

Major survey of communication executives reveals cause for concern

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Introduction:

“Two days in the field is worth more than a year in a classroom,” wrote Kari Arnold, editor of the Country World News in Sulphur Spring, Texas. Ninety percent of the 767 mass communication and PR professionals surveyed believed essentially the same. That’s how many “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that university mass communication programs would be improved with a required professional internship. Only 2% disagreed. Their response to open-ended questions in a follow-up survey gave voice to their concerns.

“The more internships served, the better the student looks to a prospective employer,” wrote Suze Parker, president of Parker Communications Group of Overland Park, Kan. Cheryl Treleaven, executive vice president of HLB Communications Inc., adds, “It’s a must. Both for the student’s perspective and an employer’s. The fact is, employers know that new grads are a ‘project.’ But it’s a point of difference if they’ve had some exposure to the work that they’re looking to do. At least they’re not at ground zero.”

This was not the only question to which students’ future employers expressed strong preference for more practical hands-on training. In fact, media and PR executives felt strongly enough that most said they would be interested in hiring graduates from revolutionary work-study programs very much in conflict with AEJMC accreditation standards.

Study after study has shown a “gap” between the educational priorities of communication professionals and those of university professors. But while the gap has been identified and studied for more than four decades, many professionals, including most of those responding to the current survey, have seen no satisfactory reforms. But researchers such as Dickson and Brandon (2000)

have concluded that the gap is not very wide.

When Medsger (1996) tried to sound an alarm that university journalism education might be in jeopardy without substantial reform, her expansive study was attacked and derided by such academics as Reese (1999).

However, a series of much earlier studies by Harvey et al (1979, 1980, 1982) had led to similar conclusions. Summarized in the Editor & Publisher trade journal, Harvey and Smith (1982) warned that “60.8% of [newspaper and magazine] executives agreed that journalism training in American colleges and universities needed ‘major reforms’ or ‘need to be totally revamped.’ ... However, many of the executives said they had simply given up on university journalism education, and 57.1% of them showed at least some interest in starting or participating in an independent training program. ... Asked how they would react if a skilled journalism educator proposed to create a private [work-study] journalism institute for their respective corporations,” open-ended responses from across the country included: “We’d love it!” “We’re ready.” “Sounds fine.” “I would be pleased.” “An excellent idea.” “I would react favorably.” “Most positively.” “Love it.” “This would be mutually beneficial to us and the students.”

Harvey and Smith surmised, “Just one successful program might be enough to change the relationship between the journalism profession and journalism education forever.” But that was nearly 30 years ago, and nothing has happened to cause communication executives to look elsewhere for a substantial portion of their workforce. So, how upset are communication executives with university programs today? Do they agree that their differences with educators are minor, or are they still interested in bolting if a viable alternative is presented? To discover the answer to these questions is the purpose of this study.

Literature Review

Many studies have shown that mass media executives want their reporters to have knowledge and skills they feel university mass communication programs do not adequately provide. Lepre and Bleske (2005) summarized that the “current literature shows that there are, indeed, discrepancies between how journalism educators and journalism professionals think about the purpose of a college degree in journalism and about the skills or knowledge students...should have upon graduation.” Mass communication executives think journalism educators emphasize too much theory and would prefer an emphasis on practical skills (Lancaster, Katz and Cho, 1990). Lepre and Bleske, Du and Thornburg (2010) and others have referred to this phenomenon simply as “the gap.”

Dickson and Brandon (2000) stated that studies documenting this gap date back as long as 50 years. Educators have supported more highly such esoteric subjects as media law, media history, communications theory, media criticism, ethics, while professional journalists value skills courses relating to reporting, editing, design and technology more highly. But Dickson and Brandon and other researchers have concluded that while a gap exists, it is not particularly wide.

In their own research Lepre and Bleske focused on the gap between magazine editors and educators. In their study, educators rated 18 of 23 skills, courses and educational experiences higher than editors. The editors rated clerical skills, grades and creativity higher than educators, but the difference was statistically insignificant, as was the difference in the educator-editor ratings of media theory courses and interpersonal skills. They concluded: “From a practical sense, there is much here to comfort educators. ... There is agreement that writing, reporting, ad editing count. Editors appear to endorse as strongly as educators do those skills that lie at the core of most collegiate journalism programs. Many journalism programs also emphasize a strong liberal arts foundation, in addition to a journalism major, though educators may not be doing enough to explain to students why this foundation is so important and to explain to editors that a journalism education

is a well-rounded education.”

Medsger, the former chair of the Journalism Department at San Francisco State University and an experienced newspaper and broadcast journalist, took exception to this “all is well in academia” analysis. In a well-financed, yearlong study, involving three separate surveys by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, she came to several conclusions in her 181-page report regarding practices that she considered detrimental to the preparation of future journalists and, thus, jeopardizing the professional value of a journalism degree. She concluded that:

- There was a lack of significant real-world experience and journalism expertise among faculty.
- Accreditation and other academic pressures made the hiring of faculty with Ph.Ds a higher priority than hiring faculty with significant professional experience.
- The emphasis on accreditation was causing traditional scholarly research to be valued and rewarded over in-depth journalistic research in universities' hiring, tenure and promotion practices.
- Journalism courses were being replaced with generic communication courses.

Damning evidence she cited from the surveys included:

- While only 37% of journalism faculty thought a Ph.D should be required to teach in their department, two-thirds nevertheless had one.
- Among professional journalists with less than 12 years experience, 57% said their best journalism professors had extensive real-world news experience and no doctoral degree; 31% had significant professional experience plus a Ph.D; but very few of the best professors had a Ph.D with negligible experience.
- Young journalists without a journalism degree were doing as well or better than journalism graduates in terms of job satisfaction, income, winning prestigious

awards, and being promoted to managerial positions.

“If journalism education is to survive, it needs a close relationship between the practitioners and the teachers,” said Charles Overby, president of The Freedom Foundation, which supported the study.

The study, however, came under attack by academics such as Reese, who essentially accused Medsger and the Freedom Foundation as being part of a plot by the largest American newspaper chain, Gannett, “to insert itself in academia, diverting blame and shaping how future journalists are prepared,” which he considered inappropriate because journalism education needed “to preserve its value ... as part of broader academic reforms, modeling an intellectually independent integration of theory and practice, supporting not just a media pyramid, but also a press-literate public.” He questioned Medsger's objectivity, noting: “Although the report's findings, conclusions, and interpretations are said to be those of the author ... the strong endorsement of the report by Forum leaders and its wide dissemination at their expense suggests that the thrust of the report is consistent with the currently prevailing Forum view,” which, he added elsewhere, with its associated Media Studies Center, had “become the most aggressively high-profile organization involved in journalism education.”

While Reese's statistical analysis did raise important questions about Medsger's interpretation of some of her own data, Reese's personalized attack on the researcher, on Gannett and on the media-related non-profit organizations that Gannett has helped fund in and of itself provided support for some of the very concerns Medsger was voicing. Indeed, if her study had no academic merit whatsoever, the concerns expressed by Medsger as the alleged puppet of the largest American newspaper chain and one of the largest media conglomerates should still have concerned journalism educators.

While Medsger's study may have exaggerated the problem, the other studies seemed to minimize it. The other surveys have typically failed to ask questions that allowed communication executives to express the level of their frustration or whether they might, indeed, turn their backs on university mass communication programs if provided a viable alternative.

And Medsger's is not the only study that has raised questions as to the degree of the industry's disenfranchisement – regardless of whether media professionals prioritize courses, essential skills, and other isolated elements of journalism education only a little differently than educators. What would seem most important is how they evaluate universities' final product – their graduates.

In a series of studies, Harvey et al (1979, 1980, 1982) detected substantive overall dissatisfaction many years earlier. Haroldsen and Harvey (1979) explored the nature and depth of media executives' concerns about journalism education first among magazine executives. Then Harvey, Mills and Warnick (1980) found similar concerns among weekly and daily newspaper executives and began probing what alternatives the executives would prefer. The typical AEJMC-accredited curriculum with 25% journalism coursework was rated last among four options by newspaper executives – below even an intensive two-year program. Top rated among the options described was a two-year intensive training program followed by a one-year full-time apprenticeship, and a university program with 40% journalism coursework ranked second. But, as with the current research, Harvey (1980) also found that news executives were very willing to help improve university journalism programs by providing internships and other real-world experience and training.

The current study has aspects of a longitudinal study, although with admitted limitations. The '80s-era studies were conducted by mail; the current research by email. Consequently, the previous research, as expected, had a much higher return rate – 27% of the magazine executives and 34%

of the newspaper executives -- than the 3.5% rate achieved by email.

