

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: BOTH SIDES OF THE BRAIN: STRATEGIES FOR  
REINVENTION FOR SOLO VIDEO JOURNALISTS

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Technological advances have made it possible for one video journalist to do the work of three. These solo video journalists perform the research and writing functions of a reporter, the field production tasks of a videographer, and the post-production assembly of an editor. Many of these hybrid journalists are veterans of the industry; once single-skilled journalists who have retrained themselves to work alone. However, while technology makes it possible, it takes much more than technical mastery for a professional to make this transition. Not everyone will be able to make the transition. From a series of qualitative interviews with former videographers and reporters, this text examines what factors are required for a successful transition into becoming a solo video journalist, including training, newsroom support, motivation, production competency and personal qualities.

BOTH SIDES OF THE BRAIN: STRATEGIES FOR REINVENTION FOR SOLO  
VIDEO JOURNALISTS

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
2011

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2011

For Kathleen, Taylor and Grace

In memory of Robert (Bob) Brandon, and Ray Farkas  
Colleagues, Mentors, Friends

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work could not have been completed without the generous support and assistance of...

The Philip Merrill College of Journalism, The University of Maryland College Park  
The Advisory Committee  
Dean Kevin Klose  
Assistant Dean Katherine McAdams  
Lee Thornton, PhD  
Caryn Taylor  
Sue Kopen Katcef  
Cassandra Clayton  
Ray Hiebert, PhD  
Ira Chinoy, PhD

and

The National Press Photographers Association  
Sharon Levy Freed  
Julie Jones, PhD, University of Oklahoma  
Charles Hadlock, NBC News

and

Steve Crane, Arizona State University  
David Burns, PhD, Salisbury State University  
Deborah Potter, NewsLab, Washington  
Wally Dean, Committee of Concerned Journalists  
Scott Livingston, WBFF-TV  
Alex Magoun, PhD, Sarnoff Library, Princeton, NJ  
Russ Moss, WJZ-TV  
Scott Broom, WUSA-TV  
Albert Calogero, WUSA-TV  
Lane Michaelsen, WUSA-TV  
Kevin Swift, Missouri State University

...and the many journalists who candidly shared their insight for this work.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

There is little argument among journalism professionals, newsroom managers, consultants, professional educators, and academics alike, that the business of news is changing so quickly that it is hard to keep pace. This is especially true when considering stories that are produced using video for broadcast and Internet platforms. It once took a crew of several to report with video from the field; now, developments in camera technology, editing, and transmission have made it possible for one person to do the work of many (Rosenblum, 2008).

Running parallel with advances in technology is the ubiquitous nature of news in the Internet age. Less than a generation ago, the consumption of news was mostly by appointment; the traditional news cycle began with the daily newspaper's arrival in the morning, continued along the commute to and from work with news updates at the top of the hour from a local radio station, and concluded when the 11 o'clock news aired in the evening. The next day the cycle of information would repeat, starting once again with the daily paper. Data from The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press shows that reliance of that cycle has waned; the Internet has become the fastest growing news source, overtaking newspapers and quickly catching up to television ("Internet overtakes newspapers as news outlet," 2008). A second study produced by the Pew Center found that Americans in 2010 are actively seeking and consuming more news on a daily basis than they have at any time in the last ten years ("Americans spending more time

following the news,” 2010). They are also less likely to do so on a set schedule, instead, seeking information whenever motivated (ibid.). Americans are consuming more news, and have more choices of where and when to find it.

Simply put, the pie is getting bigger, but the slices are getting smaller. While the public is much more informed than in any other time in history, the individual organizations that produce news content are seeing decreases in overall audience (“The state of the media,” 2010). One significant factor in declining audiences is the multiple media options available to the news consumer, which in turn fragments the audience (Rosenblum, in Sharkey, 1994). The Internet has also helped fractured the audience (“Americans spending more time following the news,” 2010). This dynamic suggests trouble for any newsroom’s true lifeblood – its revenue income. Advertisers looking to buy time or space for a news seeking audience have many more options to choose from for their messages, and since each newsroom’s audience is deteriorating, each commercial spot has less value (ibid.). All of this affects the newsroom’s bottom line – which for many executives has become a troubling figure.

For many newsroom managers, future success depends on their operation’s ability to feed the public’s insatiable appetite for content while keeping overhead costs in-check. The balance between an increased demand for content and revenue declines has caused many operations to trim staff, or closely examine the possibilities of merging the duties of their employees (“The state of the media,” 2010). As a result, many seasoned journalists from traditional broadcast backgrounds are now finding their once singly-focused job descriptions fractured in a way that was almost inconceivable just a generation ago. In many instances, those who were once reporters or producers are now

shooting video, while those who once only shot video are now beginning to field produce or report. Many of them are making this hybrid job description their permanent occupation, becoming solo video journalists.

