

11-1999

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David Ozmun

Ouachita Baptist University, ozmund@obu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Ozmun, David, "Status of the Shooter: News Coverage and Input from Photographers in Local Television News" (1999). *Articles*. 77.
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VOLUME 40 • NUMBER 3 • 1999

Feedback

SUMMER

Status of the Shooter: News Coverage and Input from Photographers in Local Television News'

David Ozmun, Ouachita Baptist University

The rise of the 24-hour regional cable news channel has focused attention on "one-man bands—also called video journalists (Beacham, 1996; Colman, 1996; Lieberman, 1998). An increase in the number of journalists who report and shoot their own stories has been attributed to, among other things, economic pressures and technological advances (Sherer, 1994; RTNDF, 1995; Dickson, 1997). Television stations in very small markets have traditionally required reporters to make contacts, interview sources, record the video and sound, write the script, and edit the taped material into a finished product (Lindekugel, 1994). In most markets, however, the concept of a newsgathering team has served as the norm (Smith, 1987; Cremer, Keirstead and Yoakam, 1996). There is some evidence to suggest that the use of video journalism in local television news organizations may be on the rise (RTNDF, 1995).

Flight Crew for Kosovar Refugees Arriving in the U.S.



Kelvin Story

Technological advances in newsgathering equipment offer news managers the option of utilizing only one person to fulfill newsgathering tasks (Rosenau, 1988; Brodie, 1991; Calen, 1993; Langman, 1993; Sherer, 1994; RTNDF, 1995). Television camera manufacturers offer increasingly smaller, lighter, less expensive but more sophisticated, camcorders (a camera/videotape recorder unit in which the recorder is built into the camera housing), and videotape formats that make it easier for one person to cover a news story (McConnell, 1996; Jessell, 1996a; Beacham, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to explore the current status of photographers in local television newsrooms to see if video journalism is a regular practice and whether it is associated with other newsgathering routines and professional norms. Much of the research into the television news environment has been ethnographic in methodology and critical in analysis (Epstein, 1973; Altheide, 1976; Tuchman, 1978; Gans, 1979). Television news research has also focused on the effects of individual, organizational, institutional and societal factors on media content (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). There is less research, however, into the effects of some of these factors (individual, organizational and institutional) on the organization itself, its structure, and personnel. Traditionally, the organizational structure of television newsrooms has been divided among news managers, news gatherers, and other newswriters who hold little journalistic influence or editorial control (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996). As a news gatherer, the reporter's "primary function is to collect and to frame information into one to two stories or packages per day" (Goedkoop, 1988, p. 33) that inform and engage the audience. The photographer's responsibility has been to illustrate the stories with appropriate and interesting pictures—that is, to complement the written and spoken information (Lindekugel, 1994). The question is whether photographers deserve to be included among news reporters or strictly as newswriters.

This study explores elements of two structures, "selecting" and "processing," via the perceptions of news photographers. The first refers to the situations in which decisions are made concerning the choice of news material for broadcast (the product); the second "refers to the application of work routines which affect the nature of this product as it passes through the 'chain' of decision-making" (McQuail, 1994, p. 212). Both often occur, suggest Cremer et al. (1996) during the morning editorial meeting, the catalyst for much of the day's activity. Whoever attends the meeting is expected to "bring hard material—stories, segments, series that are or will be ready to run—and to contribute to general discussion of how scheduled stories and breaking news will be covered" (p. 265).

Since organizational structures are created by human actors, they are open to change through human interpretation and application. Established norms reflecting influence, professional values, and superior-subordinate relationships are examples of structures that exist through application and acknowledgment. Comparing photographers' interpretations of the various work patterns explored in this study may uncover structural factors that support or challenge assumptions about some of these established norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Shoemaker and Reese (1996) portray it, media content can be affected and influenced by six variables: the individual, media routines, the organization, extramedia and ideological factors. The authors' depiction of media creation as a series of concentric circles is drawn from earlier research of media organizations and individuals. Shoemaker (1987) determined that very few variables intrinsic to the journalist affect content. One exception was the influence of professionalism. In an early study, McLeod and Hawley, Jr. (1964) devised a means of indexing professional orientations among journalists. Basing

their measurement indices on sociological studies of professionalization in other occupations, the researchers developed a measure of desired job characteristics, and a demarcation of respondents according to those characteristics. Items that were measured included attitudes toward specific aspects of job performance, professional training, and the organization of the company.

