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The Lure of Journalism

What motivates a young person to become a journalist? This is a very competitive profession that primarily takes college graduates who are highly literate and who have high levels of intellectual curiosity. Yet these young journalists received average starting salaries of only \$30,000 in 2006.¹ Why make the effort? Why would a college student, active in student life and in the plethora of organizations that come with it, turn to a profession that tends to isolate its members from socializing with others? Journalism does not rate that high in popularity among the general public, and many parents worry that their children will not be able to make much of a living if they become journalists. Additionally, the newspaper industry is facing serious threats to its survival with readers and advertisers turning to other media platforms such as television and the Internet. Finally, although the average daily newspaper in America is still highly profitable, much of that profit comes from cutbacks in departments seen as “non-revenue producing,” and several media companies perceive the newsroom as one of these departments. Therefore, even as the number of daily newspapers has shrunk from two or three in every major city to one in all but a few cities, the number of reporting and editing jobs on many newspapers has also decreased. The profession is now more competitive than ever. So we return to the question: What motivates a young person to become a journalist?

The Love of Reading and Writing

One of the most common traits found among aspiring journalists is that they simply love to read and they love to write. Part of this love springs from their

insatiable curiosity, but part of it is their love affair with the written word and their artistic desire to create something profound and beautiful. Here's what author Michael Walker, formerly of *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, says about this passion: "What got me interested in journalism was good writing," Walker explains.

My father used to read my brother and me James Thurber short stories as bedtime stories; plus both parents were avid readers of the *Chicago Daily News* in the 70s when it still had Mike Royko and others. Also I was deeply influenced by *Rolling Stone* and the writings of Joe Eszterhas, Hunter Thompson, and Timothy Crouse.

They were such good writers; they made me want to write and report as well as they did. So I took the shortest route I could think of, and, since I liked rock and played in a band, I started writing concert reviews for my high school paper. Stuff like Jethro Tull, Elton John, the Faces, etc. All the big shows that came through Chicago.²

Walker combined those passions of reading, writing, and music and wound up as an arts and entertainment writer for the *Los Angeles Times* and then as author of *Laurel Canyon: An Inside History of Rock and Roll's Legendary Neighborhood*.

Jim Robertson, managing editor of the *Columbia Daily Tribune*, found he could weld his love of writing to newspaper journalism.

"I got my first byline in our community weekly paper at about age 10," Robertson says. "It was an account of a 4-H camping trip, and I instinctively used storytelling technique. The positive feedback was a revelation. I led a team in high school that established a weekly community alternative newspaper. During that time in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the power of newspaper journalism took on a new tone for me as I read reports from Vietnam and Watergate—unprecedented war coverage."

What he discovered was there is a kind of unwritten contract existing between the journalist and the reader when it comes to newspaper journalism.

"I started to understand the intimate connection between readers and their newspapers," he explains, "and the fact that readers expect not only information but leadership. Tremendous potential to be a progressive force. The mix of ego and altruism hooked me early and sustained me through high school and college."

And one Illinois reporter said in response to a nationwide survey on reporter motivations:

Reporters most enjoy the creative process that goes into writing a good story, being able to choose the correct words, organization and mood without the interference of someone else.³

Journalists are, by nature, voracious readers. Walk into most journalists' homes or apartments and you will be greeted by full bookcases and other books scattered about, both nonfiction and fiction. Journalists love to devour information and get a lot of their story ideas and observational clues from other writers' works. They also pick up ideas on writing itself. Many journalists are born or cultivated editors who read not just for pleasure and information but also to see how the author writes. Is there anything about this style that I like or dislike? Can I incorporate it into my own writing style, or even change my style to read more like this? These are questions that haunt journalists as they read, and, consciously or subconsciously, they are believers in the saying that "to write well, you have to read a lot and write a lot." So journalism becomes a favored choice for a profession because reading and writing are what journalists do on a daily basis as they research and report their stories.

As for writing itself, journalists find a lot of creative possibilities existing within the framework of journalistic style because that framework evolves to make room for the best writers and reporters. The traditional "inverted pyramid" format has given way to more narrative storytelling that is nearly identical in form to the narrative style that fiction writers use. But even within the inverted pyramid (summary lead, amplification paragraph, followed by details in descending order of importance), many journalists find creative territory and work with a wide range of creative analogies, similes, and individual words and combinations of them to create beautifully descriptive passages. Ever since Truman Capote shook the journalistic world with his new style of "nonfiction novel" when he wrote *In Cold Blood* nearly five decades ago, other journalists have continued to open what had been a formulaic journalistic structure, to adapt this structure to the styles of many different writers.

