Licensing Journalists: A Study on the Perspective of Media Specialists

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Abstract

This qualitative study sought to explore media specialists' opinions regarding licensing in the field of journalism. Through a series of intensive interviews, researchers gathered data from current media workers who provided their perceptions of both positives and negatives of journalism today and how, if at all, licensing would change the business. Critics of current media indicated significant distortion occurring in journalism today, however, there is an aversion to government interference with the free press. Some of the findings indicated that the Internet spurred the proliferation of an ever-increasing populace of citizen journalists who lack formal training. Further, concerns of journalism schools not properly training students for the fast paced, technologically driven needs of modern day journalism also arose.

Keywords: media, journalism, licensing, distortion, government, free press, Internet, education, technology

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Journalism today is distinctly different from the news coverage of the past. Though elements of sensationalism and distortion of the news were popularized by William Randolph Hearst and his 'yellow journalism', the public has since been increasingly exposed to news coverage with a bias or slant that helped lead to an unclear views of the world around them (Fengler, 2003). Further, some claim that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is losing its regulatory powers over distortion and fairness as courts have ruled in favor of media organizations (Lowry, 2009). The question becomes whether the current system of checks and balances is adequate to ensure accurate and ethical journalism and fulfill its duty as the watchdog for the public.

The future of the current journalism model is unclear and has been a topic of discussion and concern as the line between entertainment, journalism, and public relations continues to blur. The current system is under scrutiny by a self-regulatory system comprised of ombudsmen, press councils and local journalism reviews, which are typically comprised of media professionals (Fengler, 2003). There appears to be a desire to enhance the monitoring and regulating of journalism, however, the actual method for this remains debatable (Winter, 2010) and some argue that the press has an inability to properly regulate oneself (Ingram, 2007). State Senator Bruce Patterson of Michigan has spearheaded a movement to establish a licensing board to regulate journalism. "We have to be able to get good information," he said "We have to be able to rely on the source and to understand the credentials of the source," (Winter, 2010). The Senator seeks a licensing process based on the moral character of journalists (Oosting, 2010), though others hold that once the government takes control of journalist licensing they will also control the flow of news and the free press will be severely compromised (Kubiske, 2010).

The research herein suggests that while concern over the new media's influence on news is a consideration there are also advantages to a plethora of information sources. Journalism has benefitted, throughout history, from advancements in communication technologies (Gordon, 2005). The results of this study will illustrate a viable solution for media regulation, which can address the concerns and desires of journalists and the populace they serve.

Literature Review

Journalism has always been an evolving profession, though today's advancements appear to have occurred during a much shorter time frame than in the past and continue to expand. This can be seen in newspapers and magazines, which are converting to online formats in an effort to cut costs and attract audiences (Gordon, 2005; Stverak, 2010). Video is also utilized by publication journalists to enhance their stories and create a more dynamic experience for their viewers (Layton, 2008). Publications are not alone, however, as radio and television are undergoing a significant migration to web based platforms as viewership and listenership numbers dwindle in the traditional markets that are deemed boring to younger audiences (Baird, 2009). The Internet influence has set many events in motion with regards to media. Now a multi platform interactive experience is becoming the norm for consumers and media outlets are reorganizing to take advantage of this (Lūders, 2008; Mabillot, 2007; Arsenault & Castells, 2008). Live news casts offer audiences the opportunity to comment on trending stories and be commented on by the newscasters. The experience is no longer passive, but rather fully developing and interactive.

The technologies today have also enabled ordinary citizens to become journalists in their own right. Inexpensive digital cameras and cheap computers offer just about anyone the opportunity to produce and air stories. Web based publications give people the opportunity to market oneself, build an audience and establish viable journalism sites (Gordon, 2005). Some professional journalists are left wondering whether press credentials are even worth acquiring in today's market (Niles, 2011), especially considering that during times of heavy competition amongst media mergers it is often debatable if the public interest is of the utmost concern

(McCombs, 2005). As physical borders blur with the increased use of digital media, journalistic licensing and its utility is becoming an increasingly complex issue.

Journalists are beset by a host of pressures not the least of which come from media owners and corporate sponsors. In fact, a 1998 study demonstrated that more than eight out of ten U.S. citizens believed advertisers held an unjustifiable influence over editorial content (Tompkins, 2011). This is a key concern since independent journalism is critical for a well-informed populace (Mercier, 2012). News organization mergers by massive conglomerates put the shareholder's interests ahead of independent journalism. The autonomy of journalists has been effectively reduced due to corporate concerns and their own public relation assertions. The pressures of big business interests have undermined the legitimacy of journalism today (McChesney, 2003).

