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Professionals' Perceptions Of Mass Media Education

By

Elliott S Parker
A sample of newspapers, magazines and broadcasting stations was compiled based on listings in Editor and Publisher International Yearbook 88, Benn's Press Directory International 7, and Press and Media Directory 1983 14. In addition, because of lack of comprehensiveness and currency in the above, some organizations were included that were not in the directories. Even official sources may be incomplete. See Foster's problems in attempting to find out the number of stations in Indonesia 19.

The final sample consisted of 179 print and broadcasting institutions in the six ASEAN countries:

- Brunei: 2 stations, 1 newspaper
- Indonesia: 13 stations, 26 newspapers
- Malaysia: 1 station, 32 newspapers
- Philippines: 17 stations, 13 newspapers
- Singapore: 1 station, 15 newspapers
- Thailand: 5 stations, 54 newspapers

Given the incompleteness and unreliability of the universe of publications and stations, a random sample was deemed inappropriate. The final sample was stratified and an attempt was made to mirror the number of institutions per country and insure that small, rural, vernacular publications were represented. Selection of publications was limited to those with a general interest appeal, such as Tempo (Indonesia). However, this classification also included such publications as Singapore's Business Times newspapers and the Malaysian Her World, publications read by a wider audience than the titles might indicate. Magazines directed to highly specialised audiences such as tourists and technical magazines were not included. Magazines with a religious orientation were also excluded. It was felt that this somewhat ill-defined parameter would include those...
institutions that hire the majority of new entrants to the profession. Wire services were included under publications. Advertising and public relations agencies, and government information departments were also excluded, although they hire significant numbers of mass communications graduates.

The sample also reflects the communication structure of the various countries. The Philippines has many commercial broadcasting stations and Indonesia has many non-governmental stations, while Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia all have a central, government-run network. The Thai stations are run by the armed forces, but are directed to the general public {11}.

Questionnaires were sent out in September and October 1984 accompanied by stamped, self-addressed return envelopes. Within the country, mailing was handled by AMIC staff in transit or AMIC country representatives. The four-page questionnaire varied slightly depending on whether it was directed to a print or broadcasting institution. All were in English. Copies of both questionnaires were appended.

The main areas of interest concerned numbers of new-hires and educational level; satisfaction or dissatisfaction with new employees; available internships/apprenticeships; perception between media and media training institutions; and an overall rating of journalism and mass communication training. The respondents were also asked an open-ended question: "What would you most like educators to do in the future that is not now being done?"

Forty responses (of 179 questionnaires sent out) were returned. Eight were returned from Thailand, three from the Philippines, ten from Singapore, seven from Malaysia, 11 from Indonesia, and one from Brunei. Six or 15 percent of the responses came from broadcasting institutions.

The returns reflect the size of the media establishment in the country and the rate of return that has been affected by a lack of a translated version. The original selection was designed to ensure that smaller stations and newspapers were represented and, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand, returns were low since translations were not provided due to time constraints. Presumably, the return rate was also affected by the lack of familiarity with survey instruments and general suspicion of intent.

The quality of response does leave something to be desired. Some questions were not answered and some responses were marked twice instead of once as requested. Where more than one response was marked, both were recorded, resulting in some questions having more responses than questionnaires returned. Percentage figures are for the responses to the individual question.
The quality of response was also affected by the lack of extended explanation of terms, e.g., the difference between communication skills and technical skills. Although most of the concepts are common in the academic world, it was felt that many of the questions depended too much on assumed, background knowledge.

The relatively low rate of return (22 percent) is cause for concern, but was not felt to drastically impair the validity of the results since broad trends are still evident. If smaller and rural papers and stations are excluded—which cannot afford to hire many, if any, university graduates—the rate of return would be in the range of 40 percent.

Only a few responses (3 or 7.3 percent) said none of the newly hired people graduated from a tertiary- or university-level institution. Most said at least some of the new hires had this level of education. Twelve (29.3 percent) said about one-third of new hires had graduate training, fifteen (36.6 percent) indicated about two-thirds had advanced training and eleven (26.8 percent), said almost all had advanced training.

