

Conference 2004: Journalism Training

Journalism Training: Current Practices and Future Needs.

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1.0 BACKGROUND

I visited 15 newspapers and the NZPA to conduct face-to-face interviews with editors and senior staff about journalism training. The interviews had two aims:

- To get editors' feedback on current training.
- To explore new training opportunities for Wintec's School of Communication .

2.0 PROCEDURE

2.1 Who was surveyed?

2.1.1 The newspapers included:

- Three metropolitan papers (circ: above 90,000)
- Five provincial papers (circ: 10,000-42,000)
- Six community papers
- One national weekly
- NZPA

2.1.2 Twelve papers were based in the North Island and three in the South Island .

2.2 The Questions

2.2.1 The questions covered:

- Current training
- Internships and relationships with training institutes
- Strengths and weaknesses of graduates
- Access to external training courses
- Future training needs
- Qualities of good journalists

3.0 FINDINGS

3.1 All papers

3.1.1 The comments most frequently made about graduates were:

- Graduates have good basic news writing skills.
- They have a good work ethic and a willingness to learn.
- They are generally careful and accurate.
- Some adapt to the newsroom culture easily; others take longer.
- Most have difficulty meeting deadlines and juggling assignments.
- Spelling and grammar are generally poor.
- They don't put up their own story ideas.
- Many lack tenacity.
- There is a lack of diversity of experience. Most graduates are female, white and from similar backgrounds. There are fewer graduates from different walks of life – “the other side of the tracks.”
- Dress standards are often poor, especially among male reporters.

3.1.2 The comments most frequently made about training were:

- Students need more “real” experiences. The gap between classroom and newsroom experiences needs to be reduced. Training institutes should be replicating deadline and multi-assignment pressures.
- More emphasis should be put on time management and meeting deadlines.
- Graduates are not prepared for a multi-media environment. Training needs to recognise that journalists will soon be asked to write online, plus do a piece to camera or a voice report.
- There is very little advanced work done. It would be valuable to offer some students a special project that would extend their skills.
- Care needs to be taken to choose the right students for training, especially those who show a hunger and passion for news rather than an interest in writing. Journalism is much more about being curious and having a social conscience than about being “good at English.”
- Recruiters need to tap into a wider field. A good course should have a diversity of people who reflect the community.

3.1.3 Internal training

- There is very little ongoing internal training on community newspapers and provincials.
- Most of the metropolitan papers provide regular internal training.

3.1.4 External training

- External courses include those offered by the JTO and some management courses run by training institutes.
- The JTO courses are valued by most editors. However, community editors say it is difficult to release staff to attend them and that travel costs prohibit staff attending.
- Two editors were critical of the JTO courses. One said they reflected an “old-style of journalism - leftwing, and unionised.” He said, “There are more risks being taken now. The environment has changed. The courses should reflect that and be more challenging.”
- Most editors felt there were opportunities for private providers to establish high quality training courses, especially for specialised staff.

3.2. Community Newspapers

3.2.1 Background

- The communities produce one to three editions each week. Some also produce specialist publications such as monthly rural papers.
- The smallest newsrooms employ two journalists – an editor and a reporter/photographer. Larger newsrooms pool resources and have access to teams of subeditors and photographers, plus news executives.
- Staff turnover is higher than on larger papers. Most journalists move to bigger newspapers within 18 months.
- Community newspaper journalists have a high workload. A reporter may be assigned 6-8 stories a day. Reporters need to be able to prioritise assignments and manage their time effectively to meet deadlines. They also need to be versatile. Most reporters don't have the luxury of a single round. “Versatility is our middle name,” said one editor. “Journalists on this paper may cover a council meeting in the morning, a sports event in the afternoon and a fashion parade in the evening.”
- Journalists on community papers write, edit and take pictures as well as represent the newspaper at public functions.

3.2.2 Internal training

- There is little ongoing formal training on community papers. Some journalists report they have had no on-the-job training in their current employment.
- An editor commented that far more effort was put into training advertising reps than journalists.
- Some community newspaper editors have had limited (less than two years') newspaper experience. They mentor junior staff but have limited access to mentors themselves. They often work in isolation. They believe collegial support and feedback would improve their own work. “I'd like to have critical feedback,” said one. “When I try new things, I want to know if they work.” They have access to head office staff for advice on legal and management issues.

3.2.3 External training

- The cost of external training courses is prohibitive and editors report it is difficult to release staff for off-site courses.
- Some editors report external courses are too specialised or too far away to attend.

3.2.4 Skill gaps identified

- **Spelling and grammar.** Most editors report the standard of spelling and grammar is poor.
- **Time management.** Editors say many journalists have trouble juggling assignments and meeting real deadlines. “They are not well-prepared for the reality of newsrooms. It may not be possible to replicate newsrooms in the classroom but it would certainly help us if graduates had better time management skills.” Another said, “Journalism training needs to drill home the importance of deadlines. Students may get extensions on their assignments but it doesn't work that way in the real world. They have to be able to deliver on time.”
- **Interpersonal skills.** Reporters need special skills to handle relationships in small communities. “You can't afford to burn a source,” said one editor. “That person may be your only source.” The editors also report that journalists must be able to withstand the pressure from a local community to put a positive spin on the news. “There is considerable pressure (in a small community) to report issues positively,” said an editor. “The community can be critical of a newspaper's so-called negative coverage. It can be difficult covering a story when the community is sharply divided on an issue.”