Journalism school attendance has increased as journalism jobs have declined (Kolowich, 2010). Further, many journalists lack any journalism training in the new media market. This seems to go back to the time before fading traditional journalism began when journalists came from blue-collar lives and the college bred journalists were a new aspect in news-gathering (Stepp, 2010). Economic crisis in modern day newsrooms has reduced the number of journalists significantly (Stverak, 2010) and it is not unusual for reporters in the print industry to be trained as photographers and videographers to compensate for a diminished staff (Layton, 2008). The void has been filling with recent journalism school graduates and untrained bloggers (Gordon, 2005).

Student enrollment in journalism schools has hit record numbers as traditional markets and majors dwindle (Kolowich, 2010). Publications are recruiting young journalists as well as college students to cover local beats, which the press can no longer afford to cover. Concern over

un-scrutinized politicians has fostered this approach and publication editors are aware of the journalistic limitations, but the need for journalists in the field is paramount to deter political corruption (Strasser, 2010).

The increase in both untrained and undertrained news gatherers has caused concern for audiences and government (Gordon, 2005). The primary concern is whether news reported today is based on opinion or fact rather than a neutral watchdog perspective (Ingram, 2011). There is a growing desire to establish a journalism licensing organization to differentiate between professional journalists and citizen journalists (Oosting, 2010). However, there is also strong opposition to this notion. The expanding Fifth Estate, comprised of citizen journalists and bloggers, continues to replace the fourth estate of traditional news gatherers and reporters (Winter, 2010).

Potential outcomes of a government-controlled agency managing press qualifications have both support and concern in our media profuse world. Some argue the necessity of accurate and reliable journalism requires a licensing board to determine who is in fact a true journalist (Winter, 2010) while others strongly oppose such an organization, citing the hazards such a system would create (Gillmor, 2010). The concept of a slippery slope is the overwhelming concern for supporters of the free press (Oosting, 2010) where journalists may very well be the best equipped to regulate themselves. The government's role may then be to aid in the restructuring of current curriculums to better prepare upcoming journalists to utilize the current technology used media (Strasser, 2010).

Methodology

Three key research questions were of primary consideration in this study:

RQ 1: Is the licensing of journalists a viable option in today's overwhelming information society?

RQ 2: In our current system, what areas of journalism are capable of working successfully and what areas need overhauling?

RQ 3: How does our current system differ from the pre-web days of journalism?

Participants

A series of interviews with United States media specialists from a variety of disciplines was used to gather information for this study. This variety aimed to ensure a balanced perspective of those who are currently journalists, those who have done journalistic work in the past, and those who are media specialists and can provide insight to the field. Researchers contacted fifteen working specialists, and nine responded. The actual interviews were conducted with a total of seven participants of whom two were females and five were males.

The cross section of participants was varied. Since the pool of interviewees was limited to seven, each will be described in detail to offer insight into their backgrounds. Although the participants' specialties differentiate each has worked professionally either in the news media or with journalists during their careers. The researchers sought out an unbiased panel of participants who have a working knowledge of journalism and the machinations of the industry itself.

(A) A teacher of TV production at a New Jersey high school. He works independently as a videographer and editor for various media projects including independent films.

(B) An Assistant Professor from Desales University in the TV/Film Program who has worked in the film and video industries for nearly two decades. She has worked as a producer, reporter, editor, and director in journalism and feature film capacities.

(C) An independent casting director based on the East Coast who specializes in independent film.

(D) A specialist in the music and film industry. He works as a composer, orchestrator, mastering engineer, editor, screenwriter, film director, and producer.

(E) A senior editor for CNN of 10 years. He has a background in editing and sound production for news and creative services.

(F) A local broadcast TV specialist who additionally owns and operates a local video production company.

(G) The president of a communications company and former senior executive with the world's then largest public relations agency, Burson-Marsteller.

Procedure

An interview-based approach was utilized for this study to attain a deeper insight into the thoughts and concerns of the participants. The interviews took place over a period of five weeks. The researcher interviewed each participant separately and the sessions took place at either their home or business depending on availability. Durations ranged from 20 to 50 minutes and there was no payment involved as the participants volunteered their time and locations for the study.