Many of these solo video journalists are self motivated for change, seeing the proverbial writing on the wall before they are approached to do so by mandate from their bosses. Others are being driven to change by new business models in newsrooms instituted at the urging of consultants. Other reporters or camerapeople make this transition to becoming solo video journalists in an attempt to become more marketable, believing that the journalists who will soon be entering the field are prepared to do it all, and therefore they too must embrace this model.

Today it is cheap enough and simple enough to purchase the requisite equipment – camera, microphones, tripod, and laptop computer with editing software – and assume that, with limited training and enough motivation, anyone can become a solo video journalist. However, these items are merely tools of expression – and being able to operate them does not necessarily make one a professional. After all, Picasso was not considered an accomplished artist because paint, brushes, and canvas were easily available or affordable.

There is more to consider than just technology when exploring the necessary duties of video journalism. While tools make the work possible, the tasks are done by human beings. For instance, a traditional newsgathering team consists of a reporter, responsible for research and writing, and a photographer, who uses production equipment

to perform his or her job. While both members of this team are on the same assignment, they approach their duties with a different mindset.

In terms of pop-psychology, some of us are “left-brained” and others “right-brained,” which refers to psychological studies of cerebral lateralization of the human mind (Iaccino, 1993). Those whose predisposition is to be more creative are at times referred to as “right-brained”, since research has demonstrated that side of the human brain as dedicated to nonverbal, holistic, and intuitive processes (Springer & Deutsch, 1993). By contrast, those with stronger cognitive tendencies are labeled as “left-brained,” making reference to the hemisphere of the brain associated with language, rational, and sequential thinking (Iaccino, 1993). Studies have also suggested that many people have a tendency to favor one style of information processing over another, referred to as the hemisphericity of the brain, which have been observed in an individual’s preference in occupation and education (Bogen, 1969) (Springer & Deutsch, 1993) (Iaccino, 1993).

In a video news construct, those who exhibit an ability to excel in the skills needed to operate production equipment to produce aesthetically pleasing video (such as composition or lighting) could be considered “technical” or perhaps “creative,” while those who are skilled at research and writing – two hallmarks of a stalwart reporter – may be described as “literal” or “analytical”. It is possible to posit, when considering this theory of hemisphericity, that a traditional two-person news gathering team may have a “right-brained” (or technical) photographer, and a “left-brained” (or literal) reporter. This new model of a solo video journalist requires one person to excel at both skill sets; someone who excels with both sides of their brain.

The argument presented in this paper holds that while solo video journalists are quickly becoming valued members of many newsrooms, not every television journalist can easily become a solo video journalist. It takes more than a reporter learning how to operate a camera, or a videographer learning how to write to become a successful solo video journalist. Successful transitions depend on several factors, including the journalist's motivation for change, the availability of continuing professional development and the support of news managers in assignment of duties. While the new lighter and digital technologies make the solo video journalists possible, it takes time and training to become accomplished. Many consultants, news managers, and academics contend that anyone who can operate a camera and write news copy can become a solo video journalist. While recognizing the value of the solo video journalist, this text argues otherwise. Solo video journalism can be done well, but it takes much more than learning new skills.

### **Statement of Problem**

Whether the change begins with an individual's desire to grow professionally or instituted by an employer as a condition of new or continued employment, many veteran journalists are now, or will soon be, retraining themselves to become solo video journalists. However, as these new storytellers populate newsrooms, it becomes increasingly vital to examine how they are trained, how they manage the additional workload, and how to better prepare the solo video journalists of the future.

This qualitative study seeks to find how to better prepare this unique population of journalists who will make this shift in their storytelling process. How do today's successful solo video journalists retrain their newsgathering processes, and what qualities

do some of the successful solo video journalists share? Is the transformation from single-skilled journalist as simple as picking up new skills, such as on-camera presentation or video camera operation? Are there specific personal qualities one needs to be successful, such as motivation? Is it possible for any practicing single skilled journalist, with enough hard work and training, to become a solo video journalist: or are there natural predispositions that those who are successful at the transition seem to have?