While the magazine and newspaper surveys of the '80s era and the current study do share many of the same questions, the current research also asked some questions not previously posed. And the previous studies did not include radio, cable, new media or public relations executives, as does the current research.

The first part of this report compares longitudinal responses by newspaper and magazine executives 30 years ago and today, and also compares them with today's broadcast and new media executives. The second and third parts of this report review results from questions not asked previously or not in the same way. Part 2 (and Table 2) focuses on internships and other experiential learning. And Part 3 (and Table 3) focuses on questions demonstrating the strength of executives' dissatisfaction and willingness to support radically different educational programs. Parts 2 and 3 review only current results, separated by newspaper, magazine, broadcast and new media executives, along with a total of all respondents, which includes public relations executives and unclassified respondents. Due to space limitations, however, we intend to contrast news and PR executives' responses more fully in a separate article.

Methods

A survey was sent to 22,094 representatives of mass communications organizations which included print, television, and radio media executives as well as public relations and "new media" executives. To survey our population, executives were contacted by email through the *Qualtrics* survey research program. The *Qualtrics* program sends each respondent an introductory letter and email with an embedded link to our survey. Surveys were emailed to members of six media databases: EasyMedalist.com, Data-Aide.com, Contacts on Tap, Congress.org, Editor & Publisher, and the Expedite email service. Three follow-up emails were sent after our initial contact. The

Qualtrics survey research program prevents duplicate emails from multiple lists and prevents any respondent from answering more than once.

Survey Content. Respondents were asked a total of 55 questions to assess the importance of various education, training and experience benchmarks needed to become an effective communications industry employee. Specifically, respondents were asked to react to statements questioning whether students need more education, training and experience with specific job skills, and how certain university reforms might affect the quality of graduates. Respondents used Likert-like graded preference scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree) to express their opinions. In the 2009-10 survey, 1 represented “Strongly Agree” and 5 represented “Strongly Disagree.” In the 1980s-era research, that was reversed, with 5 representing “Strongly Agree.” In Table 1, the 2009-10 results have been inverted to match that of the 1980s-era surveys. See <http://Virtual-University.us> and go to the RESEARCH link for a copy of the survey and complete results. In a follow-up the survey, respondents who provided contact information were given the opportunity to answer open-ended questions assessing the quality of academic mass communication programs and suggest ideas for improvement.

Survey Population. Respondents were 767 media and public relations executives representing an overall response rate of 3.5%. Of the respondents 263 identified themselves as print media executives (34%); 154 broadcast, cable or new media executives (20%); and 258 as public relations executives (34%). Ninety-two respondents did not categorize themselves in any category (12%). In written comments, some news media respondents indicated that their organizations owned more than one type of media, and our question would only allow a single response, so they did not respond to that question at all. The PR category indicated that respondents belonged to a “PR organization.” Some respondents who work in PR for a corporation like Wal-Mart did not feel that described them, since Wal-Mart is not a PR organization. So, they did

not select any response. Of those respondents identifying themselves as print media executives, 63 indicated they worked for a daily newspaper organization, 165 for a weekly news organization, and 35 for a magazine or “other” print media. Of those executives identifying themselves with broadcast media, 80 worked in television or cable and 45 in radio. Twenty-nine respondents identified themselves as members of a new media organization. In all three tables the column reporting total response includes both public relations respondents and the unidentified respondents. That did not seem to skew the results in most cases. We also did not separate out in this report the responses of “Other Print Media.” We considered merging them with Magazine Organizations, but since we are comparing current results with the 1979 survey of magazine editors, we did not want to pollute the 2009-10 sampling of magazine editors.

Limitations. With a survey population of over 22,000 and responses over 750, we are pleased with the large N of our study. A potential limitation comes from the relatively low response rate that may reflect a response bias. While it is well documented that social scientists have been experiencing decreasing response rates, the response rates of this study are below even those recently documented (Keeter et al, 2006). Recent research suggests that low response rates do not bias a sample, and studies with low response rates are producing the same results as surveys taken years earlier when response rates were higher (Keeter et al, 2006). The longitudinal portion of this study, as well, demonstrates great consistency.

Findings across Time and Media

Table 1 shows the longitudinal and cross-media results for questions relating to skills and experiences that mass communication students might be provided before graduation. These have been placed in highest to lowest preferences among all respondents in the 2009-10 survey. The consistency across time and across media is remarkable. The need for more training in basic spelling

and grammar was rated among the highest by all categories of respondents in 1979-80 and in 2009-10. In fact, the mean response by all 2009-10 respondents exactly matched the newspaper executives' three decades earlier at 4.54. While the mean for magazine editors in 1979 was lower, at 4.19, it was still their second-highest-rated item. Otherwise, there was very little variance among categories across time and media.

Need for basic skills

“Spelling and grammar are atrocious,” wrote Wick Allison, editor/publisher of D Magazine in Dallas.

“I am appalled at students’ poor writing skills. The majority, in my experience, do not use correct sentence structure and punctuation; nor are many able to effectively and succinctly communicate core ideas in writing,” wrote Parker, the Parker Communications Group president. “Mass comm programs at universities should focus heavily on making certain that communications students’ writing skills are strong.”

Mike Heronemus, managing editor of the Junction City (Kan.) Daily Union, added: “Many of the college grads I have hired cannot write simple, clear sentences. They ramble in their writing. Uses of prepositional phrases, passive voice, misplacement of modifiers and improper pronoun/antecedent agreement are very frustrating.... Many college grads often misuse words or don’t question what they have heard. ... My latest example was when a reporter wrote that some engineers had laid down a layer of ‘purple’ soil on an old landfill site. ... My questioning of the engineer firm revealed they had put down a layer of impervious soil (clay).”

<<Insert Table 1>>

Table 1 - Comparisons across Time & Media

Overall 2009-10 Ranking	PROMPT	2009-10 TOTAL All respondents*	1980 Newspaper Executives	2009-10 Newspaper Executives	1979 Magazine Executives	2009-10 Magazine Executives	2009-10 Broadcast News Execs	2009-10 New Media News Executives
*This includes PR, Other Print Media and Uncategorized Respondents not reported here separately.								
1	Journalism students need more training in basic grammar and spelling.	4.54	4.54	4.53	4.19	4.43	4.58	4.66
2	Mass Communication education would be improved with a required professional internship.	4.53	3.92	4.46	4.01	4.53	4.58	4.55
3	J-students need more experience in gathering information from a variety of sources for in-depth stories.	4.45	4.04	4.57	4.22	4.47	4.52	4.48
4	J-students need more experience in basic reporting and interviewing.	4.39	4.16	4.48	3.81	4.00	4.52	4.38
4	J-students need more training in copy editing	4.39	3.94	4.38	4.13	4.67	4.24	4.59
6	J-students need more experience in writing basic news stories.	4.35	3.94	4.37	3.43	4.27	4.5	4.41
7	Mass Communication students need more experience writing in-depth stories.	4.34	3.76	4.44	4.2	4.4	4.18	4.21
8	Mass Communication students need more experience in writing analytical stories.	4.31	3.6	4.3	4.09	4.33	4.16	4.28
9	Mass Communication education would be improved with more practical mass communication classes and fewer theory classes.	4.1	3.66	4.22	3.61	4.13	4.11	3.97
10	Mass Communication students need more experience in writing technical stories concerning science, economics or politics.	4.08	3.52	4.08	3.78	4	4.01	4.21
11	Mass Communication students need more training in new media technology that students may need to know in the future even if that's not their field immediately after graduation.	4.08	NA	4.03	NA	4.2	4.18	4.34
12	Mass Communication students need more training in note-taking skills.	4.03	3.27	4.11	3.42	3.93	3.98	4.38
13	Mass Communication education would be improved with general education classwork to include more research and writing assignments.	3.99	3.82	3.96	4.12	4.13	3.84	3.86
14	Mass Communication education would be improved with more laboratory mass communication experience.	3.89	3.73	3.91	3.58	3.93	4.04	4.03
15	Mass Communication students need more training in industry-specific computer skills such as desktop publishing, audio-video editing, etc.	3.86	NA	3.9	NA	4	4.02	4.21

16	Mass Communication students need more training in other industry-specific technology skills such use of digital cameras, radio and TV equipment.	3.79	NA	3.92	NA	3.93	4.12	3.79
17	Mass Communication students need more training in photography.	3.7	3.4	4.03	3.08	3.6	3.71	3.59
18	Mass Communication students need more training in layout design.	3.67	3.56	3.91	3.44	4	3.47	3.66
19	Mass Communication students need more experience in broadcast program production skills.	3.59	NA	3.42	NA	3.33	4.11	3.76
20	Mass Communication students need more experience in live newscast production and performance skills.	3.58	NA	3.42	NA	3.4	4.26	3.76
21	Mass Communication students need more training in general computer skills.	3.38	NA	3.42	NA	3.33	3.48	4.14
22	Mass Communication students need more training in typing skills.	3.36	3.17	3.36	3.18	3.47	3.5	3.62

The need for a professional internship received the second-highest mean response in 2009-10 but the sixth-highest for 1980 newspaper executives and seventh-highest among 1979 magazine executives, although still with a relatively high mean. It was considered important 30 years ago, and responses to this question and others underscore that communication executives feel it is even more vital today.

