

# **“Young Journalists’ Attitudes Toward Their Communities”**

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## INTRODUCTION

It is by now old news that the pool of young reporters is shrinking as the average age of newsroom staffers approaches 40. At the same time, fewer young journalists say they plan to make journalism their only career. Various studies show that young reporters leave the field not only to earn high salaries elsewhere, but also to attain a lifestyle more compatible with their personal goals. Another reason several studies have noted for the declining number of young reporters is that they lack interest in the kind of news that newspapers traditionally carry. Young reporters feel that their interests are not represented in the newsroom nor in their newspapers' content. Young people, and not only those in journalism, tell researchers that they expect to have a "mobile lifestyle." Because of this, they have little interest in local government and often do not form connections to their communities. A nationwide survey of reporters in their first newspaper jobs indicates that they don't expect to stay at that job or in that community more than one or two years. Many report that, when hired, they did not expect it to be an important part of their job to get to know the local history and geography, nor to know the names of local leaders.

Not surprisingly, editors complain that their new hires come to the job with less knowledge of public affairs than their predecessors. "We no longer get the best and brightest. Far fewer youths are attracted to newspapers than at any time in the last ten to fifteen years, said one editor."<sup>1</sup> Editors want journalism students to know more about local government.<sup>2</sup> Some editors at larger papers complain that the younger reporters lack

the kind of training and honing of their skills that small newspapers provide, but note that young applicants do not want to start in small markets.<sup>3</sup>

To address this, some larger newspapers have begun offering attractive internships and other incentives to local high school students or journalism majors who already have ties to the community in hopes that they will retain them on their staffs longer. Newspapers in small communities often cannot afford such programs, and are up against a national trend of young people leaving their small hometowns after attending college. Some who have departed daily newspapers to work for online companies blame the industry for waiting too long to address the salary issue. “I didn’t go into journalism so I wouldn’t be able to pay the rent,” says one former print journalist. He noted that the industry has begun to raise salaries in the face of a declining workforce, but says small and medium sized newspapers – which traditionally have hired the youngest journalists --haven’t joined the effort.<sup>4</sup>

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

In 1993, the Associated Press Managing Editors Journalism Education Committee surveyed newspaper managing editors as well as recent college graduates working in newsrooms. They asked each group to rank the topics journalism schools should emphasize in preparing future journalists. “Learning to listen to readers” ranked third on the editors’ list, but was ranked fifth by the young journalists.<sup>5</sup> The two groups also ranked other topics on the list differently. This and other studies, as well as firsthand

experience counseling journalism graduates in their first newspaper jobs, exposed a gap between the graduates' expectations and that of their editors'. Could this lack of knowledge of each other's expectations be one of the unexplored reasons behind the declining interest in young people in entering the field of journalism, and of remaining in the field once there? This study suggests that this is so, and sets out to reveal that what young journalists experience in their first jobs is not what they expected, especially in regard to how much they will need to know about their communities and current events.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Two sets of major nationwide studies of American journalists provide the basis for any discussion of trends within the profession. The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) sponsors one. The 1988 ASNE study produced "The Changing Face of the Newsroom" in 1989, and in 1996 the study was repeated and expanded. Paul S. Voakes in "The Newspaper Journalists of the '90s." reported the results<sup>6</sup> The second set of studies began in 1976 with the publication of *The News People* by John W.C Johnstone, Edward J. Slawski and William W. Bowman,<sup>7</sup> and has been built upon by researchers David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, first in 1986 in their book *The American Journalist*,<sup>8</sup> and again in 1996 with *The American Journalist in the 1990s*.<sup>9</sup> Both report in their most recent studies that the average age of journalists is increasing. The Weaver and Wilhoit study, which was conducted in 1992, showed the median age for journalists had increased to 36 from 32.4 a decade earlier.<sup>10</sup> They also found that those at the beginning of their journalism careers were more likely to leave the field than in previous

