Newsroom 2000

*Not my kid! Journalists leery of industry’s future*

by Ted Pease

“It’s a great job, but not for *my* kid!” Journalists are happy with their career choices, but only half would want their children to follow in their footsteps. Why not? Low pay, long hours, poor prospects and “inhuman” management. And – say a sobering number – newspapers are dinosaurs that probably won’t survive.

Midway through a January 1990 seminar on how to keep minority journalists from leaving the newspaper industry, a Reuters reporter started talking about her 18-year-old daughter’s career goals. Like many college freshmen, she said, her daughter was shiny and excited with her new experiences. She had told her mother she might follow her into journalism.

The veteran Reuters reporter, an Asian American journalist in her late 30s, sighed. She was painfully ambivalent about the prospect of her daughter entering journalism, she said. In fact, she admitted, if she herself had it to do over, she wasn’t sure she would.

Inspired – or perhaps sobered – by the comments of the Reuters reporter, this survey asked 2,209 newspaper journalists the same question:

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"Would you want your child to go into newspaper journalism as a career?" The results? If those who work in a profession are its best ambassadors, these responses may give some indication of why the newspaper business is having trouble finding new recruits.

Almost 90 percent of the 1,328 newspaper journalists responding to this survey said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their choice of a newspaper career (see Table 1), but there was much less unanimity on this question. Like the Reuters reporter, U.S. newspaper journalists waffle when asked to recommend the profession to their children; only half want their kids to follow them into the newspaper business. Sure, maybe there aren’t many plumbers, teachers, air traffic controllers and CEOs who want their kids to follow in their footsteps — although it’s part of the American Dream to want something better (whatever that is) for your children. But what this survey shows is that half of U.S. newspaper journalists don’t want their children anywhere near the newsroom, which may indicate a morale problem in that will cost newspapers some of their best recruits. “It’s a dying business!” a reporter from California wrote in response to this survey. After 10 years in the newsroom and a graduate degree, he says he’s unlikely to be in the newsroom in five years. “Being a newspaper reporter is like being a cowboy on a dinosaur ranch,” he said.

Already, newspapers are far from competitive in attracting America’s best and brightest; if current journalists won’t urge their own kids to enter the newsroom, where will future newspaper journalists come from?

Background

A summer 1990 survey of California Latino journalists in both print and broadcasting yielded similar results: About half of those respondents answered “Maybe” when asked if they would want their children to become journalists; 34 percent said yes.¹ In this study, however, while 54 percent of working journalists said they’d recommend newspaper careers
to their children; 46 percent said they would not.

These attitudes exacerbate a personnel situation already thin on hope. Ever since 1978, when the American Society of Newspaper Editors enunciated its goal of achieving "parity" between newsroom and population demographics by the year 2000, the newspaper industry has struggled with the philosophical and practical question of how to employ and reflect the country's multicultural diversity.

Part of the impetus for the ASNE efforts was the 1968 Kerner Commission report on race in America 10 years earlier, which assailed newspapers for their failure to inform and educate the society. The Kerner Commission convened after the urban violence of 1967, which - like the Los Angeles riots of 1992 - shocked and dismayed a nation that had preferred to overlook issues of race. Since 1967 - as this spring's events in Los Angeles demonstrate - "progress" has been agonizingly slow both in U.S. society and in the notoriously "liberal" ("culturally elite," as Vice President Quayle says) U.S. media. As Timothy Crouse observed in The Boys on the Bus, "Journalism is probably the slowest-moving, most tradition-bound profession in America. It refuses to budge until it is shoved into the future by some irresistible external force."

In recent years, newspaper industry efforts indicate a willingness - on the surface at least - to act on the question of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in newspaper newsrooms and content. From less than 1 percent in 1967, daily newspaper newsrooms now are 9.4 percent African-American, Asian-American, Latino and Native-American (or 90.6 percent white). The overall consciousness of newsrooms and boardrooms has been raised - particularly in the last five years - and those who control newspapers are much more aware of the diversity of audiences in their circulation areas than their counterparts at any time in the past.

