Media and Journalism

The Culture of the Journalism Industry

Skills
- Dedication
- Initiative
- Interpersonal communication
- Patience
- Curiosity
- Competitive spirit
- Flexibility
- Knowledge of current events
- Creativity
- Ability to research
- Writing—This is a key component for anyone in the field and should be developed over a lifetime. Starting early is key, and gaining continual experience and practice is crucial.

Headlines and deadlines—that’s the field of journalism. Writing under the gun is the essence of the job, and the culture of the industry reflects the urgency of the journalist’s task. Here are some of the most prominent characteristics of the culture of journalism:

Competition
There is a strong tradition of competition among journalists and publications. As a journalist you’ll always be on the lookout for a scoop—an important story that you and your paper report first. And just about the worst thing that can happen to a reporter is to get scooped—to find out that your competitor beat you to the big story of the day.

Hectic Pace
Journalism is more than a nine-to-five job—it’s a way of life. Newspapers must cover the news beyond regular office hours, so journalists should expect to be awakened at 3 a.m. to cover a breaking story. (Keep in mind that the journalist may then return to the newsroom with just 15 minutes left to write the story and be expected to do it all over again the next day.)

Stress on the Job
It can definitely be frustrating putting in many “extra” hours for a relatively small paycheck. (Some newspapers do offer over-time pay.) Deadline pressure and erratic hours may be less extreme at magazine publications.

Curiosity and Aggression
Most journalists tend to have a strong streak of curiosity in their personalities, but it’s aggressiveness that gets them the stories they go after.

Tough Crowd
The field of broadcast journalism is famous for its big egos and difficult personalities, especially in the higher ranks. Newsrooms attract aggressive, opinionated, ambitious people. While the traits may help reporters survive, they don’t make for the most pleasant employee relations. As one insider states, “You need to be thick-skinned. If you’re covering breaking news and something goes wrong, it can be complete chaos.”

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Broadcast Media

Broadcast Networks
Broadcast networks—such as ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox—operate by paying local stations, called affiliates, to carry both network-produced shows and programs purchased from other sources. Most networks produce a variety of news programs, including daily national news shows, morning talk/news programs, such as The Today Show, and news-magazine shows, such as Dateline. Networks employ thousands of newspople, but they seldom hire anyone without some type of television experience.

Cable Operations
The growth of cable news and information networks such as CNN and FOX News Network has created more jobs for broadcast journalists. Because they provide 24-hour news programming, these stations have a need for more journalists and offer more entry-level opportunities than the networks. In fact, rumor has it that CNN hires more entry-level people than any other broadcast news operation in the world. On a community level, a new trend toward local, 24-hour cable news stations is opening up even more opportunities for aspiring broadcast journalists. Don’t forget your local community access channel; many of these stations also produce news programs, although the paid news staffs tend to number as few as one or two people.

Where Do I Start?
The road to a career in journalism depends on whether you want to work in print or broadcast media, as well as your interests. Recent graduates who are interested in print journalism can pursue a variety of roles at newspapers, magazines, online publications, and wire services. While there aren’t as many types of entry-level positions in broadcast journalism as there are in print, there are still several places where you can get your start. Affiliates and newspapers in smaller cities and towns tend to offer more entry-level opportunities that are perfect for recent college graduates with little experience.

Here are some of the entry-level positions often available:

Broadcast Journalism
General Assignment Reporter, Production Assistant, Intern

Print Journalism
Copy Editor, News/Editorial Assistant, Intern, Researcher, Freelancer, Photographer, Reporter

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Print Media

Magazines
Magazines can be organized into two groups. The first and larger group is made up of consumer magazines, many of which address a niche market related to hobbies and leisure activities (Tennis, Vegetarian Times), or offer a variety of news, information, and entertainment (The New Yorker, Esquire). The “big three” news magazines, Time, Newsweek, and US News & World Report, are influential consumer magazines that have large circulations and employ large staffs. Niche consumer magazines usually have small staffs and rely on freelance writers for much of their content.