studies.<sup>11</sup> Too little job autonomy and a general disillusionment with the field were predictors of younger journalists leaving.<sup>12</sup> The most recent ASNE study reported that the proportion of journalists under 30 has dropped since a decade before from 29 percent to 20 percent.<sup>13</sup> The under-30s reported that they would like their jobs to provide more time for personal interests.<sup>14</sup> Only 19 percent of them report that they expect they will be working at a newspaper in their 60s, and many say that they would very much like to eventually “live elsewhere.”<sup>15</sup> A study by the University of Georgia’s James M. Cox Jr. Center of International Mass Communication Training and Research reported similar findings. Only 20 percent of the respondents in that 1999 survey reported that they planned to retire as journalists, down from 21 percent two years earlier.<sup>16</sup> Given that there are fewer young people interested in making journalism a career, Columbia Journalism Review conducted a survey of editors in 1999 to find out how the shrinking pool of recruits compares to previous generations. Two thirds of the editors said they believe that the newcomers have less knowledge of public affairs than in the past, and more than half believe they have less writing talent and motivation. Editors complained that the younger generation of journalists does not understand government, nor do they have a historical perspective on the news.<sup>17</sup> Other research reveals that journalism students list among their top reasons for being attracted to the field the opportunity to have an impact on society and to have an impact on significant matters in a community. Perhaps a clue to their ultimate dissatisfaction, however, lies in their number one and two attractions: the creativity and excitement of the job<sup>18</sup> Voakes found that among the major complaints journalists have about their jobs are “dealing with insignificant matters and having little impact” and the “lack of opportunity to be creative.”<sup>19</sup> The fact that once on

the job this particular expectation is dashed might provide some important insight into why young people are disillusioned about a career in journalism. A study by the Cox Center of International Mass Communication at the University of Georgia found that four in 10 recent journalism graduates felt their jobs did not meet their expectations, and only one in four plans to stay with their current employer permanently. Only three in 10 want to remain in journalism permanently.<sup>20</sup>

This problem hits hard at small newspapers, which are most likely to hire recent college graduates. A study of mobility rates at daily newspapers under 25,000 circulations found that the smaller papers had turnover rates of up to 43 percent. Most of those in this survey were under 30 and most respondents were in their first job. They revealed a paradox that has shown up in other studies – that while they find their current jobs satisfying, if given the chance to do it over, they would not go into newspaper work. And yet, the largest segment reports that the aspect they most like about their jobs is the opportunity to serve others, a very community based concept.<sup>21</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

Interviews were conducted with a dozen editors and a dozen reporters holding their first newspaper jobs. After editors' comments revealed that recent college graduates were rarely hired at larger newspapers, the study was narrowed to include only newspapers under 100,000 circulation. A pre-test questionnaire was drawn up from topics covered in these interviews and the questionnaire was administered to a non-random sample of 10

reporters holding their first newspaper jobs. This feedback was used to construct the final questionnaire of 24 questions. Two questionnaires were mailed to managing editors at 200 randomly selected dailies with instructions to give them to the two reporters most recently hired into their first newspaper jobs. (It should be noted that not every newspaper in the sample had two or even one reporter fitting that description.)

## RESULTS

Eighty-six questionnaires were returned, representing 64 newspapers, or 32 percent of the selected newspapers and 22 percent of the surveys mailed to reporters. Most respondents (65 %) were between 21 and 24, and nearly all (86 %) were under 30. They were predominantly white (88%) and female (58 %) In Voakes' study, half the under-30 respondents were female and 85 percent were white. <sup>22</sup>

Editors interviewed for this study indicated that in hiring reporters they looked for someone with knowledge of the community, or willingness to become part of the community. A significant segment of reporters responding to the questionnaire, however, did not expect community knowledge to be important to their job. Respondents were given a list of 20 activities that might be required of a reporter. They were asked to rank how important they expected each to be when they were hired. They were then asked to list which had proven to be more important than they expected. Only 26 percent thought that knowing about local history and geography would be very important, although 57 percent said they expected it to be somewhat important. There were 17 percent who did

not think this knowledge would be at all important to their jobs or didn't know how important it would be.