The need for more experience in gathering information from a variety of sources for in-depth stories with a variety of sources rated No. 3, with a mean of 4.45 in 2009-10. While the mean was lower, at 4.04, it was also the third-highest item for 1980 newspaper executives, and, at 4.22, the second-highest for magazine executives in 1979. And, again, there was not much variance across media in the latest study.

Basic reporting, interviewing skills

Recent respondents gave the need for more experience in basic reporting and interviewing the fourth-highest mean response at 4.39. At 4.16 it was No. 2 for 1980 newspaper editors, and at 4.22 it was No. 1 for 1979 magazine executives.

Leslie O'Donnell, editor of the Londonderry Times, Nutfield News and Tri-Town Times in New Hampshire, summed up most of the top concerns of the news executives. "Make sure your graduates can actually write a coherent sentence, figure out what the lead is, figure out what the most important story is coming out of a meeting, and realize the importance of multiple sources," she wrote.

Tied for No. 4 in the current study was more training in copy editing at 4.39. The 1980 newspaper editors and the 1979 magazine executives also rated it No. 4, although with a lower mean response.

No. 6 in 2009-10 was the need for mass communication students to have more experience writing basic news stories, with a mean of 4.35. It was tied for No. 4 for 1980 newspaper executives and much lower at No. 13 by 1979 magazine executives, perhaps feeling that anyone wanting to work for a magazine must have skills far beyond the “basic” level.

More in-depth, analytical writing

No. 7 in 2009-10 was writing (as opposed to reporting) in-depth stories, with an overall mean of 4.34. It was No. 8 for 1980 newspaper executives (3.76 mean) and No. 3 for 1979 magazine executives (4.2 mean). Magazine executives in 2009-10 also ranked it higher, at No. 5 (4.4 mean), indicating that magazine executives from both eras recognized the need for employees who can report and write in-depth stories more typical of their medium.

Experience writing analytical stories ranked No. 8 overall in 2009-10 (4.31 mean) – somewhat higher than 1980 newspaper executives at No. 11 (3.6 mean) but lower than 1979 magazine executives at No. 6 (4.09 mean), which matched, however, the ranking by the 2009-10 magazine executives (4.33 mean). Again this reflects the more common use of analytical stories in magazines.

The ninth most popular response in 2009-10 (4.1 mean) was to have fewer theory and more practical courses. The earlier newspaper and magazine executives both ranked that one notch lower at No. 10 (3.66 and 3.61 mean, respectively).

“Universities tend to stress ‘big questions’ like freedom of speech and the Constitution, but what I really need is someone who’s ready to cover stories and anchor newscasts,” wrote Herb Trix, news director for WVIK News in Rock Island, Ill. “Practical experience should be emphasized.

Someone well-versed in the current scholarship will not help us cover stories and do newscasts.”

And No. 10 in the current study, with a mean response of 4.08, was more experience writing technical stories concerning science, economics or politics. The 1980 newspaper executives ranked it lower at No. 13 (3.52 mean), while 1979 magazine executives ranked it slightly higher at No. 9 (3.61 mean).

Need for cross-training, new media skills

The 2009-10 survey added some prompts not included in the 1980s era. Ranked No. 11 overall (4.08 mean) was training in new media technology. New media executives ranked it slightly higher at No. 8 (4.34 mean) for obvious reasons. But many print media executives also recognized the importance of students receiving cross-media training as media converge onto the Internet and digital technology makes most news reporting multimedia in nature.

“Recently, I attended a training seminar presented by a University of Utah professor who had developed a course in convergence. The students did stories and presented them in four formats – print, web, audio, video. That’s an example of colleges teaching things kids need to know when they get into the working world,” wrote Suzanne Dean, publisher of the Sanpete (Utah) Messenger. “Assimilate the convergence trend. Every kid needs to know how to cover news (and features); write for print and broadcast; ... shoot photos with an SLR digital camera; lay out pages in InDesign, including writing headlines; touch up and scale photos in Photoshop; create a Web site; integrate Web content with social-networking sites like Twitter and YouTube; gather and edit audio; and gather and edit video.”

Reginald Davis, assistant managing editor of the ABA Journal: The Lawyer’s Magazine,

agreed: “Students need training in reporting and writing, but for blogs, video and audio, and they need to learn the software for editing video and audio. Work in investigations and enterprise needs to be emphasized as the way to distinguish oneself in a world competing with untrained bloggers.”

Industry-specific skills not among highest priorities

Training in industry-specific computer skills, such as desktop publishing or audio-video editing, was ranked No. 15 overall (3.86 mean). New media executives ranked it higher at No. 10 (4.21 mean). And new media executives also thought more general computer training was important, ranking that at No. 13 (4.14 mean), while the overall ranking was 21 (3.38 mean).

Only one industry-specific item made the top 10 by broadcast executives. Broadcasters ranked more experience in newscast production and performance skills No. 6 (4.26 mean), compared to the overall ranking of No. 20 (3.58 mean). But enhanced training in industry-specific technology, such as cameras and broadcasting equipment, was ranked only No. 11 by broadcast executives (16th by all respondents). And more broadcast production training was only No. 12 by broadcast executives (No. 19 overall). Besides newscast and performance, broadcast executives seem to recognize interviewing, reporting and writing skills as more important than technical skills.

Perhaps more surprising was the relatively little variance between the different media in the current study, even with the industry-specific questions added. Among the responses for the highest 10 ranked items overall, the greatest variance from the overall mean was .28, with magazine executives seeing the greatest need for increased copy editing training, and broadcast executives the least. Among the other top 10 items, the greatest variance from mean was only .16, with broadcast executives rating the need for greater experience writing in-depth and analytical stories lower than the text-dominant media executives, especially magazine executives.

Table 2 - Support for Practical Skills & Internships

Item Number	Simply respond by indicating how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.	Grand Total (All respondents, including PR executives)									
		Newspaper organizations		Magazine organizations		Broadcast organizations		"New media" organizations (Internet...)			
		Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree
23	University mass communication graduates are well prepared to handle a professional position in your organization.	22%	39%	26%	33%	13%	67%	14%	52%	17%	52%
24	Recent university mass communication graduates are better prepared than mass communication graduates 10 years ago.	17%	37%	17%	40%	0%	60%	17%	45%	17%	34%
25	Mass communication students need more hands-on experience.	89%	1%	96%	0%	100%	0%	90%	4%	93%	0%
26	Mass communication education would be improved with a required professional internship.	90%	2%	90%	2%	85%	8%	93%	2%	90%	0%
27	Every mass communication student should be required to serve a professional internship of at least 4 months.	76%	6%	73%	8%	73%	13%	79%	5%	71%	7%
28	Every mass communication student should be required to serve a professional internship of at least 6 months.	39%	18%	34%	21%	40%	20%	41%	14%	38%	17%
29	Every mass communication student should be required to serve a professional internship of at least 9 months.	19%	35%	19%	37%	20%	40%	20%	31%	31%	40%
30	Every mass communication student should serve multiple internships in different media.	31%	24%	20%	35%	36%	29%	33%	22%	54%	29%
31	University mass communication students need a broad, general education in addition to a mass communication degree.	79%	5%	87%	4%	87%	7%	87%	4%	59%	21%
32	University mass communication students should have one or more content specializations such as political science, economics, fine arts, etc.	50%	17%	50%	18%	53%	33%	50%	15%	48%	31%
33	Our mass communication organization does or is willing to provide UNPAID internships.	74%	20%	82%	18%	80%	20%	93%	7%	61%	39%
34	Our mass communication organization does or is willing to provide PAID internships.	45%	49%	49%	51%	40%	60%	27%	73%	48%	52%
		767*		217		15		125		29	
		100.00%		28.29% of total		1.96% of total		16.30% of total		3.78% of total	

*This includes PR, Other Print Media and Uncategorized Respondents not reported here separately.

<<Insert Table 2>>

Support for Practical Skills, Hands-On Training

At this point in the current study, communications executives were asked to respond to statements reflecting the degree of their dissatisfaction. And in so doing, they demonstrated a greater variance in their opinions. Also starting at this point of the study the questions were different than those used in the '80s-era studies, so no direct longitudinal comparisons can be made. Tables 2 and 3 have been simplified to show just the percentage of combined respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with a statement and the percentage of those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. Those respondents who were neutral or undecided are not shown in these tables.