The researcher also recorded the reviews as to allow for the conversation to be more open ended. However, a list of 13 questions, as seen in Appendix A, was used to open further paths of conversations, which allowed for varied responses from each of the participants depending on

their individual mind-sets. Each interview setting was free from distraction allowing for interviewer and interviewee to delve into possibilities, which would not be attainable from a questionnaire. During the interviews, the researcher allowed the interviewee to pursue their own thoughts in an effort to glean insights into their deeper thoughts concerning journalism.

The material was collected and digitally captured for study utilizing Final Cut Pro Studio 2 on a MacBook Pro. The researcher isolated the answers of each participant with relation to the specific question asked or some variation thereof. The interviews were transcribed longhand to enhance the familiarity of the material, filling an academic notebook. The data was then studied, analyzed and compared. The results were then interpreted and presented for this study.

Findings

The overall question of whether or not journalists should be licensed was answered with a resounding "no" by all participants. The notion of licensing being based on a journalist's moral character was viewed as being preposterous by some of the participants and potentially harmful to journalism as a whole. Concern over whose morals would be the basis for who gets licensed was unsettling to most of the participants. Many reasons were presented as to why such an organization should not be allowed to form. A sense of fear and mistrust of putting so much power into the hands of a few was prominent. The licensing concept was considered anathema to journalists due to their reliance on the First Amendment. Restricting citizen journalists from gathering and presenting information to the general public was deemed a breach to this constitutional right. A general awareness of news distortion and lack of ethics was acknowledged but there was a strong belief that this situation would work itself out. The reality of the pace at which news is produced today was deemed an issue regarding fact checking for reporters. Also, a basic laziness by the public to verify what they glean from news was also voiced.

A majority of the participants hit upon the idea that news today is presented as a form of entertainment. The need to excite the audience with hyped up stories and other marketing strategies was considered necessary to keep ratings up and keep advertising dollars coming in. However, participants expressed that they felt that there is an unhealthy amount of opinion woven into news today and that the audience should be aware or even made aware of the distinction between opinion and fact. The checks and balances of our journalist system, including ombudsmen, press councils and media critics, were deemed adequate as watch dog entities. Commentary from consumers and other reporters keeps an awareness of news distortion active in the media as well and the enormity of current news sources was seen as a positive aspect.

Audiences taking in such volumes of information can expect a reasonable cross section to from which to draw. The legal system also punishes for libel and copyright issues, which further offers reassurance for audiences. Ultimately, participants considered the public to be the preexisting board for journalism critique and criticism. The belief was the audience would filter out the poorly prepared and untrustworthy news in time and that reliable journalism would then prevail.

The concept of what journalism means hovered around one important aspect -- the reporting of facts. News reporting requires keeping one's own opinions to remain out of the story and allowing the audience to interpret the information provided for them; the gathering and presenting of unbiased facts was key. The participants collectively believed that what journalism used to be was clear, but today's journalism is ambiguous. The separation of opinion from fact appeared less prevalent in today's journalism; opinion pieces and commentary were not deemed problematic, simply the distinction between factual news and editorials. Journalism requires facts and only facts, which are checked and backed up by more than one source. Opinions are biased commentary meant purely for rumination and entertainment.

A majority of the participants felt that current journalism was seen as money driven, biased, and containing sensationalism out to catch and hold the attention of audiences. The lack of context in news stories leave audiences lacking the knowledge of how the individual facts fall into place. Further, the political polarization of news providers was seen as rife with bias -- that major news has become shallow and brief, relying on showmanship and titillation instead of reporting on quality news. However there were some participants who argued that most news "is on the up and up" regarding quality and trustworthiness. Those participants arguing that some elements of journalism are seeing beneficial changes report so because news inaccuracies can be reported on and critiqued by other journalists as well as citizen commentary on the web -- a

citizenry journalist population. One participant talked of many examples of reporters in recent times who fabricated stories and lost their jobs, and made the ultimate conclusion that if the population was more aware of what they are taking in, that their ability to judge fact from opinion would ensue.

Education

Journalism schools were once considered a licensing organization in their own right. Today's journalism is technology driven and citizen journalism has become prevalent. A concern among the participants was the lack of skill sets from new journalism graduates. Universities were seen as teaching the traditional aspects of journalism when there exists a need for new concepts to be taught. Young graduates being thrust into situations they could not handle was also addressed as an area of concern. Specifically taking stories at face value and not following up with fact checking due to the intense demand for story turn around. Some stories given to new reporters are agenda driven and reporting on them as they stand was considered to be hazardous to journalistic integrity. The speed of news has been greatly enhanced by modern technologies but so has the ability to research stories -- participants referenced that using the Internet to fact check was an economical and efficient reason as to why journalism should be more accurate today than in prior times. A participant in the educational environment echoed this by saying that Journalism schools need to improve upon current methods for news-gathering -- the changes in media have occurred so rapidly that the original curriculums are insufficient, as many do not cover such areas as incorporating new media technologies. These issues were considered transient, however, as society and journalism schools catch up to technology it was thought that the issues would eventually work themselves out.