### **Definition of Terms**

This text will be exploring the experiences of solo video journalists, also referred to here as SVJs. The National Press Photographers Association, that in collaboration with the Poynter Institute holds the annual Best Of Photojournalism competition, describes solo video journalists as “...those who do it all themselves, do it daily, and do it well” (“Best of Photojournalism,” 2010). For the NPPA, “it all”, refers to the duties necessary to perform daily video newsgathering; researching stories, shooting video, conducting interviews, writing scripts, narrating, and editing the final product. This study will use similar parameters, defining the solo video journalist as a journalist who in his or her daily employment duty, is solely responsible for all aspects of the content and video production of a daily video news report.

By this definition, the medium of the solo video journalist’s employer is irrelevant. While many solo video journalists work for television newsrooms, such journalists are also found in other media: including the websites of legacy print newspapers, traditional wire service, and Web-only publications. Additionally, many solo video journalists who produce content originally aired on broadcast television also repurpose their material for online consumption, thus blurring the distinctions between

those two media. Therefore, this definition of the solo video journalist encompasses any employee engaged in this multiple disciplined task for the public's consumption of information, be it via traditional broadcasts or on the Internet.

Solo video journalists are called by different name: "one-man band," "backpack journalist," or "digital journalist" (Broom, 2010), "multimedia journalist" (Young, 2009), "video journalist" (Rosenblum, 2008), "Mojos" (Kennedy, 2010) and "SoJos" (Sites, 2007). In consideration of consistency for the reader of this study, the term solo video journalist and the related acronym SVJ will be used except in quotations from sources using different terms.

All the solo video journalists interviewed for this study were once *single-skilled journalists*. For the purposes of this study, the definition of a *single-skilled journalist* is a professional news employee, whose chief responsibilities encompass one traditional duty, either on the content or production side. In most broadcast newsrooms, a *single-skilled journalist* would describe an employee with the title of *Reporter, Producer, Photographer, or Editor*.

In the realm of broadcast, newsroom employees responsible for content are:

- *Reporters*: Journalists who research stories, gather the visual and sound elements in the field with the production assistance of photographers, and write and narrate reports for broadcast. Reporters also report on-camera.
- *Producers*: Journalists who gather information for stories, conduct research, and typically have other writing roles in the newsroom, but do not appear on-camera on a regular basis. Many broadcast newsrooms differentiate between producers; *line producers* are responsible for writing and coordinating the content of a

singular newscast, while *field producers* gather news for individual stories out in the field. In this definition, producers do not physically operate equipment, but rather develop content, and therefore, have no production responsibilities.

And broadcast employees responsible for production are:

- *Photographers*: Journalists whose chief responsibility is to shoot the video and record the necessary sound for taped or live news reports.
- *Editors*: Journalists who use analog equipment or nonlinear computer editing programs to arrange video and audio elements for a news story. Editors serve as gatekeepers between the raw video and scripted words of the photographer and the reporter, and the news consuming public. Unlike print newsrooms, editors of video do not have supervisory responsibilities, but rather use their creative editing abilities to prepare the video presentation for the audience.

It should be noted, however, that even in traditional broadcast newsrooms journalists have often performed tasks that extend beyond their assigned job description (“State of the media,” 2010). For example, in many smaller-market newsrooms especially, field reporters and line producers often perform the job of video editing reports. Also, photographers often shoot stories by themselves for a reporter, anchor, or a producer to write. For the purposes of this study, those journalists are still considered *single-skilled*, because their primary responsibility is single-skilled.

### **Purpose of the study**

Expectations of news employees are changing. For some traditional broadcast markets, many journalists have been asked, or have voluntarily made the transition from

single-skilled journalist to a solo video journalist. Newsrooms in Washington DC, such as WUSA-TV, have been gradually asking their reporters and photographers to make the transition to SVJs over the last few years (Young, 2009). Others newsrooms have chosen to restructure their newsroom by making a wholesale change of staff to solo video journalists – as San Francisco’s KRON-TV did all at once in 2005 (Carr, 2008) (“KRON-TV, the “VJ model” files for bankruptcy,” 2009). As of March, 2011, many television stations in large markets have made few changes to the responsibilities of their staff. For example, in Baltimore only one of its four major television newsrooms – the ABC affiliate, WMAR-TV – now has SVJs.

This study intends to provide some insight into success strategies for those practicing journalists who already have, or are in the midst of becoming SVJs. It is hoped that this study will serve as a guide for those who will be soon asked to follow their lead. The study seeks not only to understand this changing population of journalists, but how to best serve them in this time of transition.

Specific research questions for this study are:

1. How do successful solo video journalists approach their stories when they are switching between using production skills and reporting?
2. What qualities do successful solo video journalists think are necessary to manage the demands of working alone in an environment that has traditionally been team-oriented?
3. What do successful solo video journalists believe would help make the transition easier to manage for those who will be asked to do so in the future?

