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Journalism as a Profession:

Careers and Expectations

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““The journalist has a position that is all his own. He alone has the privilege of moulding the opinion, touching the hearts and appealing to the reason of hundreds of thousands every day. Here is the most fascinating of all professions.”

Joseph Pulitzer (1904),
The North American Review

Ask most people to describe what journalists do and there's generally a swift reply – they report the news. Of course, the truth has never been as simple as that. Journalists work in a wide variety of areas from writing and filmmaking to archiving and data analysis and this has always been the case. From the days of the first printing presses; through the introduction of mass distribution networks; to the first computers; journalism has always been a profession in flux.

Over the last decade however, journalism practice has undergone an unprecedented revolution and scrutiny of such intensity, that many new questions are being asked, not only about the future of the profession, but about the roles and careers of working journalists. For journalists and employers alike, there are two central issues. Firstly, whether new forms of journalism can, or ever will, raise enough revenue to allow for the quality and quantity of professional work seen in the past. Secondly what should (and can) be the roles and responsibilities of professional journalists in the new media world?

When it comes to examining the financial future of professional journalism, many of the predictions are bleak. In his book “The Big Switch: Rewiring the World from Edison to Google” Nicholas Carr (2008, Pg 156) quotes former New York

Times Executive Martin Nisenholtz saying: “How do we create high quality content in a world where advertisers want to pay by the click, and consumers don’t want to pay at all?” Carr then adds his own pessimistic conclusion: “The answer may turn out to be equally simple: We don’t.”

In the wake of the phone hacking scandal of 2011 and other crises of trust in journalism, the criticism of the profession and those involved in it has been vociferous and widespread, Journalists have been accused (with considerable justification) of fundamental failings their in ethical and professional standards. Professor of Journalism at New York University, Jay Rosen (2011) has said: “Things are out of alignment. Journalists are identifying with the wrong people. Therefore the kind of work they are doing is not as useful as we need it to be.” Former Daily Star Editor Brian Hitchen (2012) summarised much of the outrage, when he told the trade publication, Press Gazette he was “appalled, angry and disgusted” by the phone hacking affair, which he said was “another example of poor journalism today”.

While such debate about the role and purpose of modern journalism is undoubtedly critical at such a time, this chapter seeks to investigate the implications of the crisis at a more fundamental level. It looks specifically at the lives and working conditions of journalists today and considers the possible future awaiting those young people hoping to enter the profession.

According to data from the Higher Education Statistics Authority, in 2010-11 there were 11,840 students studying journalism in the UK at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. There are many hundreds more studying at further education and private colleges. Each of them hope to join a profession that many would argue is in turmoil. So when these young people finish their training, this chapter asks:

- Are there enough rewarding jobs for journalists entering the profession?
- What can they expect their working lives to be like?
- Why are significant numbers of working journalists apparently disenchanted with their careers?
- And can such a rapidly changing industry offer the financial and personal development needed to provide lifelong professional development?

Death by a thousand cuts?

The journalism trade press is full of stories of job cuts. Among working journalists it has become a commonplace belief that jobs are disappearing and career opportunities shrinking at a rate unrivalled in other workplaces, but does the evidence bear out that conviction? In 2010 researchers from international public relations company Burson-Marsteller spoke to a hundred and fifteen journalists from across Europe, the Middle East and Africa. 81% of those interviewed said they were experiencing cost-cutting measures. Of those, nearly a quarter said the spending reductions would be implemented as job cuts, while just short of a third said they'd be cutting freelance budgets. The subsequent report makes depressing reading;

“A common thread across the region, like the US, is the enormous number of journalists being laid off. All across the region editorial departments are downsizing significantly in response to the economic crisis and the intense competition in the media sector. Even for journalists lucky enough to be in full-time employment, their lot is not a happy one; job uncertainty, vastly increased workloads, demands for multi-platform content; less editorial space to put that content into and (often) moves to “dumb down” the content and editorial agendas in general.” (Burson-Marsteller, 2010, Pg 3)

This may well be true, but are these cuts any worse than those for other professions? In its most recent “Employee Outlook” survey of general employment, the Chartered Institute for Personnel Development found that around a third of working people questioned said their employers were cutting jobs. That figure is higher than the 25% in the Burson-Marsteller survey and for staff working in the public sector, the number experiencing job cuts rose dramatically to 57%. These two sets of data aren't strictly comparable as the sampling and methodology are different, but they do give a rough indication that the pressure of job cuts in journalism may well be no worse than it is in many other professions.

