

Broadcast Journalists Need Training to Meet Intense Demands

By Deborah Potter

Director of NewsLab

A research and training center for television journalists

Most broadcast journalists in the United States have some university preparation. Increasingly, working journalists argue that further refinement of their skills throughout their careers would better serve both the profession and the public.

Journalism in the United States is generally regarded as a professional discipline, yet it has little in common with other professions like law and medicine. In journalism, there is no specialized education, no entrance exam, and no expectation of continuing education. Most young Americans entering the field of broadcast journalism today have studied journalism at the university level. After they enter the workforce, however, they are unlikely to get any formal journalism training unless they seek it on their own.

Many working journalists actually urge students not to get a degree in journalism or a related communications field, but rather to get a broad education in the liberal arts. "It's one of the most worthless degrees you can have," says news director Dave Busiek of KCCI-TV in Des Moines, Iowa. "I would much rather see someone with a bachelor's degree who has spent a year or two on the street covering news and learning how to write."¹

Still, broadcast news is a competitive field, and students find that a journalism degree gives them an advantage, at least when looking for their first jobs. One survey found that fully 90 percent of college graduates taking their first jobs in television news came from journalism and mass communication programs. Employers want new hires to "hit the ground running" in today's short-staffed television and radio newsrooms, and news managers know that students with a broadcast journalism degree are familiar with the basics: how to shoot and edit audio and video and how to write in broadcast style.

At schools such as the University of Missouri and Brigham Young University, students gain experience producing and reporting for a daily television newscast. Most broadcast journalism programs also require students to complete at least one internship in a broadcast newsroom, which helps them build contacts in the field as well as develop a professional-looking resume tape. At

Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, students pay more than \$30,000 for a 10-month, hands-on program, and most think it's worth the money. "I came to Columbia to learn the nuts and bolts and to make the contacts I need to succeed in journalism," one student wrote in response to a recent survey. "I believe the school does an excellent job of that."

Future broadcast journalists not only need to learn the basic skills of the trade, they also need training to deal with the pressures they will face on the job, particularly time pressures. Over the last decade, local television stations in the United States have increased the number of hours of news produced daily, but most do not have a proportionally larger staff. Reporters are now routinely required to produce more than one story each day. That means they need training in how to work more quickly and more efficiently.

Two dozen educators who spent part of the summer of 2002 working in broadcast newsrooms around the country certainly got that message. As part of the Radio-Television News Directors Foundation Excellence in Education project, each teacher was assigned to a station for a four-week fellowship. These experienced educators were amazed by how much the profession had changed since they left the newsroom, and some of them had been gone less than a decade. For several, the biggest lesson learned was that they need to push their students harder to prepare them for the ever-looming deadlines and intense demands of today's television newsrooms.

Camilla Grant of The State University of West Georgia says she'll now require her students to produce reports for more than one medium, having seen how her host station, KMOL-TV in San Antonio, Texas, insisted that reporters routinely write for the station's Web site. Dutch Hoggatt of Harding University also came back from his newsroom fellowship planning to be more demanding. "The major thing I want to emphasize with my students is the speed at which stories need to be written and reported."

Teaching young journalists to work faster will only improve the quantity of what they produce, not the quality. They also need training in journalism ethics and law. They need to practice exercising good news judgment and grappling with difficult decisions on deadline. Should they broadcast graphic video from a crime scene? Should they lead the newscast with a late-breaking, highly visual story of little or no significance?

They need to be able to spot the holes in a story, and know where to look and what questions to ask to fill them. They need to learn geography and history, because news directors are looking for good thinkers, not just button pushers. Dan Weiser at KCRA-TV in Sacramento, California, asks potential new hires to explain the Dow Jones industrial average and finds many can't even come close. Sean Kennedy, news director at KTAL-TV in Shreveport, Louisiana, says one of his favorite questions for prospective employees is: Who are James Dean, Jimmy Dean, and John Dean? (Answer: a movie star, a country singer, and a Watergate figure.)

Future broadcast journalists need to learn these things in school because it's often the only formal training they ever get. U.S. journalists are not required to take continuing education courses to remain active in their profession, and few U.S. news organizations provide mid-career training opportunities to their employees. Fully half the journalists questioned in a recent survey by the Council of Presidents of National Journalism Organizations said they get no training at all.