The researchers found significant differences between the responses of editorial and non-editorial employees. Those who scored higher on the professionalism measure expressed a stronger need for professional values, and were more critical of their organization. Other studies (LeRoy, 1973; Weinthal and O'Keefe, 1974; Smith and Becker, 1989) used many of the same indicators of professionalism to apply the concept to broadcast journalists. The research questions became a means for suggesting what constitutes a professional journalist and how he/she may be different from less professional associates in broadcasting.

Once a story is assigned, how much influence is brought to bear by the newswriters? Jacobs (1996) found that when news is produced, requirements handed down from above "were not hard constraints, but were mediated by the way newswriters saw the world" (p. 381). This was particularly true for when routines are interrupted by breaking news, events break with the normal pattern, and other coverage that prevents "orchestration" (p. 387). Jacobs concluded that it was the interpretive and communicative practices of newswriters that transform events into newsworthy stories. They "legitimate this sense of newsworthiness to their superiors, and construct broadcast texts" that conform to their perceptions of the story (p. 393).

There have been attempts at quantifying the conclusions of qualitative and critical examinations of individual and organizational effects on news. In a survey of Canadian newswriters, Pollard (1995) suggested that newspaper workers enjoyed job characteristics that are conducive to autonomy, control and responsibility, while broadcast newswriters were controlled more by the organization and by broadcasting's technological and scheduling pressures. Both reporters and photographers have expressed frustration in their work as journalists, and dissatisfaction with their station's product (Smith, 1987). Producers report feeling ratings pressures more than visual newswriters, while self-described photojournalists indicate ratings pressures violate their ethics (Upshot, 1994). The formal structure of the news hierarchy subordinates the news photographer to the level below management, and without the direct link to managers that reporters often enjoy (Cremer et al., 1996; Shook et al., 1996). Until recently, photographers were often classified as technicians (see Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996).

Some researchers have concluded there is more to producing the visual content for news than simply operating the camera. Because of perceived changes in the newsroom, Allen (1993), surveying news directors about hiring trends, concluded that the extent "to which reporters and videographers are needed is essentially determined by commitments to journalistic quality" (p. 7). In order to simply provide news, it would be more efficient to use material obtained elsewhere or just read the copy.

Based on the literature, this study posed three research questions:

- RQ1: How much of photographers' work is performed alone (video journalism)?
- RQ2: Does the proportion of solo work correlate with participation in news selection and processing situations?
- RQ3: Does the proportion of solo work correlate with professional values and working relations with reporters?

METHODS

Survey items were adapted from several questionnaires addressed to broadcast journalists (Smith 1986; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991; RTNDF, 1995). To operationalize video journalism, three questions were asked about work duties from the past five working days in which the photographer worked alone to some degree: (1) covering an event or story alone, (2) producing a package without any assistance from others, and (3) editing a story that he/she shot (while this does not constitute video journalism as it is usually portrayed, it does offer the photographer opportunities for more editorial input and responsibility). Photographers were also asked for the total number of story assignments in which they were involved over the previous five working days, so as to compute a percentage.

Specific statements alluding to the construct of "selecting" included covering a subject of importance to the photographer, influencing which aspects of a story should be emphasized, defining how a story will be used, writing, and participating in planning meetings. Statements that dealt with "processing" included the frequency with which photographers believe they influence the video coverage of an issue or story, management influences the video coverage, and a reporter influences the coverage.

Value statements included the importance of understanding local politics, identification of photographers as journalists, perception of news photography as secondary to the text, and importance of opportunity for creativity and story influence. Statements suggesting interaction included interpretations of working relationship with reporters, supervision from reporters, and neglect of facts by reporters in the search for video.