An example was the Wairarapa Times-Age's exposure of a “P” problem in Featherstone where the community claimed the town had been betrayed by the local paper. As a result, some businesses threatened to withdraw their advertising.

- **Self-editing.** Several editors commented that graduates weren't able to critically analyse and self-edit their own stories.
- **Lack of substance.** The editors report that journalism graduates have good basic skills but their stories lack substance. “They don't stand up to scrutiny. There are big gaps and unsubstantiated details. They suggest the students' work has previously not been subjected to hard subbing and analysis,” said one.
- **Photography.** Photography skills are not well-developed, according to the editors. “Most of the (photography) skills are picked up on the job. They don't seem to learn very much about photography on their courses. On small papers, reporters are expected to take pictures.”

3.2.5 Community newspaper training needs

- Basic and extended writing skills
- Time management
- Photography
- Subediting/headline writing
- Technology
- Dealing with conflict
- Interviewing skills

- Community editor training sessions

3.3 Provincial Newspapers

3.3.1 Background

- Provincial newspapers have between 20 and 60 staff, including news executives, reporters, subeditors, photographers, librarians and graphic artists.
- Reporters may write for more than one publication. They rarely take pictures.
- Reporters carry a high workload and may cover two or more rounds, plus write for specialist pages. Editors say that means there is little time to focus on stories that fall outside rounds. “Reporters have less time to chase down elusive sources so they fall back on the ones they know. Reporting becomes largely institutional,” said one editor.
- Provincial newsrooms tend to be a mix of settled, experienced staff (mainly subeditors) and younger, less experienced staff (reporters). There are more female reporters than males and few Maori, Pacific Island or Asian journalists.
- Staff turnover is higher among reporters than subeditors. Reasons given include: remuneration, career opportunities and travel.

3.3.2 Internal training

- There is little formal in-house training.
- Reporters get informal feedback from chief reporters, news editors and sometimes editors.
- One editor holds weekly training sessions on topics such as writing intros.
- Reporters on the same paper also have monthly one-to-one sessions with the chief reporter to go through their clippings.
- Most newsrooms do not have regular performance appraisals.

3.3.3 External training

- External training courses such as those held by the JTO are seen as useful but of benefit to few because of costs and resources.

3.3.4 Skill gaps identified

- **Tenacity.** Provincial editors report that graduates have good basic writing and shorthand skills when they enter newsrooms. However, they say many lack drive and tenacity. “They are reasonable writers and they know how to construct a story but they don’t know how to push to get the information. Some are far too timid. They don’t like to be told to piss off. They want to please people,” said one editor. Another said, “They have to toughen up quickly. Some aren’t prepared to get their hands dirty. Their primary aim seems to be to write well, rather than to find out stuff.”

- **News “antennae”.** Some editors reported graduates do not have well-tuned news antennae. “They don’t see the stories unless they are handed them on a plate. Some think their job starts and ends with the assignment diary. We have to ram it home that they must be constantly tuned in to potential stories and bring those ideas to the news desk.”
- **Deadlines and accuracy.** Several editors said graduates were not well prepared to meet deadlines. “We have to work hard to get newcomers up to speed,” said one. Others identified inaccuracy and lack of general knowledge as problems. “I want reporters who can write solidly and not make a mistake rather than those who write with flair,” one said.
- **Spelling and grammar.** Poor spelling and grammatical errors were identified as weaknesses by all editors.
- **More females.** Some editors commented on the lack of males applying for reporting jobs. “The newsroom was becoming very female-oriented,” said one. “I tried to get a good bloke but it was hard.”
- **Lack of subs.** Most editors said they struggled to find subeditors. They believed there was an opportunity to offer specialised training in that field.

3.3.5 Provincial newspaper training needs

- Subediting/headline writing
- Design/graphic design
- Writing development/new ways of writing
- Feature writing
- Legal issues
- Digging deeper
- Management training
- Searching the Internet
- Official Information Act requests
- Photography
- Sports writing
- Editorial writing
- Research (library and Internet)

3.4 Metropolitan Newspapers

3.4.1 Background

- Metropolitan newsrooms employ between 60 and 100 staff, many of whom work in specialised areas.
- Most journalists aspire to work on metropolitan newspapers and, once they get jobs on them, they tend to stay longer. Staff turnover is lower than on the provincials and communities. Journalists who leave tend to go into higher paid jobs in public relations or government departments.
- The metropolitans report they have no difficulty recruiting general reporters. However, there is a shortage of good subeditors and specialist writers.
- The metropolitans' relationships with tertiary institutes are based on geographical proximity and the quality of the training offered. Most have a close relationship with their nearest tertiary institute. They also have longstanding relationships with larger institutes such as Canterbury University and AUT.
- The metropolitans offer student internships. They expect the interns to be the top students from the courses.
- Some of the metropolitans also offer students part-time work experience "to get a toehold in the newsroom". This may include research work, monitoring phones and helping out on the night shift. At least two papers have recently employed a student as a trainee subeditor.