As might be expected, of the university graduates hired, almost half (46.0 percent or 18) had degrees in journalism or mass communications. Five had degrees in political science (12.8 percent), nine had degrees in literature or sociology (21.0 percent) and one had a degree in history. Under "other" degrees were included economics, accountancy, English, and Malay studies.

Of the people hired without a degree, two respondents (5.0 percent) said most new people had some formal training and 30.0 percent (12) said the new people were about evenly split between those that had training and those that did not. A majority, 65.0 percent (26), said they hired "very few or none" without some formal training.

The professionals were asked what they were most satisfied and most dissatisfied with in the last few employees they have hired. It is probably not surprising that topping the list of things the professionals were most dissatisfied with is "technical skills." Thirteen or 28.9 percent checked this. The "level of general knowledge" dissatisfied 24.4 percent (11) of the respondents, followed by communication skills and "interpersonal skills," 22.2 percent (10) and 13.3 percent (6), respectively. This is not a unique response (See, for example, a Canadian and a U.S. study {15}, {13}).

Combining the category on communication skills and technical skills shows that more than half of the respondents were dissatisfied with the professional competence of the people they hired. An Indonesian editor underscored the lack of skills
training by saying"...journalism graduates seem to have nothing special to offer {12}" and a Thai broadcaster added that "graduates from journalism and mass communication schools do not necessarily have an advantage and cannot be readily put into service. They often lack practical knowledge...
{16}"

Given the institutional and academic realities it is not surprising to see this emerge as a major dissatisfaction. Few of the instructors of these students had any experience or interest in the skills portion of the curriculum.

Adhikarya's 1979-1980 survey of media educators in the ASEAN can be seen on one level as the complement of the current study (1). The current survey considers communication education from the professional's point of view, while Adhikarya looks at the educators' side. Although the Adhikarya survey may be subject to argument since he defines the "ideal" ASEAN communication scholar as one interested in development journalism, it does offer insights into what the communications scholar thinks is important {2}.

When asked what they would most like to teach, most put skills courses, such as writing and reporting, near the bottom of the list {5}. He also points out that the two most important variables for academic promotion are possession of a U.S. master's degree and seniority at the institutions {4}. Professional experience is not mentioned. Additionally, almost all ASEAN communications scholars received their degrees from U.S. schools where theory and research methods predominate {3}.

This is not unique to the ASEAN countries. Golding argues that, in fact, most newly graduated communications students are more interested in "clean," white-collar jobs, analogous to civil service jobs, where the emphasis is not on professionalism, but degrees {10}. The head of BERNAMA, the Malaysian news agency says, journalism graduates "lack a sense of commitment to the profession" and "reporting is seen just as a stepping stone to a more lucrative career in non-media organizations {6}.

A 1975 UNESCO study makes the point that "no matter how good the training, if it is cut off from contact with the working media, it fails {18}.

The current survey asked about this contact between people in the industry and in education. With the exception of one "no opinion" and one "no response," all the other respondents felt that contact between professionals and educators was important. Only five respondents, 12.2 percent, however, said they had "some contact" and 17, or 41.5 percent had "very little or no contact." When professionals were asked what they were most satisfied with, there was an indication that they liked what most
universities consider an important objective: "general education of the media man or media woman (17)." Sixteen of the respondents, 38.1 percent, said they were most satisfied with the "level of general knowledge."

Respondents were also satisfied with interpersonal skills, 23.8 percent (10) giving positive answers. As might be expected, the respondents were least satisfied with the communication and technical skills, only 14.3 percent (6) and 9.5 percent (4), respectively, saying they were satisfied. Job enthusiasm and adaptability were also mentioned.

