What Photo Editors/Managers Want Photo Students to Learn

by Michelle I. Seelig

Photo managers and editors recommend educators continue to provide students an education that focuses on writing and storytelling skills, coupled with critical thinking and visual literacy skills.

Since the late 1990s, newspapers have been either digital or nearly all digital in all aspects of news gathering and production of news. With the latest technological innovations, news photos are no longer produced chemically. Now, everything is produced digitally. This includes the digital capture of images and the use of photo imaging software, along with computer hardware, to execute all visual journalism tasks, such as photo selection, enhancements, toning, cropping, printing, performing gradation changes, adding caption information along with images in the computer, internal search of staff photos, as well as easy access to wire photos by means of the Internet, to using pagination software to place photos on pages for final output with text in the computer.

Though many colleges and universities have taken extreme measures to incorporate new technology in the classroom, there is still a lag between the technology in the classroom and that which is in place in the media industry. As a result, there is a growing concern professionally that students will graduate, despite lacking the necessary skills to succeed in a career in visual journalism. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to assess the impact of technology on creating visual messages and the skills necessary to execute related tasks. The findings presented here will be instructive for visual journalism educators seeking to meet the challenges of the digital age in the classroom, and for students interested in pursuing a career in a digitized newsroom.

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Background and Literature Review

New technology has modernized the media industry. As a result, journalism and mass communication programs are confronted with a dilemma—how to teach for the real world. While there is research that has addressed the impact of technology on journalism, few specifically examine skills necessary for visual journalism.\(^5\)

Hollifield, Kosicki and Becker\(^6\) examined newspaper editors’ and television news directors’ hiring decisions of new employees. Using survey data, they found that the ideal candidate should possess first strong personality attributes along with strong language and writing skills and second, technical skills. News executives today look for well-rounded job candidates “…who will make good employees and who, secondarily, bring with them traditional journalism competencies.”\(^7\)

Lowrey and Becker\(^8\) examined job skills necessary to succeed in media. The data, which were collected from recent graduates in mass communication, found that job-finding success is correlated to sequence specialization and use of technology is directly related to a specific medium. They also found that the degree of technological skill was determinant to job-finding success, thus, reinforcing the notion that employers seek candidates with job-specific skills.

Fee, Russial and Auman\(^9\) surveyed Accrediting Council of Education of Journalism and Mass Communication-accredited programs to see what professors claimed were important for students to know about editing. Fee, Russial and Auman compared their responses with those of professional copy editors to determine where journalism education is now and where it is headed in comparison to the industry. Their findings revealed that traditional editing skills are still taught and remain the core of copy editing classes. They found students are graduating with traditional and headline writing skills and basic computer proficiency skills. To a lesser degree, students possess organizational skills, though with very little knowledge in page design, Web and multimedia skills, according to the findings. Professionals did agree that traditional editing skills are important, yet commented that acquiring knowledge of newer technologies would also be beneficial. While professors agreed that skills relating to technology are important, they differed with professionals in their level of use and application of technological competencies. Though Fee et. al.,\(^10\) addressed concerns regarding journalism education, their survey did not consider visual literacy, skills related to technology, and the construction of visual news.

Russial and Wanta\(^11\) conducted a national survey of photo editors to determine the degree of technological change in newspaper photography and the importance placed on digital imaging and photography skills. Almost all newspapers surveyed were digital or planning to go completely digital in the near future. Photo editors reported that the traditional skills of shooting, writing caption information and picture editing were important and will continue to be important along with emphasis on technology skills as important hiring criteria
in the future. Their findings suggest a trend will emerge for photo managers to seek out new hires with a convergence of skill sets encompassing digital camera use, use of the web, traditional writing skills and photography.