### **Limitations of the study**

While this study seeks to understand motivations and success strategies of successful SVJs, it is limited by the fact there is little history to reference: SVJs, even successful ones, have not been working long years in their multi-tasking roles. Additionally, the issues surfaced in this study are limited because the sample size is relatively small. The responses of the SVJs interviewed for this study are not to be extrapolated as the attitudes or beliefs of the entire population. Nor should the conclusions drawn from those answers be seen as exhaustive: no single study can give a complete roadmap to success for anyone who wishes to become an SVJ. Still, this study is designed to provide the insight of a select few who have successfully made the transition to a larger audience. Insight gained from the responses should help the industry's understanding of these journalists, and help the profession better educate and train those who will be taking on this role in the future.

## Chapter 2

### HISTORICAL CHANGES IN VIDEO STORYTELLING

#### **An Abridged History of Technology and Changes in Newsgathering**

Rapid changes in technology have allowed the practice of solo video journalism to become routine in many of today's newsrooms, but the foundation for the proliferation of the practice was laid well before the availability of small HD cameras and nonlinear editing software for laptop computers of the last decade. As early as the 1960s, a few journalists have taken on the dual tasks of shooting video and reporting by themselves (Winslow, 2010). Those early independent journalists were capable of doing the combined tasks well, even while working with news film (and later videotape); but those journalists were rare, and limited in their production abilities by the state of the art.

Since the very first years of television's growth as a method to distribute information to the world, change in the production of news has been constant. Technological developments have altered workflow, redefined job descriptions of newsroom employees, and allowed audiences to receive news at a pace that has grown exponentially over decades. These changes have been the catalyst for the recent phenomenon of solo video journalism. Indeed, Professor Tom Kennedy of Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication cites the advancement of technology as the "liberating factor" for solo video journalists (as quoted in Winslow, 2010, p.42).

There have been several shifts in the technology of how information is gathered, processed and disseminated to the public since the 1960s. Each decade has contributed its own technological breakthrough in the production of television news, and each breakthrough has had enormous consequences for the journalists who report, and the public who consumes the news. Key innovations have included:

- 1960s- Live remote transmission of breaking news events
- 1970s- Electronic News Gathering and videotape allow instant playback
- 1980s- CNN makes news available 24 hours a day
- 1990s- Continued miniaturization of components and nonlinear editing make editing more efficient
- 2000s- Laptop computer based editing and file transfer protocol make the process mobile

*A Perp Walk in Dallas; Live Breaking News in the 1960s*

President Kennedy was assassinated on a Friday, and by Sunday morning the press had several opportunities to see and hear from the suspect, Lee Harvey Oswald.<sup>1</sup> The public clamored for more about the man accused of killing the 35<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, and the press was aggressive in its news gathering and reportage. This held especially true for the television film cameramen.

The Dallas police chief granted the journalists exceptional access to the police station, and whenever Oswald was led through the corridor to the homicide office,

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<sup>1</sup> The report created by Chief Justice Earl Warren's *Warren Commission* details the relationship of the press and the accused in detail, on pages 201-242.

television cameras raced ahead of the entourage (United States, 1964). Newsfilm camera operators pushed and shoved each other down the narrow hallway backpedaling along Oswald's every step, while news reporters pointed microphones at him. This shepherding of the accused, from the homicide office to the elevator leading to the jail, occurred at least fifteen times during the weekend (ibid.). Dallas Police Chief Jesse E. Curry obliged the demands of the reporters, and allowed the accused to appear at a press conference late in the evening on Friday (ibid.). The hallways remained clogged by journalists in conservative suits, wielding their microphones, cameras, and notepads. They were not afraid to push, shove, or even stand on furniture to get closer to the suspect (ibid.).

Texas law at the time stated that a prisoner must be transferred to the county jail within 24 hours of charges being filed. So on Saturday evening, when the police chief told the reporters it was okay to leave for the night – as long as they were in the basement of the police station by ten o'clock on Sunday – the journalists trusted the chief's suggestion (Hill, 1963). They had enjoyed nearly *carte blanche* access to Oswald, but with the transfer of custody to the county sheriff, that would likely end. For the journalists, the transfer would likely be their last opportunity to see the man accused of killing the president before he would be remanded into custody to await trial.

When Chief Curry arrived at the station on Sunday morning, there were already reporters in the basement, even though Curry had not yet decided on executing the transfer below ground (United States, 1964, 210). While an alternate route to protect the suspect and to dupe the press could have been entertained by authorities, Curry felt an obligation “to go along with the press and not try to put anything over on them,” (ibid.) according to the testimony of a police captain in front of the Warren Commission.

