Is journalism besieged?

A lack of resources and time are proving to be critical in the way the new generation of journalists are getting trained and mentored in the newsroom.

USHA M RODRIGUES describes the changing face of news media in Australia.

Posted/Updated Tuesday, Nov 04 01:04:46, 2008

Is journalism besieged? Has the heart gone out of journalism? Is the newsroom atmosphere so poisoned by competition, commercial pressures, staffing cuts and multiple deadlines for copies to be filed for various media formats, that it is pushing journalists to get stuck to their desks - at worst writing stories from press releases and at best gathering news on their mobiles and computers - instead of getting to know their community and investigating authorities’ claims?

A recent study in the state of Victoria, Australia, by the author found that many journalists feel stressed and frustrated because of their continuous struggle to meet the needs of their employers, and yet not being appreciated for the contribution they make to their employers' bottom-line.

"Newspapers are going through a transitional phase and it is not clear, for instance, what this product or this office will look like in five or 10 years' time. There are fewer members of staff, fewer resources and the paper itself is shrinking," according to one of the 100 journalists surveyed between mid-2007 and early 2008.

The survey found that an average journalist in Victoria is in his/her 30s, with around 40 per cent of them being women, and about 66 per cent with a university degree.

Although, journalists still consider a news organisation’s ‘editorial policies’ and the ‘amount of autonomy’ they have in performing their role to be most important factors when judging a job's attractiveness, an overwhelming majority feel that their employer is more interested in circulation and ratings, than maintaining their morale.

Allan Russell, Channel 10 Chief of Staff, Melbourne, says that the reality of the news business is its link to the advertising revenue, which results in a pressure-cooker environment in the newsroom. "Every day we are in competition ‘If we are not getting the ratings to justify our existence then we have to make changes. Now, the first area to suffer always is the reporting staff ' then we look at the producers' finally we look at the managing staff.”

Q. How important would you say the following goals are to the owners of your organization?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Extremely Important</th>
<th>Quite Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Not Very Important</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
<th>No Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Earning Profits</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintaining employee morale</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keeping the size of your audience as large as possible</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing journalism of high quality</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similarly, technology and the choices it provides, is having an impact. Media owners and media managers feel that traditional media has to rely on online multi-media presentation of their news to survive, as noted by a number of media commentators at the recently held "The Future of Journalism" summit in Sydney (http://www.thefutureofjournalism.org.au/).

Declining circulation is pushing print news organisations to look for alternative ways to raise revenue, including presenting their news in multi media format and increasing the level of commentary by dubbing up journalists as bloggers, according to the State of the News Print Media in Australia report 2006 published by the Australian Press Council (http://www.presscouncil.org.au ).

The clash between the management’s need to restructure its traditional newsroom and staff’s demand for better working conditions reached a breaking point, when Fairfax Media, one of Australia's well known media companies, announced its plans to cut 550 jobs under its ‘business improvement program’ and as a result journalists at its two major mastheads in Australia - The Age in Melbourne and The Sydney Morning Herald in Sydney walked off the job in protest in August this year.

Gary Hughes, Senior Writer with The Australian, says that increased diversity of coverage in the media via online news and commentary is an illusion. "It is the same content which is being recycled, what has increased is the volume of opinion journalism" referring to blogging, which is becoming a staple of online media.

Whereas, an anonymous broadcast journalist says that it is the journalists’ news values which are being affected by the emphasis on commercial imperatives and a need to keep the readership and...
An area of focus for this study was to look at the impact, the pressure of commercial interests and shorter deadlines is having on newsroom training and mentoring of the new generation of journalists.

Matthew Ricketson, who in mid-2006 returned to full time journalism at The Age as the Media and Communication Editor, after a number of years in academia, talks about his first tenure in the newsroom. “My recollection from my earlier days was that there were a lot of reporters going up to the local pub, which was the Golden Age, and you know young reporters would mix with older reporters and sub-editors and so on and there was both debriefing, just general getting to know people, and also some sort of sharing of wisdom, if you like. You know it wouldn’t have been described in that way, it was just talking about the day’s work. But, in effect it was an informal way information and tips ‘n advice and so on being passed on from one generation to another.”

A lack of resources and time are proving to be critical in the way the new generation of journalists are getting trained and mentored in the newsroom. Peter Gregory, Chief Court Reporter at The Age, Melbourne, acknowledges that young journalists are better educated, more sober, industrious and confident than journalism trainees in the past, but he says young journalists lack “all round training”.

“...There are relatively fewer people in the news rooms. Younger people are given responsible jobs to do from quite early on, and I suspect their training can almost, even though there are people who are involved in giving them training and that is quite organized, but their actual on-the-job training can almost be accidental. People are put in different areas and they don’t perhaps get the full range of training that they might have done previously.”

Gregory adds that some early career journalists have more of a business-like approach; they do not have the time to make personal connections.

Ricketson agrees that because of the availability of technology and deadline pressures, journalists are getting stuck at their desks and therefore risk losing touch with their audience. Most of the information is available on hand via mobile phones, via computers, which means the need to go out and ‘press the flesh’ has been reduced.

But, some cadet journalists blame ‘the deep end’ they are thrown in when they start their career with regional and suburban newspapers, where the formal process of training is lacking, and so is a discussion of ethical issues. “No discussion. No. But people are really quite ethical. Not that there are that many ethical dilemmas (in regional and suburban newspapers),” says a younger journalist.

The feedback from journalists working in regional Victoria is disheartening, pointing to a need for reassessment of local, suburban and regional newspapers as mere businesses rather than a public service. One of the editors managing a regional newspaper states: “(he/she is) tired of managing staff issues, outdated equipment, lack of resources and meeting deadlines. Need professional development - self renewal.”

Another young journalist working in a regional newspaper is unsure of his/her future in journalism. “I do (want to continue working as a journalist), but not sure for how long, as I am already feeling worn out by it, and I’ve only been doing it for six years.”

This is demoralizing because as one of the cadet journalists points out, not only are the regional and suburban newspapers the training grounds for metropolitan media, they also lay the foundation for good practices among the next generation of journalists.

A new entrant journalist comments about his experience in his first job with a suburban newspaper: “I thought the workload was immense. Essentially, it was one person having to be the sort of news editor, the writer, you know, chief of staff. So the onus was on you” to learn and deliver stories.

At the same time, in metropolitan media, declining newspaper circulation is resulting in growing emphasis on infotainment and lifestyle journalism rather than investigative journalism.

Senior journalists seem concerned that younger journalists being trained in such an environment is having a detrimental impact on the range of skills available in the newsroom. “What I mean is the investigative approach or thorough research, perseverance in reporting and the mental attitude to do in-depth reporting is being lost,” says Gary Hughes, who used to head the Investigative Journalism unit at The Age.

As today’s journalists seem to have less time than ever before to work on their stories, the role of spin doctors cannot be underestimated. Robin Jacklin, the executive producer of news and current affairs programs in Victoria at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (a public service broadcaster), says that investigative journalism is being undermined by government and corporate secrecy.

“The other issue for investigative journalism is the rise of the spin doctors and getting to the heart of the information and it's not just in government, it is in many big corporations as well. Trying to get through the wall put up to either spin the information that a corporation or a political party wants to give you, to put them in the best light or to simply stonewall all your efforts to get the information. And, it’s particularly relevant in government and probably more so at state government level.”
As an experienced journalist notes this has an impact on newsroom atmosphere, “the biggest change I think is that the heart has gone out of it, out of journalism. The heart, not in terms of people's commitment to work, but the heart of working together. Now it's harder (sic) and there's more cut and thrust in the office.”

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