Graduates prepared for entry-level job?

To Statement 23, "University mass communication graduates are well prepared to handle a professional position in your organization," all media categories disagreed with the statement, but for magazine executives it was 67%-13%, while for newspaper executives it was only 33%-26%. The overall response, including PR executives, was 39%-22%.

To Statement 24 that recent graduates "are better prepared than ... 10 years ago," all categories again disagreed with the statement but with a range of 34%-17% for new media executives to 60%-0% for magazine executives. The overall response was 37%-17%. Responses to Statements 23 and 24 represent a discouraging report card for universities dedicated to improving their performance. But executives clearly feel that educators have failed to respond adequately to decades of industry input.

Nearly unanimous about hands-on experience, internships

There was great consistency in the responses to Statement 25 that students need “more hands-on experience,” 89%-1% overall. Newspaper executives agreed 96%-0%, magazine executives 100%-0%, broadcast executives 90%-4% and new media executives 93%-0%. The responses were similarly consistent in favor of a “required professional internship” -- Statement 26 -- with a 90%-2% overall landslide vote.

“When I hire someone, I don’t care about which college they attended or which degree they earned,” said Trix, the WVIK news director. “What matters are their resume, aircheck, and writing samples.”

Randy Arrington, editor/general manager of the Page-Shenandoah Newspaper Corp. in Virginia, suggested: “Offer as much ‘real world’ experience as possible. Those who have done internships or worked at the student newspaper/radio station/TV station will always have an advantage over those who haven’t done these things.”

And Treleaven of HLB Communications added: “The more grounded in real-world application, the better. It’s not all glitz and glamour. Offer hands-on work in a studio, both on-camera and behind the camera, editing and production, etc. Require internships! That exposure helps students get a more realistic picture of what it means to work in the industry. Understand the integration of social media into the distribution of news and information. ... Create your own blog, integrate with your Twitter account, create a YouTube video or series.”

The survey asked several additional questions about internships to clarify executives’ preferences. Overall, executives agreed with Statement 27 76%-6% that students should serve a

professional internship of at least 4 months in duration. For “at least 6 months,” executives agreed 39%-18%, and for “at least 9 months” support dropped to only 19%, with 35% opposed (Statements 28 and 29, respectively). To Statement 30 that students should serve multiple internships in different media, the response was split. The executives overall supported the idea 31%-23%, but with 46% neutral or undecided. The strongest support came from convergence media, 54%-29%, while the only group that opposed the statement was newspaper executives, 35%-20% against. Not shown in the table, however, is that daily newspaper executives slightly favored the statement (27%-26%), while weekly newspaper executives strongly opposed it (39%-18%).

Still need broad, general education?

In the face of all the push for practical, hands-on education, however, we asked executives to respond to Statement 31 that mass comm students need a “broad, general education,” to which respondents agreed 79%-5%. Respondents were less certain whether students should have a content specialization, such as political science or economics, but supported Statement 32 50%-17%. However, frequent comments to the follow-up, open-ended questionnaire suggests that the executives may have some specific work goals in mind when they think of general education.

“Make sure students have a good grounding in political science so when they get sent to their first city council meeting and don’t have the slightest what’s going on, they at least have the savvy to know what questions to ask the city manager or mayor the next day,” wrote the Sanpete (Utah) Messenger Publisher Dean.

Overall, 74% of the executives indicated they do or are willing to provide unpaid internships, including 82% of newspaper executives, 80% of magazine executives, 93% of broadcast executives and 61% of new media executives. About 45% of all executives said they would provide paid

Table 3 - Support for Radical Change

Item Number	Simply respond by indicating how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements.	Grand Total (All respondents, including PR executives)									
		Newspaper organizations		Magazine & Other Print Media		Broadcast organizations		"New media" organizations (Internet...)			
		Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Strongly Agree/Agree	Strongly Disagree/Disagree
35	If political science graduates took one intensive journalism skills course and served a professional internship, I would be just as likely to hire them as a mass communication graduate.	38%	32%	51%	22%	47%	20%	40%	33%	43%	32%
36	If liberal arts graduates took one intensive journalism skills course and served a professional internship, I would be just as likely to hire them as a mass communication graduate.	40%	31%	50%	19%	33%	33%	38%	32%	48%	38%
37	If math or science graduates took one intensive journalism skills course and served a professional internship, I would be just as likely to hire them as a mass communication graduate.	26%	46%	38%	33%	33%	40%	26%	43%	24%	52%
38	University mass communication education needs to be totally revamped.	33%	23%	35%	22%	40%	27%	41%	20%	55%	17%
39	University mass communication education needs only minor reforms.	34%	27%	36%	31%	20%	40%	35%	33%	25%	43%
40	University mass communication education should require at least 40% mass communication coursework rather than the 25% most departments now require.	48%	11%	47%	15%	50%	29%	53%	11%	64%	0%
41	University mass communication education would do a better job by providing one year of general education, two years of intensive mass communication training, and a one-year professional apprenticeship.	53%	11%	61%	8%	73%	13%	54%	11%	45%	21%
42	I would be interested in hiring mass communication graduates as yearlong apprentices at lower pay while we help complete their professional training and consider whether to offer a permanent position.	48%	2000%	55%	18%	73%	0%	43%	28%	45%	28%
43	If a university and a news organization teamed up to launch a 4-year work-study apprenticeship program where students would work about 6 hours a day as apprentices and then study 6 hours a day using journalism as a general education learning method, as well as a set of professional skills, I would be interested in hiring graduates from such program.	63%	9%	72%	4%	86%	7%	60%	13%	72%	7%
		767*		217		15		125		29	
		100.00%		28.29% of total		1.96% of total		16.30% of total		3.78% of total	

*This includes PR, Other Print Media and Uncategorized Respondents not reported here separately.

internships to help students gain the practical experience they need, including 49% of newspaper executives, 51% magazine executives, 60% broadcast executives and 48% new media. Not shown in Table 2 is that among newspaper executives 65% of the daily newspaper executives will provide paid internships, whereas only 43% of weekly newspaper executives will.

<<Insert Table 3>>

Support for Radical Change

The current study took a slightly different approach than with the 1980s-era research in examining how radical a change media executives might support. In response to open-ended questions in 1979-80, some media executives made statements like, "I would rather hire a math graduate than a journalism graduate." So, in this study we decided to test the support for such a statement. Are media executives so unhappy with mass comm graduates that they would just as soon hire graduates from other programs?

Statement 35 in Table 3 states, "If political science graduates took one intensive journalism skills course and served a professional internship, I would be just as likely to hire them as a mass communication graduate." Overall, 38% of the respondents agreed, with 32% disagreeing. But newspaper and magazine executives showed stronger support -- 51%-22% and 47%-20%, respectively. It is difficult to interpret the high number of neutral or undecided respondents to this statement, but it cannot be good for journalism education that in addition to the 38% who just as soon hire a political science graduate that 30% would not discount that option. There was also a large percentage neutral respondents for the subsequent two statements.

Employers supported Statement 36 that they might hire liberal arts graduates who take one

intensive course and an internship, with respondents overall agreeing 40%-31%, with support from newspaper executives holding at 50%-19%. Support did drop off with Statement 37 that they would, indeed, just as soon hire “math or science graduates.” That statement was opposed overall, 46%-26%, but newspaper executives actually did favor the statement 38%-33%.

“We do not consider a communications/journalism degree an important part of an applicant’s background,” wrote Jack Sanders, executive editor of the Ridgefield (Conn.) Press. “Instead we look for knowledge of the community, writing skills, common sense, etc.”

Jon James, news director for WIBW TV 13 in Topeka, Kan., agreed. “Years ago a friend of mine told me he would prefer to hire someone with a degree outside journalism because he could teach that person the things he/she would need to be a good television reporter. I cannot disagree.”

Mass comm education needs total revamp?

To Statement 38 that “mass communication education needs to be totally revamped,” respondents agreed 33%-23%, but this is one of the few questions where PR executives had an obvious impact. Support for the statement by every news media category was greater than the overall average (with PR): 35%-22% for newspapers, 40%-27% magazines, 41%-20% broadcasting, and 55%-17% new media. It should be noted, however, that respondents then contradicted themselves somewhat by supporting Statement 39 that “mass communication education needs only minor reforms” – 34%-27% overall. However, they were split. Newspaper and broadcast executives supported the statement 36%-31% and 35%-33%, respectively, while magazine and new media executives opposed it 40%-20% and 43%-25%, respectively.

