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Jumping from Journalism — Why Broadcast

Journalists Leave the Field

Daniel Mark Woodruff

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Jumping from Journalism – Why Broadcast Journalists Leave the Field

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Journalism plays an important role in our society. But what happens when a journalist decides to pursue a new profession? The loss of a journalist from a newsroom can have a significant impact, particularly when that journalist takes with them institutional knowledge and a history of the market. This study uses qualitative interviews with 12 former broadcast journalists to investigate what factors cause them to leave the field and what the implications are for the industry. Relying on burnout theory as a framework, this study reveals three key reasons broadcast journalists decided to walk away. First, they faced increasing demands including long or unconventional work hours, a tenuous work-life balance, difficult stories to cover, and doing more with fewer resources. Second, they endured difficult issues with management including unfulfilled promises, the increasing commercialization of news, unrealistic and unethical expectations, the consolidation of the industry, and a lack of appreciation. Third, they felt they were not adequately compensated. This study recommends more support and professional development for broadcast journalists, more cross-training opportunities, and improved financial compensation.

Keywords: journalism, broadcast news, demands, management, compensation

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis began as an idea I had while riding to work in the fall of 2018, almost a year after I left the broadcast news industry to pursue a new career in media relations. That original idea has evolved over time to become this finished product today. This is a topic I care deeply about, largely because I have personally gone through the soul-searching and thought process that these former journalists have. I understand the difficult decision it is to leave journalism and jump into a new career. The implications of that decision for the journalists themselves and the communities where they work are real.

I am grateful to each of the 12 former broadcast journalists who freely shared their thoughts and insights about the profession they recently left. While I cannot recognize them by name, they know who they are. My thesis would also not have come to fruition without the dedicated help and mentoring by my committee at Brigham Young University – Dr. Miles Romney, Dr. Steven Thomsen, and Dr. Dale Cressman. I am grateful for their advice and help as I have pursued this qualitative research project. Thank you also to my classmates in my graduate cohort, especially Melissa Gibbs, Madison Parks, and Alex Sanders. They have helped me maintain my sanity and have always given me valuable, practical feedback on my writing.

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Finally, I want to recognize and thank my family for their unwavering support of me as I have pursued this degree. My wife Amanda is the reason I went back to school. I also hope my children – Matheson, Liliyana, and Truman – will know how much I have appreciated their love and support that they have each demonstrated in their own ways.

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Introduction

Across the United States, in markets big and small, journalists play a noticeable role in their communities. Their reporting is promulgated on a variety of platforms, using a variety of technologies. While the profession continues to change as technology evolves, the public fascination with and reliance on journalism persists. Some may agree with Pelley (2019) who said democracy cannot exist without journalism and that “the fastest way to destroy democracy is to poison the information” (p. 400). Others may sympathize with the sentiments of President Donald Trump who has repeatedly called the news media “the enemy of the people” and has criticized their coverage (Samuels, 2019).

The role of journalism has many ardent defenders, although there is widespread discussion about the faults and failings of what has broadly become known as the fourth estate (Hampton, 2010; Rather, 2012). Thomas (2006) called journalism “a most honorable profession” (p. 1), but she bemoaned the industry’s focus on entertainment, making money, and a series of embarrassing ethical scandals by journalists. Technology allows journalists to report news almost instantaneously, but this has also come with numerous errors and missteps due to speed (Rosenberg & Feldman, 2008). Yet, overshadowing the entire debate on journalism is a long-standing tradition of a free and vigorous press. This, of course, is made possible by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which has long acted as a key component of the country’s democracy and embrace of free speech (Lewis, 2007).

So it is that journalists have a role to play in the public discourse of the country. Part of this role is to inform and disseminate information that citizens use to make decisions that impact the public (Powers, 2018). In order to do what journalism was intended for, there must be

journalists. These journalists must be competent and credible, and their work must be readily accessible by the public they serve (Costera Meijer & Bijleveld, 2016).

Consider the specific field of broadcast journalism. Many Americans continue to claim television news – especially local television – as their number one source of news despite the rise of the internet and social media in the digital age (Gottfried & Shearer, 2017; Robinson, Zeng, & Holbert, 2018; Shearer, 2018). Public crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, can serve to elevate interest in the news and, as a result, boost broadcast ratings in the process (Bauder, 2020). The importance of having established journalists working in a given broadcast market would seem to be obvious. Yet, the industry has faced the dilemma of a drain of talent for decades, particularly due to low salary levels (Malone, 2013; Potter, 2000). The stresses of the job and other lifestyle considerations have also been cited as potential problems for broadcast journalists, especially long hours and irregular schedules (Tompkins, 2002). Sullivan (2017) also questioned whether budding journalists would shy away from what has often been considered a noble pursuit due to frequent criticism of the media.

If a journalist leaves the profession for any reason, he or she usually takes with them valuable institutional knowledge that a replacement would have to spend months – if not years – working to gain (D. Kauffman, personal communication, December 12, 2018). News organizations would seem to benefit when established journalists stay put, but that is not a given, especially in today's environment.

The question, then, is what causes a broadcast journalist to leave the field in which he or she has built up expertise? And what is the impact of that decision on the journalism industry? This study, relying on burnout theory as a framework, aims to answer those questions with relevant, timely, and thought-provoking insights from former broadcast journalists who only

recently left the field to which they had devoted significant parts of their lives and careers. The thoughts and feelings of these former journalists offer valuable insights to today's journalists as they try to survive and thrive in a tumultuous environment. They can also greatly inform news managers as they seek to retain the best and brightest in their newsrooms.

Literature Review

Burnout Theory

Burnout is cited as a multi-pronged phenomenon affecting individuals who work in a number of industries. Maslach and Jackson (1981) defined burnout as “a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people-work' of some kind” (p. 99). Further, the authors identified three aspects of burnout which include feeling emotionally exhausted, developing negative feelings about those they serve, and feeling “unhappy about themselves and dissatisfied with their accomplishments on the job” (p. 99), all of which pose potentially serious personal and professional consequences.

Burnout in Journalism

Burnout has frequently turned up in discussions about journalism and even the broader communications world in general. According to the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA, 2019), newsrooms are “high-stress, fast-paced environments with heavy workloads, limited control and the need to always be on” (para. 2), and these conditions are exacerbated today by an environment that has been generally unfriendly toward journalists. Tompkins (2002) noted the “low pay, long hours, separation from family, unskilled management, layoffs, and job stress” that has traditionally defined the news business (p. 199). He remarked that stress has become generally accepted as part of working in the news business, which operates around the clock and has traditionally been difficult on family life.

Even during a robust time for the television news industry, Reinardy (2013) found more than one in five broadcasters were especially exhausted and cynical about their work, notably among anchors. Reasons varied but included having to do more work with fewer resources, including duties on social media. Of those surveyed, more than a third said they planned to leave the profession within the next five years.

Macnicol (2014) argued being burned out in journalism “is not the same as being tired out, stressed out, bored, or in need of a vacation. It's more like all those things wrapped together, times ten, plus a lobotomy” (para. 8). Yet, Macnicol said it is difficult to even bring up burnout in the United States – which rewards long hours and ambition – without sounding like a complainer. Indeed, some journalists are praised for their ability to withstand anything (Torregrosa, 2017). Yet, others have expressed concern about the need to recognize the potential pitfalls that come with practicing journalism including anti-journalist sentiment, low pay, increased competition, exposure to traumatic and disturbing events, online incivility, never-ending deadlines, pressure on family life, workplace discomfort, less autonomy, non-stop pressure to produce on social media, and low job satisfaction (Eli, 2017; MacDonald, Saliba, Hodgins, & Ovington, 2016; Martin, 2020). “Any one of these factors could have an effect on the mind of a level-headed, healthy person. Toss them together and you've got a psychological minefield” (Eli, 2017, para. 13).