Data were gathered through a mailed questionnaire sent to news photographers currently employed full-time at commercial broadcast television stations selected randomly from the population listed in *Broadcasting & Cable Yearbook* (1994). Chief photographers and/or other news managers were contacted by phone and asked the names of their photographers, and for permission to include them in the sample. Assuming an average of six full-time news photographers per station², systematic random sample of 135 local television news operations (approximately 18 percent of the population)³ reached a target of about 800 potential respondents. Two follow-up phone calls were made to all non-responding stations. The responses determined that a final sample of 119 stations would reach approximately 1050 full-time photographers.

The survey instruments were sent to either individual photographers or, if the station would not release individual names, to chief photographers or other news representatives. Two follow-up letters were sent over a six week period, based on response cards. Overall, 398 usable instruments were returned, for a response rate of 38 percent.

Factor analysis was used to check the grouping of "selecting" and "processing" statements.⁴ The varimax rotated factor matrix supported the grouping of elements from four factors into the two constructs of "selecting" and "processing," with one exception. Items (relative frequency statements) that exceeded a criterion of .5 loading were retained within the loaded factors and used as an index for interpretation and analysis.

FINDINGS

The average (mean) age for a full-time local television news photographer in this sample was 34.5 years, while the mean years of experience as a photographer was 10.4. These averages are higher than the 30.7 years of age and 6.35 years of experience found by Smith (1987).⁵ The respondents in this study averaged 7.5 years working at their current

stations. The majority of respondents had received a college degree (74 percent), and another 22 percent had at least some college education.⁶ Of those responding (n = 394), 23 percent indicated that they were members of a union. Chief or senior photographers constituted 17.7 percent of the responding sample.

About 50 percent indicated that solo coverage constituted anywhere from 30 to 70 percent of their work. However, over 50 percent of the photographers surveyed suggested that they go out on an assignment by themselves less than half the time. The mean response was 47 percent. The percentage of video assignments edited by the respondents was notable for its extremes. Even though the mean was 62 percent, over 12 percent did not edit any of their own work, while about a third edited over 90 percent of their video work. Finally, the proportion of assignments that were complete one-man-band packages was low, with almost two-thirds of the respondents answering zero (the mean percentage was 11 percent). Only about 4 percent indicated that over half their assignments resulted in packages.

Barbara Lepor, WABC



Kelvin Story

For the second research question the respondents were asked to indicate, on a frequency scale ranging from never (1) through always (5), how often they contributed to or influenced certain decisions. The Spearman's rank order correlation results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Correlations Between Solo Work Percentage and
Frequency of News Selecting and Processing Involvement

SITUATIONS	r_s and (n)		
	<u>Solo coverage</u>	<u>Editing</u>	<u>Packages</u>
<u>Selecting</u> I am able to cover a subject when I think it's important and should be covered.	.02 (378)	.15** (382)	.08 (385)
I help influence which aspects of a story should be emphasized.	-.00 (379)	.21*** (382)	.12* (385)
I do the writing as well as the shooting for a story.	.13* (381)	.08 (385)	.30*** (388)
I help define how a story will be used in a newscast.	.00 (380)	.14** (384)	.15** (387)
I participate in daily planning meetings with producers, reporters and news managers.	-.04 (381)	.29*** (385)	.07 (388)
<u>Processing</u> The opinions or views of coverage of an issue/story	-.06 (383)	.09 (386)	-.02 (386)
Station management influences my coverage of an issue/story.	.10 (381)	-.01 (385)	.01 (388)
My opinions or views affect my coverage of an issue/story.	.01 (380)	.06 (384)	.04 (387)
I stage a scene for purposes of editing.	-.12* (381)	.05 (385)	.01 (388)
A news source attempts to manipulate video coverage of a story.	-.00 (372)	-.15** (376)	-.08 (378)

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001

For the first assignment variable, covering a story or event alone, a statistically significant correlation was found in only two cases. Some correlation was observed with the production of packages and writing, but with little else. With the variable "editing" there were two situations that suggested some correlation—influencing which aspects of a story should be emphasized, and participating in daily planning meetings with producers, reporters and news managers.