Support grew, however, as the survey asked about specific reforms – some of them quite

drastic. Executives supported 48%-11% Statement 40 that mass communication coursework should be increased to “at least 40%” of all coursework, as opposed to the 25% that most programs now require, and this time the support was fairly consistent across all categories.

Support greater for more radical alternatives

Support was greater for much more radical proposals, such as “one year of general education, two years of intensive mass communication training, and a one-year professional apprenticeship” (Statement 41), with executives agreeing 53%-11% overall, but even greater among most news media, with 61%-8% newspapers, 73%-13% magazines, 54%-11% broadcasting, and 45%-21% new media.

Respondents also supported Statement 42: “I would be interested in hiring mass communication graduates as yearlong apprentices at lower pay while we help complete their professional training and consider whether to offer a permanent position.” Overall, they favored it 48%-20%, with newspaper and magazine executives voicing greatest support, 55%-18% and 73%-0%, respectively.

The strongest support came for perhaps the most radical change of all, Statement 43 -- “a 4-year work-study apprenticeship program where students would work about 6 hours a day as apprentices and then study 6 hours a day using journalism as a general education learning method, as well as a set of professional skills.” Overall, respondents interested in hiring graduates from such a program outpolled those opposed 63%-9%, including 72%-4% for newspaper executives, 86%-7% magazines, 60%-13% broadcasting and 72%-7% new media.

Discussion

- 1) PRIORITIES COMPARED ACROSS TIME, MEDIA (Table 2): Responses to the longitudinal portion of the survey demonstrated great consistency in ranked priorities, although not always in the mean response, between the '80s-era communication executives and those surveyed in 2009-10. Executives in 1979-80 consistently gave lower scores to each of the instructional and experiential aspects of university education, but the ranking of the top 10 out of 22 available was very close. The top 10 items overall for communication executives in 2009-10 did not vary more than three spots in comparison with 1980 newspaper executives and 1979 magazine executives, with only three exceptions.

The main exception was the increased urgency expressed for professional internships, which rose from sixth place for the earlier newspaper executives and seventh place for the earlier magazine executives to second overall in 2009-10. The only other two exceptions where rankings varied more than three spots seemed to reflect the special needs of magazine executives. While the overall response by 2009-10 executives made the need for more training in writing basic news stories No. 6 in their list of priorities, and it was No. 4 for 1980 newspaper executives, the 1979 magazine executives ranked it only No. 13. However, that seems to reflect that magazine writing would be considered by magazine executives to be beyond the "basic" level, as exemplified also by their higher ranking of the No. 7 item in the 2009-10 survey – writing in-depth stories, which the 1979 executives ranked No. 3. The 2009-10 magazine executives also ranked it slightly higher than their colleagues at No. 5.

Similar consistency was seen comparing the cross-media responses of the 2009-10 newspaper, magazine, broadcast and new media executives. For the top 10 items overall,

not one group varied from the overall mean by more than .28 on the 5-point scale. Indeed, the second-highest variance from the overall mean was only .16, and the rest were even less. In short, the top 10 priorities emphasized practical over theoretical; basic spelling and grammar; news gathering; and writing, writing and more writing:

- Basic spelling and grammar.
- Professional internship.
- In-depth reporting.
- Basic reporting.
- Copy editing.
- Writing basic news stories.
- Writing in-depth stories.
- Writing analytical stories.
- More practical, fewer theoretical courses.
- Writing technical stories in science, economics and politics.

2) SUPPORT FOR PRACTICAL SKILLS & INTERNSHIPS (Table 2): The consistency of responses shown in Table 1 demonstrates areas that university journalism programs have not adequately addressed over the past 30 years. In the second part of the survey, the vast majority of those expressing an opinion (37%-17%) don't think the situation has improved over the past 10 years. The concerns expressed in the 1980s-era surveys still persisted in 2010. The consistency of responses over time not only confirms the reliability of the data but the seriousness and strength of the executives' opinions. A large majority of those who expressed an opinion (39%-22%) don't believe university graduates are ready to go to work

for their respective organizations. And there was very strong, in some cases nearly unanimous support across all media for more practical, hands-on instruction.

Communication executives:

- Almost unanimously (89%-2%) demand more hands-on experience for their future employees.
- Almost unanimously seem to feel internships are a way to compensate for inadequate classroom instruction (90%-2%).
- Strong support (76%-6%) internships of at least 4 months and, by more than a 2:1 ratio (39%-18%), internships of at least 6 months.
- Support (31%-24%) multiple internships in different media. This ratio was higher among broadcast and new media respondents (33%-22% and 54%-29% respectively).
- In an apparent contradiction still want students to receive a “broad, general education” (79%-5%) and one or more specializations, such as political science (50%-17%). However, other responses, including open-ended comments, seemed to suggest that their vision of a broad, general education still demands more professional orientation. For example, while most journalism students take one or more political science courses, editors complain that they don’t have a clue as to how to cover a city council meeting. In other words, most political science courses don’t adequately cover the topics a beginning reporter needs to know – in particular local government.

3) SUPPORT FOR RADICAL CHANGE (Table 3): The most troubling part of this study from the perspective of educators must be the almost desperate preference for anything that is NOT associated with the status quo. In other words, it almost seems like communication executives are saying, “Anything would be better than what we have now.” In this survey the communications executives supported:

- 48%-11% a program with “at least 40%” mass communication coursework.
- 53%-11% one year of general education, followed by two years of intensive communication training, followed by a one-year apprenticeship.
- 48%-20% a culminating yearlong, lower-salary probationary apprenticeship.
- 63%-9% a four-year work-study apprenticeship.

If these were not the prospective employers of still a large portion of universities’ graduates, it would not be so important, but they are. And they are concerned with more than just isolated skill sets, but with the entire approach of university education and with the final results. Some educators may suggest that with the dramatic changes in the media landscape we no longer have to be concerned with the needs and, therefore, the opinions of mass media executives. But it should be noted that in almost every case in the current survey new media and public relations executives agreed with executives of the traditional news media. New media and PR are two fields of communication that are not going to diminish any time soon. Therefore, the results of this study should not be written off as irrelevant to the future of university instruction. We will review the results of the survey of the PR executives more fully in a separate report.

- 4) In a post-modernist era when the value of existing institutions is being increasingly questioned; in a period of prolonged economic crisis, especially in the communications industry, when interns may be of increased value; in the Digital Age when work-study students could easily access a virtual classroom via the Internet; and at a time when the University of Phoenix, with a head count of about 500,000 undergraduate and graduate students, has demonstrated that a publicly traded corporation can successfully challenge established institutions, this study suggests that universities should recognize a very real threat to current programs by more trade school-like competitors.

Recommendations

- 1) While communications executives appear ready to support many alternative forms of education, what are some alternatives for maintaining a system closer to what now exists and still satisfy students' future employers? In the '80s era and in the current survey, executives have repeatedly suggested the same formula for how to help students become better writers. John Samerjan, vice president of public affairs and communications with the New Jersey Sports & Exposition Authority, voices it again: "Have them write, write, write." In two experimental studies by Haroldsen and Harvey (1982), it was shown that lecture and objective quizzes could be replaced by independent research and writing with no significant increase in grading time and with no adverse impact on final scores, based on objective final tests. In the current study, with a mean score of 3.99 and by a margin of 51%-18%, media executives agreed that one way to improve students' skills is to require more research and writing in general education coursework. The last "radical proposal" that executives supported 63%-9% was not just a work-study approach. It also called for journalism to be

used as a “learning method” in general education.

- 2) While negotiating for increased research, writing and/or other communication requirements in general education courses may be problematic, increasing their use in the mass communication theory and overview courses should not be. At KIMEP University the Journalism and Mass Communication faculty is discussing which practical, hands-on skills should be added to the learning objectives of the various theory and overview courses. Despite some of these courses exceeding 50 students, Harvey’s main assessment tools in such courses are student presentation and writing assignments. In the Mass Media & Society course, for example, students take notes and write a news story weekly about the presentations made by the professor and by students, as if the presentations had been made at a conference on campus. In that lower-level course, students make team presentations. In higher-level courses, students make individual presentations. In his general education Introduction to Public Relations course with up to 50 enrollment, students take notes and write a press release each week as if the presentations were pre-interviews for an upcoming conference. In his large-enrollment International Journalism course, the students’ make blog entries about current news relating to international communications. In the 1982 experiment, Harvey used a content sampling method now commonly used by professional testing firms in order to reduce his grading time, making it comparable to the grading of quizzes and other objective tests. The argument is that since a quiz only samples the information in one’s memory – never asking for all the information accumulated there – it is just as valid to sample a student’s essay or story. Harvey has developed a detailed critique sheet so as he scans a student’s story, if he sees a problem in a student’s lead, for example, he can just write, “#1,” pointing the student to the critique sheet explanation of how

a lead should be written and a reference to his textbook where the student can read a more detailed explanation and see good examples. If the problem is in attribution, the code is #2B; in punctuation of a quote, #3E; etc. In this way, if he is in a hurry and has 50 papers to grade, he can limit himself to 30 seconds per paper, sample the content, and be done in half an hour. Since the students have 10-20 papers per semester, they get plenty of feedback overall.