The news industry can pose challenges for journalists based on the subjects and topics they are asked to cover on a regular basis. Lindner (2012) told the story of a female broadcast journalist who was ready to leave the world of hard news reporting and begin working for an entertainment television show because of the sheer number of bad news stories she had told over the years. “She feared that she had become desensitized and was becoming ‘less human.’ She

said that for a change, she wanted to smile on-air and tell stories that were uplifting and fun” (Lindner, 2012, p. 199). Journalists can also experience emotional exhaustion due to the nature of the stories they cover. For black journalists covering the Black Lives Matter movement, those stories hit close to home, coming with “real emotional costs, and in the meantime, this huge, expanding story doesn't show any signs of slowing down — the deaths keep coming” (Demby, 2015, para. 29). Even beats that might appear harmless can lead to burnout in the non-stop news cycle in which journalists now labor (Neason, 2018).

Sometimes the speed at which news stories break can lead to symptoms of burnout. Neason (2018) wrote of the first year of President Donald Trump’s administration as a “burnout year,” and her feelings on this topic are especially noteworthy:

With every ban, every policy threat, every protest I covered, every executive order, every press conference (the entire newsroom plugged in, our eye rolls almost in sync), every alarmist headline, every controversial tweet and the inevitable backlash—I became increasingly exhausted and void of any energy to actually do my job. I’d spent it all just trying to keep up. (para. 10)

Reinardy (2011) examined newspaper journalists and found journalists were highly cynical and were losing the important feeling of professional accomplishment that could help buffer against burnout. Nearly three-fourths of journalists under age 34 said they planned to leave the journalism profession or were uncertain about the future of their careers, underscoring the fact that “dissatisfaction with pay, job demands and high levels of stress are whittling away at the commitment of young journalists” (p. 46). Women in journalism have also been found to be at higher risk of burnout as they have faced “family issues, sexism, discrimination and the proverbial glass ceiling that limits professional prosperity” (Reinardy, 2008, p. 5).

Lindner (2012) argued that with less experienced support staff, lack of resources, and less time to research and report, broadcast journalists rarely experience true satisfaction in their work and often do not achieve the high-quality work they want to produce. “It is essential for talent to effectively manage their work-product expectations—otherwise they will (continue to) be very disappointed and unfulfilled” (Lindner, 2012, p. 212).

Looking specifically at sports journalists, Reinardy (2006) found the stressors and potential causes for burnout remained the same as for other journalists, but that sports journalists’ risk of burnout appeared to be less largely due to the sense of professional accomplishment and enjoyment that they received from their jobs. However, Reinardy (2006) also cautioned that this sense of professional accomplishment for sports journalists may have been waning, posing potential future problems.

News Salaries

Given the frequent mention in the literature of low salaries as a potential factor of burnout in journalism, it is worth looking at the history of news salaries and recent statistics on this topic.

History of news salaries. Discussions about broadcast journalists’ salaries have persisted for decades. When ABC personality Barbara Walters scored a highly publicized salary of \$1 million per year, a wide variety of reactions and commentary ensued about the implications of paying a journalist so much money (Cronkite, 1976). More than three decades later, similar public incredulity resulted over reports that then-CBS anchorwoman Katie Couric would make \$15 million a year – more than the operating budgets of two major programs on National Public Radio (Massing, 2009). When then-NBC host Matt Lauer renewed his contract at the *Today Show*, his new annual salary was reported to be \$25 million a year, although Lauer disputed that

figure (Stelter, 2013). While multi-million-dollar contracts are usually more common to network news, discussions about high salaries are not native to the network level alone. Local news anchors have frequently occupied the center of the discussion regarding salaries. Allen (1995) researched the circumstances surrounding the hiring of local news anchors and noted their compensation could be significant – around \$265,000 in the country’s largest media markets at the time – due to their role in station identity and ratings.

While debates about overpaid on-air talent exist and will likely continue in some form, there is an acknowledged pay disparity in broadcast journalism between certain major players in local and national newsrooms and the rest of the working broadcast journalist population (Lindner, 2012). Indeed, much of the discussion at the local news level centers on salaries that are far lower.

Aspiring journalists have long been warned about the compensation awaiting them in their future careers (Tompkins, 2002). Potter (2000) painted a dismal picture for local news with a warning that the “best and brightest” are avoiding the profession altogether due to low starting salaries (p. 94). She shared an example of one journalism student who took a public relations job because it paid nearly double what a news position would have. However, the outlook around that time was not all negative. Colamosca (1999) observed salary conditions were improving, but the base salary for journalists remained low compared to other fields.

Conditions remained troubling toward the end of the next decade. During the economic downturn that began in 2008, television stations struggled to remain financially solvent, leading to falling salaries and requiring some journalists to take substantial pay cuts during contract renegotiations (Lindner, 2012). Even after the recession was over, financial compensation lagged. Malone (2013) bemoaned “starvation wages” that he argued were partly responsible for

making it difficult to attract young journalists to join what used to be an attractive, even glamorous profession (p. 10). With consolidations of television station ownership groups and the pressures of public ownership of them, Malone (2013) expressed pessimism that salaries would eventually rise. Even if they did, broadcast journalists would still face several challenges, one of which Friedman (2013) touched on when discussing journalists attempting to renegotiate a better salary: “There is a sort of survivor’s guilt that’s taken hold in media, wherein we all feel grateful to be employed at all” (para. 6).

Low salaries have also been blamed for leading to a subpar product on local television stations where staffers simply are not able to produce quality, in-depth news reports. This has led to more syndicated stories being aired on stations which receive this content from their respective networks. This has provoked the ridicule of late-night comedians such as Conan O’Brien who in late 2012 mocked numerous TV stations for using identical wording to introduce a syndicated story (Farhi, 2012). As Potter (2013) asked, “who has the time or experience to rewrite anchor introductions, much less produce original stories to fill all those newscasts?” (p. 36).

Becker, Stone, and Graf (1996) suggested that salaries in broadcast news remained low due to an imbalance between the number of job applicants and the number of available jobs. The authors noted, “television in particular has many more persons seeking entry-level jobs than there are jobs available” (p. 530). More than two decades later, the problem appeared to be compounded by the fact that the U.S Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2019) forecasted the job outlook for reporters, correspondents, and broadcast news analysts to decline by 10 percent from 2018 through 2028. Ironically, this projection came at a time of renewed interest among college students in pursuing journalism as a degree (Anderson, 2018).

Salaries today. Some of the preeminent salary information for local broadcast journalists is made available annually through a partnership between the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA) and Hofstra University's Bob Papper, distinguished professor emeritus of journalism, media studies, and public relations. A recent study found the median starting salary in local television news was \$28,600 with the average starting salary sitting at \$29,500 (Papper, 2018).

Looking at overall local television news salaries, Papper (2017) found they had risen by four percent in 2016, more than the level of inflation. Breaking salaries down by position, Papper found the median salary was \$44,000 for a television reporter, \$33,000 for a television news producer, and \$32,000 for a multimedia journalist. Salaries improved for employees in higher-level positions with the median salary at \$55,000 for an executive producer and \$70,000 for a news anchor.

Papper's (2017) salary information also allowed for close-up examination of median salaries based on market size. For example, the median salary for a local television news reporter was \$76,000 in the country's 25 largest markets. In markets 26 through 50, that number fell to \$55,000. In markets 51 through 100, it was \$40,000. Markets 101 through 150 saw reporters making \$30,000 as a median salary. In markets 151 and above, the median salary was \$26,000. The salaries across market sizes varied similarly for other positions; for example, a news anchor's median salary ranged between \$43,000 and \$171,300 based on market size, while a news producer's median salary ranged between \$25,500 and \$55,000.