One area of employment where journalism is distinct from other industries is the large number of freelance journalists who produce thousands of pages of copy and fill the rotas in

dozens of newsrooms. As we have seen in the Burson-Marteller research, many editors have been making cuts by reducing their freelance budgets. There has been much written about the growth of digitally published “citizen journalism” and whether this is directly related to the demise of freelance journalism, but for many commentators, the situation appears more complex. City University Professor of Journalism and former Daily Mirror Editor, Roy Greenslade (2012), has blogged about his belief that many newspaper publishers are using new technology as an excuse to boost their bottom line:

“Beware publishers who link announcements about going online with the cutting of journalists’ jobs. The digital revolution is not a sensible (or ethical) reason for news providers to reduce the number of staff engaged in journalism. Part of the problem is about appeasing investors.”

The Director of media think-tank Polis, Charlie Beckett (2009) also thinks the situation is far from simple. This is from a blog post:

“The problem is not that the work is being done by the public instead of professionals. Although personally I would welcome that if it was the case. I think that the pressure on freelancers is part of a much broader industry trend towards some fundamental restructuring which will have [sic] already seen widespread job losses with more to come.”

Pay and Working Conditions

So while the reasons for cost-cutting may be complex, it is undoubtedly true that there are more journalists chasing fewer jobs. What does this mean for those who are lucky enough to remain in employment? How much can they expect to earn and what will their working conditions be like?

The official graduate careers website “Graduate Prospects” suggests the average salary for all journalists in 2011 was around £24,500, with a top salary after ten years in the business being around £40,000 and a little higher for journalists working in broadcasting and particularly television. In comparison, the current average (median) annual full-time salary in the UK is £26,200 (ONS, 2011). While most journalists would

probably argue that salary was not the main reason they entered the profession, the National Union of Journalists claims its members' pay and working conditions are deteriorating dramatically. The organisation's General Secretary is Michelle Stanistreet:

“A long-hours culture and stress is rife in our industry. Too many newspapers and website services are being run on goodwill, with journalists working very long hours. This is simply unacceptable. Cuts to editorial posts and recruitment freezes mean that many are working longer and longer hours. We are all prepared to go the extra mile when required, but members are routinely covering for their former colleagues and working excessive hours.” (Email to author, 16th April 2012)

This may well be true, but once again are these working conditions any worse than those of in other industries in these tough economic times? The CIPD found that fewer than half of those employees surveyed, across the general working population, were satisfied with their jobs and more than a third said they were under excessive pressure at least once a week. Clearly journalists are not the only workers who claim to be dissatisfied and over-worked.

In addition, considerable numbers of media organisations would argue that they invest time and money to improve the experiences of their employees. According to the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (Emails to author, various dates June – July 2012), around forty employers connected with, or working within, the media are accredited by its “Investors in People” staff management kitemark programme. These include some very large players, such as Channel Four, the BBC and Real Radio.

Stories from the Newsroom

Although figures tell part of the story, it's journalists themselves who can reveal the most about their working lives.

In an attempt to find out more about their personal experiences the author of this chapter conducted a small and very unscientific study. A short questionnaire was promoted via professional contacts and the website “www.journalism.co.uk”.