In late 1963, producing live television was possible from the field, but it was no easy feat. Film cameras were used to shoot television newsreels, but live television required the use of cumbersome, studio-type cameras. Despite the challenges, two newsrooms made the decision to broadcast the transfer live. In order to do so they needed to have in place several newsroom employees for each live broadcast: a camera operator, an engineer, and the reporter who would appear on screen. By the time Lee Harvey Oswald made his fateful walk, the live studio cameras and nearly fifty journalists lined the hallway (United States, 1964). Along the basement walls, from the vestibule to the armored car, the journalists formed a gauntlet for the accused to be ushered through. Poised at the turn of this narrow pathway were cameras for WBAP-TV and KRLD-TV, prepared to air the event live (Van Der Karr, 1965). WBAP-TV, the Dallas NBC affiliate, was set to broadcast to the nation, while CBS's KRLD-TV was set to broadcast only to the local audience with its live feed (Zelizer, 1992).

We know today that the transfer was never completed – violently interrupted by the actions of Jack Ruby. Ruby lunged from within the press corps to fire a single bullet into the stomach of Oswald. NBC's feed to its affiliates across the country meant that from the first, those who tuned to NBC witnessed live what was happening in Dallas. CBS quickly went national too; the network picked up KRLD's feed to distribute to the national audience, so that by the time Oswald's shooter was wrestled to the ground,<sup>2</sup> CBS viewers across the country could watch the Dallas events live. As a result of the NBC and

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<sup>2</sup> KRLD-TV, now KDFW-TV, has an extensive library of archive material from that weekend. The live camera images of the shooting can be found at [http://www.myfoxdfw.com/subindex/news/fox\\_4\\_projects/jfk\\_video](http://www.myfoxdfw.com/subindex/news/fox_4_projects/jfk_video).

CBS live cameras, the nation witnessed the assassination of an assassin as it occurred; marking the first time a person had been murdered on live television (Zelizer, 1992).<sup>34</sup>

It was extraordinary that the event was captured live, but the camera equipment's bulk limited the ability of the journalists to do much more. The cameras were hardly mobile and required at least two employees to put into position (United States, 1964). During the chaos, the camera for Dallas's KRLD-TV reporter Bob Huffaker remained fixed at a position about waist high, requiring the reporter to crouch down awkwardly when giving an impromptu, on-camera summary of the events (KDFW, 1963/2009). As evidenced by the assassination of Oswald, live remote television was very possible in 1963, but required a lot of planning and was not particularly adaptable to changing situations.

Oswald's death provides a baseline for this examination of how the gathering of news in the field for visual journalism has evolved. While television today is powerful because of the ability to be live and mobile, in 1963 it could only be one or the other, not both. To advance the state of the art to solo video journalism, there would need to be several evolutions in technology. The first changed the medium used to record news in the field.

*Electronic News Gathering; News comes out of the soup, and onto the tape in the 1970s*

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, live television became increasingly more mobile, as engineers from three leading manufacturers – Sony, RCA and Ikegami –

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<sup>3</sup> Zelizer notes that the ABC television network dispatched their crew to the county jail for Oswald's arrival, and therefore had no camera in the basement.

<sup>4</sup> According to Zelizer, a Japanese politician was assassinated on recorded television in Tokyo in 1960.

worked on miniaturizing components. In 1974, RCA's TK-45P camera system allowed live images from a hand-held position in the field, implemented in Los Angeles television station KNXT-TV's live coverage of the standoff between the LAPD and the Symbionese Liberation Army (Farhi, 2002). Cameras had become portable, but the associated gear required to operate them was cumbersome nonetheless. An operator had to wear a backpack or pull a cart to have enough equipment to produce a quality video signal (*Broadcast News*, vol. 157, 1975). Live television was easier to produce and more portable at this point – at least when compared to the previous decade – but it was still far from convenient for anyone involved in the process of making it happen.

Compounding the lack of efficiency in the newsgathering process, television reports gathered in the field were exclusively created on film. In order to produce a news package, the film first needed to be processed, a task known as putting it in “the soup” before it could be edited by a film cutter, and eventually broadcast. This workflow could sometimes take over an hour, and limited how quickly breaking news could be aired.

In the mid 1970s, the engineers at Sony, RCA and Ikegami engaged in their own space race of sorts, to develop a camera small and portable enough to both broadcast live remotely and allow for quick broadcast of recorded material. The camera system would also need to be small enough to be used by a single operator. The revolution would be known in the industry as *Electronic News Gathering* or *ENG*.