But is it enough? That 9.4 percent of the newsroom workforce - 5,100 people of color, more than ever in our history - compares poorly indeed to the overall U.S. population, now about 25 percent minority and expected to increase to 33 percent by 2010. As events both in 1967 and in Los Angeles...
in 1992 demonstrated, progress in reflecting the population in terms of employment and coverage have fallen short. So where will future newsroom employees with the sensitivity, experience and willingness to cover the people of America come from? Intuitively, one might think current newsroom staffers would be the most effective recruiters, but perhaps not.

Method

This study was part of a larger national survey of job satisfaction at U.S. daily newspapers. The study surveyed 1,999 randomly selected journalists working for 27 randomly selected daily newspapers, stratified by circulation and geographic region, plus 210 journalists of color selected at random from the membership lists of the four major national minority journalists associations. A random sample of fulltime newsroom professionals working at each participating newspaper was drawn from the papers' personnel rosters; respondent sample sizes at individual newspapers ranging from 44 at the smallest papers to 150 at the largest. The respondent sample pool also was manipulated to reflect the national workforce in daily newspapers by circulation category. Each selected respondent received a letter explaining the study, a six-page questionnaire and a postage-paid return envelope. The surveying took place in December 1990 and January 1991. Of the 2,209 journalists surveyed, 1,328 responded, for a response rate of 60.1 percent; 871 (66.1 percent) respondents were white and 446 (33.9 percent) were people of color; 829 (62.4 percent) of the respondents were men, 499 (37.6 percent) were women. On the question of whether they would recommend newspaper careers to their children, 1,193 respondents participated.

Results

About 90 percent of the 1,328 journalists who participated in this study - regardless of their race or gender or the size or location of their newspapers - said they were satisfied with their choice of a newspaper career (see Table 1). Most said they were likely or very likely still to be in newspapering five years from now (see Table 2). But U.S. newspaper journalists are much less willing to link their children's future with that of the newspaper industry.
The 54 percent (645) of respondents who said they would want their kids to go into the newspaper business offered some predictable and genuine reasons why. Although the reasons respondents gave varied for their judgments on this question, the newspaper supporters fell broadly into two camps (see Table 3) – the Good-Timers and the Altruists.

The Good-Timers, constituting about 40 percent of respondents in the “Yes” group, think newspaper work is “as much fun as you can have with your clothes on. And get paid for,” as a white female reporter from Missouri wrote in response to the survey. The other 60 percent of the “Yes” group – the Altruists – think newspapering is important work, necessary for the health of the democracy: “Journalism offers an opportunity for work that makes the world better,” a black religion writer from California said.

The 46 percent of nay-sayers (n=548) who said they would not want their children to pursue newspaper careers also might be classified generally into two groups, the Burnouts and the Doomsisters. The Burnouts, about 63 percent of the nay-sayers, cite stress, long hours, lack of advancement opportunity, poor salaries and strain on family in newspaper work as unbearable. A white male Southern reporter with 18 years in the business is representative: “This business destroys families,” he said. “Satisfying, well-paid jobs are few, competition is backbreaking, management is insensitive, hours are long and stress is high.” The Doomsisters share not only

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<thead>
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<th>Table 1: Journalists’ job satisfaction</th>
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<tr>
<td>Q. How satisfied are you with your choice of a newspaper career?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Very Satisfied</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somewhat Satisfied</td>
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<tr>
<td>Somewhat Dissatisfied</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very Dissatisfied</td>
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n=1,326; X²=13.166; d.f.=3; p=.0043; Missing = 2

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<th>Table 2: Who’ll stay?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Q. Do you think you’ll still be in newspaper journalism 5 years from now?</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Very Likely</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likely</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unlikely</td>
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<tr>
<td>Very Unlikely</td>
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n=1322; X²=13.27; d.f.=3; p=.0041; Missing = 6
Table 3: Would you want your child to go into newspaper journalism as a career?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Minority</th>
<th>All</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>55.8%</td>
<td>50.6%</td>
<td>54.4% (654)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>44.2</td>
<td>49.4</td>
<td>45.9% (548)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Good-Timers”</td>
<td>178 (14.8%)</td>
<td>85 (14.1%)</td>
<td>263 (40.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Altruists”</td>
<td>265 (32.4)</td>
<td>126 (32.6)</td>
<td>391 (59.8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Burn-Outs”</td>
<td>235 (28.9)</td>
<td>111 (28.7)</td>
<td>346 (62.9)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Doomsters”</td>
<td>139 (17.0)</td>
<td>65 (17.0)</td>
<td>204 (37.1)</td>
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<td>(n = 816)</td>
<td>(n = 387)</td>
<td>(n = 1,202)</td>
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*X^2 = 2.676; d.f. = 1; p = .1018; Note: percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding

those workplace concerns, but also think newspapers are a bad future bet for their children; they will die off within a generation, these journalists say, because of declining readership, the impact of electronic information media, corporatization and newspapers’ failure to adapt to a changing society. The words “dying,” “decline,” “failing,” “dwindling,” “doom” and “extinction” run through these journalists’ comments: “Will there be newspapers in 25 years?” asked an African American woman from Cleveland.

For minority journalists, the question assumed additional dimensions. A black male reporter in his late 30s wrote, “Unless you’re a white male, there’s no point. Your ideas are not respected and multiculturalism is a farce. Perhaps, as newspapering’s ivory (I emphasize the color ivory) tower sinks farther into irrelevance to U.S. society, this will change, but probably too late to save newspapers.”

Broken down along lines of gender, race and circulation, newspaper journalism is only a marginal winner at best in this straw poll, as Table 4 indicates. Women overall – largely on the optimism of white women – are more supportive than men of the idea of their children pursuing newspaper careers, but only slightly (see Table 4). Nearly 63 percent of white women answer yes; but nearly 52 percent of Latinas said they would not want their kids in newspapers. Asian American men are the most negative – almost 57 percent said they would not want their children to pursue newspaper careers. Other men are marginally supportive of their kids trying newspa-
Table 4: Would you want your child to go into newspaper journalism as a career? by race and gender, in percents

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latino</th>
<th>Asian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>M/F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>50.4/54.5</td>
<td>51.7/62.9</td>
<td>54.3/50.6</td>
<td>52.2/48.1</td>
<td>43.4/56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>49.6/45.5</td>
<td>48.3/37.1</td>
<td>45.7/49.4</td>
<td>47.8/51.9</td>
<td>56.6/43.5</td>
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N=1,193; $X^2=13.108$; d.f.=7; p=.1082; Missing = 135

pers, with black and Hispanic men slightly more positive than whites.

Opinions of white respondents are largely constant across circulation categories; slightly more than half at newspapers of all sizes say they would want their children to pursue newspaper journalism as a career. The vote among minority journalists on this question improves somewhat as circulation levels increase. A 60 percent "No" vote by minority journalists at smaller newspapers is consistent with other findings of dissatisfaction at this circulation level, falling by about 14 percent among minorities at the largest papers in the sample, perhaps a function of better salaries and other working condition factors.

 Taken as a whole, responses to this question are troubling. Given human nature, it is perhaps not surprising that most journalists expressed satisfaction with their careers; it would be difficult to acknowledge the alternative, that one's career had been a disappointing waste of time and energy. Further, newsroom staffers are prone to complain - "Journalists are professional kvetchers," observes a white male West Coast feature writer in his 40s - those least satisfied with the profession may already have found other occupations.

Why would journalists who expressed such a high degree of personal satisfaction in their own career choices respond so negatively when asked if they would recommend the field to their children? Perhaps they think it's too late to change careers themselves. Or maybe they see only a few more good years in the profession before the newspaper knacker arrives to deliver the industry to what one copy editor called the "graveyard for newspapers and other dinosaurs." In any case, whether the nay-sayers base their advice to their children to avoid newspaper journalism on the profession's poor working conditions or on a perceived dismal future, the fact that nearly half of all newsroom rank-and-file vote "no" on this question sends
a sobering message to the industry. If so many working newspaper people would tell those people who are closest to them to pursue other fields, what message would they send to others in the society, to audiences in high school auditoriums, to candidates at job fairs, to strangers’ children?

Understanding why

Because so many of these respondents took the time to explain their answers, it is instructive to review some of their comments, which offer insight into the morale, thought processes and priorities of those who populate American newspaper newsrooms. These responses show where American journalists live, what’s important to them in their professional and personal lives as issues that most affect their work, how they evaluate newspaper performance and mission.