Contributors were anonymous and self-selecting and since the survey drew only forty-eight respondents it would not be wise to draw any broad conclusions. With that caveat, it was interesting to note that the numbers of journalists claiming to have had good and bad working experiences were roughly equal. More than 44% of journalists who took part said they found their jobs enjoyable, while around the same number said their roles were unrewarding. Perhaps more enlightening though, were the additional comments of those who were unhappy in their jobs:

“The cuts make me feel very unsecure [sic] about a future in journalism. The way that long-serving employees were treated also shows what little respect the multi-national corporations show their staff.” Another replied: “Although changes have not led to a decrease in my salary, I have not received the two pay rises I should have in my first year of work.”

One wrote simply that their current job had given them depression.

Of course such comments should come with a number of health warnings, not least that there is a natural tendency for people to use such an anonymous survey to gripe. What is interesting though is the dissonance between the intensity of these comments and the general satisfaction expressed by large numbers of the respondents. It’s a pattern that many editors and newsroom managers will recognise. Most newsrooms have a small but very noisy coterie of journalists whose dissatisfied voices can be heard regularly and frequently above the general hubbub of workplace debate.

One theory to explain the most extreme views is that the complainers might be older journalists who have experienced a longer and more sustained period of change. Although there were not enough respondents to this writer’s survey provide accurate statistical analysis, additional interviews conducted for this chapter suggest age and career length might be a factor. Former Chief Sub Editor Paul Stevens decided to take redundancy from the Bournemouth Echo a few years ago. He’s now retraining as a teacher and works at a local radio station. Like many print journalists of his generation, Paul built his much of his career within the same newspaper group and saw the transformation of his workplace.

“Those places are a lot softer now. I can’t imagine the newsroom I worked in to start with being replicated now. The technology didn’t change that. It was just something that happened. I just think it was something that happened across society. All work-places changed and newspapers are no different. Now they just look like banks and they’re very quiet. The thing I miss really ...there was a lot more pressure. We were used to working much harder and more intensely.”

(Interview with author, 2011)

In his Press Gazette interview, former Daily Star Editor Brian Hitchen (2012) was far more damning about the lives of those working in modern newsrooms, saying he felt “sorry for journalists today” likening them to “battery hens sipping Evian water and eating half-frozen sandwiches from the vending machine”.

Many young journalists however are comfortable with a working environment which is arguably greatly improved for being more open, fairer and less aggressive. They also accept more easily the constant technological and economic change which has unsettled many of their older counterparts. Recent graduate Lee Sibley secured his first job as a staff writer at a major magazine publisher. Within six months of starting work he was delighted to be called into the editor’s office and offered a pay rise. Just a few weeks later he was under threat of redundancy. He is sanguine about the likelihood of it happening again:

“When it comes to journalism it is a bit ‘new school’ versus ‘old school’. The new school, that’s me, we’re not afraid of innovation. It doesn’t matter what job I’ll be in, in 20 years time. I actually know a lot of people who’ve left long-term jobs to go freelance. In a strange way, in a job you don’t have security, but if you’re your own boss – if you don’t get paid it’s your problem. Working for yourself gives you some security. People my age are used to not living in the comfort zone. They want to get out and see the world. It’s not really an issue for us.” (Interview with author, 2012)

For younger and older journalists alike, the reality is that journalism has always been a challenging career. While new entrants may dream of high-profile reporting or presenting roles, many journalism jobs have always been somewhat repetitive

and unrewarding. In small news organisations there are naturally relatively few opportunities for promotion and journalists have been forced to move from job to job to climb the career ladder. The digital revolution and economic constraints have made the opportunities fewer, yet the evidence suggests that despite these limitations, large numbers of journalists of all ages remain perfectly happy and satisfied in their jobs.

