Do Political Reporters Need To be Political Scientists?

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Introduction

It is generally accepted in both schools of journalism and political science that democracies require an informed and analytical public in order to work effectively. The conventional wisdom also posits that journalists play an important role in providing accurate and comprehensive information to the lay public so that they can perform their duties as citizens. More recently, however, the media have become subject to increasing scrutiny by both journalism critics and political theorists (Tanner, 2011; McChesney, 2003; McNair, 2000). Critics argue that some of our current political problems can be directly attributable to the failure of the media to serve as effective watchdogs of those in power. McChesney (2003) offers a searing criticism of his own profession, writing “The US polity is enmeshed in a deep crisis and the collapse of a viable journalism is a significant factor ...in explaining the shriveled and dilapidated state of US democracy.”

Coupled with criticism of journalism at-large are more specific criticisms indicating that schools of journalism are not educating future reporters with the skills they actually need to effectively promote political knowledge and critical thinking among their readers. Early studies performed by Haroldsen and Harvey (1980) and Mills, Harvey and Warnick (1980) to later studies by Bales (1992) and Dickson and Brandon (2000) have consistently shown that newspaper publishers, magazine editors, and media executives feel there needs to be changes to journalism education. The research suggests media executives want newly minted reporters to have more content knowledge, better writing skills and more “real world” experience instead of journalism theory.

As the criticism of our current state of journalism and the current state of journalism education mounts, we ask a simple question: Could political science graduates do a better job of providing political reporting than graduates with journalism degrees? Although we do not test this question empirically, a review of the extant literature (see below) suggests that political science departments and curriculum
have the potential to foster graduates that have a high level of political knowledge, political judgment, and critical thinking skills or, as Gorham (2007) writes, pedagogical skills that “develop cognitive capacities that sustain good citizenship.” These skills are essential for political reporters if they are to wade through political spin, manipulation, and misdirection.

Finally, even if political science graduates are indeed more qualified to provide political reporting to US citizens and re-energize American democracy, would media executives be willing to hire such graduates absent a degree in journalism? This question we do examine empirically. With a survey to current media executives utilizing a battery of questions assessing their willingness to hire non-journalism graduates, we are pleased to find an openness on the part of media executives to hire political science graduates to do their political reporting, even if such graduates do not possess a degree in journalism.

**Literature Review**

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 (Pew Research Center, 2011; Morris, 2007). It is generally accepted that Fox News appeals to more conservative viewers while MSNBC pursues more liberal viewers. Recent research suggests newspapers are doing the same thing and adopting rhetoric that appeals to a particular partisan base (Gentzkow and Shapiro, 2006). At the same time, Internet news sources have increased in popularity with nearly one quarter of all Americans now getting their political news from the internet (Smith, 2010) 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. As one might expect, research shows that Internet news outlets are far more partisan than traditional wire services (Baum and Groeling, 2007). And finally, the media industry has seen the rise of “infotainment” shows such as The Daily Show and The Colbert Report. Reports indicate that these shows overwhelmingly appeal to younger audiences and that 13% of citizens under the age of 30 watch these shows on a regular basis (Pew Research, 2010).

The “Gap” Between Journalism Education and Journalism Practice

It is well established that mass communications 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 want 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 existing journalism 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 communications executives want to hire. The question not being asked is whether mass communications 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 communications 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 communications professionals.

**Can Political Science graduates do better?**

It is not a surprise that political reporters commonly ignore political scientists and their research. Media critics such as Marx (2010) and Bia (2009) both highlight the absence of political science research in news stories about about politics. Social scientists have lamented on the same issue (Iyengar and Simon, 1993). Far too often, political journalists are ignorant of the broader political phenomenon upon which they are reporting. Nyhan and Sides (2011) unique article titled “How Political Scientists Can Help Journalism” not only summarizes the limitations of political journalism—which comes from reporters’ general ignorance of political science and economics—but they go one step further and outline how political science could make political journalism richer and more effective. Nyhan and Sides argue that the incorporation of political science research into political reporting offers five potential benefits:

- Providing structural context on episodic events
- Providing fresh angles on the news
- Countering spin about the effect of an event for a politician or party
• Better describing historical trends and points of comparison
• Clarifying what questions are not well-understood by scholars and why

Summarizing research by Ewen (1996), Rampton and Stauber (2001), and Mundy (2001), McChesney suggests that Nyhan and Sides’ third point, countering spin, may be the most important function a more politically educated journalism corps could perform. McChesney argues that the rise of professional journalism has been countered by the rise in professional public relations firms. The job of PR firms, as McChesney sees it, is to provide “slick press releases, paid-for experts, ostensibly neutral-sounding but bogus citizens groups and canned news events” for the purpose of spinning the news to their advantage and filtering out potentially damaging stories.

Other scholars offer a small light of hope. Marx (2010) writing for the Columbia Journalism Review suggests that journalism may be in the early stages of trying to accept the Nyhan and Sides challenge. Marx notes that some prominent political reporters are actively seeking to engage academics, political scientists in particular. Marx also notes that a few political scientists are joining the effort and trying to facilitating such cooperation. Whether this initial and limited coordination will continue to grow is still to be determined. Rather than hope that more political journalists will seek out political scientists, this paper suggests a different course. What if we simply cut out the middle man? Rather than having reporters engage political scientists, what if political scientists became reporters?