Some critics of newspaper industry efforts to “fix” shortcomings in coverage and content of all segments of society have suggested that simply hiring new troops will do little to alter performance if the troops remain powerless to effect change. For many newsroom professionals, as this discussion illustrates, powerlessness is a central issue in their evaluation of whether they would recommend the profession to others.

The Yes Votes

Anyone who’s taken journalism history or an intro to mass communication course knows the philosophical reasons for going into journalism. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, the marketplace of ideas, the watchdog on government. The Pentagon Papers, Watergate, Woodward and Bernstein. Zenger, Pulitzer, Tarbell and Murrow. Sometimes self-righteous, many journalists tell themselves they go into the profession to do good, to comfort the afflicted and afflic the comfortable, to serve the community and to right wrongs. Further, anyone who’s been in a newsroom knows the other attraction: Journalism is fun. It’s exciting. It seductively powerful. It’s ego-gratifying. It is an opportunity for people who love language to use their writing skills in a stimulating environment, to see their words and names in print and to perform a critical function in society under the moral imprimatur of the First Amendment. Journalists have plenty of reason to feel good about themselves, as those who said they
support their children’s choice of a newspaper career explain. Those respondents break down generally into the Good-Timers and the Altruists.

The Good-Timers. The profession traditionally has attracted free-thinkers, individualists, artists and poets. For many of these, newspaper work is fun and personally satisfying. For many, journalism was a way for new college graduates to apply their otherwise unmarketable BAs in English, art, political science or photography. These liberally educated college graduates discovered that newspapers would let them exercise their talents while avoiding being a starving poet or artist. These journalists enjoy their work; they love language and ideas, they like people, they findin their profession an excuse for being nosey and chasing gossip; they like knowing what’s going on in the world.

A Missouri reporter said he’d like his child to work in newspapers “to help people, to right wrongs. And because journalism is a hell of a good time.”

One African American former reporter-turned-educator says, “I know what I’d tell my son [then 2]: ‘Newspapers are fun.’ They never really told me that at Indiana.” For many journalists, the fun, excitement and challenge of newspaper journalism more than make up for its shortcomings. “It takes absolute dedication, and family life suffers,” wrote a white male sports editor from the West Coast, “but it’s satisfying, challenging and exciting. It’s a hell of a life – I enjoy going to work.”

“Many days I can’t believe I get paid to do this,” a Midwestern desk editor agreed. And a 29-year-old Latino reporter from Texas wrote, “Most journalists I know actually like their work. How many professionals can make a similar boast?”

“It’s exciting, rewarding and something different happens every day,” a white female sports reporter said. Others added: “Beats banking” or “Beats driving a truck. I think.” “It’s never boring,” a white, 38-year-old female feature writer concluded.

For a great many journalists, newspaper work is a license to do what they enjoy and to perform good works at the same time. For example, a Missouri reporter said he’d like his child to work in newspapers “to help people, to right wrongs. And because journalism is a hell of a good time.” This combination of personal satisfaction and involvement in an institution critical to society makes journalism the best possible profession, many say – both fun and useful. “Reporting is honest, wonderfully creative work that
forces people to be engaged in their world and communities,” a reporter from the Pacific Northwest wrote. “It’s important stuff.” Others agreed.: A Pennsylvania metro reporter in his late 30s wrote. “The press is arguably the most important institution in a democracy.”

The Altruists. Those classified here as Altruists cite journalism’s importance to society as the primary reason for wanting their children in the profession. “It’s a wonderful way to perform a public service while constantly learning new things,” a white Southern reporter wrote. “Newspapers are extremely important to a free society.” Even so, after more than 10 years as a reporter, she said she’s leaving the business to go to law school. “It’s a critical public service,” one respondent wrote. Said another, “I still consider it a noble profession, despite the negatives.”

“This is one of the few career where you can still work your conscience. Not many jobs offer that – still a battlefield for underdogs, justice,” a black male desk editor wrote. A female Hispanic reporter for an Eastern metro added, “It’s intellectually challenging. You can expose injustice at times and sometimes make someone’s life better.”

Which are high hopes for anyone’s child, many wrote. “If his talents and interests are suited to the profession, I would want him to pursue journalism because I want journalism in the hands of people who seek and tell truth, and he is such a kid,” wrote a features editor in her 40s. The father of a 7-year-old boy agreed: “It’s an honest, socially useful profession, but needs more honest, ethical participants.”