Russial surveyed photo editors to see how technology has changed the work of photojournalists. The data revealed that shooting photos still is the greatest task for photographers, followed by working on the computer to digitize and edit images. More than half of the photo editors surveyed reported an increase in workload as a result of digital imaging and that the workload for some has shifted from production to the photo department. While there has been an increase in responsibilities in photo departments, few newspapers reported an increase in staffing to support a heavier workload. Russial also examined the data for specific changes in work life, such as improved quality of work, more time to spend on content and perform journalistic tasks, loss of control of images and more access to desk editors. Overall, Russial's findings suggest that while there has been a shift in work and an increase in workload, there is less staff to support the work, and photojournalists and photo editors are left with more responsibilities that often carry over into other aspects of production work.

By 1996 newspapers were making great strides to transform traditional methods of gathering and producing visual news. At the cusp of an all-digital newsroom, several news professionals offered insight as to future hiring criteria. With the year 2000 looming, newsrooms across the country finished the digitization process. While the industry has embraced convergence, and practitioners continue to advise educators in kind, this research presents an updated look at what tools and skills visual educators ought to teach in the classroom to support a career in visual journalism.

Research Questions

RQ1: This research set out to uncover what skill sets photo managers and photo editors deem important.

RQ2: How recent technological innovations have changed the way of doing business in visual journalism.

Method

A national survey of photo editors and photo managers at the top 100 U.S. daily newspapers as determined by circulation size was conducted in fall 2002 and fall 2004. Between the years of 2002 and 2004, no major technological changes occurred within the industry. While the data were collected separately,
in essence, they are measuring the same thing, and for that reason the data will be presented together.

In the first survey, every photo editor from the top 100 daily newspapers listed in the Editor and Publisher International Yearbook 2002 was selected. Some newspapers listed more than one photo editor, for multiple listings all photo editors were sent a survey for a total of 212 questionnaires. A follow-up mailing was sent in spring 2003. The two mailings elicited responses from 99 photo editors for a total response rate of 47 percent.

A second set of survey data was collected from photo managers in fall 2004. Photo managers were selected from the top 100 daily newspapers as determined by circulation size from the Editor and Publisher International Yearbook 2004. Although the top position and title of photo manager differed from newspaper to newspaper, the highest ranking photo manager was selected and sent a questionnaire. A total of 100 questionnaires were mailed and yielded an overall response rate of 25 percent.

Both surveys asked photo editors and photo managers to evaluate expectations about technology in the newsroom, including functionality of technology, anticipated use of technology, views toward technology and types of technology used. The survey also addressed questions on visual literacy using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Open-ended questions included opinions about journalism education, concerns regarding technology in education and its impact on teaching and learning. The method employed was self-report survey. All information remained anonymous and participation in both surveys was strictly voluntarily.