In 1975, Bob Brandon was the chief photographer at Houston's KPRC-TV. Brandon, who would later become a highly acclaimed network freelancer for CBS News' *48 Hours*, used film cameras to shoot his assignments. On a typical day, Brandon and his

reporter shot a story in the morning, called the station to request a courier to meet them in the field to pick up their first roll of film, grabbed a quick lunch, covered a second assignment in the early afternoon and then rushed back to the station to get their second reel in the soup by a four o'clock deadline (B. Brandon, personal communication, October 15, 2008). The process was carefully orchestrated, driven by deadlines and the development bath. They had little hope for getting their stories on the air by six o'clock, if they did not get their film in the soup by four.

Despite the time constraints of developing, film had its proponents even after the advent of videotape; film was reliable, tried and tested, and many of the photographers who used the medium were fond of its aesthetic qualities, especially when compared to the harshness of videotape. However, there were many reasons why videotape became the better option for newsgathering. Videotape, unlike film, could be played back instantly from the field, without the delay of processing. Also, videotape could be reused, where film could only be exposed once. News managers at the time routinely reminded their film crews that prices for 16mm sound film were around 22 cents per foot (R. Moss, personal communication, December 5, 2008), creating a workflow where time literally was money.<sup>5</sup>

Live television cameras came in two pieces before the ENG era, and for videotape, a separate recording deck was necessary. Therefore, if one operator were to have the ability to produce live television *and* record images on videotape, it required three pieces of cumbersome equipment. The proliferation of videotape as the primary

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<sup>5</sup> Moss' estimate of 22 cents per foot comes from his employment at a local television station in Charleston, South Carolina in 1976. Considering 24 frames of film makes one second, and each foot holds 40 frames, each second of time equates to around 13.3 cents.

media for which news would be gathered was entirely dependent on the development of a portable live-capable camera that was self-contained, so that it could be attached to a recording deck, requiring the operator to manage only two pieces of equipment. The first camera to satisfy that need was the RCA TK-76.

The functions of the TK-76 camera were similar to a film camera: it had the familiar pistol-grip lens controls for example. But for many operators, the significant differences of size and weight offset any similarities. News film cameras, such as the Cinema Products CP-16, could be hand held, while the nearly two-foot long TK-76 needed to be tripod or shoulder mounted. The CP-16, fully loaded with a 400-foot roll of 16mm film weighed about 15 pounds. The bulky and boxy TK-76B camera by itself weighed 19 pounds.<sup>6</sup> With a recording deck, tripod, microphone and lights, photographers carried well over fifty pounds of equipment to each assignment. The weight itself was a limitation on who could become a photographer.

Yet given the weight, the TK-76 became “the unquestioned standard of the world” (Abramson, 2008, p.214) and “perhaps the first realisation of a camera suitable as a replacement for the 16mm film camera” (McCirrick, 1989, p.2). By August of 1976, nearly 100 TK-76 cameras were out on the street, and demand caused RCA to speed up its production schedule (*Broadcast news, vol. 159, 1976*). Within a year, there were 650 TK-76 camera systems being used world-wide (*Broadcast news, vol. 162, 1977*). RCA’s marketing materials proudly showed images of the camera capturing scenes at the Great Pyramids in Egypt, Moscow’s Red Square, and other exotic locations around the globe

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<sup>6</sup> This is weight for the camera only, according to a user manual found at the David Sarnoff Library in Princeton, NJ (RCA, 1979). Weight for the recording deck varied with manufacturer.

(ibid.). Meanwhile, newsrooms responsible for covering locations not quite as exotic, such as Scranton, Pennsylvania's WNEP-TV, retired their entire fleet of film cameras in favor of a full complement of TK-76 cameras, and rebranded themselves as the "Insta-Cam" news team (*Broadcast news, vol. 165*, 1978). By the close of the 1970s, film had gone from the industry standard to an anachronistic relic, and with it, the expectations of the news audience changed. No longer would it be acceptable for news to be delayed because the film had to run through a development process before making air.

#### *CNN rearranges the news cycle in the 1980s*

When CNN launched in 1980, its mission was to provide news content around the clock for the cable viewing audience. Its mantra, to be "advancing the news, every minute..." (Schonfeld, 2001, p.78) by continuously creating new content, could not have been possible in the era prior to the introduction of electronic newsgathering. When CNN began its programming, it relied heavily on the TK-76 camera system to gather news. The budding network initially ordered 21 of the new cameras, and when their seven original domestic bureaus opened their photographers used the TK-76 to shoot video and go live. (*Broadcast news, vol. 169*, 1981).

