

Article

# Changing by the Click: The Professional Development of UK Journalists

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**Abstract:** Changes in technology, audience engagement, the business model and ethical requirements have greatly expanded the skills required to be a professional journalist in the UK. At the same time, the esteem in which the profession is held by the public has diminished. This research used the UK journalism profession as a case study of change in a profession. It asked what were the changes in the profession since 2012. The research method includes an in-depth survey of 885 UK journalists, two previous similar surveys, interviews with stakeholders, national data and documentation. The study finds that UK journalist numbers, their educational attainment and workload has increased significantly in the period. The majority have become multiplatform journalists—working across at least two mediums like print and online. There has been a significant shift of job roles from traditional newsroom to a wide range of other organizations and some 36% of journalists are now self-employed. Diversity continues to be an issue with the profession having a white middle-class bias. The implications of these changes for future professional UK journalism education were then analyzed. They include the need to develop a national continuous professional development framework, better cooperation amongst competing accrediting bodies to enhance the public trust in journalists and greater flexibility on the professional pathways to senior qualifications.

**Keywords:** media ethics; change management; mobile journalism; journalism education; professional education

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## 1. Introduction

Globally, journalism education has changed significantly over the past decade to keep abreast with the profession which has been through huge upheaval. The profession is transforming itself to keep relevant with the technological, audience and business model changes. It has also to deal in many countries with declining public trust in journalists and increased threats to both journalists' safety and media freedom. The challenge for educators and the profession is only just beginning given unrelenting pace of change. This research used the UK journalism profession as a case study of a profession in a state of change. It asked what were the changes in the profession since 2012. The implications of these changes for future professional UK journalism education were then analyzed.

Educators must plan for this ever-changing profession's future, and prepare teachers and students to cope with even greater turbulence throughout their careers. Frost [1], one of the world's longest serving journalism educators, does not underestimate the challenge. He said that the education bodies face the future where the boundary between the digital and human world become increasing blurred and the technical future may be something not even the most far-fetched sci-fi films could have predicted. Frost [1], postulated that a key future challenge will be teaching those in the profession to learn: "Journalism education also needs to take more seriously the need to not just train journalism students but to give them the tools to deal with a fast-moving world where things can change almost month by month". Across the globe journalism education is becoming professionalized mainly in

courses at private universities. While country specific journalism culture dominates, the curriculum generally is moving to more uniformity globally. There are now over 30 national journalism education associations linked with the World Journalism Education Council (WJEC), the main global journalism education body. There is a strong exchange of information between them on the curriculum.

But the need for greater technical knowledge and agility has, in many countries, re-ignited the long-running debate at the center of global journalism education. This is the tension between the practical on the job training versus intellectual education. For this reason, in many universities' journalism education has been on the fringe of their activities as it lies across professional training and the liberal arts. Folkerts [2] said that "News professionals and university educators pondered whether journalists needed to be college-educated, whether they needed a liberal arts degree, or whether they needed professional education that combined liberal arts and practical training. This debate still rages today around the globe with no international uniform system for journalism education".

Hirst [3] concurs that the same debate is happening on the other side of the globe: "In Australia and New Zealand a key area of discussion is around attitudes towards the concept of professionalism in the practice, training and scholarship of journalism". It has also fueled the debate on how much attention should be given to teaching ever-changing technical skills and traditional news gathering skills. Research conducted amongst veteran American employers indicated disquiet that training of online journalists, in particular, has become too skewed towards technical skills and away from the key tradition skills of information gathering, verification, writing and publication. Ferrucci [4] said: "This study finds that, while veterans said educators are doing a good job teaching technology, there is too much focus on it to the detriment of traditional journalism skills". But the bigger question facing educating the next generation for the profession is how you teach the skill of learning to learn on top of the already packed curriculum of traditional journalism skills. Frost [1] said: "Training simply for today's world is no longer good enough and lets our students down—students need skills for a future".