An Intense Curiosity

Closely associated with their passion for reading is the insatiable curiosity that journalists have about what is going on. Journalists must determine whether the surface action is as it seems or whether there is something else going on beneath the surface and why. A nationwide survey of reporters revealed the following areas related to curiosity as prime positives of the profession for these responders: learning new things every day, meeting newsmakers, covering a variety of stories, and having a status as an insider.⁴ Journalists, probably since childhood, have wanted to know how things work and have been unsatisfied with pat answers. Frequently, journalists

will say that one of the best things about their jobs is getting to learn new things every day. If a newspaper is the classroom of its readers, then the world is a classroom for journalists—or at least that portion of the world the journalist covers.

One television journalist turned college professor, Gretchen Dworznik, described her motivation this way: “Even as a child I’d always loved the news, and I got most of it from television news shows. Also, Mom was a magazine freak, and I’d read her *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines and even cut out articles on major stories like the Challenger disaster and Pan Am 103. Not out of morbidity, but just out of interest.” Her story is not unlike that of many other current and former journalists. If people are interested in slaking their curiosity about the world, then journalism is the career for them.

A Desire to Contribute

The love of reading and writing and an intense curiosity about the world can help drive a person into journalism, but the desire to contribute to society—to right the wrongs and make things better—is often what keeps them there. And, for many, this embodiment of near-missionary zeal is the prime motivator for entering the profession. Listen to what a couple of journalists have to say about this. Here is what Peter Bhatia, executive editor of *The Oregonian*, says about his motivation:

It is the same today as it was when I was a teenager. I loved writing stories, I loved being the eyes and ears for others, and I very much wanted the opportunity to do something that had a social purpose. Working in newspapers has fulfilled my career expectations. I wanted to do meaningful work, have the opportunity to be a witness to history, have an opportunity to make a difference through the work we do in newsrooms.

A deep concern for helping others was a prime motivation for Joe Hight’s becoming a journalist in the first place, and he discovered that many people could be helped simply by learning the truth about situations in the world. He majored in journalism at the University of Central Oklahoma and has spent nearly 30 years in the profession since. He is managing editor for features and newsroom training at *The Oklahoman*, the Oklahoma City newspaper that led the coverage of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

“Idealistically, I wanted to make a difference in people’s lives,” Hight says. “Early on when I worked at a campus newspaper I learned that the

media have a significant effect on people and how they react to news and events that affect their lives. I also found that, because of the First Amendment, journalists were vital to our democracy. Those two factors, and my instructors and fellow journalism students in college, motivated me.”

The Grady College of Journalism at the University of Georgia conducts an annual, nationwide survey of recent graduates in journalism and mass communication. Among the questions asked are ones related to what new journalists like about their jobs. Every year, these recent grads report a high level of satisfaction derived from feeling they are making a difference in society.⁵

The Independence Factor

Most writers love the independence that comes with this creative craft. Writing or reporting is often an individual effort, although much less so when one reports for a television station, where reporters, videographers, and editors usually work as a team. A newspaper reporter generally pursues a story on her own, however, possibly after initial consultation with the editor and any photographer or graphic artist assigned to do supplements to the story. Reporters love blending into the woodwork of the events they cover. Again, that is harder to do for television reporters because they are on-air talent who are easily recognized by many on the street. Even so, television reporters enjoy the same ideal of independence that newspaper reporters do when it comes to actually reporting and crafting the text of their stories. Few other professions allow their practitioners to enjoy the kind of independence that journalists enjoy, and that is a big draw for many who go into journalism. Even with the ever-present reality of editors, some of whom are prone to make changes to reporters’ copy without first consulting them, reporters seem to feel they have more independence than those in most other professions.

Like other aspects of the business, however, independence is not an absolute. There are pressures and organizational requirements, and the team aspect of television news is one, as has been noted. But there are several other potential restrictions to a reporter’s independence. Among them are the following:

- *Available resources.* Some stories are just too time consuming or expensive for a newspaper or television station to cover. For example, a reporter wanting to do a story requiring expensive travel to another region might discover that the project is too expensive. The story, if done at all, will have to be done from home base. A more common example of a resource restriction is lack of time. A story that would take a reporter a long

time to research and produce is rarely pursued. Most daily news operations require their reporters to produce at least one story a day, if not more. One reason investigative projects have been curtailed at many news outlets is that these stories just take too long, take the reporter out of the daily rotation of stories, and are deemed too expensive.