It's all about quality not quantity

It might be asked then whether some other aspect of the lives of working journalists might account for those strident voices complaining about their careers and working conditions. A significant factor that affects any workers' job satisfaction is the confidence they have in the quality of the product or service they are providing. This issue was raised very clearly by journalists who replied to the survey for this chapter. One respondent wrote: "I do not consider many of the tasks I now do to be journalism." Another said: "Whenever the newsdesk receives a press release, no matter how small or insignificant, it 'must be webbed immediately, which means time is often taken away from writing and researching proper stories.'" It's a concern that former newspaper journalist Paul Stevens also recognises:

"As a layout sub for most of my life I can see the changes are going to affect how the papers look. They're going to be less creative. They're already less creative, because they have less well-paid, less experienced people producing them. I don't think I'm being disrespectful to the people who took mine and my colleagues' jobs. The readers know when something's good and isn't good. You can see it. There's sloppy writing and spelling. It isn't just quite as dynamic. It doesn't leap off the page at you in quite the way it used to." (Interview with author, 2011)

Paul, like many older, more experienced journalists partly blames their managers' recruitment policies for a perceived drop in the quality of their publications. In the Burson-Marsteller survey, 40% of the journalists interviewed said they believe the employment of less experienced, lower salaried journalists is the biggest threat to high quality journalism today.

Alongside the concern that their work is not as good as it should

be, many journalists are being forced to ask themselves whether in a wider sense they are falling short of the role which they should be playing in society. In their book “The Elements of Journalism” Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenthal (2007, Pg 53), remind us “People who gather news are not like other employees. They have a social obligation that can actually override their employers’ immediate interests at times, and yet this obligation is the source of their employers’ success”. For many journalists, such beliefs are central to their perception of their jobs and their working lives. Former local newspaper journalist Paul Stevens explains:

“I liked reporting on my community. It did have that symbiotic relationship. People expected their local paper to stick up for them when the chips were down.” (Interview with author, 2011)

It may be the difference between these wider professional expectations and the reality of the working world that provides the biggest clue to the arguably disproportionate job dissatisfaction experienced by some working journalists.

Managing expectations in the changing newsroom

Harold Shaver (1978), an Assistant Professor at Kansas State University published research which involved sending a questionnaire to more than four hundred relatively recent journalism and advertising graduates. Respondents were asked what had been satisfying and dissatisfying about each of their jobs since graduation.

Although Shaver admitted there were some flaws in the research, it suggests that in most respects journalists evaluate job satisfaction using the same criteria as other employees; low salary being the most important specific complaint. One significant difference for journalists though, was the importance they placed on the possibility of personal development and promotion. Shaver suggests this might be due to the weight given to professionalism in journalism training; something that may not be realistic in any busy news environment. “The importance of growth in the job is probably because journalism graduates are conscious of and conscientious about professionalism”.

So it could be argued that journalists, who are by their nature high achievers with a heightened scepticism about the world,

leave their training instilled with strong ethical standards and high expectations. Then faced with the reality of the workplace, some can become very rapidly disillusioned. Shaver suggests that two stakeholders should shoulder some responsibility for this. He argues it's up to employers to do more to foster happy satisfied staff, but suggests journalism educators should also consider spending more time giving students realistic expectations of the working lives ahead:

"If journalism graduates went into their first jobs aware of the reactions many people have to their own first jobs, the journalism graduates might be less likely to become quickly disenchanted and to change jobs." (Shaver 1978, pg 61)

Undoubtedly many journalism educators, former journalists themselves, would argue they do their utmost to give their students realistic expectations. It should be also be noted that young people aren't always inclined to take advice, however useful. Indeed, like many graduate journalists, Lee Sibley would acknowledge that in the excitement of securing a first job, realism can easily be overlooked.

"I was so excited to get this job, that before I started; I expected to forget that I was working and that my pay packet would be a side issue. That hasn't happened." (Interview with author, 2012)

A career for life?

If young people enter the industry with realistic expectations and solid skills it seems quite possible that they can still secure an enjoyable and rewarding first job, but what opportunities are there to build a long-term career and earn enough money to buy a home and support a family?

In many cases, young graduates' natural familiarity with technology, newly-acquired multimedia skills and insight into the requirements of young consumers can make them highly valued employees. If they keep those skills updated, employers may well feel it worthwhile to reward them and support their personal development.