The added complication is journalism is a profession usually serving several often competing masters—the public's right to information, holding those in authority to account and the business interests of the employer. Given these triple requirements, education within the profession has become even more important. Particularly in a world where there is an increasingly contested information environment via censorship, propaganda or fake news. Richardson [5] argued that journalism is being constantly undermined by a determined counter-offensive that purports to show that 'truth' and 'accuracy' are pliable concepts in the hands of the mainstream media. Journalism educators, Richardson argued [5], have to confront this dilemma and affirm within the classroom the priority of the basic tenets of the job. "Not just reporting accurately and capturing balance, but committing to a process of verification that shows the rigor behind the best kind of journalism". The former editor of *The Guardian* Peter Preston [6] took it further: "Journalism may put you or your family at risk. Journalism offers no proper career structure. But journalism is also fundamental and necessary. Without it, there is no proper freedom". The *Irish Times* [7] editorialized too in 2018 about the importance of particularly investigative journalism: "The fundamental fact is that investigations—a basic rationale of journalism itself - are one of the ingredients of democracy". Thus, the importance of a robust professional education system as the profession has a strong ethical and public interest requirement in addition to technical skills. The aforementioned gives the background about what are the key debates around professional journalism education internationally.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The primary data used in this paper are the *Journalists at Work 2018* survey of 885 working journalists across the United Kingdom from a population of 73,000 journalists. The survey was sent to all major employers who were asked to forward it to employees as well as to industry bodies such as the National Union of Journalists and the Society of Editors. Journalists self-selected whether to complete it. The questionnaire was overseen by the board of the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), the largest journalism education accrediting body in the UK. It was processed by

Spilsbury Research and BMG Research, England. The response rate and results to the questionnaire were comparable to that of similar Journalism at Work studies in 2002 and 2012. These are also used in this paper for comparison purposes. The response rate for them was slightly higher than in 2018 at 1238 and 1067 respectively. But the 2018 response sample size, given it was random, was sufficient to provide reliable findings. The questionnaire was supplemented with other data from several sources including the UK Office for National Statistics' household survey, the annual Labour Force Survey and UK Higher Education Statistics Agency data. Documentation from the NCTJ relating to curriculum change, diversity and changes in the profession, was also reviewed. So too, surveys by YouGov on the reputation of various professions. This was supplemented with 11 formal and informal interviews with key stakeholders and educational providers. A review of the British and international literature on journalism education and changes in the profession was also conducted to put the UK changes into an international perspective.

### 3. Results

The Journalist at Work 2018 survey showed that after almost two decades of an extremely turbulent time the UK's journalism profession has changed significantly. The profession has had to adapt to deal with a change in the news business model as mobile devices and the internet have proliferated. There were mass job losses in the traditional print sector as advertising and readers shifted online coupled with recession in 2008/2009. In addition, the profession's reputation with the public has been severely damaged by international scandals involving fake news and a domestic one involving illegal surveillance by leading national tabloid newspapers of celebrity's mobile phones.

Despite these issues, one of the most positive aspects of the research was that the number of journalists rose to 73,000, up 12% from 2012, according to the UK's Office of National Statistics' annual Labour Force Survey [8]. It had reached a trough of 52,000 in 2009. This growth in journalist numbers is forecast to continue, according to the UK government's Working Futures [9] report. It estimated that the numbers in the profession in the UK will reach 79,000 by 2024—a 6% rise.

But while the numbers employed are rising the type of work undertaken is changing. The NCTJ's Journalists at Work surveys show that between 2012 and 2018 the nature of work that a high proportion of journalists do in the UK has altered significantly. The majority now work as multimedia journalists—that is working on more than one platform, e.g., print and online. This is a shift from 2012 when almost half of journalists worked in the 'traditional' areas of print and magazines. By 2018, this had declined sharply to 30%. The number employed outside of traditional newsrooms has risen from a third in 2012 to 42%. The number in broadcasting had doubled to 12%. The numbers working in communications and media relations was steady at 15%.