**Findings**

Comparison of the demographic variables indicated that both photo editors and photo managers share similar characteristics. Almost half of the photo
Editors (49 percent) were 40 to 49 years of age, half (50 percent) said that they have worked in the news industry between 21 to 30 years, and more than half (58 percent) responded that journalism, photography or photojournalism was their undergraduate major or field of study in college. As for photo managers, 20 percent said they are the highest-ranking news photo editor responsible for picture editing decisions, 12 percent checked assistant managing editor/graphics, 23.6 percent said photo department manager, 68 percent responded that they are the director of photography and 8 percent said picture editor. More than half of photo managers (60 percent) were between the age of 40 to 49, more than half (64 percent) indicated that they have worked in the industry between 21 to 30 years and more than half (66.7 percent) responded that journalism, photography, or photojournalism was their undergraduate major or field of study in college. Circulation for newspapers ranged from 100,000 to more than 1,000,000. Table 1 lists the technology photo editors and photo managers said were are relevant to them in gathering and producing visual news.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Mean Scores of Responses by Photo Managers and Photo Editors Perceptions of Technology in the Newsroom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statements</td>
<td>Photo Managers Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 “Strongly Disagree” to 5 “Strongly Agree”)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given a little time and training, anybody could learn to use computers.</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers put too many people out of work.</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am confident that I will be able to keep up with the important technological advances of computers.</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers are effective for communicating with colleagues for work-related activities.</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers enable me to interact more with my boss.*</td>
<td>3.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers control too much of our world today.*</td>
<td>2.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers isolate people by inhibiting normal social interactions among users.*</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today’s news professionals in my field must be computer literate.</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers will create more jobs than they will eliminate.*</td>
<td>3.44</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This statement only applies to photo editors. N = 25 N = 99
Table 3
Mean Scores of Responses by Photo Managers and Photo Editors of Skills Important in the Construction of Visual News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements (1 &quot;Strongly Disagree&quot; to 5 &quot;Strongly Agree&quot;)</th>
<th>Photo Managers Mean</th>
<th>Photo Editors Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communicate visually: interpret visual media and create meaningful visuals.</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptualize, formulate good picture stories.</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>4.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display time management skills by readily meeting deadlines.</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply analysis and original thought to existing information to create new picture-story ideas.</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>4.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable using computers for photo gathering and production.</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have an understanding of how news photos are produced, organized and disseminated.</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>4.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have an understanding of how professionals use news photos.</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo editors confer with other photo editors.</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo editors confer with news editor.</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>4.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo editors confer with boss.</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand that news production is a strategic process.</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>4.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know how to find photos and information in electronic databases and on the World Wide Web.</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apply evaluative criteria to select quality news photos.</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>4.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers save time and work.</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>3.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of computers has increased my effectiveness.*</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers make news production easier.</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers make for a more effective photo-gathering process.</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers expand the news images available.</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers enhance the final news product at my organization.</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>4.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This statement only applies to photo editors. n = 25 n = 99
To demonstrate some of the changes that have occurred in visual journalism as a result of recent technological innovations, the data collected will be compared to an internal survey conducted by The Philadelphia Inquirer. Early in 1999, The Inquirer was in the process of adopting and implementing new technological innovations. The Inquirer surveyed other major newspapers to see how they were using the technology and how technology was changing photo editors' and photojournalists' work. Compared with the findings collected by The Inquirer, the most notable change technology has brought to the gathering and production of visual news has been a shift in work, including editing, production work and selection of images to accompany news stories.

While most photo editors are still involved in the editing process (88 percent), photo editors reported that photographers (70 percent) are taking a more prominent role in the editing process. However, in 1999, The Inquirer found that a majority of photo editors edited film (or digital images), and only two newspapers reported that photographers were involved in the editing process.

There is, however, little change when it comes to putting images in the computer system. In 1999, mostly photographers input photos into the system, and lab techs did the pre-press work, while three newspapers reported that photographers did it all—make the scans, provide the caption information and do pre-press work. Not much has changed in 2002. According to photo editors surveyed, most photographers (77 percent) make the scans and provide caption information, while most lab technicians do pre-press work. Only a few (7 percent) said that lab technicians make scans and do pre-press work, though some (16 percent) indicated that photographers do it all. The findings were also consistent when it comes to cropping. In 1999, most respondents said that both photographers and photo editors cropped images. Likewise in 2002, both photographers (71 percent) and photo editors (92 percent) crop photos, and less than a handful (2 percent) indicated that lab technicians crop photos.

The process of selecting images to accompany stories has slightly changed. In 1999, all managing photo editors reported that photo editors made the initial selection. In 2002, while photo editors (69 percent) often made the initial selection, some reported that photographers (25 percent) make that first choice. Given the adoption of digital cameras in recent years, this change in routine is

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Taken as a whole, both photo managers and photo editors have a positive outlook toward new technology and its role in the newsgathering and production process.
expected and consistent with past research. What has not changed is the person responsible for making the final selection of images. Final selection still takes place with photo editors (80 percent). In other instances though, director of photography (34 percent), news editor (21 percent), assistant managing editor (16 percent) and others (22 percent) make the final selection. Because some respondents indicated more than one person, it can also be assumed that some still view final image selection as a collaborative process. For example, Seelig found that at times, photo editors would collaborate with others to make final image selection particularly when working on a breaking news story.