Altruists pointed to other values of newspaper journalism: “Few careers allow an individual to influence the local and national agenda,” one black woman wrote. Others saw their children as soldiers in the fight to provide multicultural perspectives in the news and to help empower minority communities. Wrote a Hispanic metro reporter from Washington, D.C., “It is critical that Latinos and other minorities increase their numbers in journalism.” An African American reporter from Austin, Texas, agreed: “Only rugged determination and sacrifice will improve the climate for minority journalists and only by increasing our numbers will we have foot soldiers to fight for change from within.”
An African American features editor in his 40s had a more personal reason for wanting his children to follow him into the profession: "I will need workers at my newspaper when I own it," he said, "and we need many more minorities in the business." And a black female copy editor from the South said her children could do a job that whites cannot: "I think it's essential that minorities be represented on newspaper staffs and that they cover their own communities as well as other assignments," she said. "They have an expertise that is unmatched by even the best white writer."

Finally, echoing the charge of the Hutchins Commission, a Latino metro reporter in his mid-30s summed up what many others said about newspapers' mission and responsibility:

I am a firm believer in public service. Moreover, if American journalism ever is to become an institution reflective of our increasingly diverse society, it must recruit more people of color. And if my child could help provide sensitivity and perspective to the white-male-dominated profession of journalism, then I would be all for her or his entry into the career, especially given the disgusting percentage of minority journalists in American.

The Nay-Sayers

Any industry that elicits a vote of no-confidence from its rank-and-file is overdue for serious self-appraisal. Nearly half of American journalists – 45.9 percent – say the costs of newspaper careers are too high to inflict on their children; they would steer their children into other professions. The problem areas? According to 548 journalists who say they wouldn't want their children in newspapers, the problems fall into two broad categories: 1) Working conditions – low salary, long hours, high stress, lack of respect and autonomy, and unhappiness with newsroom management; and 2) Fears that newspapers are dying, that economic, social and industry changes place newspapers in their waning years as an American institution.

Perhaps most chilling about these responses is that they come from the whole spectrum of newsroom employees, without regard for race, creed, experience level, gender or geography. The 548 journalists in this study who say they wouldn't want their children to follow them into newspapering are
diverse a group as people in U.S. newspaper newsrooms can be: about half white, half nonwhite; in their 20s to their 60s; working for both 50,000-circulation metros and 1 million-circulation giants; beginning reporters and seasoned veterans; women and men; Texans, Oregonians, Long Islanders, and Floridians.

These in-house critics may be categorized roughly as Burnouts and omsters.

The Burn-outs. Complaints about stress, hours and salary are traditional in the newsroom. Almost two-thirds of journalists who say y’d counsel their children not to join the industry have these complaints. e former reporter said he’ll never regret his time as a reporter, but he knows what he’d tell his son: “I’d tell him to do it for the thrill,” he said. “It’s great preparation for just about anything else. But I’d sure never want to grow old here.” Many current journalists feel the same. “I’m glad I pursued it,” said an African American reporter in Cleveland with 12 years’ experience, “but I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Most of those who answered “no” to this question about their children’s desire to enter the newspapering field say it’s because of environmental conditions in newspapers or structural characteristics of the industry that, they say, make their day-to-day lives difficult. As much as they might love writing and thinking, being involved with society and making a difference — the elements that originally drew them to newspapering — other factors have gotten to be too much to bear. They wouldn’t wish this on their kids, they say.

Many simply scrawled a dollar sign or a pithy epithet in response to the question about why they wouldn’t want their children to try newspapering: doesn’t pay the bills,” wrote one. “$, low satisfaction, publishers’ attitude pushing profits over product,” said another. “Dead end.” “No family.” “Stress stress stress.” “Too many injustices.” “No advancement.” “I’d him, Your mother and I used to be married.” “Miserable quality of life, for what?”

“I’m ambivalent,” wrote a Midwestern copy editor with almost 10 years in the business. “This can be a hugely rewarding business at its best.
Unfortunately, it hits that place less and less often."