The lack of ongoing training was most evident for journalists in local TV stations. The survey found that 81 percent of journalists said training in journalism ethics and values is important, but only 33 percent said they were getting it. More than half (54 percent) of TV journalists said they needed training in content or specific coverage areas, but just 13 percent said they were getting that training.²

News executives questioned in the same survey acknowledged they should provide more training for their employees, but said they don't have the time or the money to do so. "Though news organizations are in the knowledge business, the news industry lags behind others in providing its people with new knowledge and skills through professional training," said survey editor Beverly Kees.³

Too rare is the general manager like Shawn Oswald of KNSW-TV in Wichita, Kansas, who values training enough to make it a station priority. "It is a sad commentary on our business—we don't train people," Oswald told the Wichita Business Journal. "The industry has lost too many good sales people, reporters, and photographers by not training them."⁴ By contrast, in some European countries, television journalists with union contracts are given paid time off every few years to pursue professional development opportunities.

While their employers may not provide them training, U.S. broadcast journalists can and do seek training on their own from a variety of institutions and organizations. Most of these organizations are either independent or funded by membership dues. The Poynter Institute, a school for journalists in St. Petersburg, Florida, offers mid-career courses in reporting, producing, ethics, and news management for broadcast journalists. Professional membership groups like the Radio-Television News Directors Association, the National Press Photographers Association, and Investigative Reporters and Editors present regular regional and national workshops for their members. While the cost is generally low, the journalists who take part in many of these programs and seminars often have to pay their own expenses and sometimes must use their vacation time to attend.

On-the-job training is provided in some TV newsrooms, but it tends to be limited in both availability and scope. Young reporters can and do learn the finer points of their jobs from supervisors who edit and approve their scripts. But a recent survey of reporters with experience of two years or less found that almost 40 percent said their stations have no formal process for approving scripts before going on the air. This suggests that many of the least experienced journalists in TV news are getting little or no guidance in improving their work. Many stations rely on private consultants from outside firms like Frank N. Magid Associates or Broadcast Image Group to advise their employees.⁵ Some consultants offer training sessions on writing and producing. But more commonly, their advice is offered mainly to news anchors and focuses on appearance and presentation skills, not on journalism issues. Magid, for example, offers help with makeup, wardrobe, hair, and vocal inflection.

To fill the gap, nonprofit groups like NewsLab and the Project for Excellence in Journalism have stepped in to offer low-cost or free training programs in television newsrooms. These groups generally are funded by foundations with close ties to the field of journalism and provide training in storytelling, decision-making, newsroom organization, and specific topic areas, such as covering health or education.

Some television station groups are developing their own training programs to groom candidates for specific newsroom jobs that do not draw as many applicants as on-air positions. Susana Schuler, corporate news director

for Nexstar Broadcasting Group, Inc., created what she calls Producer School to attract producer candidates to her company's stations. The stations offer a paid internship to college seniors, whom they train to produce newscasts. In exchange, the students promise to sign a two-year contract if they're offered a producing job by any Nexstar station.

The Hearst Argyle group recently joined with the Belo Corporation to offer a "producer academy" to polish the skills of news producers already working at their stations. Hearst Vice President Candy Altman says participants worked on everything from newsgathering skills and ethics to headline writing and newscast production.

It is clear that there are also plenty of young journalists who need and want more training than they are getting. In the short term, however, that situation appears likely to continue. The current economic situation in the United States has led several foundations to reduce their financial support for journalism training programs, and newsrooms facing budget cuts are unlikely to fund training programs. In the long term, research may be needed to quantify the return on investment companies can expect when they provide training for newsroom staff. Anecdotal evidence suggests that training can help journalists in a number of ways, from improving their work to rekindling their passion for journalism. If studies can substantiate that training also pays off by improving a company's bottom line, the case for journalism training will be strong indeed.

1 Busiek quote: <http://www.emonline.com/newspro/111802jschool.html>

Hiring study: <http://www.grady.uga.edu/annualsurveys/PauleyReport01.htm>

2 Young reporter survey: <http://www.newslab.org/tuohey.htm>

3 Kees quote: <http://www.spj.org/news.asp?REF=230>

Columbia student survey: <http://spj.jrn.columbia.edu/2002-11-19survey.pdf>

4 Oswald quote: <http://wichita.bizjournals.com/wichita/stories/2002/10/28/story7.html.pdf>

5 Magid services: <http://www.magid.com/resources/ctd.html>

Potter is a former correspondent with CBS and CNN television networks. NewsLab is a non-profit resource for television newsrooms, focused on research and training, and serving local stations across the United States.

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