New job roles had also been created like news aggregator and data visualizer in this decade. These titles are so new that they are not included in the 51 journalism job titles used in the occupational standard classification (OSC) [10] of the UK's Office of National Statistics. However, such new roles, particularly those involving public relations or marketing, fuel the debate about defining what a journalist is. The official Office of National Statistics occupational definition of the job role of a journalist is to: "investigate and write up stories and features for broadcasting and for newspapers, magazines and other periodicals, evaluate and manage their style and content and oversee the editorial direction of these types of output and publication". There is, however, difficulty in this definition particularly as the profession adapts to the new digital reality. Many former newsroom journalists and new entrants trained as journalists are working in what could more accurately be defined as public relations and marketing communications. But as they are trained as journalists, in the various surveys, they continue to define themselves as members of the journalism profession. This is also likely because they have trained so long and invested so much to be a journalist.

Journalists, as the Journalists at Work 2018 survey showed, have much higher qualifications than the workforce in general as it is a knowledge intensive profession. The national data source suggests that 87% of journalists have a degree or a higher-level qualification, compared with 43% of

the UK workforce. An increasing number, 81%, have formal journalism qualifications—the majority of them NCTJ qualifications, which are often the required entry point into first jobs by employers. This compares to 63% having formal journalism in 2002, indicating the increasing requirements of employers. A further 55% of working journalists had undertaken some form of training in the previous 12 months, mainly related to their jobs rather than future employment. But the increase in qualifications required to enter the profession has helped accentuate another problem—the lack of diversity in terms of race and class in the profession. The Journalist at Work 2018 survey showed that almost three-quarters of journalists had parents from a higher-level occupation. This compares to 41% of the general UK labor force. The debt built-up getting the required education—on average £27,000 compared to £4750 in 2002 [11]—coupled with the requirement to build-up experience through on average of two months of non-paid work placement, has re-enforced the elitism of the profession. The expense and period of non-paid work puts off those from poorer backgrounds. Former national UK newspaper editor and retired professor of digital economy, Ian Hargreaves [11] (p. 4) said: “This explains why journalism continues to be an occupation chiefly of young, white people from relatively prosperous backgrounds”.

Other research conducted by the NCTJ in 2017 [12] showed that ethnic minorities are very under-represented in UK journalism. For example, the 2011 Census suggests that 60% of London’s population is white, with 19% being Asian/Asian British and 13% black, so the numbers in journalism should be significantly higher. The research’s author Spilsbury [12] (pp. 1–4) offered several reasons for this lack of diversity. Firstly, employers are mainly recruiting a graduate-only workforce. But the graduate population is not reflective of the overall population as it is biased towards the higher social classes. Even when someone from an ethnic minority does train to be a journalist they are not always then attracted into the profession. Finally, even when they do go forward to get into the profession employers may have, Spilsbury [12] (pp. 1–4) argued, a selection bias against them.

In terms of disability in the profession it is at average levels and in relation to gender the workforce is fairly balanced just skewed 52% in favor of males [12]. The NCTJ’s research shows no apparent sex discrimination in job allocation. However, research by Thurman et al. [13] found that females tend to stay in more junior management roles and men are statistically more likely to progress to senior management. There is also concern within the profession that the increasing move towards short-term contracts and freelance work is particularly discriminating against women’s career advancement. The national data sources indicate that an increasing 36% of journalists are self-employed [8]. A respondent to the Journalism at Work 2018 survey said: “It’s a shifting sea of unpredictable fixed term contracts and freelancing that cannot be manageable for everyone”. This shift into less stable employment and rights has not been helped by the reduced role of unions in the profession. Only 41% of journalists are members of a trade union or employee group, predominantly the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). The lack of unions may also explain too why salaries have declined since 2012, according to the Journalist at Work 2018 survey. The average annual salary is £27,500, which is just below that of a teacher and other professions requiring less formal education. The hours are, on average, around 40.7 h per week but can involve shift and weekend work.

The other pertinent issue facing UK journalism education is restoring the public’s trust in the profession. A survey by pollster YouGov and press regulator IMPRESS in 2016 [14] indicated that the level of trust varies depending on the publication platform. Journalists working in upmarket titles like The Times (of London) and local newspapers rank above trade union leaders in terms of public trust but below doctors, teachers and judges. But those working in mid-market national papers like Daily Mail and tabloids like The Sun have extremely low levels of trust, ranked near the bottom of the scale with politicians and estate agents. The NCTJ has reacted to various scandals at the beginning of the 2010s by placing ethical good behavior at the core of its curriculum. It is a difficult task as the Journalists at Work 2018 survey indicated that 31% of journalists have felt that business pressures in their job have meant ethical boundaries are not respected.