The respondents had a more accurate expectation regarding their need to know the names and titles of community leaders. There were 44 percent who expected this to be very important to their jobs, and 45 percent who expected it to be somewhat important. Again, however, there were 10 percent who didn't think that knowing the names and titles of community leaders would be at all important to their jobs or didn't know how important it would be.

Respondents also had a more realistic expectation of their need to know about current events, but considering that these are journalists, it is surprising that only slightly more than half of them (57%) thought this knowledge would be very important to their jobs, and again, that 7 percent thought it would not be important at all to know about current events.

When asked to list those items that had proven to be more important than they expected, however, respondents most frequently mentioned knowledge of local history and geography. Also frequently mentioned as being more important than expected were knowledge of community leaders' names and titles, the need to explain government budgets to readers, and the need to explain complicated policy issues to readers.

However, 71% did expect that their job would give them an opportunity to help people. And nearly as many (73 percent) expected to have meaningful and exciting encounters

with the people they were writing about. However, 68 percent did not expect that as reporters, they would influence public policy.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine whether young journalists' unfulfilled expectations of their first newspaper jobs were contributing to their age group's declining commitment to the field. It seems that this is the case, at least in terms of how much the younger hires expected they would need to know about their communities. It is also likely, given the results of Voakes' study, that their expectations of having important assignments and creative work are also not being met. Coupled with an intention to move several times during their careers, and the lack of a desire to make journalism their sole careers, it is no wonder that for many young people, these disappointments cause their first job in journalism to be their last.

There is, however, an interesting paradox in that many young journalists do find that their expectations are met in regard to helping people and to having interesting and exciting encounters with the people they cover. Neither of these items appeared as responses in this study where respondents could list the aspects of the job that were less important than expected, or which contributed to their dissatisfaction. Written comments and follow-up interviews reveal that these are the aspects of the job that young journalists like best. One respondent said his job at a 60,000 circulation daily is better than he expected it to be. " I enjoy the impact my work has on the community that I cover. It sounds like PR,

I know, but it's true." Said another of her job at a 4,000-circulation daily, " My writing makes a difference in people's lives." Another first-time reporter, this one working for a 15,000 circulation daily, said the job is better than she had expected to be, partly because of the opportunity to "cover positive community events." Another young reporter expressed the excitement that drew many current journalists to their field: "As the government reporter, I really get to help shape the agenda in this town. I feel like I'm in tune with so many different groups and issues that really change this community. At 22, I'm spending time with some of the most powerful people in town and serving as a "watchdog" over their activities. It's scary and exciting at the same time."

This study only begins to answer some of the questions about whether young reporters have accurate expectations of their newspaper jobs. It is clear that some of their expectations are incorrect or unrealistic. Perhaps another part of the problem is that the editors' expectations are also unrealistic. A follow-up to this study is under way that asks editors many of these same questions about what they expect young reporters to know. While those results are as yet unavailable, comments from editors participating in various workshops and studies indicate that their expectations might not be in line with what this generation of journalists has to offer. When fewer than 30 percent of adults under 25 can answer "yes" when asked if they read a newspaper "yesterday,"<sup>23</sup> editors may be setting too high a standard in regard to hiring young journalists with a great deal of community knowledge. However, given the responses reported here, editors might be wise to unleash the youngest staffers on stories that make a difference in people's lives, and that allow the reporters to feel they have helped people and had an impact.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Awareness seems to be growing in the newspaper industry that if newspapers are going to attract and retain young reporters, there is going to have to be a change in the newsroom culture. As Rem Reider, editor of *American Journalism Review*, put it, “The notion that journalists can also have a life is gaining currency at American newspapers.”<sup>24</sup>

Young people are willing to learn about their communities, but they aren’t necessarily willing to marry them. In this survey, 32 percent of the respondents said they planned to leave their current newspaper, and one can assume, move out of the community, within one year. Within two years, according to the responses, 67% of the young reporters plan to be gone from their current newspapers and community. The connection between these plans and the reporter’s anticipated need to learn about their communities has not been statistically proven but seems to have some obvious connections.