Salary information from the Pew Research Center (2019) found the median annual wage for a broadcast television news reporter was roughly \$55,000 in 2018. However, it is important

to note that this number included employees in both local and network newsrooms whereas the RTDNA/Hofstra data surveyed only local newsrooms.

Journalism salaries have also frequently been compared to other communications professionals such as those working in public relations. The BLS (2020) found a public relations specialist's median salary was \$61,150 compared to \$46,270 for reporters, correspondents, and broadcast news analysts. The same data showed an announcer's median pay was \$39,790. Additionally, Williams (2014) conducted research on this topic and found public relations specialists earned a median salary of \$54,940 which was 65 percent higher than the median salary of \$35,600 for news reporters (broadcast and print).¹

Research also exists showing how journalists who have a college degree fare financially compared to other workers in the country. Grieco (2018) looked at general newsroom salaries – broadcast and print – and found newsroom employees did well in terms of compensation when considering all U.S. workers at all education levels. But when looking specifically at those with a college degree – and 79 percent of newsroom employees had a college degree – newsroom employees did worse than their similarly educated counterparts in other industries. “The median earnings of newsroom employees with a college degree are about \$51,000, compared with roughly \$59,000 for all other college-educated workers” (Grieco, 2018, para. 4).

Beyond Journalism

Returning to burnout in a broader sense, this issue can be extrapolated beyond journalism to the wider world of communications. Chan, Huang, Krainer, Diehl, and Terlutter (2015) found that communication technology had the power to not only help communication professionals in

¹ It is also insightful to compare compensation to other professions. For example, according to the BLS (2019), an electrician's median salary was \$56,180, a police officer's median salary was \$63,150, a computer programmer's median salary was \$86,550, and a construction manager's median salary was \$95,260.

their work but also contribute to stress. This technology was found to increase “the job demands in the communication industry because of a tighter deadline and more frequent last-minute changes” (p. 88), even blurring the line between what is and what is not work-related.

Potential Solutions

Is there a solution for burnout among journalists? There are many ideas offered in the literature designed to help journalists avoid burnout or, at least, better deal with the circumstances that can lead to it.

Green (2019), who argued that burnout is more of a management than an employee problem, maintained that “editors, who in particular have large amounts of pressure on their shoulders, should receive support and leadership that fits the challenges of the modern newsroom” (para. 13). Cleary (2006) argued for professional development and training and questioned whether a failure to provide training led to the burnout of some of the industry’s potential rising stars, particularly producers who feel a lack of support from management for professional development. Liu and Lo (2018) found journalists who had sufficient levels of autonomy in their work were better able to deal with burnout – specifically caused by a heavy workload – which bodes well for the retention of experienced journalists. Martin (2020) urged a focus on mental health which “could save a young journalist from turning away from the profession entirely at a time when their energy and passion for journalism is desperately needed” (para. 30).

RTDNA (2019) argued that journalists should work on simplifying their task list, focusing on tasks rather than bouncing around, and recharging. For newsroom managers, the organization suggested they should strive to find a better work-life balance and demonstrate that to staffers, which can help create a better culture at work. Macnicol (2014) urged a rethinking of

how society defines being available with the advent of technology, especially as more workers begin exhibiting signs of burnout earlier in their careers. Demby (2015) argued for more diversity in newsrooms so minority journalists are not forced into situations where they are the only ones covering stories about minorities that impact their own lives and are often difficult to tell. And Wenger (2019) advocated for higher salaries to improve television news specifically.

As many journalists are exposed to traumatic events in the course of their work, some have argued for increased organizational support and helping them connect with others (Smith, Newman, Drevo, & Slaughter, 2015). Speaking specifically of journalists who cover war and sometimes suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, Feinstein (2004) argued they often do not receive needed treatment.

But journalists not assigned to the war beat are just as vulnerable to the pressures and negative influences that come with their jobs. The *Huffington Post's* five-part series in 2015 on journalism and mental health examined multiple factors that are concerning for journalists, particularly trauma they either directly or indirectly experience while working. The first installment of that series identified a culture inherent in newsrooms where journalists are encouraged to be tough while discouraged from seeking help or opening up about their problems (Arana, 2015). The second installment elaborated on that issue:

The role of a reporter or editor is to produce hard-hitting journalism, to speak the truth about difficult and harrowing events. Journalists are supposed to be fearless, bold, brave. They are supposed to write about others struggling — not admit that they are struggling themselves. (Taibi, 2015, para. 19)

Calls for change in this series included better preparing journalists to deal with trauma and providing better support from colleagues (Taibi, 2015), talking more about trauma and stress as

well as taking regular breaks (Arana, 2015), and even looking at how workspaces are configured and designed to promote happiness among workers (Taibi, 2015).

Research Questions

The possible reasons for a journalist to become disenchanted with the profession or even burned out are wide and varied. However, recent studies have not adequately or definitively stated why today's broadcast journalists actually choose to leave the field, particularly in the current journalistic environment. This study aims to identify the primary reasons based on the practical and recent experiences of former broadcast journalists with at least five years of experience who left the field in the last two years. In carrying out this study, I posed the following two research questions:

RQ1: What factors cause a broadcast journalist to voluntarily leave the field?

RQ2: What are the implications for the broadcast journalism industry?

Method

Participants

In order to gain as much insight as possible to answer the research questions, I conducted qualitative interviews with 12 former broadcast journalists – six men and six women – who left the field during 2018 or 2019. These journalists represented television markets across the United States and worked in various positions including news and sports. Prior to conducting the interviews, I obtained permission to carry out this qualitative study from the Brigham Young University Institutional Review Board (IRB). In accordance with the conditions outlined by the IRB, this study has taken great lengths to protect privacy. All the former journalists are referred to by pseudonyms. Additionally, specific markets are not identified but are instead broadly

categorized by market size as defined by national rankings of designated market areas (Nielsen, 2019). Descriptions of the 12 research study participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Former broadcast journalism participants

Pseudonym	Position	Years of Experience, When Left News	Market Size (Range)	Approximate Final Salary	Post-News Profession
Aaron	News anchor	11, September 2019	30 to 60	\$45,000	Unemployed
Adam	Reporter	8, September 2019	1 to 30	\$48,500	Marketing
Ally	Reporter	10, June 2019	1 to 30	\$53,000	Public relations
Christina	Content director	6, June 2019	120 to 150	\$42,500	Marketing
Erika	Executive producer	20, September 2018	1 to 30	\$75,000	Media relations
Gil	Reporter	10, November 2018	1 to 30	\$49,000	Media relations
Julia	Reporter	8, March 2019	60 to 90	\$45,000	Public relations
Kelly	News anchor	5, December 2019	120 to 150	\$32,000	Self-employed
Nash	News anchor	10, November 2018	90 to 120	\$65,000	Corporate communications
Paul	Sports anchor	10, December 2019	30 to 60	\$43,000	Public relations
Sarah	Producer	10, February 2018	1 to 30	\$63,000	Marketing
Stephen	Reporter	23, November 2019	1 to 30	\$92,000	Media relations

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted by phone or in person, based on the location of each journalist, between January 29, 2020, and March 20, 2020. They lasted between 16 minutes 45 seconds and 30 minutes 53 seconds, based on the availability and schedules of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured with a few general questions prepared in advance but with broad flexibility to ask additional follow-up questions as needed. This approach helped guide the interviews while allowing them to flow organically and naturally, yielding valuable insights and thick description from the participants. Some of the questions posed to all interviewees were as follows:

1. What were your experiences as a journalist? What did you like or dislike?
2. Why did you leave broadcast journalism?
3. Do you plan to return to the field? Why or why not?
4. Were you burned out at the end of your news career? Why or why not?

