

THE HOW OF JOURNALISM

Module 7



WHY THIS TOPIC MATTERS

Learning about the process of journalism can help us gain understanding of news content and its strengths and weaknesses.

An introduction to the different jobs within a newsroom can help media consumers become aware that the production of news is often a collaborative effort among well-meaning but imperfect individuals.

Becoming familiar with the Knight Commission's recommendations can empower media consumers to know what to ask of journalists regarding how they can improve in their profession.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

THE HOW OF JOURNALISM

While most people consume media several times a day, many don't know where their news comes from. Identifying newsworthy topics and preparing them for consumption is a meticulous process completed by journalists every time they clock in to work. This module will attempt to scratch the surface of how journalists do their jobs. It will also provide an introduction to the inner workings of newsrooms, including how trust in the news industry might be improved.

Many things factor into what a journalist considers newsworthy, but the traditional values are ***timeliness, proximity, impact, conflict, novelty*** and ***human interest***. Traditionally journalists have used those values to guide their decision-making about which topics and events, out of all the possibilities, should be the focus of news coverage and how it should be conveyed. Those traditional news values, however, are not necessarily the only or even the best guidelines for news decisions.

Journalists in Western democracies have tended themselves as watchdogs of government who should be objective and independent. But there are other styles

of doing journalism in various cultures. Increasingly U.S. journalists are being called upon to engage with their communities in problem solving as opposed to detached observations about societal problems.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

There's a lot that has to happen to produce a finished product in journalism. Long before a piece is published, a topic must be identified. Sometimes journalists are assigned a topic. For example, coverage of a politician's rally or an important community event. Other times, they have to do a little more legwork to find the right direction.

Journalists use a variety of resources to try to determine what is "newsworthy," and therefore worth pursuing. [Media college](#) determined that the five factors that make a story newsworthy are timeliness, significance, proximity, prominence, and human interest.

Once a journalist selects a topic, they dive head first into a sea of resources to help them develop a story. They [interview expert sources](#), search public records, and sometimes visit the scene where an event took place. Much of their time is spent researching and verifying facts to ensure the accuracy of information. For in-depth, long-form pieces, this stage of the process can sometimes take [years](#). For articles with a same-day deadline, journalists may only have a few hours to work with.

After enough content is collected, journalists are tasked with putting it all together in a cohesive product. Depending on the type of article being written, a journalist works anywhere they need to in order to produce the story. While the setting can be a typical newsroom, journalists may write [wherever they feel comfortable](#); whether that's a coffee shop or a local library. The important thing is that they produce a reliable story and meet publication deadlines.

How To Do Better Journalism

In response to the decline of trust in media that has prevailed over the past several decades, the [Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy](#) created a report in 2019 called "[Crisis in Democracy: Renewing Trust in America](#)." The report details four specific ways to practice and produce better journalism to regain the nation's support.

The commission's first recommendation is to emphasize transparency. They specifically promote



Fig 7.1 *The Knight Foundation Logo* In 2017, the Aspen Institute Communications and Society Program, in partnership with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, established the Knight Commission on Trust, Media and Democracy.

radical transparency and community engagement from news organizations. Changes could include the development of ["industrywide, voluntary standards on how to disclose the ways they collect, report and disseminate the news."](#) This would require that leaders from several competing news organizations come together to establish agreed upon standards, and vow to enforce them.

The second recommendation is to ["increase support for quality journalism at all levels with a focus on rebuilding local journalism."](#) One way to accomplish this is by encouraging collaboration. Local news organizations who work with outlets in a higher level of the industry are stronger than those who have no such connections. Another helpful move would be to ["accelerate a national push"](#) for various types of revenue regarding local journalism. This could include non-profit, for-profit, or hybrid revenue models.

Another crucial component to rebuilding trust is [innovation](#). The reality is that news companies must embrace technology in order to create a sustainable organization in the 21st century. Utilizing technology will simplify the process of collaboration, thereby making it easier for them to combat disinformation and polarization.



Fig 7.1 Diversity graphic

The final recommendation the Knight Commission provides is to [foster diversity and inclusion](#). At the heart of this suggestion is the need for news organizations to be representative of the communities they cover. With a staff that reflects the audience in regards to gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, the

outlet is more likely to produce quality content that comes from a variety of relevant perspectives.



Fig 7.2 Key Players

INSIDE THE NEWSROOM: KEY PLAYERS

The size of a newsroom will impact the amount of [key players](#) within it. In a large organization, journalists are more likely to specialize in a certain area. Whereas in a small organization, a journalist may take on several roles to meet the demands of the day. Below are a few of the key roles that journalists might be asked to step into.

Reporters identify newsworthy topics, do research, find appropriate sources, interview people and put together a coherent message in print, broadcast or multimedia form. Reporters may be generalists or could specialize in a certain topic area. Some are news organization employees and others are freelancers.

Sub-editors guide and work with reporters in developing and presenting news articles, multimedia narratives and broadcast packages. They may edit the work for both substance and format or style.

Photojournalists use images and video to report news. They may be subject to extra attention or even attacks, at times, due to the presence of electronic equipment.

The editor makes final decisions on news content and is accountable to a publisher or station manager.

Feature journalists write longer stories or create longer video news packages focusing on human interest stories.

OUTSIDE THE NEWSROOM:

Although the newsroom is traditionally seen as the place where journalism happens, [newsroom-centric](#) journalism has been in decline in recent years. This change has meant that there are many key players outside the newsroom that contribute to the media landscape in important ways. Listed below are just a small sampling of the people who fall into this category.

Freelance journalists have similar responsibilities to newsroom journalists, but they are self-employed. This means they have more autonomy when it comes to who they write for, what they write about, and where they write from.

Documentarians film or “document” non-fiction stories that [in some way capture reality](#).

Authors are writers who have published one or more books.

Social media journalists are journalists who use social media as their main platform for distributing the stories they write.

CONCLUSION

There is much more to the job of a journalist than meets the eye. Behind the scenes is a lengthy process of research, writing, and editing to create a newsworthy story worth consuming. The typical newsroom has multiple key players who make it all possible. Despite some journalists’ best efforts, trust in the media is far from where it needs to be. The Knight Commission has offered helpful recommendations to restore the public’s faith in journalism.



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