As one respondent holding his first job at a 10,000 circulation daily said, “I think it would be great to be connected to this city, but I don't want it to be to the point of eating, breathing and sleeping Oneida. I certainly don't want to live there. I think it's important to have contacts in the city, but that's about it.”

Rather than complaining about young reporters’ lack of commitment to their communities, the American Society of Newspaper Editors has mounted a campaign to attract young people to community journalism. Its publication *@small newspapers* includes comments from various young reporters and editors about what “fun” it is to

work at a small newspaper, about the opportunity to have more say in the final product, about the chance to make a difference in the community. Several of them talk about how difficult they found it to make a difference when they worked at larger newspaper.<sup>25</sup> Others in the industry are recognizing that finding an answer to this problem can be reflected in the bottom line. It is expensive to repeatedly advertise for and train new recruits. Among the ideas that are being tried are providing paid internships, more flexible work schedules, opportunities for training, mentoring programs, and of course, higher salaries. It is unlikely that any one idea will be the one that makes a difference in keeping young reporters on board. What may be needed is that, rather than trying to make young journalists adapt to the newspaper community, newspapers might be better served if they expanded their community to include the ideas and abilities of the young.

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<sup>1</sup> Hickey, Neil. "Rating the Recruits" Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 1999, p 39.

<sup>2</sup> Gaddis, Wood, "Editors, educators agree on many key J-education issues," Journalism Educator, July 1981, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Hickey, Neil. "Rating the Recruits" Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 1999, p 39.

<sup>4</sup> Hood, Robert. "Why Low-Wage Newspapers Are Now Paying a Price," Columbia Journalism Review, May/June 2000, p. 73

<sup>5</sup> Presentation to the Administrators Workshop, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, December 1994, St. Petersburg, Fla.

<sup>6</sup> Voakes, Paul S. "The Newspaper Journalists of the '90s," American Society of Newspaper Editors, April 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Johnstone, John W. C., Slawski, Edward J., Bowman, William W. *The News People: A sociological portrait of American journalists and their work.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Weaver, David H. and Wilhoit, G. Cleveland. *The American Journalist: A portrait of US news people and their work.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1986

<sup>9</sup> Weaver, David H. and Wilhoit, G. Cleveland. *The American Journalist in the 1990s.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996, p.8.

<sup>11</sup> Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996, p. 113.

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- <sup>12</sup> Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996, p. 121.
- <sup>13</sup> Voakes, p.2,
- <sup>14</sup> Voakes, p.24.
- <sup>15</sup> Voakes, ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Villano, Matt. "J-School grads enter a raging bull market," Editor & Publisher, August 21, 1999. p. 14.
- <sup>17</sup> Hickey, Neil. "Rating the Recruits" Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 1999, p 38.
- <sup>18</sup> Dodd, Julie E. and Tipton, Leonard. "Shifting Views of High School Students about Journalism Careers," Newspaper Research Journal, Vol. 13 &14, No. 4 &1, Fall 1992/Winter 1993. pp. 111-119.
- <sup>19</sup> Voakes, p.49.
- <sup>20</sup> Overby, Charles. "High Newsroom Turnover Hurts Credibility," the Freedom Forum News, Vol. 5 No. 8., p, 3.
- <sup>21</sup> Tharp, Marty. "Turnover and Mobility at Small Daily Newspapers," Newspaper Research Journal, Winter 1991,pp. 76-90.
- <sup>22</sup> Voakes, p. 6.
- <sup>23</sup> Maynard, Nancy. "The Age Factor: How Gray is Your Newsroom?" Columbia Journalism Review, September/October 2000, p. 68.
- <sup>24</sup> Reider, Rem. "The New World Order," American Journalism Review, September 2000, p.6.
- <sup>25</sup> Benge, George, Ed @small newspapers, ASNE Small Newspapers Committee, Reston, Va. 12 pp.

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