Each interview was documented via audio recording. The interviews were then transcribed using the web-based application *Otter* with all identifying information later redacted. Further follow-up discussion with participants to clarify points and ask additional questions occurred by email and phone.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were analyzed and coded for themes. This study used constant comparative analysis to produce a grounded theory, in accordance with established qualitative methods (Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The goal of the analytical process was to identify the dominant reasons why these former broadcast journalists left the field and then use

that information to develop recommendations that could be useful for news managers and journalists still working in the industry.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Because this is a qualitative study built on a naturalistic paradigm, it is critical to establish credibility or confidence in the findings of the study. There are several ways to do this including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Due to the impracticality of several of these methods since the individuals interviewed are *former* journalists – not current – I relied heavily on member checks to establish credibility and build confidence in the validity of the findings. Erlandson et al. (1993) described member checks as the opportunity for participants to verify “both data and interpretations” in the study (p. 31). They further defined this step as giving participants “a chance to indicate whether the reconstructions of the inquirer are recognizable” (p. 142). Through member checking, I shared my main findings from the individual interviews with each respective interviewee and asked for their validation in the correctness or incorrectness of the material gleaned. Everyone then had the chance to confirm the findings or suggest corrections and clarifications. As Erlandson et al. (1993) have said regarding member checks, “no data obtained through the study should be included in it if they cannot be verified through member checks” (p. 31). I have followed this guidance strictly, and I was able to keep an open line of communication with each participant throughout this process. Each participant will also be provided an electronic copy of this study for their personal records.

An additional step to verify the results of this study involved peer debriefing, which Erlandson et al. (1993) defined as “allowing a peer who is a professional outside the context and who has some general understanding of the study to analyze materials, test working hypotheses

and emerging designs, and listen to the researcher’s ideas and concerns” (p. 140). As a former journalist, I have many friends and acquaintances who have extensive experience in the news industry. I called on several of them to share my main findings and discuss ideas and other considerations pertinent to the study. It is important to note that the peer debriefers were not members of my research committee, nor were they involved in the study in any other way. In accordance with established practices, I attempted to use peer debriefing to “keep the research honest” and come up with fresh ideas for expressing the findings of this study (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 141).

Personal Disclosure

In conducting and analyzing the interviews, my background as a former journalist also played an invaluable role. I spent nearly a decade working in broadcast news in multiple markets in the United States, in both on-air and off-air capacities. I left the industry and accepted a media relations job in November 2017. The news business is akin to a small, tight-knit community with its own language, jargon, and points of reference. As each former journalist spoke with me about their experiences, I clearly understood the events and considerations they described because they were very similar – if not identical – to what I had experienced during my news career. I was also able to easily understand technical terms and other descriptions that might have been confusing to a researcher with no previous journalism experience. Throughout this process, I have relied on my personal experience and background as a framework to garner important information and insights to answer my research questions.

Findings

Julia worked at four news stations throughout her career. She enjoyed it, especially working as an investigative reporter filing public records requests and having support from her

then-boss for going after hard-hitting stories. But by the end of eight years in the news industry, she had had enough. “I was like, I'm tired of the abuse, and I'm ready to have a job where I'm treated with dignity,” she said. “So, I decided to get out.”

This is one of many similar stories. Each interviewee without exception recounted their love for journalism and their passion for the pursuit of storytelling and sharing information with the public. But each interviewee also expressed several reasons that ultimately led them out the door. While the interviewees described experiences that were unique and personal to them, they also surprisingly often echoed the sentiments of the others. After coding the material in the interviews and analyzing it for commonalities, I was able to identify three clear themes. These former broadcast journalists generally left the field due to the increasing demands placed on them, issues with management, and low financial compensation. Within each theme lie many sub-themes that allow us to better understand why these journalists decided to leave the profession they knew so well.

Theme #1: Demands

The former broadcast journalists in this study generally described an industry that is changing rapidly. As Aaron put it, “I think the expectations in the industry are getting tougher as time goes on.” Paul said, “I felt like I worked myself to the bone for 10 years and the reward was never there.” Many of these former journalists regularly cited some aspect of increasing demands and their associated effects as a reason for leaving the field. These demands manifested themselves in many ways including long or unconventional work hours, a tenuous or even non-existent work-life balance, difficult stories they were required to cover, and newsrooms demanding journalists do more work with fewer resources. In some cases, increasing demands

led to health issues for these former journalists, and they felt the increasing demands led to a loss of quality in the stations' product.

Work hours. Adam had a work schedule that spelled out when he was supposed to work. But it seemed that schedule was rarely set in stone. "I wasn't sleeping enough. It was just a very volatile schedule," he said. Adam described often getting called late at night by a manager asking him to fill in as a reporter on the early shift the next morning. He said his work hours varied constantly and, in the end, "it wasn't good for me." While other former journalists described having more set hours, some of them still struggled with the wild variability from one day to the next. Kelly said,

I needed a schedule that was consistent ... I was dayside during the week and then nightside on the weekends. And so that was just too hard on me physically, as I'm getting older and just physically and on my health, and so I just needed something consistent. I needed something that gave me more, more time to take care of myself and go to the gym and do things like that.

Aaron also described the challenge for him of working as a weekend anchor in the evenings for two days a week and then having to report three days a week during the daytime. In his case, Aaron's unconventional schedule did not match up well with his wife's more traditional work schedule. "It makes things tough on your relationships," Aaron said, who had also worked as a morning anchor for much of his career and had labored during overnight and early morning hours.

Even journalists who had more consistent hours still struggled. Several of them worked the early morning shift. Ally said that contributed to her deciding to leave the field because of what those hours could force her to give up in the long run. She said,

I was 32 years old. I was working weekends and early mornings, you know, coming to work at three in the morning. And I knew I wanted to have a family at some point and ... it was really hard to picture those things in the context of the job that I was at, just because of the hours and ... everything being so non-stop.

Ally left her large-market reporting job in June 2019 and now works in public relations with more traditional hours.

It is well-known that journalists often work many holidays. That was no exception with the former journalists interviewed for this study. After starting her new job in marketing following 10 years in the news business, Sarah said,

I joked last year that I got Memorial Day off for the first time in my whole career. And so many of my friends were laughing because I was like, I didn't even plan anything.

Because in my mind, like, it's just a day that I don't even think about having off.

Sarah bemoaned the fact that many newsrooms continue to require journalists to work holidays and suggested they take a second look at it. "I think there needs to be a reevaluation of how people consume news. And is it really that important for everybody to work every holiday?"

Work-life balance. The demands placed upon these former journalists while they worked in the news industry led some of them to feel that they did not have a good work-life balance. Erika, an executive producer with 20 years of experience in the field, cited this as the top reason she left the field. She said,

I was stressed. I was always in fear of missing a story, wanting to make sure that the competition didn't beat us, that we had the right people in the right places at the right times. And I was messing with people's lives, you know, of, oh, you have to stay longer,

you have to work, you know, and there just weren't enough people. And so, it wasn't just my work-life balance. It was everyone's work-life balance.

Paul, who held a position as a sports anchor, had a wife and children while working in the broadcast news field. He said he reached a point where he felt it was not worth “breaking your back and bending over backwards for an industry” that did not have his best interests in mind.

Nash also struggled with work-life balance. He said his current job in corporate communications has helped him regain it. He said,

I am busy, but there's a difference between being busy and being stressed. And there's just something about a journalist – you take your work home with you whether it's, you know, comments that people have said because it's very public, or just you kind of just nitpick at yourself because you're on TV. As a journalist, there's just a different type of stress, and I do think that also contributes to the burnout.

While these former journalists may not have always used the words “work-life balance” to describe their dissatisfaction, many of the stories they shared pointed clearly to a feeling that they were serving the industry at the cost of other aspects of their lives or well-being.

