreneurial environment of the individual and citizen journalist. The interaction between these two types of news workers will become particularly important. Work in this area is only in its infancy (Lowrey, 2006; Singer, 2006; Wall, 2006).

Because of the weakened institutional setting, the characteristics of the journalists themselves will become more important. In an organizational setting, the individual characteristics of the journalists can be muted. Journalists are assigned stories by more established managers. Editors handle and modify copy the journalists produce before it appears in print or online.

Among the characteristics of the journalists that are likely to be particularly important in this new setting are the skill sets available and employed. A journalist with expertise in the medical sciences is more likely to be able to cover developments in health care than is a journalist without this training. A journalist with an understanding of economics is more likely to be able to write about that topic. A journalist with a background in the performing arts is going to be more able to write meaningfully about theater.

It also should be the case that a journalist with a background in the law and history of the occupation will address legal and ethical issues differently from a journalist without this training. And a journalist with knowledge about the

consequences of media messages and of the limitations of news gathering techniques will produce different kinds of stories than a journalist without this expertise.

These same arguments can be made about the public relations or advertising practitioners. Their work has come under less scrutiny in research than is true for journalists. The exception is where public relations work has had impact on news production (Cameron, Sallot & Curtin, 1996). Clearly more needs to be known about the work of public relations and advertising practitioners.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNICATION EDUCATION

Becker (2008) has suggested a number of possible activities that journalism and mass communication programs should consider undertaking in this new occupational environment. Chief among these is credentialing. Universities might want to put more emphasis on degrees and titles. Universities might want to create easy verification of these degrees via Internet links. The universities might even become proactive in listing people who have degrees from their programs in easily accessible data bases.

Stronger distinctions might be made between the American first degree, the bachelor's degree, and the second, the master's degree. And there might be some consideration of what a doctorate degree might contribute to the non-academic occupational world.

Rather than a single certification, universities might develop a series of certifications, such as in open records searches or in data base analysis. Students might be certified as trained in editing procedures or with graphic design software. Journalism students might be certified as having special training in health issues, and public relations students might be certified as expert in conducting and evaluating health campaigns.

The communication curricula are almost certainly going to need to focus more 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 public relations and advertising 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 with more experience in such an environment could provide guidance for the future.

Communication education, at a minimum, needs to be aware of the open-source world in which future graduates will work. Everyone can create and edit code. Everyone can make entries into an encyclopedia. Everyone can issue public relations releases and develop advertisements. And everyone can produce news.

In such an environment, communication education either helps to provide the skills for success and for differentiation of the successful from the amateur, or it will contribute to the demise of the communication occupations as they exist today. Such inaction could result in the creation of the communication hobby—an activity for which there is no longer any real financial compensation.

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