The third research question also found little positive correlation between either professional values or relationships with reporters and proportion of work that is executed alone. Based on how strongly the respondents agreed or disagreed with statements, no pairwise comparisons produced meaningful correlations (higher than .19), though a few were statistically significant. Only one association was found to be statistically significant and it was slight. The results are found in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlations Between Solo Work Percentage and Professional Values

STATEMENTS	r_s and (n)		
	<u>solo coverage</u>	<u>editing</u>	<u>packages</u>
<u>Values and Judgments</u> A thorough understanding of local politics is important for my job.	-.04 (375)	-.06 (379)	.02 (382)
Photographers are journalists more than technicians.	.05 (382)	-.02 (379)	.11* (382)
News photography should illustrate a story's verbal content.	-.05 (355)	.07 (377)	.14** (380)
Opportunity for photographers to be original and creative is important on most stories.	.02 (373)	.02 (377)	.15** (380)
It is important for me to have some influence on news coverage decisions when I am involved.	.04 (372)	.06 (376)	.07 (379)
<u>Reporter Relations</u> I have a good working relationship with most reporters at this station.	-.07 (365)	-.06 (369)	.03 (372)
There is freedom from editorial close supervision from reporters.	.08 (363)	-.02 (367)	.11* (370)
Some time reporters need to check the facts of a story in the search for info.	.01 (364)	-.07 (368)	-.03 (371)

*p < .05 **p < .01

DISCUSSION

The work of a video journalist who does it all may be shaping the content of cable news channels and small-market television news, but for the sample of photographers participating in this study, only a relative handful match their cable counterparts. And for

those who do produce their own packages, there is little to suggest this translates into greater involvement in the selecting and processing of news, except in cases where the photographer's story is at stake. Even a higher number of packages produced over the previous five days did not strongly correlate with higher frequencies of writing by photographers.

The National Press Photographers Association, the Poynter Institute and other journalism organizations encourage photographers to be well-rounded journalists, suggesting story ideas and taking leadership roles (Potter, 1997). The findings from this study suggest many may not realize the potential of their role. As one photographer puts it, "Photographers need to suggest stories in the morning meeting, not sit in the parking lot with the engine running and waiting for the next assignment" (Potter, p. 5).

This survey was limited in both its scope and its population. No effort was made to measure or analyze the nature of assignments. Videotaping a burning building does not require the reportorial skills of campaign finance reform or physician-assisted suicide. A content analysis of stories that are shot and/or produced by photographers may clarify the context of one-man-band journalism. For that matter, future research needs to explore the practice from the reporter's perspective. Under what circumstances are the reporters being asked to do the shooting? And how often are reporters working with video supplied from a source not directly employed by the station?

In addition, a comparison of local and regional cable news photographers with their broadcast counterparts may provide a clearer picture of variables that relate to increased involvement in news selecting and processing situations. Technological innovations and economic necessities suggest continued realignment of the newsroom, modifying both responsibility and authority. This rapidly changing profession promises a future that will require of journalists technical as well as editorial talents. Those photographers who cannot edit videotape, write a script, and contribute to daily planning meetings may have their photographic duties given to others as well. Another scenario might unfold if photographers' solo work increases without at least some editorial input. Either way, broadcast journalism is threatened when clarity and context are sacrificed simply because one person can get the video.

NOTES

¹ This research received financial support from the National Photographers Foundation.

² From unpublished table, compiled by Vernon Stone (personal communication, February 8, 1996). Very small stations averaged two photographers, and very large stations averaged 17.

³ This, according to Stone's "Local TV News Operations" 1994 survey projection of an estimated 740 newsrooms at commercial stations.

⁴ Babbie (1986) suggests that use of interval-based measurements for ordinal-type data when the purpose is for researcher understanding, but he warns against using such measurements for inferential statistical purposes.

⁵ Using a one-sample test, with the 1986 mean for the test value ($p < .001$).

⁶ Smith computed a mean from four categories of education (4 = graduate degree, 3 = bachelor's degree, 2 = some college, 1 = high school or less) resulted in 2.57. This would suggest more education by respondents in this study.

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