Difficult stories. Covering disturbing or less-than-happy stories is nothing new in the broadcast news business, and journalists tend to know that this comes with the job. Yet, several of the former journalists in this study cited the requirement to cover difficult stories as one reason they decided to find a different line of work. For Adam, this acted as sort of a tipping point. He was near the end of his news career when he was covering the murder of a child. He remembered, “the day that they found this little girl's body was the day that I was like, I don't want to do this anymore. It was just a horrible case.” Gil had similar thoughts, remembering the difficult stories he had covered involving death and tragedy which took a toll on him. He said,

I just didn't realize until later how much of a toll it was. I was just trying to kind of brush it aside and be like, oh no, I'm fine, I'm fine, I can do this. You know, this is my job. Not realizing that it was leading to depression and other things.

Gil said he ultimately decided to leave the news business for a variety of reasons related not only to his career, but also to his mental health.

Even for Erika, who had years of newsroom experience at several stations, the difficult stories became difficult to handle, particularly stories about crime. "I think I just wasn't able to compartmentalize it anymore," she said. "It impacted me and you, you felt for those people, telling those hard stories."

Doing more work with fewer resources. Aaron worked in a mid-sized market as a weekend news anchor and weekday reporter, in a city with a sizeable population. Yet, he rarely worked with a photographer. "Ninety percent of the time, I was out on my own," he said. Aaron was one of many journalists known as one-man-bands or multimedia journalists, responsible for shooting and editing video, writing, and reporting. Some of these journalists even run their own live shots. "You're doing two, three, four people's jobs in one," Aaron said. "It makes it tougher to do your job well."

Many of the former journalists said they were asked to do more work with fewer resources. For Erika, that meant producers being asked to effectively become graphic artists by designing maps and other materials for newscasts. For Gil, it meant working in chronically short-staffed newsrooms that felt acutely the absence of even one journalist, making him feel guilty for even thinking of calling in sick. For others, it meant regularly using social media in addition to their other duties. Describing today's newsrooms, Paul said,

It's not just, you're the anchor anymore. It's, you're the anchor. You're the reporter. You're the photographer ... You're the digital web person. You know, you run your account on Twitter. You run the Facebook account. You're kind of like the copy editor, and all those things.

Paul said he felt that journalists are doing the job of several people, and it is difficult to accomplish everything that is required within an eight-hour day. Stephen, who worked as a reporter for more than two decades, agreed. He said,

Facebook Lives, tweeting, Instagram, Facebook. So that takes time plus, in the midst of all that, you're trying to set up stories for the next day. You're getting calls from sources, people pitching you stories, all trying to do that.

Stephen added, "it was non-stop every day," and these increasing demands led him to realize that he could not continue down the path of working as a professional journalist.

Health issues. In some cases, as alluded to previously, the former journalists said the increasing demands on them led to health challenges. Sarah said her ten years as a producer in the news business was filled with "long hours" and "not a lot of days off." She said she often worked evening and overnight shifts. She said, "it was really hard on me. I actually feel like it took me a few years to recuperate ... [and learn] how to sleep like a normal person." She also said the non-traditional work schedule contributed to an autoimmune disorder. Nash, who worked as a morning news anchor, suffered from frequent migraines. When he decided to pursue other employment, he said, "part of me was looking for a little bit better work-life balance and hours and things like that." Now working in corporate communications, Nash said he is "much happier." He said, "I go to work at nine o'clock in the morning, leave every day at five." He reported that his health is much better today than when he was working in news.

Stephen, who often worked as a one-man-band reporter responsible for shooting and editing his own material, said he struggled with neck and back issues during his career. “I didn’t generally have an office to work in,” he said. “So, I’m in a car hunched over – non-ergonomic at all – with the strain and pressure of watching the watch and checking the clock trying to get it done.” He said it was difficult to take time to walk around due to the stress of meeting all his deadlines. “I could just tell that as much as I loved what I was doing, it was unsustainable to keep that going long-term in my life.”

While mentions of mental health challenges were fewer, they were not absent in the interviews. Speaking of his volatile work hours, Adam said, “it was taking a toll on my physical health and mental health.” He now works in a marketing role, and he said those problems have vanished. “I sleep now,” he said. “My sleep habits have improved drastically. I don’t have bags under my eyes. My health has improved. I’m a lot happier.” Gil and Sarah both cited their mental health as one of the reasons for deciding to move on from their careers. “My last year in news really kind of solidified for me that it was too hard on my mental state,” Sarah said, adding that working in news “did a number on my brain.” Gil said he dealt with “depression and other things” due to the difficult stories he was assigned to cover throughout his time in the industry.

Loss of quality in stations’ product. Some of the former broadcast journalists felt the increasing demands impacts the quality of what television stations produce. Paul said he feels stations are just looking for “warm bodies.” He elaborated,

They’re just looking for somebody who has a warm body and a pulse that knows how to press record. Can they edit? Yeah. It doesn’t look the best, yeah. Can they put a sentence together and make it sound coherent? Yeah. Are they looking for quality talent? Not always.

Aaron felt the quality of the news product has dropped as some stations encourage reporters to put news stories together on their smart phones.

The diminishing quality of the news product could also be tied to the busy schedules of working journalists. Speaking of the general demands of the industry, Christina said,

I think it's getting more difficult for journalists because they're expected to do more and more. And I think they're expected to turn more stories and are expected to, you know, shoot more of their own stuff ... while also being able to maintain web and social media. So, I think the expectations are getting harder ... I think it's becoming more difficult for them to sustain at the level they're at.

Adam said the broadcast journalism business is about “quantity over quality” and puts a premium on “more content. More content to fill the hours. But the quality of journalism is suffering, and I think people are less informed because of that.”

Theme #2: Issues with Management

Adam worked at three stations in his career in a variety of markets. Each time, he said he felt like there was a disconnect between management and staff. But it was especially pronounced at his last station. He said,

I never felt supported by upper management. I always felt like for them, if there was a problem, blame the reporter ... There was always this attitude of, well, the reporter must be wrong ... It always felt like I was under investigation.

He said tension was also apparent in the daily story meeting, which was led by his news director. “He would yell at us for an hour in the story meeting – literally for an hour – just telling us how bad we sucked,” Adam said. He felt that any problems his station had reflected bad management. A few months after leaving his job and taking a position in marketing, Adam had this to say:

Nobody thanks you for your job. Nobody gives you any feedback, at least in my experience. There's no feedback given ever, unless you did something wrong. There was no praise, no incentive to do well. It was just, get out there, beat the competition. And if you don't beat the competition, that's okay. We don't care ... as long as we fill time. That's what it always felt like was that we were always filling the airspace with frivolous content that wasn't necessarily that important to viewers.

While Adam's account is pointed, his is not the only one. One of the most prevalent themes of the interviews involved frustration or dissatisfaction with management, both local and corporate. The former journalists described several ways this manifested itself including unfulfilled promises, the increasing commercialization of news, unrealistic and unethical expectations, a general lack of appreciation, and the consolidation of the industry by large corporations.

Unfulfilled promises. Based on the interviews of the 12 former journalists, there didn't seem to be a lot of trust or goodwill between them and the managers who supervised their work. Aaron remembered being promised the opportunity to work on long-form stories at his station. However, due to several variables he was not made aware of – and the fact that the long-form unit was dissolved within a year – he did not have that opportunity. “Anytime where it felt like we were moving in the right direction on something, it was kind of a pipe dream,” he said.

When Kelly took a position as a weekend anchor at her station, she was told it would be only temporary. She recalled managers saying,

When something opens up during the week, it'll be yours. And I was like, yeah, okay, fair enough. I can, you know, sacrifice my weekend and have a kind of an off schedule for a while until something opens up because, you know, in the business there is a lot of turnover and so I expected something to open up quickly.