To understand better the impact of technological change, photo editors were asked to evaluate their perception of technology in the newsroom and the changes these innovations have brought to visual journalism. They also answered questions related to both their technological and visual literacy skills. Photo managers also responded to these statements; however, they were asked how applicable these statements are to their perception of their photo editors and their perception of the role technology plays in producing visual news. Taken as a whole, both photo managers and photo editors have a positive outlook toward new technology and its role in the newsgathering and production process. [See Table 2] Photo editors perceive that they have strong visual literacy skills, as well as professional skills and technical skills. [See Table 3] Photo managers also have a favorable opinion of photo editors’ work, as well as their visual literacy skills, and the role technology plays in helping them execute their tasks. [See Table 3]

Of all the hiring criteria photo managers and photo editors look for, open-ended responses revealed that by and large the basics still apply—photo editing, writing, critical thinking skills, how to conceive of a story idea and to tell a story and how to package a story for the various media outlets. One photo editor said:

Most journalism programs are doing a good job of teaching the technology needed and fundamentals. However, many struggle with a broader base of knowledge that would help students better identify good stories, develop them into a relevant package, and to get them into the newspaper. Bottom line, college students need to know how to edit.

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...Virtually no one teaches photo editing, and papers across the country are desperate for good picture editors. If you can design a curriculum that will graduate good editors, you’ll not only help the field, but also increase your placement rates! (good editors will find the job market significantly more friendly than photographers will).
Students also need strong writing skills:

*Teach photographers to write coherent captions; explain to them that the caption is exactly half of the job – no less. Too many students labor under a false sense of entitlement.*

Students need to be challenged to think creatively and think of different ways to tell a story. With so many media outlets, emphasis ought to be on how to package a story in a way that will make theirs standout. “Instill passion, emphasize relevance and finding stories that go beyond cliches and conventional wisdom. ...”

*Stop teaching things to be done the way they always have been. The market for “traditional” newspapers is drying up. We need innovators to recreate what a newspaper is.*

...How to shoot the Strawberry Festival for the Fifth time in a creative way, NOT how to go to an impoverished country and sneak up on people to get a picture.

Professionals also suggest providing students with a good work ethic. This includes stressing truth and accuracy along with ethics in journalism.

*Emphasize the basics, solid reporting, good people skills, ability to listen to others, compassion and respect for our subjects, fairness and accuracy in our reporting.*

College programs must be more thorough in the teaching of media law and journalism practices and ethics. Interns are weak in these areas. They also are not readers of newspapers, which is tragic. We are getting interns who want to be photographers, but not necessarily newspaper photographers with a strong journalism base.

*Force them to get a broad liberal arts education. Teach them to be aware of and limit their biases to ensure a more balanced journalistic product.*

A visual journalism education should also include an understanding of all parts of the newsroom so they understand how a newspaper is put together.
One thing I see missing in many newsrooms, including ours, is an understanding of what other journalists are doing. Reporters/designers/photographers all seem isolated and in the dark about each other's jobs. A little cross exposure, some sense and learning to appreciate each other's work would be good.30

Teach them how and why photojournalism and design are essential components of the communication process and that both must be equal partners with words if their newspaper is serious about visual journalism.31

Photo managers and photo editors also encourage journalism programs to encourage students to pursue internships and/or real world experience in some form or another.

Be sure students know it's not all good assignments and picture stories. Tell them about the scut work.32

"Be honest about the quality of students' work. I see too many student photographers that will never make it."33

Push to get students published using internships, school paper, etc. Give them as much information as possible about real world photojournalism through working speakers or visiting newsrooms/photo departments.34

Students also need a "better understanding of newspaper photos. Some things are in-depth, some are single image on deadline needs."35

Still, photo managers and photo editors did say that college students need some understanding of technology as production continues to embrace media convergence. For example:

Stay ahead of the curve by teaching new and emerging technologies. Stress multi-platform convergence, i.e. still/video and multimedia/web.36

Prepare the students with the ever challenging technology landscape and remind them that you still need a good idea and a trained eye no matter how sophisticated equipment gets.37

Conclusions

This study set out to uncover the impact of technology on creating visual messages and the skills necessary to execute related tasks. Based on the findings
of this survey, photo managers and photo editors share a similar outlook toward technology and view technology as beneficial to the gathering and production of visual news. Photo managers surveyed here have a positive outlook on technology because photo managers require their news staff to possess strong professional, visual, and technological skills. Photo managers and photo editors recommend that visual educators consider how technology has changed the way of doing business in visual journalism. By doing so, visual educators may better teach students interested in pursuing a career in visual journalism.