The second group is trade or professional magazines, which contain material of interest to certain industries or professions. For example, Editor & Publisher helps newspaper professionals stay abreast of events and trends affecting their business.

Deadlines tend to fall farther apart in the magazine industry than at many newspapers, so the pace can be a little less break-neck. “Working at a news magazine is quite different from working at a newspaper. There is not all that much room in the publication for the actual stories—the magazine comes out just once a week and a lot of space is taken up by advertising; many of the articles have to be very brief. This intensifies competition among the writers, who jockey to get their stories in the magazine with their bylines in the largest font possible. The atmosphere is also different in that it’s a lot more corporate than at most newspapers—the organization is very hierarchical, there’s no newsroom (we work in cubicles and offices), and the men wear ties to work every day,” says a reporter at Newsweek.

Newspapers
The largest employer of journalists is the newspaper industry. There are about 6,700 newspapers published in the United States today (1,700 daily and 5,000 weekly)—even the smallest towns in the nation are covered by a local or regional paper. Although they compete with other media—radio, television, and the Internet—newspapers are still an essential source of news and information for the public. Broadcast and electronic media cannot provide the in-depth news coverage and analysis that newspapers offer. Most large metropolitan newspapers appear daily. Some papers such as USA Today and the Wall Street Journal are national in scope and, therefore, skip over much regional news. Smaller suburban and local papers, which are usually published once a week, concentrate on news that affects their immediate areas.
Finding an Internship in the Media and Journalism Field

The most important factor for getting started in journalism is previous experience. Not only is an internship a great way to find out if journalism is the right field for you, but it can also be a stepping stone to an entry-level job. Even if you later decide that journalism isn’t the career for you, having a journalism internship on your resume impresses people in all communications fields. Journalism differs from other industries in that many people do internships after graduation; aspiring journalists often think of post-graduation internships as their first jobs in the field.

Importance
An internship is the first thing potential employers will look for on your resume. You can compensate for a lack of internship experience, but there’s no substitute for the real thing. In addition to impressing potential employers, internship experience serves many other purposes, including testing how well journalism suits you, building a portfolio of clips, and making professional contacts who can help you in your job search.

Getting an Internship
Getting an internship at a top publication can be tough. There are, however, a lot of newspapers and magazines offering internships. Don’t neglect smaller publications, especially your hometown paper where your status as a native son or daughter may give you an “in.”

Types of Organized Internships
Generally, only larger publications that hire multiple interns per session have organized programs. The structure of these programs varies considerably; interns may work in one department for the duration of their stay or rotate among departments. Some publications organize “seminars” by staff members on topics such as the inner workings of specific departments or issues in journalism. Beyond the most prestigious publications lies a world of other magazines and newspapers that take interns, but they may not have organized programs. Even if an internship seems ad hoc, that doesn’t mean it’s inferior to an internship at Newsweek or the Los Angeles Times in terms of work experience. In fact, you may get more hands-on exposure, better assignments, and greater levels of responsibility at a smaller publication with a less rigid corporate structure.

Compensation
Many, but not all, journalism interns are paid for their work, though the pay is usually low. The larger, more prestigious publications, which tend to be located in areas where the cost of living is high, spend the most money on their interns. If you can get by without making money, you have the luxury of selecting an unpaid internship, which is just as valuable an experience and often more available.

Internship Duties
The level of responsibility given to journalism interns varies from publication to publication. Speaking broadly, there are two types of internships: those that encourage and expect interns to perform “real work” (i.e., writing stories for publication), and those that use interns primarily as research assistants and fact-checkers. Both types provide valuable exposure to the business. At large, prestigious publications interns often assist staff members, while at small publications interns may have more opportunities to write. In either type of organization, the details of your day may depend on the department or supervisor for whom you work.

Follow Industry “Tweeters”

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