Positions did open but, unfortunately for Kelly, she did not get them. “They didn't even consider me. They just put two other girls in the position who were younger than me and who had less experience,” she said. After getting passed over for a third time, she lost hope. She said,

I know that there's turnover in the business, but I just could not sacrifice that for my family any longer, for a corporation and ... for a company that obviously didn't value me as much as I hoped they would ... and just blatantly lied to their employees. Because I would not have signed a contract for a weekend position had I known that that was going to be a permanent thing, but they had guaranteed me that it wasn't a permanent thing. And of course, my ignorance, I did not get that in writing. And so, needless to say, we didn't necessarily end up on positive terms.

Kelly looked back on her station management as “very, very poor. Beyond words. It was just very, very poor management. And they seemed to make decisions based on personal feeling rather than professional.”

Increasing commercialization of news. In Julia's final market, she was hired as an investigative reporter. But she quickly learned that doing stories like that would be difficult. “Once I started turning stories,” Julia said, “the [general manager] told the news director to have me stop doing stories.” She said the general manager did not want hard-hitting stories but instead “wanted our brand to be your hometown station, feel-good stories.” On top of this, Julia said, the general manager would attend editorial meetings and worked to “sponsor every single segment.” She was often pulled from her investigative beat to go produce “good news stories.” Julia continued,

It felt like everything was backwards at that station, like real journalism was looked down upon, and these fluffy good news stories was what they wanted. And the content was

terrible. But they were still the number one station, so they could do whatever they wanted.

Julia went from this station to a competing station in the market in a management position, but she did not last beyond a year. Ironically, she said, she felt frustrated having to make the same demands on her employees that she had endured at previous stations. She decided to leave the business.

Julia was not the only former journalist to lament the increasing commercial influence on the news product. Aaron said his station's morning show ended up airing many sponsored segments that management championed. Aaron said he felt it was a "watered-down product, and it's not something that really provides any service to the community." Adam said his station aired "hours and hours and hours of sponsored content. And that's all the station seemed to care about."

Unrealistic and unethical expectations. Sarah enjoyed producing the news. At her last station in a large market, she pioneered a franchise. But she did not enjoy trying to please management in what felt like a futile exercise. She said,

My bosses didn't know what they wanted, but what they didn't want was anything I gave them ... They couldn't tell me from the beginning what they were looking for. All they could say was from the backside of, like, I didn't like these 10 things.

Paul also felt tired of "the unrealistic expectations from management" that he felt sprung from the fact that news managers do not usually have the background of being a field reporter or photographer and understanding what it takes to put stories together. Paul said, "it's easy, I think, sometimes for people to be behind the desk to demand so much without understanding the workload that, that's involved with it."

Erika recalled upper management at her station often failed to communicate expectations down the line. “They started a new campaign, but no one in the newsroom really knew what it meant,” she said. At times, she felt, there was too much management and not enough workers. She, like Paul, felt that managers should get out of the newsroom to gain a different perspective.

In one case, one of the former journalists recalled management imposed what he felt was an unethical mandate. Nash worked as a morning anchor for a station owned by Sinclair Broadcast Group. In 2018, the company told anchors at its nearly 200 stations to record a promo decrying “biased and false news” – similar talking points regularly voiced by President Donald Trump – which resulted in widespread public outcry (Domonoske, 2018). Nash was one of those anchors, and he said this experience left an extremely sour taste in his mouth. He said,

We were threatened that if we did not read it, things were not going to go well for us. I know a lot of other people were in that same boat. That was really, really tough for me because it was just like, I felt like we were ... fighting for the truth, and then to have our superiors kind of fight back ... that was tough.

Nash blamed both corporate and local management for the debacle. He said,

I wish local management ... would have fought more for us. I have worked with news directors in the past that I feel would have handled that situation much differently and would have actually fought for me. But it felt like we were just being thrown out there.

Nash said by the end of his time at his station, he was so frustrated with what management was asking him to do, he felt it would be better to look outside news for a new job.

Lack of appreciation. Some of the former journalists said they felt management did not appreciate their efforts to do a good job. Gil said he did not receive many accolades from management on a job well done. Neither did Adam. And Kelly summed it up this way: “I was

overworked, underpaid, and not appreciated.” None of the journalists indicated they needed to be coddled or showered with praise, but some of them noticed a general silence from their bosses when things went well.

Consolidation of the industry. The broadcast news industry is changing as large corporations buy television stations, thereby growing even larger. While local broadcasters have argued consolidation helps them survive in today’s technological environment, critics have argued consolidation leads to fewer voices in the media landscape (Fischer, 2018). Several of the former journalists interviewed for this study also criticized consolidation, arguing it has led to management issues that pushed them out of the industry. Julia said she worked for several of the country’s largest media companies. She said,

They did not care about digital when I worked there at all. And so, there was no sense that these corporations wanted to keep up with the future and wanted to survive. And these corporations are just getting bigger and bigger, and that’s just the reality of every station everywhere.

Kelly had similar thoughts. When her station’s owner was bought out by a larger company, she noticed a negative impact. “The larger they go, the worse it seems to get,” she said. Paul noted that the largest owners of local television stations are companies “who value a dollar more than they value ... their people. And they put profits over people. And it’s not a good combination to have.”

Theme #3: Compensation

When Paul started his career in sports broadcast journalism in 2009, he worked in a small market where he made \$18,500 a year. He lived in income-based apartments and racked up

credit card debt trying to make ends meet. By the time he finished his career in December 2019 in a mid-sized market, he made approximately \$43,000. In our interview, he said,

Now, in my mid-30s, I'm like, holy crap, I can't believe I wasted 10 years of my life bending over backwards in an industry that – it wasn't great, but it wasn't, wasn't worth, you know – there's some days I kind of feel like I wasted 10 years of my life.

Julia said, "it's just crazy how cheap news stations are." And Adam shared, "I knew people who were asking their parents for \$1,000 a month so that they could survive." The topic of compensation came up in many ways during the interviews with these former journalists. While not all of them felt they were destitute or even that their salary was the main factor that caused them to seek new employment, the sentiment was generally the same – they did not feel they got paid enough money in broadcast news for the work they were doing.

Salary stories. Especially at the beginning of these former broadcast journalists' careers, money was scarce. Sarah, who worked in several markets as a producer, said,

Starting out in those low markets where you're making no money ... there are times you, you kind of have to decide, like, can I put gas in my car or can I eat this week? Can I pay my bills?

Sarah's salary rose as she moved up in market size, but she did not leave the business totally satisfied that she was earning a decent living. "I learned after – kind of after the fact – that some of my colleagues were making significantly more than me with, with commensurate experience," she said.

Aaron began his career making around \$20,000 a year as a news anchor. When he moved on to his second market, his pay rose less than \$10,000. "So, the first five years of my career, I didn't make over \$30,000 a year," he said. By the time he got out of the business, he was making

approximately \$45,000 a year. He called his salary “a side concern” in terms of causing him to leave the business, but he did not mince words either. “I don't feel, for the amount of work that you put in, the salary is sufficient.”

Christina worked at one station in a variety of roles, including on air and in management. As her contract came up for renewal in 2019, she was making \$42,500 a year. Yet, she did not want to sign the contract her station was offering. She remembered,

They had offered me ... a raise I didn't think was adequate for the level of work that I was doing. I was basically an assistant news director without the title, and sometimes even the news director in an acting role. So, I thought, okay, what if I stay on and you don't have to pay me any extra? Just, I'm not on contract, not planning on going anywhere, but you know, want to keep that option open for me and my family. And they said, oh, we're not sure if we can do that, we'll let you know. Two weeks later, I got pulled into a conference room and was let go on the spot.

Christina said the experience left a bitter taste in her mouth, but it also solidified for her the new path she would take. “Definitely the fact that I felt I wasn't being valued at the level I was at was kind of a turning point,” she said. She now works in marketing and said that new opportunity is better for her family.