- *Editors and their expectations.* When a reporter wants to do a story that his editor doesn't define as news or when he wants to take a different angle on the story than the editor wants, friction can arise, and the story may not be done at all. At least not by that reporter. Getting approval of the reporter's version depends on how flexible the editor is and how well the reporter can sell the story and its angle to the editor.

- *The marketing department.* In newsrooms across the nation, walls have come down between the newsroom and the marketing department. More and more, stories are being judged as interesting (or not) to those who live in areas of the city where the newspaper wants to concentrate its efforts to secure subscribers and advertisers. To the dismay of many reporters and editors, that means more suburban, middle-class coverage and less coverage of those in need in the inner city. The disenfranchised don't usually subscribe to newspapers, and advertisers don't target them as buyers. So the marketing goals of the newspaper or TV station may emerge as paramount in some decisions on what areas of town to cover the most. This potential restriction varies from one news company to the next, depending on how much independence the company grants its news operation.

- *Public journalism.* This concept of news, which has been in existence for a couple of decades and which gains more favor with some news companies than with others, is controversial in the profession. Some see it simply as paying more legitimate attention to the news consumers by asking them what they would like to see covered. Others see it as abdicating the editorial responsibilities of the newsroom to untrained and self-interested groups and individuals. Public journalism is an effort to connect more with news consumers, getting them more involved in the selection of news stories, seeking more feedback from them, and setting up forums that look for solutions to the problems covered. Some news media set up editorial advisory boards of readers or viewers; other news operations do readership or viewership surveys and use the results to help them define news for that market.

- *Consultants.* Television news operations have used consultants for many years to guide them in their selection of what news to cover and in the ways of packaging those stories. One of the jobs of these consultants is

to monitor the kinds of stories and “sweeps” series that are working in other markets around the country and to inform news directors at client stations about these results. Some of these consulting companies are national in scope, and they include Frank N. Magid Associates, Inc., as well as Audience Research & Development. Many journalists dislike the influence these consultants have over their own newsrooms and over the kinds of stories they are assigned to cover.

- *The “chilling effect” of libel.* Another reason that some news media have backed off from doing investigative stories is that they often result in allegations of wrongdoing that can result in libel suits filed against the newspaper or television station. Even though the news operation may feel it can win the case, the cost of fighting a libel suit can be extreme in and of itself. It is out of the question for some smaller news operations to respond to lawsuits, and it is an unwanted hassle for many larger news media. So the threat of libel itself can cool a story down if the editors, news directors, or publishers and general managers decide it’s not worth it. This threat is felt by even the largest news media. CBS decided to back off airing the full interview with Jeffrey Wigand, former head of research for Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation, who was alleging nicotine boosting by the company. The reason was the threat of a lawsuit (in this case because of “tortuous interference”) posed by B&W and treated seriously by the legal division and top management of CBS-TV. The interview aired at a later date, but only after other media had published and aired the same story first. The whole episode, which tarnished the CBS reputation for a while, was the subject of the film, *The Insider*.

At first glance, it would seem there are several threats to journalistic independence, but many daily news reporters never encounter these potential restrictions and, when they do, don’t run into them often. Journalism is still a job with a great deal of creative independence.

Being on the Inside

Journalists love being on the inside of things. They love meeting newsmakers and getting to know them, and they love being the first to know things. This motivation is related to the one previously discussed, curiosity, but it extends that motivation to being able to rub shoulders with newsmakers on a regular basis. This desire can also compromise a reporter, however, so journalists know they must be vigilant in keeping the line drawn between friendships and professional relationships. In the real world, that line gets crossed

a lot, and it falls to the reporter to keep her integrity as a journalist intact, even though a friendship with a source or government official may exist. It's not easy to mix the two kinds of relationships, especially when events call for the reporter to do a harsh story on a friend.

Both journalists and government officials know they need each other to achieve their own goals. It's a symbiotic relationship in which the source needs the journalist to get a particular side of the story out, and the journalist needs the source in order to provide the story in the first place. The journalist-source manipulation can go both ways. The film *Capote* depicted the relationship that writer Truman Capote had with the convicted murderer Perry Smith following the 1959 brutal slaying of Herbert Clutter's family on a quiet Kansas farm. This was a complicated relationship wherein Smith and Capote needed one another, and each tried to manipulate the other for his own individual ends. Capote was working on what would become the classic nonfiction novel, *In Cold Blood*, and he needed everything Perry could tell him. Perry wanted to stay alive and needed Capote to help him gain appeals. Beyond the self-interest and manipulation, however, there seemed to exist a real friendship and caring between the two men, who found themselves to be more alike than many would assume. At one point in the film, while talking with Perry in his death-row prison cell, Capote tells Perry, "We came from the same house; I came out the front door, and you went out the back." In crossing the line between friend and professional journalist, Capote created difficulties both for himself and for Perry. Others noted the closeness between the writer and his source. One could make an argument that, in cases like this, the lure of journalism can also be the writer's quest to understand himself or herself better. Here is how one writer viewed Capote and Perry Smith:

After "In Cold Blood" was published, Capote's friends and detractors (and he had plenty of both) would remark on the parallels between the author and Perry Smith, the more sensitive and guilt-ridden of the two killers (Richard Hickock was the other). Possibly, Capote felt a physical kinship to Smith: His body, as one of his "swans" would later recount in George Plimpton's "Truman Capote," combined a boyish face and torso with "the legs of a truck driver." More likely he simply understood that what separated him from Smith, more than anything, was luck. Capote, like Smith, had been born to absent, unreliable parents. Both had suicide and alcoholism in the family. Both were desperate for acceptance, but they also had ironclad estimations of their own importance—Perry, in his words, was "special"; Capote, in his own, "a genius." Were it not for his mother's second marriage and his own considerable charms and angelic good looks (and his keen ability to ingratiate himself to his benefactors), Capote might have ended up as alone and desperate as Smith did. Like Smith,

Capote knew exactly what he wanted to be, and he constructed himself accordingly. Capote's ambitions were realized; Smith's weren't.⁶

Another journalist has written about how being so close to the intensity of stories can lead a writer to a deeper understanding of himself or herself. He is Anderson Cooper of CNN's popular news show *AC 360°*. About this phenomenon, which for him is a lure in journalism, he writes about his mother's advice to him when he asked her, following the pain of his brother's suicide, what she thought he should do after graduating from Yale:

"Follow your bliss," she said, quoting Joseph Campbell. I was hoping for something more specific—"Plastics," for instance. I worried I couldn't "follow my bliss" because I couldn't feel my bliss. I couldn't feel anything at all. I wanted to be someplace where emotions were palpable, where the pain outside matched the pain I was feeling inside. I needed balance, equilibrium, or as close to it as I could get. I also wanted to survive, and I thought I could learn from others who had. War seemed like my only option.⁷

So Cooper headed to the war zones of the world as a freelance journalist, quickly parlaying his stories into jobs with the networks, winding up at CNN. Discussing one particular harrowing moment in Croatia, he reveals what he saw in himself in a near-death moment:

I'd just set up my tripod when I heard a loud crack. I turned and saw a tile fall off a nearby column. But the time it hit the ground, I realized that it had been struck by a bullet. Someone had taken a shot . . . I captured some of it on camera, and narrated what I was seeing. I was white as a corpse. When I looked at the tape recently, though, I saw something I hadn't remembered. I noticed the faint hint of a smile on my face.⁸

Being on the inside of news in the making is an alluring thing for journalists, but it can also cause trouble when they try to separate themselves out personally and professionally from the people and events they cover. Former Toledo television reporter Gretchen Dworzniak put her dilemma this way: "My decision to leave the news business had a lot to do with the issue of detachment," she says. "I didn't like to be too detached, but it became hard to handle the attachment as well after the fact. So I was in a kind of Catch-22 situation. Do I care? Do I not care? So I told myself maybe this dilemma is telling me perhaps I should get out now."

The lure to be on the inside of major news events or within the inner circle of newsmakers is tempting, but also potentially co-opting. In the case of Washington DC reporters, this lure is at once both promising and problematic.

High-profile journalists are often on the invitation lists of Washington's best and brightest. There might be a hope of co-opting a reporter to a particular side of an issue; sometimes, a network journalist just adds cachet to the guest list. But journalists might also be invited because a politician or bureaucrat wants to leak information to them or—sometimes—to find out what they know. If the reason is to leak information, it is a planned leak, generally authorized up the line. This information is usually off the record and often to be used for background purposes only. Veteran reporters understand all this and must filter the information they receive through that prism as well as recognize the attempts on the part of their host to persuade them to see things their host's way. Understanding the nature of the invitation, reporters often attend these events gladly because it gets them closer to the newsmakers and the issues they are covering and may allow them to pick up on some unplanned leaks that could advance their stories.

This cat-and-mouse game of Washington invitations is one of the most obvious examples of the symbiotic relationship that exists between journalists and politicians. Just as in the case of Truman Capote and Perry Smith, Washington reporters and politicians desperately need each other to further their own goals.