Others agreed. "While I enjoy my job and am happy with my career, if I had to start over now I'd pick another field," wrote a mid-30s white female features editor for a mid-sized Southern daily. A black reporter in her 30s, working for one of the nation's largest dailies, sees newspaper work as preliminary to other careers. "It's a good way to learn about the world for someone young and without children," she said. "If you get out before you're 30 or 35, you can always get a real job later - go to law school or something and then have a life."

For some, the burden of being nonwhite in the white newspaper industry is one they wouldn't wish on their children. "This is a difficult question," wrote a black reporter in her 30s. "I'm tempted to answer yes because of the rewards offered by the career and the opportunity it presents to change stereotypical perceptions of minorities. But I don't think I want my child to go through the same kind of newsroom struggles I've encountered and the frustrations I've had because higher-ups (white decision-makers) don't share your views or understand your ideas because of their background." A black newsroom supervisor from the Midwest agreed. "Working at a newspaper is a humbling experience for a person of color," he said. "Newspapers perpetuate stereotypes, distort reality in many cases and rarely appreciate diversity. Unless you can be satisfied with very small victories, infrequent though they might be, you might be better off trying a different profession."

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Much of the blame for what's wrong with newspapers in the 1990s is laid at the door of management and the corporatization of newspapers. Poor people skills, lack of management training, lousy communication, corporate pressure and general insensitivity to the rank-and-file - the troops are ripe for revolt. "Newspapers are one of this country's most important institutions, and one of the worst-run," one political reporter wrote. An African American metro reporter from Texas, thinking of leaving
the business, agreed. "Too many mediocre middle managers destroy the careers of young, talented minorities," he said. "I don’t want my children to have to endure what I’ve had to, and seen others put through."

The economic downturn of the 1990s helped focus rank-and-file resentment on management policies, and many journalists see bookkeepers where editors used to sit. "There’s just too much influence by the bean-counters," wrote a sports reporter in his late 30s. "Newspapers in the U.S. have always been a place where characters and character could flourish. We’ve lost that, maybe for good. It’s tougher and tougher now to be creative, to go after the sacred cows."

Many journalists react strongly to the issue of "packaging" the news. Few of these reporters want their children forced into the soul-less uniformity of journalism’s equivalent of fast food, what more than one respondent called "the McPapering of the newspaper industry."

One white male newsroom manager said this conflict between newspapers as a business and newspapers as a medium for social justice is at the core of the complaints of both those who are burning out on the profession and those who fear they’re presiding over the death of a national institution. That’s why he says he’d counsel his children to look elsewhere regardless of whether they want to do good, or simply to do well.

The Doomsters. The Doomsters cite more fundamental doubts about the industry as their reasons for not wanting their children to pursue newspaper careers. These journalists fear the business is dying, or at least changing under economic pressures and corporate influences to such a degree that newspapers of the future will no longer perform those important functions that attracted them in the first place. For journalists who might once have Good-Timers, the remark of one white male reporter in his 40s (the age when most U.S. newspaper journalists start thinking about career changes) is illustrative: "The profession is not idiosyncratic anymore," he said. "Less room for eccentrics and oddballs. Less commitment to raising hell." A white photographer in his 50s with more than 30 years in the profession agreed: "It’s no longer fun!" he said.

Beyond being less fun than it once was, these journalists said, newspaper prospects are dim. "Newspapers are a dying breed. In the next 20 years
there will be few newspapers," a 47-year-old white male features editor wrote. And, as another nail in the industry's coffin, he added, "Americans are getting their news from TV."

It seems unlikely that newspapers actually will disappear in the next generation, but that's what many journalists fear. More than a third – 37 percent – of the 548 newsroom professionals who say they wouldn't want their children to go into the newspaper business think the medium might not survive.

This comment is typical: "I have no idea what the newspaper industry will be like when they finish college in 20 years."

"I think newspapers are a dying breed of communication," a black desk editor from Philadelphia wrote. A white male photo editor at a major East Coast metro agreed: "The future of newspapers never looked gloomier."

a white female copy editor wrote. "The profession will be much different, if it still exists. But the future certainly doesn't look very bright for newspapers." An Asian American desk editor from a major East Coast metro agreed: "I worry deeply about the future of newspapers. They are going to have to change drastically or die a painful death. I fear it's already too late."