Sparse raises. When Adam moved from his second to his third market, he expected to become better off financially. But with a stark difference in the cost of living between markets, it essentially equated to no raise at all. “I was constantly living paycheck to paycheck,” Adam said of his final market. “I thought about what I wanted to do with my life. I want to buy a house. I want to invest. I wasn't able to do any of those things.”

Julia felt the same way. She expected that when she left her second market and moved to another station in a new market that she would get a raise. That did not happen. She said,

You can't take carrying 50 pounds on your back, like, all this equipment ... and find that sustainable when you're working 12-hour days and making no money and unable to pay your student loans. And that's just not consistent. There's no way to keep up with that. And I'm seeing so many good journalists who love journalism just get out and they're doing what I'm doing. Like, I'm basically making fluff videos every day for [my new employer]. Because that's more sustainable than journalism. And it's sad.

Julia now makes approximately \$50,000 in her public relations job, and she feels far more optimistic about her long-term earning potential than she did working in news.

Gil also struggled with the lack of meaningful pay increases at his last station. He said when he was offered a new contract, the increase was only one percent for the first year and two percent for the second year. "That's not even a cost of living raise," Gil said, adding, "I knew that I wasn't going to have a good place to get a pay raise because so many young people were coming in willing to work for nothing."

Long-term outlook. Of the 12 former journalists interviewed for this study, Stephen was making the most money when he left the business. An industry veteran of more than 20 years, he was making \$92,000 a year and was not overly concerned about money at the time he left. But he said the long-term financial outlook was concerning and that his pay increases were not keeping up with the cost of living. He said, "It wasn't an urgent fear, but down the road I knew that something would have to change."

An increasingly inexperienced industry. Several of the journalists interviewed for this study also alluded to a drop in experience in the industry because of low salaries which do not

attract top talent. Gil said even in large markets, he could see stations hiring journalists with little professional experience. “You used to have to have five years’ experience, kind of paying your dues,” he said. Kelly echoed that idea. She said,

They’re hiring kids straight out of college who don’t have any experience and who are young, have no life experience ... They’re paying them nothing, and these kids are okay with that. And, but the quality of work is really suffering.

Nash felt the same way as he saw his station hire producers right out of college. He said it felt like he was “always training somebody, somebody brand new.” He said he was frustrated because he felt his show would only be as strong as the team. Julia went even further, arguing that hiring inexperienced people puts news stations at risk. She said,

I feel like these huge corporations and their big offices, they don’t care about the quality. They just care about the money. And, so, I don’t see that changing with the way that this news landscape is going ... It leaves room for newsrooms full of kids right out of college, and my most recent newsroom was that because that’s what they could afford. Kids right out of college making grave mistakes ... opening themselves up to lawsuits, sensationalizing things because they don’t have the experience or the know-how to know any better. And you’re just going to see more and more examples of that where people used to be making their mistakes in small markets – with hardly anybody watching – but now those kids are getting hired in much, much bigger markets and making their mistakes in front of triple, quadruple those audiences. And I think, you know, experience should be valued, but it’s not in TV news.

Adam felt that “the work that’s done in journalism is very grueling, very tasking. And the industry is not going to improve unless they start paying their people better.”

Pessimism about the future of the news industry. Compensation also caused several of the former journalists to feel pessimistic about the direction of the industry. By offering low salaries, Gil said stations send a message to journalists that “you’re easily replaceable.” He continued, “You could be a great reporter and know how to do things, but they could stick someone fresh out of college in front the camera, and they’re getting what they want.” Gil, whose base salary was \$49,000 after 10 years in the business, felt that “even if I save 10 percent of my check in my 401(k), it’s not going to make a difference. And so, people who are looking at that are going to leave the business and get out.”

Nash acknowledged he “wasn’t too terribly worried about money” at his last station. He was earning approximately \$65,000 as a morning anchor. However, he said, “once I left and went to the corporate world, I realized how much less stressful you can get a lot more money for.” Looking back with hindsight, he realized compensation did play a role. But his thoughts also focused on the general direction of the industry, not just his own situation. “It’s just kind of frustrating where news is headed,” he said. “They’re not paying people good enough to stay and want to work. And the people that do stay, it’s, it’s not a great environment anymore.”

Adam compared journalism to law enforcement and teaching as one of the “honorable” professions. But he said low pay hampers those who work in it. He said, “I think that people’s passions are taken advantage of in that industry, especially by these big media conglomerates that now own almost every station in the country.”

Theory Revisited: Burnout

This study relied on burnout theory as a framework for investigating why broadcast journalists would choose to leave their field. I asked each journalist whether they considered themselves burned out as they left. Seven interviewees said yes. Five said no. Interestingly,

several of the former journalists said they would be open to getting back in the broadcast news industry under the right conditions.

As to what constituted burnout for the former journalists who described feeling that way, the answer was different in each case. Aaron cited the increasing demands and issues with management. Ally called it “kind of a combination of burned out but also just kind of emotionally worn out from being so close to those really emotional things.” She added, “I know that there’s going to be bad things happening in the world, but I didn’t feel like I needed to be that close to all of the bad things that were happening.”

Gil said, “I was burned out. I stopped caring.” Harkening to themes laid out previously, he said,

Once you realize that you’re just kind of seen as someone to fill time on the air, like – and they can easily replace you – it’s hard to keep caring when other people both don’t appreciate you or you don’t feel appreciated, and you know that your job could easily be taken by someone fresh out of college.

Gil said rather than try again at another station, he decided he would be better off exploring other options. He now works in media relations and said he has found those things he felt were missing in broadcast journalism, including higher pay and appreciation from management.

Citing being overworked, underpaid, and unappreciated, Kelly said she was burned out. “I just wanted to do my job,” she said, “but corporate red tape and management made it difficult and frustrating.” Nash said he felt “really burnt out” from the hours and issues with management. Sarah said her burnout came from “mostly the politics of the news business.” She also said the constant demands placed upon journalists make them prone to burnout, “and I think being a journalist is much harder than most people realize.”

Stephen echoed that sentiment. After more than two decades in journalism, he said he was burned out “in that it was non-stop every day.” He said managers expected him to turn a story every day – often multiple stories – which made every day “literally a race to the finish.” He said,

Even though I didn't go complain to management, I tried explaining to them what was going on. But the workflow situation never changed. And so, it just got to the point where I realized nothing here is going to change. In fact, you know, the last few months I was there, they added an additional digital show. So, I mean, that was one more producer asking for more, you know – just do something easy for us. Well, it still takes time. And all those things add up.

Stephen also said management did not offer regular professional development opportunities. If they did, he said, it was on top of the duties he already had to complete every day.

Three of the former journalists who reported feeling burned out – Kelly, Nash, and Sarah – said they would be open to getting back into the industry under the right conditions. Generally, though, they did not have much optimism that such conditions exist at a station where they would be able to do what they want to do. It is also possible that as time goes by, the allure of getting back in will subside. Nash said,

I always told myself if I miss it, you know, I can always go back. But the longer I've gotten away from it ... the less I miss it. And I watch things on the news, and I think, wow, I'm glad I'm not in that position anymore.

Nash also admitted he is pessimistic that circumstances in the industry will eventually improve.

Five former journalists – Adam, Christina, Erika, Julia, and Paul – said they did not feel burned out at the end of their news careers. But, interestingly, only Adam said he was leaving the

door open to rejoin the industry. His comments below reflect the internal struggle he has faced in leaving the industry to which he had devoted nearly a decade of his life. He said,

I feel like sometimes, it's what I was born to do, but it is not serving me anymore. I always felt like it was a one-sided relationship. Like I was putting in all this effort, and I wasn't getting any return ... It's like a bad marriage.