The professionals were also asked to rank a series of statements according to what they believe is most important for a student to know. The answers were converted to an aggregate score and then ranked. In rank order, from most important to least important statements, are:

(1) Students should have a broad general education.
(2) Students should be literate and able to write or edit.
(3) Students should be acquainted with the field of communications in general.
(4) Students should receive craft or skill training in specific areas.
(5) Students should have received training in visual literacy and design.
(6) Students should know basic management and business skills.
(7) Students should be acquainted with the new technology.

The importance of a broad general education and the ability to write or edit were at the top of the list. An acquaintance with the field of communications in general and skills training were grouped slightly below and perceived least important was training in visual literacy, basic management, and acquaintance with new technology.

Space was also provided so respondents could add characteristics they felt important. Without exception, these centered around personal qualities: Students "should...be sensitive to the environment around them...[and] need determination and self-discipline" (Indonesia); "should be taught to think for themselves, show personal initiative" (Thailand); "be willing to devote their time for the job and work odd hours..." and "understand...the ethics of journalism...such as receiving financial contributions from sources..." (Thailand); students "must be prepared mentally for their task" (Brunei); and be "politically conscious about matters pertaining to the country and his own community." (Singapore).

When the professionals were asked to "turn the tables" and grade the performance of journalism and mass communication
education, the overall grade was C-, between adequate and poor. Only one respondent gave an "excellent," while 87.5 percent (35) marked either "adequate" or "poor."

When asked what educational institutions should do in the future that is not now being done, two major categories appeared. As might be expected from the foregoing, one category included concerns about technical skills training and was a major concern in all six countries surveyed. The other group dealt with specialized courses.

Universities were urged to "use people with actual journalistic experience to train would-be journalists, not theorists who have never been near a newsroom" and "give the students more practical knowledge..." One print editor said:

"After four years in a journalism course, graduates apply for jobs in newspapers with almost no practical knowledge of newspaper work. It is as though they are studying all over again. It takes us too much time and effort to train them.

"Universities do not have internship arrangements with us, but many students are not really interested in learning. They do it just to fulfill the course requirement. Their professors do not supervise them and we are too busy to give them very close supervision.

"I think it would be more useful for the universities themselves to provide the practical training by putting out community newspapers that approximate as closely as possible the commercial newspapers. This should be different from the school organ. While journalism students work the editorial side, business students can manage the business side and marketing students can sell advertising space and sell copies. That way everybods gets the real feel and responsibility of publishing a newspaper.

"But the most important thing is that they should be supervised by veteran newspaper people, not just professors."

Another expanded on this theme: "Teach the philosophy of journalism and its role in modern society. Equip youngsters with skills to at least get into the profession." (Emphasis in original).

In addition to answering in the affirmative for more mid-career training (87.8 percent), several professionals used this section to emphasise the need for mid-career training—both formal training for people with no formal training and also short courses; in specialised subjects such as feature writing, visual
communications, science, home economics, agriculture, and advanced TV production.

Among other things respondents suggested was to teach the difference between journalism practice in England and the United States and create "an analytical mind." One editor suggested more audience research.

In brief then, what do professionals want training institutions to do? They want emphasis to remain on inculcating general knowledge of the world and their society, but almost without exception, feel a great need for students to have a minimal level of practical knowledge when they start their first job.

It appears there is also a felt need for much more communication between the educators and professionals. The educators need to explain what they are trying to do, while, at the same time, learning a little about the "real world."

Professionals feel students should not look on various communication specialisations as discrete, but should have more knowledge of the entire field of communications in addition to being literate and able to write or edit.

The least important skill was an acquaintance with the so-called "new technology." From this survey, it was not possible to determine if they felt the hardware was not important, compared to the user, or whether most respondents were not interested because they did not have the new technology.

Perhaps one editor summed it best: "Teach them to think; to be able to research properly; and primarily to spell."

The only addition might come from the advice of an old, experienced journalist to a new reporter: "Always cover your typewriter, never triple space, never use the back of the paper, and keep your sobs to yourself."
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