CNN offered news differently from any other network or station: it offered news continuously, a decision that revolutionized the way audiences expected to receive TV news. Just as RCA and the other manufacturers had freed television from the shackles of the film chain, CNN's round-the-clock news accustomed the world to constant news and information and challenged the notion of news by appointment. The 6:30 network news and late local newscasts became less relevant (Downie, Kaiser, 2002). Reese Schonfeld, a

co-founder of the network, remarked in his book *Me and Ted Against the World* that “even if CNN did it [advancing the story] just often enough to make viewers afraid they might miss the event of a lifetime, we’d have ‘em by the eyeballs” (p.79). News was no longer distributed on regularly scheduled newscasts, but rather 24 hours a day, creating an environment in which timeliness became the new king (Ammon, 2001). CNN’s ability to quickly transmit information and news brought audiences into events as they unfolded, whenever they unfolded (Downie, Kaiser, 2002). This round-the-clock mindset which began with Ted Turner and Reese Schonfeld at CNN in 1980, has become the standard by which journalists are expected to disseminate information. CNN created a culture where viewers expect that breaking news information and video will be available on the major cable networks, including CNN, Fox, and MSNBC, almost immediately (ibid.). This shift from scheduled newscasts to information available around the clock led to the demand of a highly efficient workflow, which in turn has helped prompt the need for the solo video journalist.

#### *The continued miniaturization, and development of nonlinear editing in the 1990s*

During the late 1980s through the 1990s, equipment continued to get both smaller and less expensive than in earlier days. Broadcast quality cameras at this stage still required videotape and a sizeable charged-coupled device (or CCD) to produce an acceptable image (Musburger, 2010). Camera manufacturers began developing digital videotape technology, such as Panasonic’s DVC Pro and Sony’s Digital Betacam series, which offered a cleaner image in a format that could work well with computer-based editing. The design of these cameras bridged the analog world and the tapeless digital future that was already beginning to take shape. Digital ushered in increasingly less

expensive equipment: a DVC Pro camera and lens, for example, cost about half to a third of what an analog Betacam sold for just a few years earlier (Abramson, 2008)<sup>7</sup>. Digital videotape cameras also were faster than their analog predecessors, meaning they produced a better quality image in environments with less light (ibid.). This advance enabled a newsgathering team to be able to produce broadcast quality footage without the use of additional lighting in many situations.

Inside the newsroom studios, the video editing process also evolved. What once required razor blades and cutters in the days of film was replaced by two tape decks wired together through an edit controller in the late 1970s (Musburger, 2010). As computers with faster processors arrived in the 1990s, it became possible to edit video on desktop terminals using editing software. Nonlinear editing systems made by manufacturers such as Avid and Grass Valley began to make their way into television stations in the 1990s (Anderson, 1999). First reserved for creative services and special projects, the revolution of *nonlinear editing* had slowly begun.

#### *Mobile nonlinear editing and file transfer protocols in the 2000s*

The 2000s brought a continued acceptance of nonlinear editing, as more manufacturers began to create competing products, driving down costs (Musburger, 2010). Toward the middle of the decade, laptop computers began to have processors fast enough and the memories large enough to handle these programs in the field. These advances, along with equipment manufacturers continuing to improve the efficiency of their product, were the last pieces needed before the modern solo video journalist could

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<sup>7</sup> Prices vary, but most DVC Pro broadcast model cameras and lenses went for around \$20,000 in the middle 1990s. A high-end analog Sony Betacam SP, the prior industry standard, could cost \$60,000 or more.

emerge as a phenomenon (Winslow, 2010, p.43). In the 2000s, nonlinear editing could now be done outside of the newsroom, and every tool in the solo video journalist's toolkit was portable.

The very last step in the technology chain essential to having SVJs in common use in newsrooms was the re-engineering of the transmission of images. By the 2000s production was mobile, but transmission was cumbersome. Newsrooms since the early days of live television had used microwave or satellite vans to send a signal back to the newsroom, but this workflow requires a specialized vehicle, extra operators, and careful practice on both sides of the signal to ensure a proper connection. In the mid 2000s, the introduction of *file transfer protocol* (FTP), allowed users in the field to send large video files back to their newsrooms with little loss by sending content from a laptop via broadband (Murphy & Persson, 2009). After that innovation, a journalist could file a report from anywhere he or she could establish an Internet connection.