Discussion

In looking at my research questions, RQ1 asked what factors cause a broadcast journalist to voluntarily leave the field. Clearly, the reasons vary depending on the person, as the 12 former journalists illustrated. Surprisingly, though, much of what the individual former journalists shared naturally gravitated toward the three key themes outlined in this study. Generally, the former journalists struggled with increased demands, issues with management, and low compensation which led – at least in part – to their decision to seek new employment outside broadcast journalism. These themes also broadly align with the existing literature on burnout theory. In particular – lining up with Maslach and Jackson's (1981) definition of burnout – attitudes of emotional exhaustion, negative feelings, and professional dissatisfaction manifested themselves in various ways among the former journalists and the manner in which they viewed the profession when they left it.

RQ2 sought to understand the implications of these factors for the broadcast journalism industry. Without a doubt, the implications are sobering. Stephen summed it succinctly when he said broadcast journalism is “getting to be the three-to-five-year-type profession. Just a lot of turnover.” These interviews showed continued turnover is a great threat to the industry due to challenges with increased demands, management issues, and low compensation. When the

challenges became more than these former journalists felt they could – or wanted to – bear, they decided to look for work elsewhere, usually in a communications role.

Turnover should be something each news manager should diligently work to avoid and address. When a broadcast journalist leaves the profession, they take with them valuable knowledge and a history in the market where they are working. They also take a commitment to serving the community that they call home or want to call home for a long time to come. That was the case for nearly all the 12 former journalists in this study. Christina noted the huge learning curve and extensive time required for a journalist to truly become part of the community and not just a presence on local television. Ally said losing veteran journalists who have “institutional knowledge of the city and the city leaders” is “a huge disservice to the communities that they’re trying to serve.” Erika said newsrooms suffer when turnover occurs, especially when it comes to decision-making about coverage. She said,

When you lose someone with experience – especially market experience – you lose someone asking those tough questions. It’s like, has this been done? Who else has done it? ... Those types of questions that aren’t always asked. Instead, it’s run-and-gun, then, get the story on the air. But is it the right story to do?

As indicated previously, there is a large supply of potential broadcast journalists compared to the number of available jobs. Perhaps this imbalance gives newsroom managers less incentive to try to retain established journalists because there will always be someone ready to fill a vacancy. However, as well-intentioned or determined as new journalists are when they join a new station, it takes time, effort, and energy to establish them as a trusted, credible voice. This could easily be abated if excessive turnover were viewed as more of a threat to the survival and

vitality of the industry than it is today. To that end, I present the following three recommendations based on feedback from the former journalists as well as my own analysis:

- First, newsroom managers need to provide additional support for journalists in the form of professional training and development, more flexibility in scheduling and job duties (to the extent possible), and genuine recognition or praise for a job well done. Many of the former journalists indicated they would have appreciated these gestures to help them grow as journalists, better handle a demanding profession, and celebrate their accomplishments along the way. This is particularly important for young journalists who are just starting out and deciding whether to stick with the industry. As Christina said, managers “can really have a lasting impact” on entry-level journalists, and they should be “sympathetic to the fact that this is their first job and they’re away from their families and in a really hard situation.”
- Second, newsrooms should implement some form of mandatory cross-training opportunities so individuals in various roles can be exposed to the ins and outs of other positions, thereby engendering more empathy, understanding, and support for each other. Reporters should understand what it takes to produce a show. Producers and newsroom managers (including news directors) need to leave the building occasionally to understand the challenges field crews face on a regular basis. Aaron lamented the often-unrealistic expectations to turn multiple stories in an eight-hour period and the general reluctance by managers to allow extra time to do stories. Regardless of how it is done, it would behoove everyone in the news operation to better understand each other’s circumstances, work to accommodate them, and unify as a team.

- Third, salaries for broadcast journalists must improve. This, perhaps, is the most difficult recommendation of all to make, but also the most necessary. It is difficult because, clearly, there is no shortage of people willing to work in broadcast news. The pool of potential applicants promises to always be overflowing with people who want to be on camera, write a story, and post to social media for relatively small wages – at least, for a few years until their contract is up. But is that what news managers should want? The former journalists interviewed for this study had all accomplished important things in their careers and seemed poised to continue, even in the smaller markets. In each case, though, he or she chose not to continue. And in almost each case, money in some form had something to do with it. When Adam moved from reporting to marketing, his salary jumped from \$48,500 to \$76,000 immediately. “It’s life-changing,” he said. “I am now buying a house. I can travel. I can invest. I feel like I have money left over at the end of every pay period.” Not only that, but Adam also received a bonus within the first few months of his new job. I do not mean to suggest that reporters can – or should – expect to get rich from journalism. In fact, not one of the former journalists even mentioned such a desire. Instead, they simply expressed a wish to earn a fair salary for the increasing workload they are asked to take on. The call of public relations (or any other industry) will remain strong if journalists feel they can earn more elsewhere and provide a better life for themselves and their families. If news managers wish to counteract this and actually retain the journalists who are making a difference in their newsrooms, it should start with compensation – a fair salary and realistic raises to incentivize talent to remain and build a life in their community. Large corporations should empower local

management to make this happen which can improve the long-term quality and viability of their product.

Conclusion

Journalism constitutes an important work. For journalism to fulfill its purpose, there must be capable, competent men and women who perform the functions of reporting, fact-finding, and analysis. The importance of understanding the current journalistic landscape and the future changes likely to occur cannot be understated and are critical to comprehending the future of journalism in the United States. This study has contributed to a better understanding of the factors broadcast journalists consider when deciding whether to leave the field. It has expounded those factors under the umbrella of burnout theory, providing a current and fresh approach to understanding that theory as it relates to broadcast journalists today. This study has also sounded a warning to news managers and other advocates of broadcast journalism about ways they should seek to strengthen the profession by empowering and strengthening its most important part – the journalists themselves.

Limitations

As with any qualitative work, this study is susceptible to my own biases as a researcher and as a former broadcast journalist. While I have worked diligently to build trustworthiness and ensure this study expressed the true thoughts and intents of those interviewed, the possibility for contamination – however remote – always exists. As this study also relied on the interpretations and constructed realities of the former broadcast journalists themselves in sharing their stories, those elements are vulnerable to the same concerns. Additionally, because this study focused only on those who had left the broadcast journalism field, there is the potential for an over-

emphasis on negative aspects of the industry which might not be fully shared by those currently working in it.

This study is also potentially limited by the arrangements in which the interviews took place. Because of geographic and time limitations, most of the interviews occurred by phone rather than in person. The physical distance or lack of in-person contact could have impacted what the former journalists shared or how they chose to communicate a thought or idea. My role as an interviewer may also have played an unanticipated role. For example, in those cases where I previously knew the former journalist being interviewed, our relationship could have led to a more candid expression of thoughts or the opposite effect. The same could be said for those cases where the former journalist and I did not know each other. I have taken all reasonable precautions to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of this study (Erlandson et al., 1993). But it is important to acknowledge the unintended effects that may accompany a qualitative study such as this.

Future Research

This study has touched on various topics that would benefit from further, more in-depth examination. These exact research questions could be examined in a future quantitative study, allowing many more former journalists to participate, thereby improving the study's generalizability. Looking at specific parts of this study, the notion of salaries in broadcast journalism has clearly touched a nerve for many of these former journalists. Further studies would be beneficial to shed light on the exact state of salaries in broadcast journalism today and what prospective journalists can realistically expect to earn in various markets around the country. Future studies could even focus exclusively on journalists in large or small markets, as circumstances can vary dramatically based on market size.

This study focused on former journalists who are currently working in another field. It would be interesting to conduct qualitative interviews with current broadcast journalists who got out of the business at some point and later returned to journalism. While such a study may echo some of the sentiments expressed in this study, it would be fascinating to find out what prompts a journalist to ultimately choose to return to broadcast news and give the profession another chance. Additionally, it may be insightful to interview current broadcast journalists who have never left the industry to find out what compels them to continue their career as a journalist despite the inherent challenges and complications.

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