Media Trends

When asked about current media changes and trends, the participants reported a mixed set of reactions that fell into either negative or positive categories. The negative category essentially encompassed thoughts that opinion biased commentators are passing themselves off as journalists and deceiving or manipulating the public. The positive category stated that more voices were heard in the media due to variegation of media sources from the Internet. Diversification of news sources was deemed a meritorious aspect -- individuals are simply mere clicks away from publishing or broadcasting their own stories to inform the public.

Despite having varying degrees of positive and negative opinions of current media trends, the contrast between the newsroom of the past and the present was seen as extensive. At one time, a reporter would have their own beat and know their sources personally, while today social media helps in newsgathering in an effort to obtain immediate results. Also, the news sources of the past were very limited. Now the availability of news outlets grows daily and this diversity of sources, though potentially confusing at times, offers a clearer view of news events. Similarities in news stories give the viewer a better picture of the actual happenings. Still, the increase of untrained and undertrained journalists tend to flood the media with opinions and inaccurate news -- mistakes are made and can be corrected in large online information pools like Wikipedia and YouTube (Compton & Comor, 2007). While the diversification of news today was seen as a boon by participants there was also a general notion that the news of the past was more trustworthy, even if limited.

Discussion

Research suggests that a journalism licensing policy is not the answer (Ingram, 2011). There is a belief that such a policy is inherently unconstitutional (Winter, 2010). Journalists rely on the First Amendment heavily and limiting the press institutes a slippery slope that could prove disastrous to a free society (Oosting, 2010). The prominent belief is that once a government takes control of who can report the news they will inevitably begin controlling the news (Kubiske, 2010). Government controlled journalism exists in many societies around the world but many such nations are repressive in nature (Strasser, 2010). The purpose of journalism is the gathering and reporting of facts to the people the journalists serve. Ferreting out political corruption is one of the key aspects of good journalism. Having an existing government controlling who reports on it is inherently dangerous.

Journalism appears to have degraded in our society but this could be due to the advancements of technology changing the methods of news-gathering and dissemination too quickly. Economic strife in modern news organizations has created a void, which has been filling with an undertrained news force (Oosting, 2010). Revitalizing journalism schools to better prepare young journalists to handle new media could greatly benefit our current system (Foremski, 2008). Further, relying on the public to differentiate between fact and opinion based news is not only reasonable but an essential liberty. Should some journalists fabricate or distort information in the media then, other journalists and citizens can expose them. The immediacy of the Internet allows for fast repercussions initiated by anyone with access to the web. The court systems can further penalize wrong doings if they are found to be deliberate, unlawful and damaging.

A distinction between what is opinion and what is fact is perhaps the bigger issue, not who gets to report on information, as reinforced through the opinions of the media specialist participants in this study. Inevitably skewed and distorted news sources are discovered and exposed. Damage is often short term. Once exposed, journalists lose credibility and news organizations loose viewers and advertisers. If the public wants the truth and there is more opinion and bias in the news, then perhaps that is why audiences are leaving mainstream media sources for alternative news media and the Internet.

While the news sources of our pre-web society are deemed to have had more integrity than our current sources, they were in fact limited in number. Diversity of sources is generally considered an asset for a free press. Once society adjusts to the technological advancements of modern day journalism and training of new journalists in their uses occurs, an ethical and competent information system may be more likely to emerge.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Should journalists be required to pass a licensing process to be considered professional?

2. What does journalism mean to you?

3. What could the bonuses of a licensed journalism organization be?

4. What could be the consequences of a licensed journalism organization?

5. What pitfalls of such an organization would need to be avoided?

6. What parameters should be implemented?

7. If a board were formed, what qualifications should a member possess?

8. What areas of news should be governed? (i.e. local, national, entertainment, technology, etc.)

9. Should verifiable facts be the basis?

10. Should morality be the basis?

11. What news validity are you aware of from our current system?

12. What hazards are you aware of from our current system?

13. What do you see as the contrast between our journalistic past (pre-web) and the present?