On the whole, the findings of this study recommend that visual journalism programs continue to provide students with a well-rounded education that focuses on developing writing and story telling skills, coupled with critical thinking, visual literacy skills and an ability to package stories for various media outlets. Students in today's visual journalism programs would also benefit from a convergence of education. Such an education would not only include the traditional journalism and mass communication courses but also classes that discuss "new media." Just as the tools of the media industry have changed, the modern visual journalism college graduate would benefit from an education that exposes students to new "media tools." This includes desktop publishing, multimedia authoring and design, Web page design and layout, video editing, database management, photo editing, scanning and optimizing multimedia images.

When focusing on the impact of technology in the classroom, communication is key—have professionals talk with faculty. Make them understand what is happening in the "real world" and how those changes may be incorporated in the classroom. This is a lot easier to say than do. Yet today, faculty have a broad range of experience and understanding of more than one media. For this reason, cross-departmental curricula is now commonplace. Because of such a diversity of skills, it is possible that students would benefit from content specializations (i.e., visual storytelling), rather than a concentration along specific lines of media (print journalism). This is certainly reflective of the "real world." Important to note, these are recommendations, not requirements. Technology is rapidly changing the "new" media landscape quite rapidly. Academics need to consider basic technological recommendations. Thus, it should be suggested that educators need to focus more on media skills, not media training.

With continued demand for a more visual product, pressure is on news professionals to use their visual literacy and technological skills along with technological skills to create sophisticated visual products. Past research affirms that the basic skills still apply. Fee et al. reported that traditional skills were still being taught in the classroom with little focus on visual literacy skills and technology. According to the findings presented here, media professionals are looking for college graduates who have no fear of new technology, a willingness to learn and an ability to adapt quickly in a new environment. As such, it would also be interesting to see what kind of curriculum journalism and
mass communication programs have developed to mirror these new visual products, and how they are addressing issues of convergence in the classroom. This has potential as a topic for future research.

While the tools used to gather and produce visual news have changed, and will continue to change in the foreseeable future, Regan asserts, "that doesn’t mean the act of storytelling, which comprises the heart of good journalism, will change." Instead, more news is produced and available immediately, and at lower costs than ever before. That is not to say that what is happening in the "real world" does not take away the basics that still need to be taught in the classroom. It is the number of tools already customarily taught to the visual journalism student that will make the graduate better prepared for the "real world." These tools include thinking tools, gathering tools and presentation tools. The technology is secondary.

Notes


6. Hollifield, Gerald and Becker, "Organizational vs. Professional Culture in the Newsroom."
10. Ibid.
15. Seelig, "Constructing Visual News: Technological Change in Photo Editors Newswork."
16. Due to space limitations, only data collected on the impact of technology on visual journalism skills and changes to work are reported here. For more on technology see also Seelig, "Constructing Visual News: Technological Change in Photo Editors Newswork."
18. Dennis Dunleavy, "In the Age of the Instant;" Seelig, "Constructing Visual News: Technological Change in Photo Editors Newswork."
20. Ibid.
38. Fee, Russial and Auman, "Professionals Agree About Students' Editing Skills;" Hollifield, Gerald and Becker, "Organizational vs. Professional Culture in the Newsroom;" Russial and Wanta, "Digital Imaging Skills and the Hiring and Training of Photojournalists;" Russial, "How Digital
Imaging Changes Work of Photojournalists;” Seelig, “Constructing Visual News: Technological Change in Photo Editors Newswork.”

39. Fee, Russial and Auman, “Professionals Agree About Students’ Editing Skills.”