If widespread, such perceptions that newspapers have no future undoubtedly will torpedo efforts to recruit and retain talented journalists, making it more likely that promising entry-level prospects and experienced journalists alike will opt out of the industry for greener and safer pastures. "I think newspapers are a dying breed of communication," wrote a black desk editor from Philadelphia. A white male photo editor at a major East Coast metro agreed: "The future of newspapers never looked gloomier."

For many of these doom-sayers, the end of their own careers and the end of newspapers as a major mass medium in America will occur at about the same time. "The future of the business is murky at best," said one reporter. "It’s an industry under threat of extinction." Several wondered if there will be newspapers by the time their children were ready to look for work. "By the time my children are old enough to start a career in newspaper journalism, newspapers will be fossils," wrote a Florida sports copy editor. A San Francisco reporter agreed: "These things are dinosaurs. He’ll be taking his grandkids to museums to look at them [newspapers] much as we look at stagecoaches."

Many others worried that fewer newspapers in the future would mean
fewer good jobs and even less chance of getting ahead than there is today. “Newspapers are dwindling,” a white male copy editor for a Texas newspaper wrote. I would not want my child to face a career where chances are that there will be fewer chances to advance than in other careers.” Said a black New York features writer, “Newspapers will be obsolete by the time he reaches adulthood. I would prefer a career where my child had a chance of reaching the top of the ladder; this one may not even have a ladder by then.”

A West Coast reporter in his late 50s said, “This is a dying, irrelevant biz that has lost its soul.”

Having traded its mandate in America’s democratic marketplace of ideas for a place in the marketplace of profit, the newspaper industry has lost its dignity and, some of these journalists say, taken their dignity with it.

Some blame the rise of television, others blame mismanagement and newspapers’ misguided attempts to beat TV at its own game. “If newspapers don’t reassert themselves as news products and stop trying to be TV or civic PR and all the other things they’ve become, newspapers are doomed,” a copy editor at a major Midwestern metro said. A white male business editor on the West Coast agreed: “We seem determined to compete with TV on its terms, a battle we are destined to lose.”

A colleague added, with resignation: “As much as I hate to say it, I’d advise my kid not to try newspapers. Newsgathering, yes. Newspapers, not sure.”

For some, newspapers’ decline has been a betrayal of a public trust. “McPapering,” happy news you can use, brights, TV journalism and endless contests have replaced what newspapers in America used to stand for, some journalists say. With its loss of a mandate in America’s democratic marketplace of ideas in favor of the marketplace of profit, the newspaper industry has lost its dignity and, some of these journalists say, taken their own dignity with it.

A white feature writer from the Southeast was adamant about his daughter and newspaper work: “NO!!” he wrote:

It’s not the 1970s anymore. Journalism today emphasizes trends—pithy, clever, short takes on a consumptive society and endless inconsequential updates on life style and not life substance. I always suspected, when I saw the power of
Watergate-era journalism, that it was only a matter of time before corporations – whether through direct ownership or by the influence industry of ad firms and PR groups – bought thought. That has come to pass. Which is OK, as long as newspapers cling to their independence and fight, but they don’t. What newspapers need are editors; instead, what they have are MBAs. To tell my daughter plainly, ‘It was once, believe it or not, a noble profession.’ No more.

**Conclusion**

To be sure, newspapers are still a robust and rich industry, and most print journalism is unlikely to find itself relegated to the dinosaur ranch in the immediate future. Still, newspaper circulation long has been flat, penetration in decline, and the challenges and opportunities of new communications technology unquestionably will have increasing impacts on the daily press. Even if newspapers needn’t immediately set about writing their own obituaries, there clearly is some ground for concern based on what Jimmy Carter might have called the “malaise” pervading many of the newsrooms represented in this study. The sense that newspapers have lost the values on which they were founded, and for which many idealistic new college graduates want to enter the profession, is at the heart of many journalists’ uneasiness with the industry and their own roles in it. As one upper-level supervisor wrote, “I’m not very sure any-

*In the face of market pressures from other communications industries and information options, perhaps the marketplace has changed. Some journalists fear that, along with changes in the marketplace, the quality of the goods and services once demanded of the press also has slipped.*

more what we’re selling in the marketplace of ideas.”