A significant body of political science and pedagogical literature suggest that Nyhan and Sides might be correct. Research on political science curriculum indicates that political science graduates have a better grasp on issues crucial for effective political reporting. Gorham (2005) argues, “Civic education and engagement have become significant, if not primary, educational objectives for the social sciences.” Farr (2004) supports that conclusion, noting that political science is “amidst a rather stunning outpouring of work on citizenship and citizen education.” As political science departments have increased the use of “service-learning,” studies suggest their students have gained a greater
understanding of the political process. Gorham reports that service-learning increases students’ ability to “judge the political world.” Other researchers (Dudley and Gitelson, 2003; Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996) find that service-learning curriculums increase raw political knowledge. In contrast, however, Ishiyama and Harlaub (2003) show that a political science department must be structured correctly in order to develop “political reasoning.”

It’s not just service-learning that can promote civic knowledge. Beaumont et al (2006) summarize a host of findings that indicate “high quality civics courses that include regular discussion of current events and cover a variety of topics, can significantly strengthen adolescents’ political knowledge.” Beaumont et al (2006) also conclude from their own research “that a variety of courses and programs that include a focus on promoting political engagement and also include at least one key "pedagogy of engagement” can significantly increase political knowledge, skills, and motivations in undergraduates with a variety of backgrounds at many different types of institutions. “

If it is true that political reporting is suffering a serious capability deficit and it is true that reporters whose primary education is in political science may serve the American public better, then we are left with one question. Will media executives hire political scientists instead of journalists to do their political reporting? The remainder of this paper seeks to answer that question.

**Methods**

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 in turn develop 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 communications executives believe new political reporters need to possess? 2) Would mass communications executives be willing to hire new reporters with specific content degrees such as political science and economics as opposed to the traditional journalism degrees?

Based on a comprehensive 55 question survey of 767 mass communications 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. In light of these findings, political science departments should examine ways in which to capitalize on this emerging job market and consider partnerships with journalism departments. Such partnerships could create graduates with both an understanding of political science and a skill set to accurately report on political events. If current journalism executives are looking for such graduates, political science departments should be at the forefront of training them.

*A survey letter was emailed to representatives of mass communications organizations, which included print, television and radio executives, as well as public relations and "new media" executives. To survey our population, executives were contacted by email, most of which were sent through the*
Expedite Simplicity email service. Each respondent was sent an introductory email with an embedded link to our survey, which was hosted by the Qualtrics survey research program. 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 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 17.3%. Because of the nature of Internet security systems, most bulk emails - even when sent by permission -- are blocked. The email service we used was able to track how many letters were blocked, how many were opened, and how many recipients actually clicked on the link to the online survey, hosted at http://qualtrics.com, established by the Qualtrics professional survey firm. Survey emails were sent to contacts in six media databases: EasyMedalist.com, Data-Aide.com, Contacts on Tap, Congress.org, Editor & Publisher, and the Expedite Simplicity email service. Three follow-up emails were sent after our initial contact. Most of the emails were sent out through the Expedite Simplicity email service, which shows a block rate of 80%. Consequently, 4,418 contacts actually reached
a standard email inbox, of which 783 recipients clicked on the survey link. According to Qualtrics, 98% of those who clicked on the survey link did complete the survey.

Two hundred sixty-three 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 survey responses over 750, we are pleased with the large N of our study. A potential limitation comes from our concerns about the relatively high email filter rate of 80%. We have no way of ascertaining whether the 20% who did receive the email are randomly distributed across the sample. We have no evidence to suggest that those who did receive the email suffered from selection bias (e.g. weaker internet filters) and it seems highly unlikely such a bias exists. At the same time, we do not have access to any data that proves no selection bias exits.

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 reasonably assumed that they do not undermine the validity of the research.
What kind of mass communication organization do you primarily represent? Select the best response.

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Findings

The data presented in this paper is a subset of data from a larger study examining the attitudes of mass communications 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 communications 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 communications executives to respond.

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

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 communications 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 substantial 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 communications 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 communications 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 communications 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 communications executives to hire political reporters who do not possess a degree in journalism. With the conventional
Table 2

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<th>Mass Communication students need more EXPERIENCE in:</th>
<th>6. Writing technical stories concerning science, economics, or politics.</th>
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<td>Strongly Agree/Agree</td>
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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 communications 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 communications executives would at minimum prefer their reporters have some content knowledge in addition to a solid understanding 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 communications 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 the follow-up open-ended questions in our survey.

“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 wanted to see changes and in particular more content knowledge.

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 communications executives and editors.

From our findings it can be generally concluded that mass communications 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, our research indicates, mass communications executives are evenly split on the need for an actual journalism degree. Thirty-eight percent of communication executives are willing to consider political science graduates on an equal basis with journalism graduates whereas 32% would not. 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 social studies departments.
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