The spread of new media also offers young journalists the

opportunity to bypass traditional career paths by starting their own businesses. Not only does this mean such entrepreneurial journalists can become employers of the future, but it arguably opens up more opportunities and widens participation in the profession. The NUJ's Michelle Stanistreet (Email to author, 16th April 2012) describes a recent encounter with a young reporter:

“At a recent NUJ event, Hannah Pool, a freelance journalist who worked at the Guardian for fourteen years, said the rise of new media had opened up exciting opportunities for young black and ethnic minority would-be journalists. She said, ‘One of the best things about modern technology is how it is breaking down the old boys’ club, brick by brick, Tweet by Tweet. It used to be that you had to have a mum or dad in the business to get your first by-line, now you can just set up a blog’.”

While many focus on the opportunities offered by new media, there is a small, but persistent chorus of voices arguing that the print media, although undergoing dramatic change, will continue and thrive. The Director of the Society of Editors, Bob Satchwell (2012) has written passionately on this subject in the book “What do we mean by local?” In a version reprinted in former newspaper editor Roy Greenslade's blog he writes:

“There is a future and it may not be just online. The World Wide Web is an ancient old hat; mobile on phones and tablets are the present. Someone is already working on next week and next month and we need to keep up with them.”

“We need trained communicators to ensure readers, viewers, listeners, surfers and, above all, editors know what is coming. The job cannot be left to the techies in the IT department. It's a job for journalists who will see the possibilities for themselves and for their audiences.” (2012)

The NUJ's Michelle Stanistreet believes that whatever future they are expecting, the most important challenge for young journalists is to ensure they're at the forefront of discussions about future of the industry; shaping their jobs and making sure employers are forced to listen to their voices.

“Young journalists need to be part of the debate as the industry finds itself in transition. That is why journalists, particularly in the digital age, should be able to act collectively and, critically, to stand up for journalistic principles and ethics, wherever the workplace and whatever the platform.” (Email to author, 16th April 2012)

In conclusion

Journalism is a unique profession, which despite the current turmoil, still offers a fascinating and exciting career for many bright young people. There will be those however who graduate, trained to the very highest ethical and professional standards, only to discover the money and time are not available to allow them to fulfil those ambitions. This disappointment may well be exacerbated by the pressures from a wider public debate, which is placing journalism under intense scrutiny and demanding ever higher professional standards, in an environment where that may be neither possible nor expected by employers. It's an inconsistency that offers challenges not only to working journalists, but to those who manage them and those who train them. There is a danger that some young graduates, who join the profession with the very best skills and intentions, may also be those who are also become most disenchanted and most tempted to leave.

“That doesn't mean though, that a journalistic training is worthless; far from it. Even though he has now left the newsroom, Paul Stevens has no regrets: “I wouldn't change a single minute of it. I'm still a professional journalist. I'm just not being paid to be a journalist. I've gone into radio now. I've found that my soft journalism skills are the best thing that I could have brought with me. I'm doing a commercial radio breakfast show now. I wouldn't be doing the job I'm doing now if I hadn't brought those skills with me.”

(Interview with author, 2011)

And new journalist Lee Sibley remains optimistic. He believes that in whatever form, employers will always want his skills:

“Actually I think the media at large is quite future-friendly. Journalists have been around for a long time and I think

they'll continue to be here. I don't think that's an issue. If people hear about something it needs to be qualified, not just gossip from Mildred next door. If it's qualified, it has context and is unbiased. That need will always be there." (Interview with author, 2012)

Challenging Questions

- Compare and contrast the working lives of journalists in the 1970s and the first decade of the 21st century. How were they trained? Where did they work? What technology did they use? In which decade would you most like to work?
- Write a profile of a journalist from the past or present you particularly admire. Consider what professional values this journalist brought/brings to their work; how they approach their assignments and what qualities in their work you find of particular interest.
- According to the former editor of the Daily Star, modern journalists are like "battery hens sipping Evian water and eating half-frozen sandwiches from the vending machine". Can this description of a modern newsroom be justified?
- Watch the 1976 film "All the President's Men" and the 2003 BBC television series "State of Play". Compare and contrast how these classic productions portray the working lives of journalists, their personal ethics and their relationships with their audience.

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