But journalists seem to be satisfied with their ethical training. Nearly three-quarters of journalists said in Journalist at Work 2018 that they have had sufficient training in ethical issues and more confident

of the regulatory framework. This is a significant improvement on the situation found in 2012 where almost half felt that they had received sufficient training. The NCTJ chief executive Joanna Butcher [11] (p. 5) said: “Journalists are more confident in the regulatory system—up from 29% to 55%. We now need to do more to transfer this confidence to the public”. The NCTJ is the only accrediting body which sets a detailed curriculum and runs its own national exams, including those in ethics. NCTJ chief executive Joanne Butcher [11] said: “Much of our effort has been about responding to change and understanding the role of digital and social media in journalism. This isn’t easy when the pace of the change is so constant and fast”.

#### *Change and the Industry Accrediting Bodies*

The industry’s swift shift towards multimedia journalism has had implications for the UK journalisms three main accrediting bodies. The decline of print, for example, saw the NCTJ transform itself from 2008 onwards into a multimedia accrediting body. As part of its transition to multimedia journalism the NCTJ board took on editors from BBC television and Sky multimedia as directors whereas before it was dominated by newspaper editors. More recently strategic alliances and joint training was organized with Google and Facebook. The NCTJ’s most significant alliance being the securing of £4.5 m from Facebook in 2019 to recruit over 80 trainees to become community news reporters. It is planned that this development with Facebook would benefit the entire NCTJ organization in making it more digitally aware. The NCTJ accredits over 60 courses at 40 centers in the UK. Traditionally it had concentrated on qualifications for the industry’s largest sector, newspapers. Thus, it moved into the area of broadcast journalism habitually overseen by a rival UK accrediting body, the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC). The NCTJ also widened its remit into accrediting magazine journalism, which traditionally was overseen by the sector’s professional association, the Professional Publications Association (PPA). The latter accredits 14 university courses in the UK mainly concerned with magazine production while the BJTC accredit over 30 broadcast journalism courses in the UK. This increased tensions between the accrediting bodies who had previously operated generally within their own platform. Despite the convergence in the profession there has only been some modest consolidation amongst the accrediting bodies. The Society of Editors handed over its course accrediting duties to the NCTJ in 2012.

The NCTJ also adopted a digital first approach and will move all its examinations from paper to online from 2020. In addition, the core news writing curriculums have had new skills requirements added in social media, search engine optimization and data analytics. Its law qualifications were enhanced to include more sections on online media law and ethics. New modules and exams are also being introduced in data analytics, social media and data journalism for 2020. In terms of ethics, following the 2011/2012 Leveson Inquiry into ethical standards amongst Britain’s major newspapers, the NCTJ introduced new ethical and regulatory testing across its curriculum in 2015. Other similar changes took place across the curricula of the other accrediting bodies and they continue to review their range of qualifications.

This concludes the results part of this paper where the changes to the profession were mapped and the professional education structure outlined. In the final part of this paper the implications of these changes for professional journalism education in the UK are analyzed. Recommendations are then made on how the professional education could be improved which, in turn, would improve the UK journalism industry.

#### **4. Discussion of Results and Implications for UK Journalism Education**

Change happens in all professions and journalism is no different. Change can happen at different paces in different sub-sectors linked to technological, political, business model and competitive change. UK Journalism has, however, experienced change faster than perhaps many other professions as the results of the surveys and other research previously outlined in this paper showed. However, this is not unique. The profession’s fundamental core skills remain. Further to this, there has been

significant ethical, legal and technical change and these are evolving. While the pace of change has stabilized somewhat, the UK journalism educational bodies cannot be complacent. New waves of technology and business models will come along from different directions and the educational accrediting bodies have to judge if these are transitory or a core shift. Accrediting bodies, by their nature, are dominated by existing industry players. But most often change will come from those outside of existing industry actors. Facebook and Google, for example, were student projects 20 years ago and are now the world's leading media companies. So, it is important to reach out to new nascent entrants to the profession. The lines between journalism, advertising and public relations will continue to blur. Thus, the accrediting bodies have to ensure that students and journalists have a strong ethical code to recognize the difference between both and make it clear to their audience. They must also devise ways to get their students to 'learn to learn' and understand that over a career spanning over half a century that constant skills updating will become the norm.