- 3) Dr. Clayton Christensen (2006 and with API, 2008), the expert in the impact of “disruptive technologies,” has warned the newspaper industry, public education, and other industries and institutions that if they think they can continue doing business as usual in the face of new technology, they will suffer severe consequences. But if they embrace those technologies, they can ride them to unheard-of achievement. What will university education be like in 2050, and how do we get there from here? With the advent of more powerful and inexpensive Web-conferencing and other Web tools, as well as cheaper and more portable computers to access the Internet, the possibility of an effective work-study program may now be feasible.
- 4) While this may not be politically acceptable at the bachelor’s level, how about at the master’s level? Students having trouble finding a full-time position after achieving their B.A. may be inclined to enroll in a practical work-study master’s degree. And, in the process, the communications industry might begin developing a culture that supports continuing education, which Medsger said did not exist in 1996 – even though 57% of the young journalists she surveyed said they would benefit from professional development courses.
- 5) While the strongest demand of all by the current media executives is for required internships

or apprenticeships, some mass comm educators say their departments cannot require an internship and stay within AEJMC's 25-30% limit on mass communication coursework. Other departments are requiring internships but awarding little if any credit. KIMEP University has considered a culminating low-credit "placement internship" program that would be completed as soon as a student is hired in a full-time communications-related job or when the student has interned for a minimum time period and handed in his final portfolio. It might make the entire communications program more marketable to allow such a placement internship to be prolonged essentially as long as the student needs. At relatively low cost to the university, placement internships would continue to expand a student's experience, enhance his skills and eliminate gaps in his resume. At the same time, a university could offer graduate credit for work-study internships and perhaps entice some recent graduates to continue their education toward a master's degree. Students would be even more inclined to enter such a program if they knew, as this study found, that 45% of the surveyed executives offer paid internships – mostly around minimum wage, but some as high as their beginning full-time salary. As part of the current study, information for about 2,500 internships was gathered and is being maintained and expanded in a database at <http://Virtual-University.us>, along with all the results to this study – including statistics and comments to the open-ended follow-up questions.

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Do Political Reporters Need to be Political Scientists?

By Matthew Manweller, Ph.D, & Ken Harvey, Ph.D

Introduction:

American politics have become more complex, the media more partisan, and citizens are in serious need of accurate information to make important political decisions.

Media have experienced a revolution in the past three decades. Thirty years ago, Ted Turner launched the Cable News Network (CNN) and ended the traditional evening news approach to journalism. Since then, American journalism has experienced a proliferation of cable news networks. Many of these networks, in an attempt to carve out a market niche, have become partisan media outlets. It is generally accepted that Fox News appeals to more conservative viewers while MSNBC pursues more liberal viewers. At the same time, Internet news sources have increased in popularity. Well known sites such as The Drudge Report, The Huffington Post, and RealClearPolitics attract millions of readers each day. As with many cable networks, citizens can pick Internet sites that are compatible with their own values. And finally, the media industry has seen the rise of “infotainment” shows such as The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. It has been reported that a high percentage of younger people get their news from these shows.

While the media have become more diversified, partisan, and focused on entertainment as much as education, the world has become more globalized, interdependent, and complex. Today’s voters are expected to engage in sophisticated political and economic issues ranging from debates between Keynesianism and Supply-Side economics, free trade versus protectionism, and difficult legal issues such as immigration, gay marriage and health care policies.

In such an environment, citizens need access to impartial and accurate information. The difficulty arises in finding reporters who are qualified to both comprehend complex political and

economic issues while at the same time have the journalistic skills to condense and explain those issues to the general public. Traditionally, the media have relied on professionals trained as journalists who have become acquainted with economic and political issues to provide such information. The problem with this approach is that it requires reporters with little to no economic or political science training to comprehend and explain complex public policy issues. An alternative approach is to rely on professionals trained as economists and political scientists, who have developed journalism skills over the course of their career, to provide public policy reporting. The questions that concern this paper are twofold. 1) What type of education and experience do mass media executives believe new political reporters need to possess? 2) Would mass media executives be willing to hire new reporters with specific content degrees as opposed to the traditional journalism degrees?

Based on a comprehensive 55 question survey of 767 mass media executives, there is evidence to suggest that a significant number of executives would be willing to hire reporters with more content knowledge and less journalism education.

Literature Review

It is well established that mass media executives want their reporters to have knowledge and skills that journalism schools and educators do not teach. Du and Thornburg (2010) simply refer to this phenomenon as “the gap” between journalism education and journalism practice. Lepre and Bleske (2005) report that the “current literature shows that there are, indeed, discrepancies between how journalism educators and journalism professionals think about the purpose of a college degree in journalism and about the skills or knowledge students...should have upon graduation.” Journalism educators tend to emphasize theory while editors and practitioners prefer an emphasis on practical skills (Lancaster, Katz and Cho, 1990). Dickson and Brandon (2000) conclude that academics wants

students to master concepts such as theory, law, ethics and the history of journalism while practicing editors prefer better writing and editing skills.

Of particular interest to this study is the dissatisfaction many editors have with regards to journalism graduates' lack of specific content knowledge. Three studies are relevant. Cowdin (1985) found that newly minted reporters did not have a solid grasp of the knowledge necessary to write effective stories on topics such as economic, history and government. Following Cowdin's study, Mabry (1988) suggested that because reporters often lacked important economics, history and government knowledge, they could not ask insightful questions or know if their stories were accurate or not. Fedler (1993) concluded that many journalism professionals would prefer that journalism classes be taught by instructors with a more traditional liberal arts education than a Ph.D. with an extensive research background.

It is at this point that our study diverges from the literature. Much of the debate to this point has focused on how journalism programs should or should not alter their curriculum in order to deliver students that mass media executives want to hire. The question not being asked is whether mass media executives would be willing to forego hiring journalism majors altogether and instead hire graduates with degrees in economics, history and political science.

This study was designed to fill a gap in the literature by asking different questions. We seek to understand the willingness of mass media executives to hire graduates outside of journalism programs and, additionally, instead of comparing attitudes between journalism practitioners and educators, we compare responses across all types of media professionals.

Methods

A survey was sent to 22,094 representatives of mass communications organizations which included print, television, and radio media executives as well as public relations and "new media"

executives. To survey our population, executives were contacted by email through the *Qualtrics* survey research program. The *Qualtrics* program sends each respondent an introductory letter and email with an embedded link to our survey. Surveys were emailed to members of six media databases: EasyMedalist.com, Data-Aide.com, Contacts on Tap, Congress.org, Editor & Publisher, and the Expedite Public Relations list. Three follow-up emails were sent after our initial contact. The *Qualtrics* survey research program prevents duplicate emails from multiple lists and prevents any respondent from answering more than once.

Survey Content. Respondents were asked a total of 55 questions to assess the importance of various education, training and experience benchmarks needed to become an effective reporter. Specifically, respondents were asked to react to statements questioning whether students need more education, training and experience with specific job skills, educational backgrounds, and post graduation work experience using Likert-like graded preference scales (strongly agree to strongly disagree). See Appendix A for a copy of the complete survey. Following the survey, respondents were given the opportunity to answer open-ended questions assessing the quality of academic mass communications programs and suggest ideas for improvement.

Survey Population. Respondents were 767 media and public relations executives representing an overall response rate of 3.5%. 263 respondents identified themselves as print media executives (34%), 154 identified themselves as broadcast, cable or new media executives (20%), and 258 respondents identified themselves as public relations executives (34%). Ninety-two respondents did not categorize themselves in any category (12%). Of those respondents identifying themselves as print media executives, 63 indicated they worked for a daily newspaper, 165 indicated they worked for a weekly publication, and 35 indicated they worked for a magazine or “other” print media. Of those

executives identifying themselves at broadcast media, 80 worked in television or cable and 45 in radio. Twenty-nine respondents identified themselves as members of a new media organization.