The Challenges of Going Deeper

Sometimes, the lure of journalism is simply to tell a story better and in more detail than it has been told so far. And, sometimes, the hurdles to telling that story act as a catalyst for writers addicted to their mission. The reminiscences of writers are strewn with tales of how they saw a story about an interesting event, thought it was underdeveloped, and felt a compelling urge to go deeper into that story. They knew that the story deserved more than it got, that the reaction of the friends and loved ones of the victims was missing. Here is how writer Sebastian Junger describes the origins of his book *The Perfect Storm*:

My own experience in the storm was limited to standing on Gloucester's Back Shore watching thirty-foot swells advance on Cape Ann, but that was all it took. The next day I read in the paper that a Gloucester boat was feared lost at sea, and I clipped the article and stuck it in a drawer. Without even knowing it, I had begun to write *The Perfect Storm*.⁹

Simply having the desire to tell a deeper story, however, does not guarantee that a reporter can get access to that story easily or that other challenges do not await. Yet these challenges often act as added bait to a writer hungry to

tell that untold story. It was that way with Junger, who overcame his own doubts about his ability to get to the heart of this story and who describes many initial challenges when confronting his sources in a Gloucester fisherman's bar:

The first time I'd ever gone into the Crow's Nest, it had taken me half an hour to work up the nerve . . . I was going in there to ask a woman about the death of her son. I wasn't a fisherman, I wasn't from Gloucester, and I wasn't a journalist, at least by my own definition of the word. I was just a guy with a pen and paper and an idea for a book. I slid a steno pad under my belt against the small of my back . . . Then I took a long breath and I got out of the car and walked across the street. The front door was heavier than I expected. . . . There were a dozen men clutching beers in the indoor gloom. Every single one turned and looked at me when I walked in. I ignored their looks.¹⁰

From that improbable start, Junger made friends with the bar's owner, Ethel Shatford, who had lost her son Bobby in the storm. With her on his side, the others in the bar gradually opened up to him, and a book was born. Anyone who has reported a tough story knows what the adrenaline rush must have felt like to Junger when he succeeded in getting people to talk.

Truman Capote's experience was similar to Junger's. He had read a brief 300-word story in the back of the *New York Times* about the Clutter family murder in Kansas. The story was done in journalism's classic inverted pyramid style, summarizing the act but never getting to the why of it or its impact. The lead read simply:

Holcomb, Kan., Nov. 15 [1959] (UPI)—A wealthy wheat farmer, his wife and their two young children were found shot to death today in their home. They had been killed by shotgun blasts at close range after being bound and gagged . . . There were no signs of a struggle, and nothing had been stolen. The telephone lines had been cut.¹¹

Capote immediately called his editor at *The New Yorker* and told him this was the story he wanted to write next, envisioning it first as probably a magazine piece. When asked why he wanted to cover a story about a murder in Kansas, Capote responded that he wanted to write about more than the murder itself; he wanted to write about how people in this quiet, heartland community dealt with such a senseless tragedy as the slaying of an entire farm family for no apparent reason. He envisioned the story as a collision of two different worlds, and it was a story that eventually took him six years to write before his groundbreaking book, *In Cold Blood*, was published in 1965.

Notes

1. "Salary Survey Report for Job: Journalist," *PayScale*, <http://www.payscale.com/research/US/Job=Journalist/Salary> (accessed April 22, 2008).
2. This quotation and all future quotations without corresponding endnotes are from personal interviews that the author has conducted with eminent journalists. Attribution is in the text of this book.
3. Jim Willis, "Good and Bad of Reporting and Editing," *Editor & Publisher*, February 27, 1982, 44.
4. Willis, "Good and Bad," 44.
5. Lee B. Becker, Tudor Vlad, Megan Vogel, Stephanie Hanisak, and Donna Wilcox, eds., *2007 Annual Survey of Mass Communication Graduates* (Athens, GA: Grady College of Journalism & Mass Communication, 2007), 17.
6. Amy Standen, "In Cold Blood," *Salon*, January 22, 2002, http://dir.salon.com/story/ent/masterpiece/2002/01/22/cold_blood/index.html (accessed October 20, 2007), 1–2.
7. Anderson Cooper, *Dispatches from the Edge: A Memoir of War, Disasters, and Survival* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 46.
8. Cooper, 55.
9. Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), x.
10. Junger, 227–228.
11. "Wealthy Farmer, 3 of Family Slain," *The New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1959, 39.