UK journalism education's accrediting bodies have to enhance their skills in forecasting and then pre-empting changes for them to remain relevant. It is a constant process that requires investment in intensive research and input from industry. With the results of the Journalists at Work 2018 survey showing that almost two-thirds of journalists saying they need additional skills to be more effective at their work the continuing professional educational challenge is great. However, the UK journalism accrediting bodies mainly look after entry level skills accreditation. They must broaden their remit to develop flexible, affordable continuous professional education qualifications. Not only would it help safeguard journalism jobs but it would also improve the industry.

The disappearance of the traditional entry route into the profession in the UK, via local newspapers, has meant that the professional bodies have to change their frameworks too. The NCTJ's qualification as a senior reporter, which requires you to produce a portfolio while working in a newsroom, must be achievable by entrants working in non-traditional journalism areas. The increasing move to self-employment within the profession poses issues too about getting advanced qualifications through newsroom experience. It also requires change from the accrediting bodies about who to consult about training, its delivery and who pays for it (Spilsbury [15] (pp. 25–31). This move towards self-employment is common amongst the UK workforce so this is not a training dilemma facing only the journalism accrediting bodies.

However, the challenge of developing enhanced skills amongst journalists in ethics, law, curation, digital fact checking, media analytics and entrepreneurial journalism is immense. Video, audio, graphics and other creative skills are now required too as standard for journalists. In addition, education must work on ways to adjust the mindset of journalist from a one-way linear conversation with the audience to a two-way interactive one. Given the increasing intensity of work required with real-time 24/7 reporting—consideration will have to be given to teaching wellbeing and work/life management as core curriculum. The continued leakage from the UK journalism profession into often better paid and more stable jobs in areas like marketing communication is something harder for educators to address. But is not unique to the journalism profession. The NCTJ is taking this reality into account with new modules in public relations and communications. But this strategy poses risks in that it is blurring the professional lines between the journalists and marketing officers.

It is that risk that is at the center of the profession's relationship with the public. Journalists must win the public's trust for the profession's long-term survival. Re-establishing this is a fundamental task. However, without any cross-industry strategy to address the issue of trust with the UK public it is unlikely that the accrediting bodies actions alone will be effective. A critical component of trust between the profession and the public is ensuring that there is openness in terms of entry and advancement in the profession. As the results of the Journalist at Work 2018 survey have shown entry to journalism in the UK is proving persistently difficult for the lower social classes and minorities. This has implications as to how the media covers working class and ethnic minority issues. The NCTJ's Journalism Diversity Scheme, assisting over 20 students annually from minorities enter the profession, has reached out to these sectors of society with some success but the task is enormous and funding limited. There needs

to be greater industry involvement to fund such initiatives. However, the increasing qualifications required for entry with its accompanying student debt coupled with the requirement for unpaid placement has only re-enforced this class and ethnic bias. Targeting apprenticeships towards minorities is perhaps the way forward, along with a substantial increase in the diversity fund and mentoring for those who undertake it. However, given the convergence in the sector it is essential that there is more cooperation between the accrediting bodies and the development of a national system of journalism qualifications—entry and mid-career—that is easily understood and accepted by both employers and students, and trusted by the public.

In conclusion, there are many valuable lessons to be learnt from studying the changes experienced in the journalism profession in UK over the past decade. The implications they have for the sector's professional education are many, but if taken onboard they will help to improve the industry. In the UK like in many countries, Goodman [16] (p. 7), writes the “the very value of facts, truth, information, and knowledge—the bedrock of journalism and free societies—is under attack. Goodman [16] (p. 7) asks: “What can journalism educators and trainers do to fight back against such undemocratic trends in an increasingly ‘less free’ media and world? Giving future journalists and press advocates the best education possible is a good start”.

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