Limitations. With a survey population of over 22,000 and responses over 750, we are pleased with the large N of our study. A potential limitation comes from the relatively low response rate which may reflect a response bias. While it is well documented that social scientists have been experiencing decreasing response rates, the response rates of this study are below even those recently documented (Keeter et al, 2006). Recent research suggests that low response rates do not bias a sample and studies with low response rates are producing the same results as surveys taken years earlier when response rates were higher (Keeter et al, 2006). Low response rates can be a concern if one has reason to believe that the non-responders were not normally distributed throughout the sample population. Also of concern is that we have little control over how media contact lists are compiled and we have scarce information on how well they are maintained or updated. Retired executives may remain on the list and newer members of the profession may not be included. All of these limitations are common in journalism studies and it can be reasonable assumed that they do not undermine the validity of the research.

Findings

The data presented in this paper is a subset of data from a larger study examining the attitudes of mass media executives towards journalism education. Of the 55 questions in the survey, seven are relevant to the topic of this paper. The first battery of questions focuses on type of educational background mass media executive would like entry level political reporters to possess. The second battery of questions presents some hypothetical alternatives with respect to journalism training for political reporters and asks mass media executives to respond.

		What kind of mass communication organization do you primarily represent? Select the best response.									Total
		Daily newspaper organization	Weekly newspaper organization	Magazine organization	Other print medium	Television organization	Radio organization	Cable or other multi-channel medium	"New media" organization (Internet...)	Public relations organization	
Mass Communication students focusing on POLITICAL reporting need: - 26. A political science degree.	Strongly Agree	2 3%	15 9%	2 14%	2 11%	4 5%	4 9%	0 0%	5 19%	27 11%	61 9%
	Agree	24 38%	38 23%	2 14%	4 21%	27 37%	17 38%	0 0%	6 22%	71 28%	189 29%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	27 43%	67 41%	8 57%	9 47%	30 41%	15 33%	2 50%	9 33%	106 42%	273 41%
	Disagree	9 14%	42 26%	1 7%	4 21%	12 16%	8 18%	2 50%	5 19%	46 18%	129 20%
	Strongly Disagree	1 2%	2 1%	1 7%	0 0%	0 0%	1 2%	0 0%	2 7%	2 1%	9 1%
	Subtotal	63 100%	164 100%	14 100%	19 100%	73 100%	45 100%	4 100%	27 100%	252 100%	661 100%
Mass Communication students focusing on POLITICAL reporting need: - 27. An economics degree.	Strongly Agree	3 5%	10 6%	1 7%	1 5%	1 1%	3 7%	0 0%	3 12%	10 4%	32 5%
	Agree	17 27%	28 17%	1 7%	5 25%	14 19%	11 24%	0 0%	8 31%	55 22%	139 21%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	30 48%	78 48%	10 71%	9 45%	46 63%	18 40%	3 75%	10 38%	132 53%	336 51%
	Disagree	12 19%	46 28%	1 7%	4 20%	10 14%	12 27%	1 25%	5 19%	52 21%	143 22%
	Strongly Disagree	1 2%	2 1%	1 7%	1 5%	2 3%	1 2%	0 0%	0 0%	2 1%	10 2%
	Subtotal	63 100%	164 100%	14 100%	20 100%	73 100%	45 100%	4 100%	26 100%	251 100%	660 100%
Mass Communication students focusing on POLITICAL reporting need: - 28. Real-world experience in politics (political campaigns).	Strongly Agree	8 13%	12 7%	2 14%	3 16%	10 14%	3 7%	0 0%	14 50%	57 23%	109 17%
	Agree	11 17%	44 27%	5 36%	10 53%	24 33%	17 39%	0 0%	7 25%	115 46%	233 35%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	29 46%	62 38%	4 29%	3 16%	22 30%	14 32%	3 75%	4 14%	67 27%	208 32%
	Disagree	11 17%	35 21%	3 21%	3 16%	14 19%	9 20%	1 25%	2 7%	10 4%	88 13%
	Strongly Disagree	4 6%	10 6%	0 0%	0 0%	3 4%	1 2%	0 0%	1 4%	3 1%	22 3%
	Subtotal	63 100%	163 100%	14 100%	19 100%	73 100%	44 100%	4 100%	28 100%	252 100%	660 100%
Mass Communication students focusing on POLITICAL reporting need: - 29. Real-world experience in government (political appointee, legislative staffer, bureaucratic).	Strongly Agree	5 8%	11 7%	2 14%	3 15%	8 11%	3 7%	0 0%	10 36%	53 21%	95 14%
	Agree	18 29%	40 25%	5 36%	9 45%	25 34%	21 47%	2 50%	6 21%	113 45%	239 36%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	27 43%	62 38%	3 21%	3 15%	27 37%	12 27%	1 25%	9 32%	67 27%	211 32%
	Disagree	11 17%	41 25%	4 29%	4 20%	10 14%	7 16%	1 25%	2 7%	17 7%	97 15%
	Strongly Disagree	2 3%	9 6%	0 0%	1 5%	3 4%	2 4%	0 0%	1 4%	1 0%	19 3%
	Subtotal	63 100%	163 100%	14 100%	20 100%	73 100%	45 100%	4 100%	28 100%	251 100%	661 100%

Table 1 summarizes the responses from mass media executives regarding education and experience. Responses are disaggregated by media type (newspaper, magazine, television, etc).

<<Insert Table 1 Here>>

Do political reporters need a political science degree?

Question 26 of our survey asked executives to agree or disagree to the following question. “Mass communication students focusing on political reporting need a political science degree.” In total, 38% of mass media executives agreed or strongly agreed with that statement. In contrast, only 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Forty-one percent neither agreed nor disagreed. Taken together, a large percentage of editors (almost 60%) are willing to hire political reporters with no political science background, but a significant number (almost 40%) believe such a background is important. If one examines only the strongly agree and disagree categories, 9% of respondents strongly agree with the statement whereas less than 2% strongly disagree.

Looking across media organization types, new media organizations register the strongest support for the belief that political reporters should have political science degrees. Nineteen percent of new media organizations strongly believe their political reporters should have a political science degree and 41% agree or strongly agree. One possible explanation for the high degree of support among new media organizations is that new media sites tend to specialize and therefore need content experts whereas traditional news outlets, particularly smaller newspapers that only issue one edition a week, still serve as “utility infielders” and need to report on issues of all types. In fact, weekly newspaper organizations, at 28% showed the weakest support for the belief that political reporters need political science degrees.

Do political reporters need an economics degree?

Question 27 of our survey asked executives to agree or disagree to the following question. “Mass communication students focusing on political reporting need an economics degree.” We asked this question with the understanding that much of today’s political analysis is actually economic policy analysis. There is less support for the concept of requiring political reporters to possess an economics degree. Only 5% of media executives strongly agreed reporters need an economics degree with 21% simply agreeing. In comparison, requiring a political science degree enjoys 17% more support among executives than the requirement for an economics degree. Over 50% of respondents were ambivalent to the economics requirement—10% higher than ambivalence towards a political science degree—and about the same number, 24% disagree or strongly disagreed.

Again, it was the new media organizations that exhibited the most support for a content specialty. Forty-three percent of new media executives agreed or strongly agreed that their reporters should have an economics degree. Magazine editors exhibited the least support for the economics requirement—only 14%-- but the low number of respondents in the magazine category weakens the finding.

Do political reporters need campaign or government service experience?

In addition to education requirements, we were also interested in whether mass media executives felt it was important for their political reporters to have real world experience in political campaigns or government service. To that end, we asked two questions in our survey. We first asked executives to agree or disagree to the following question. “Mass communications students focusing on political reporting need real world experience in politics (political campaigns).” The second question asked “Mass communications students focusing on political reporting need real world experience in government (political appointee, legislative staffer, bureaucrat).”

With respect to the political campaign question, there was significant support. Fifty-two percent of media executives agreed or strongly agreed their political reporters need campaign experience. At 52%, this represented the highest level of support among all four questions relating to background education or experience. Additionally, 17% strongly agreed, also the largest amount of respondents who strongly agreed with any question. In contrast, only 32% were ambivalent to campaign experience and only 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that political reporters should have campaign experience.

With respect to campaign experience, public relations firms had a similar level of support as those in new media. Seventy-five percent of new media executives wanted campaign experience but public relations firms were close at 69%. Daily and weekly newspaper editors exhibited the least support at 40% and 34% respectively.

There was only slightly less support for the idea that political reporters need actual government service experience. Fifty percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their political reporters needed such experience—only 2% less than those desiring campaign experience. Again, those strongly agreeing were relatively high at 14%. Similar to opinions about campaign experience, 32% of executives were ambivalent and a slighter higher percentage (18%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the belief that political reporters need actual government experience.