In the face of market pressures from other communications industries and options, perhaps the marketplace has changed. Some journalists fear that, along with changes in the marketplace, the quality of the goods and services once demanded of the press also has slipped. An Asian American desk editor in his 50s might have been thinking over the recommendations of the Hutchins Commission – particularly those about the press’s respon-
sibility to present the goals and values of all members of society – when he explained why he wouldn’t urge his child into newspapers. He wrote, “The more I remain in this profession, the more I realize that newspapers rarely perform the very necessary function given them by the Constitution. Most mainstream newspapers are merely the organs of establishment and guardians of the status quo, not the defenders of the few, the weak.”

Certainly, there still are plenty of current and future newspaper journalists who enter the industry and thrive there for the many reasons enunciated by the optimistic respondents to this question – newspapering can be fun, rewarding and intellectually and morally satisfying. If the figures for enrollment in the nation’s schools and departments of journalism are any indication, the industry will have little difficulty in identifying eager candidates to replace those journalists who burn out or abandon the newsroom. And just as there always will be an England, there always will be newspapers, in whatever form. Still, it would be shortsighted to ignore the concern and discouragement expressed by the 548 newsroom journalists here about the condition, direction and future of newspapering. Such concerns, if unaddressed, could become self-fulfilling if enough of the current rank-and-file newsroom personnel start to see themselves as cowboys on a dinosaur ranch, and take their talents to more secure occupations.

Notes

2. American Society of Newspaper Editors Minorities Committee, Achieving Equality for Minorities in Newsroom Employment: ASNE’s goal and what it means, (Rochester,
5. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, op. cit.  
9. Newspapers with daily circulations of fewer than 50,000 were omitted from the study because they employ few or no persons of color. ASNE reported in 1991 that all newspapers of 100,000 circulation and more, and 93 percent of newspapers with 50,000-100,000 circulation, employ minorities in their newsrooms; nearly all of the 51 percent of papers that employ no people of color at smaller than 50,000 circulation. The participating newspapers, by circulation category (1990 figures), were: 500,000+: USA Today (1,325,507), the Washington Post (772,749), Newsday (700,174) and the San Francisco Chronicle (560,460); 250,000 to 500,000: the Houston Chronicle (437,481), the Minneapolis Star-Tribune (406,292), the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (376,888), the Portland Oregonian (310,446) and the San Jose Mercury-News (274,848); 100,000-250,000: the Seattle Times (233,106), the Pittsburgh Press (232,282), the Memphis Commercial Appeal (209,205), the Arkansas Gazette (154,001), The Akron Beacon Journal (153,550), the Fort Worth Star-Telegram (150,190), the Riverside Press-Enterprise (147,424), the Nashville Tennessean (126,092) and the Omaha World-Herald (121,985); 50,000-100,000: the Jackson Clarion-Ledger (99,830), the Spokane Spokesman-Review (97,128), the San Bernadino Sun (87,012), the Arizona Daily Star (81,869), the Oakland Press (Michigan) (74,028), the Springfield (Mo.) News-Leader (61,900), the Pensacola News-Journal (59,337), the Fargo Forum (54,726) and the Charleston Gazette (55,673). In order for the respondent sample to reflect the study population universe of the 247 papers of 50,000 circulation or more, the number of survey participants selected in each circulation category was weighted. Papers of 500,000 circulation or more employed about 18 percent of the total newsroom workforce in 1990, so 18 percent of the respondents were drawn from the papers in this category – 360, or 80 for each of the four newspapers in this size sample. In Category II, 20 percent of the respondent pool – 400 news-editorial employees, or 76 per newspaper; Category III, 31 percent of the respondents – 620 newsroom employees, or 68 at each of the nine newspapers; Category IV, 30 percent – 620.
10. The four major national minority journalists associations are the Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, and the Native American Press Association.
11. Personal communication with J. Frazier Smith, now a faculty member at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University, after an eight-year career as a
12. Personal communication, March 16, 1991. Journalism educator and historian Patrick S. Washburn is assistant director and graduate coordinator at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, Ohio University. After a dozen years in newspapers, Washburn abandoned the newsroom to return to school, earned a Ph.D. and started a new career in teaching.