3.4.2 Internal training

- Two of the metropolitans provide regular in-house training run by staff or outside tutors with specialist skills. One editor said his goal was to provide each staff member with one worthwhile training experience each year. "Our training is attuned to our business needs. The needs are identified through our performance management system. Each journalist has a development plan that identifies training needs that may be done by individual tuition."
- Another metropolitan said its training programme was "directed" not interest-based. "We focus on subjects such as writing, design, subbing, statistics for beginners and court reporting. The training may be individual tuition or training for all staff." This year, the paper ran eight sessions of one course on research and investigation (using the library and Internet). All newsroom staff attended.
- One newspaper has established an intranet training site. Course material is put online and upcoming courses are publicised online.

3.4.3 External training

- Most editors send staff to JTO courses.
- The metropolitan newspapers offer management training for young executives and some external specialised training such as business courses.
- Some newspapers organise special courses on subjects such as media law and privacy issues.

3.4.4 Skill gaps identified

- **Quantity over quality** . The editors would prefer to see evidence of higher quality work from graduates, especially projects that demonstrate students can dig deeper. “I had one applicant with 100 clippings,” said an editor. “But none of the stories was substantially developed. I would have preferred four or five pieces of writing of a higher quality.”
- **Deadlines**. The editors say they are concerned that journalism courses don't replicate deadline pressures. “They (graduates) are simply not used to completing an assignment by the end of the day. Normally (during training) they have two weeks to complete an assignment,” said one.
- **Diversity of experience**. There is concern about lack of diversity. The editors commented there were fewer “knockabout journos from the wrong side of the tracks who have a different range of life experiences.” Another said, “Our newsrooms don't reflect our communities. We are probably missing stories for that reason.”
- **Maori journalists**. Some editors were concerned by the lack of good Maori, Pacific Island and Asian journalists.
- **Research skills and general knowledge**. There was concern over graduates' lack of general knowledge and knowledge of history, and their ability to research subjects.
- **Pushing the boundaries**. Two editors said more emphasis should be put on training journalists to push the boundaries. “Our business is getting information and publishing it. That must be the prime driver. It should underpin every part of every journalism course. Everyone should be saying, ‘how do we get this into the paper?’”
- **Recruitment**. The editors stressed that curiosity and doggedness were the primary prerequisites for journalism and that any recruitment campaign should strongly reinforce that message. “There still seems to be a view that if you are good at English, journalism is for you,” said one. “The message needs to be changed. It is far more about being inquisitive and bolshy.”
- **Multi-media skills**. Two editors said students were not prepared for a “multi-media world” where journalists would be asked to produce stories for print, TV, radio and online publications during a news cycle.
- **Sloppy dress**. Several comments related to poor standard of dress and sloppy, non-professional attitudes, especially among male journalists.
- **Better than ever**. One editor commented that, in his view, journalists were better-trained than they had ever been.

3.4.5 Metropolitan newspaper training needs

- Entry-level subbing
- Advanced feature writing
- Week-long courses on advanced reporting and writing skills/analytical skills
- Multimedia skills – reporting for different radio/TV/print
- New technology – what is still to come?
- Management training for middle managers/strategic planning/project management

- Pushing harder to get things into print
- Sports writing
- Graphic design
- Photography
- Research skills
- Desktop publishing

4.0 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 The largest newspapers have effective and targeted internal training programmes and dedicated training managers.

4.2 Smaller papers do not provide regular internal training although some staff have access to external training courses. Most training is done informally through feedback from senior staff.

4.3 Most newspapers have sent staff to JTO courses and some newspapers provide private training for managers and senior staff.

4.4 All newspapers believed there were opportunities for private providers to offer high-quality specialised training for journalists.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Community Newspapers

5.1.1 The needs of community newspapers could be addressed in the following ways:

- Provision of collegial support
- Regular mentoring and feedback on writing and editing
- Management/time management training for staff
- Digital photography courses

5.2 Provincial Newspapers

5.2.1 The needs of provincial newspapers could be addressed in the following ways:

- High quality subbing courses

- Headline writing and design refresher courses
- Project management/change management training
- Regular analysis of writing and reporting techniques
- Refresher courses on interviewing techniques
- Training on Internet/library searches
- More competitions to raise the standard of journalism

5.3 Metropolitan Newspapers

5.3.1 The needs of metropolitan newspapers could be addressed in the following ways:

- Providing opportunities for projects to stimulate and keep staff – short sabbatical leave for personal projects
- Exchanges with other papers
- Multi-media training
- Writing sports stories as entertainment
- Subbing courses, especially writing headlines and standfirsts
- Week-long courses on advanced writing skills
- A course that encourages more robust reporting to push out the boundaries
- Finding new ways to publish stories