Moving away from Journalism Degrees

One of the main purposes of our survey was to assess the willingness of mass media executives to hire political reporters who do not possess a degree in journalism. With the conventional approach, most aspiring reporters obtain degrees in journalism and then self-train with respect to the beat they cover—domestic politics, foreign affairs, sports, entertainment, etc. We wanted to measure support for reversing that approach. Would mass media executives be willing to hire entry level reporters with content degrees in such fields as political science and economics if they were willing to acquire some

limited background in the field of journalism? We started with very broad questions about the need to write more technically oriented stories about politics and economics and ended with more specific questions about one's willingness to hire reporters without a journalism degree.

Not surprisingly, there is overwhelming support for the notion that mass communications students should have more experience writing technical stories concerning politics, economics and science. Seventy-one percent agreed or strongly agreed with that concept. It was the only question we asked where more respondents strongly agreed (37%) than just agreed (34%). Not a single respondent strongly disagreed and only 3% disagreed.

Next we asked executives to agree or disagree with the statement "University mass communications students should have one or more content specializations such as political science, economics, fine arts, etc." Exactly 50% of executives agreed or strongly agreed that communications students should have a content specialization, 30% were ambivalent and 17% disagreed. Our question reveals that most mass media executives would at minimum prefer their reporters have some content knowledge in addition to a solid understand of journalism theory and practice.

The most specific question we asked related to a tradeoff between journalism education and content education. We asked respondents to agree or disagree with the statement "If political science graduates took one intensive journalism skills course and served a professional internship, I would be just as likely to hire them as a mass communications graduate." The results were evenly mixed. Thirty-eight percent of executives agreed or strongly agreed with the hypothetical scenario. Just about as many, 32%, disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 25% were ambivalent. Taken together, the data from all three questions indicates that editors and media executives want their reporters to have more experience writing technical, content based stories and want them to have an educational background in a collegiate discipline other than journalism. While there appears to be less willingness to forgo the journalism degree altogether, the fact that there are more communications executives willing to

consider political science graduates on an even basis with mass communication graduates than those who are not suggests: (1) A very sizable job market for political science graduates to consider, and (2) reason for university mass communication departments to be concerned that the education they are providing is not highly valued by their students' future employers.

Some of the executives addressed this issue spontaneously in response to follow-up open-ended questions, not specifically about degrees in political science vs. mass communications, nor specifically about political reporting, but simply the quality of preparation mass communication graduates are receiving.

"Resumes I see generally lack real world journalism experience and a broad liberal arts academic background -- two things that would get my attention. I don't view degrees in mass communications, journalism, or advertising/PR as having much value," wrote Gregory Graze of Graze Public Relations in Dallas.

Mike Heronemus, managing editor of the Junction City (KS) Daily Union, wrote: "Mass communications students I've employed seem to lack a general knowledge of how government works. They, at first, seem overwhelmed by the detail they must quickly assimilate in order to adequately report what is happening on their beat. It often takes as long as two years to get a new reporter up to speed on how to cover a government beat. I don't expect a mass com grad to know it all, but when I have to explain the difference between a city manager and a mayor, I begin to doubt a reporter's ability to make sense of the complicated beat government can be."

Wick Allison, editor and publisher of D Magazine in Dallas, wrote that universities' mass communication departments are preparing their students very poorly for the real world. "Students should have grounding in liberal arts to understand the context of the controversies on which they are reporting. History is necessary. How to write in English -- understanding the rhythms and cadence of the

language -- would be very helpful. I would require a major in liberal arts and a minor in journalism/communications," he wrote.

And while not speaking of journalism, per se, Barbara Carpenter, senior associate with The Kotchen Group of Farmington, Conn., wrote: "Encourage students to be curious and creative. I would much rather hire an interesting candidate with good attitude and a major in history or art, than a communications major with a sense of entitlement and no awareness of the world outside of his little circle."

While some of the respondents to the open-ended questions were fairly positive toward the quality of universities' mass communication programs, the vast majority were not.

Discussion

For the last four decades there had been a debate between journalism educators and journalism practitioners with respect to what skills and knowledge entry level reporters should possess. Our research continues that debate, but also examines a narrow subsection of the debate—particularly the discussions surrounding what level of and type of content knowledge is needed to be an effective reporter. Our research focuses on political reporting and the specific skill set needed to be a qualified political reporter. We wanted to understand this question from the perspective of those who hire reporters and therefore we surveyed mass media executives and editors.

From our findings it can be generally concluded that mass media executives and editors would prefer that their political reporters possess more area content knowledge, especially areas of political science and economics. It is also clear those who hire reporters would prefer such reporters to have some level of real world experience in politics or government service. In fact, there is far more support for additional real world political experience than additional academic knowledge. About a third of executives want more academic knowledge but more than half want more real world experience. Such a

finding would suggest that colleges and universities may want to enhance their internship programs, but not necessarily their journalism internship programs. Our findings suggest that journalism programs may want to partner with other content area departments at their university so that their students can obtain legislative or business internships rather than or in addition to journalism internships.

Coupled with that idea of non-journalism internships, our findings suggest executives want journalism students to have degrees or specializations outside of journalism. This suggests that universities may want to require that their journalism students obtain a major or minor in some other content area. Of course, many universities already do this, but our research indicates such a practice may increase the likelihood of graduates landing a job after graduation.

Finally, as noted above, more communication executives (38%) are willing to consider political science graduates on an equal basis with journalism graduates than those who would not (32%). In this case, the ambivalence of 25% of the communications executives could be taken as support for the non-journalism graduates. While these 25% were not willing to say they would give them equal consideration, neither did they say they would not. In other words, they seem to be saying, essentially, “Bring me the applicant, and I’ll think about it.” This should be seen as a troubling response for mass communication departments and as an opportunity for political science departments.

Table 1

		What kind of mass communication organization do you primarily represent? Select the best response.									Total
		Daily newspaper organization	Weekly newspaper organization	Magazine organization	Other print medium	Television organization	Radio organization	Cable or other multi-channel medium	"New media" organization (Internet...)	Public relations organization	
Mass Communication students need more EXPERIENCE in: - 6. Writing technical stories concerning science, economics, or politics.	Strongly Agree	20 32%	65 39%	6 40%	4 20%	25 33%	14 31%	0 0%	11 38%	107 41%	282 37%
	Agree	25 40%	57 35%	3 20%	10 50%	33 44%	15 33%	2 40%	7 24%	86 33%	261 34%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	16 25%	40 24%	6 40%	4 20%	15 20%	13 29%	2 40%	9 31%	51 20%	173 23%
	Disagree	2 3%	3 2%	0 0%	2 10%	2 3%	2 4%	0 0%	0 0%	12 5%	25 3%
	Strongly Disagree	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%
	Subtotal	63 100%	165 100%	15 100%	20 100%	75 100%	45 100%	5 100%	29 100%	258 100%	767 100%
Simply respond by indicating how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. - 32. University mass communication students should have one or more content specializations such as political science, economics, fine arts, etc.	Strongly Agree	9 14%	21 13%	3 20%	2 10%	10 13%	8 18%	0 0%	4 14%	36 14%	104 14%
	Agree	30 48%	55 33%	5 33%	11 55%	28 37%	14 31%	2 40%	10 34%	95 37%	276 36%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	20 32%	52 32%	2 13%	4 20%	26 35%	16 36%	2 40%	6 21%	74 29%	228 30%
	Disagree	4 6%	32 19%	5 33%	2 10%	11 15%	6 13%	0 0%	9 31%	48 19%	125 16%
	Strongly Disagree	0 0%	5 3%	0 0%	0 0%	0 0%	1 2%	0 0%	0 0%	2 1%	8 1%
	Subtotal	63 100%	165 100%	15 100%	20 100%	75 100%	45 100%	5 100%	29 100%	258 100%	767 100%
Simply respond by indicating how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements. - 38. If political science graduates took one intensive journalism skills course and served a professional internship, I would be just as likely to hire them as a mass communication graduate.	Strongly Agree	5 8%	22 13%	3 20%	1 5%	5 7%	8 18%	0 0%	3 10%	27 10%	79 10%
	Agree	26 41%	62 38%	4 27%	8 40%	22 29%	15 33%	0 0%	9 31%	51 20%	215 28%
	Neither Agree nor Disagree	20 32%	41 25%	5 33%	5 25%	17 23%	14 31%	2 40%	7 24%	63 24%	194 25%
	Disagree	9 14%	36 22%	3 20%	5 25%	28 37%	6 13%	1 20%	8 28%	91 35%	207 27%
	Strongly Disagree	3 5%	3 2%	0 0%	1 5%	3 4%	2 4%	1 20%	1 3%	19 7%	41 5%
	Subtotal	63 100%	165 100%	15 100%	20 100%	75 100%	45 100%	5 100%	29 100%	258 100%	767 100%