All of these leaps in technology – the first days of live breaking news, the transition from film to videotape, the shift of dissemination schedule and the culture of on-demand viewing, the miniaturization of equipment, and the portability of editing and transmission – have led us to the state of newsgathering of today. What once took a crew of several in the field to research, produce, and disseminate can now be accomplished by a single person, quickly. The shared responsibility of producing a news report has given way to the concept of complete ownership of the piece by one individual journalist. All of these advances have made solo video journalism a model that meets the instant expectations of an eager public.

## Chapter 3

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### **Modern Journalism: The Role of the Solo Video Journalist**

Ask anyone involved with the production, distribution, education, or management of video journalists, and they will likely agree that the newsgathering model of the solo video journalist will be a part of the future. Just how prevalent SVJs will become in the industry remains the point of contention. Tom Kennedy of Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications told Donald Winslow of *News Photographer*, that “[backpack journalism] could be an incredibly strong methodology if it's done for the right reasons and at the right time, but it's just *part* of the future” (2010, p.42, emphasis added). Advocates of a more comprehensive newsroom-wide strategy have stated that they believe that this will be the way that almost all newsrooms will eventually operate (Rosenblum, 2010). In *Media in the Digital Age*, Pavlik (2008) contends it is beneficial for the newsroom to have the technology that enables its journalists to perform all of their duties while out in the field – researching, videotaping, writing and editing; all while on location where the news is happening, creating what he calls, a “virtual newsroom” (p.5).

This extra workload on a journalist, however, can be stressful. Belt and Just (2007) found that burnout caused by fewer staffers doing more work is a significant trend in newsrooms across the country. A 2001 survey of news directors found several have concerns about their staff's added workload. When news directors responded to the

survey question “what is the biggest change at your station this year?” (p.123) many cited shrinking newsroom budgets as a primary cause for increased workload for journalists.

Sample responses from the 2001 survey include:

“Budget cuts; frozen positions, less money and more responsibilities.”

“The cutbacks have made a lean staff malnourished”

“Loss of news gathering ability 10-12% due to cuts.”

Belt & Just (2007), p. 123

When Belt and Just (2007) followed up with these news directors a year later, they found that many of these same newsrooms were now hemorrhaging talent. Again, they asked the news directors about the biggest change in their newsroom in the past year. Sample responses from the 2002 survey include:

“Burnout – with more work to do to make up for short staffing and trying to be competitive, folks simply are running on empty a lot.”

“Cross-training and multi-tasking – people are being trained to do more than what they may have originally been hired for – for example: producers sub on assignment desk.”

Belt & Just (2007), p.123

The similar responses suggested to the researchers that the “increased workload and lack of support drove away good, experienced newspeople,” (Belt & Just, p.123) who

would then need to be replaced by new or less experienced employees, requiring more training. The researchers concluded that the profit motive behind doing more with less “causes a downward spiral of fewer resources, poorer journalism, and worse ratings.” (ibid.).

Belt and Just’s study argues that the frustrations of newsroom employees of doing less with more is not a product of the 2010 economic woes in newsrooms, but has been a developing trend for a decade for multiple reasons. Newsroom managers who must ask their employees to take on these new responsibilities are increasingly aware of the effect that the added pressures of performing multiple tasks have on an employee’s job satisfaction and ultimately, his or her ability to maintain the workload. Beam, Weaver, and Brownlee (2009) also found that journalists who face increased stress from issues inside of their newsroom, such as layoffs of fellow staffers and increased workload, find their sense of journalistic autonomy diminished, and ultimately, their job satisfaction lowered.

Still, some newsrooms that have employed solo video journalists in a limited capacity have found that SVJs can help expand coverage, freeing up resources for more in-depth reports by traditional two-person newsgathering teams. Two of the three newsrooms honored by the National Press Photographers Association 2010 TV Station of the Year – medium market winner WAVY-TV in Norfolk, VA, and large market KARE-TV in Minneapolis – use solo video journalists in this capacity, which benefits those who specialize in more traditional long form reporting in two person teams (Heist, 2010).

Staffers at other newsrooms, faced with the possibility of solo video journalism and job cuts, show concern. When Patti Dennis, news director of Denver's KUSA-TV, held a staff meeting to announce the possibility of adding SVJs, she explained that it was simply a sign of the times (Jensen, 2010). For decades, the station has been recognized for its excellent work by reporter and photographer teams. "I know you loved that business" Dennis told *News Photographer* magazine's Scott Jensen, when recalling the staff meeting. "I loved that business... but that business is dead." (2010, p.28). Jensen spoke with a staffer who, speaking only on condition of anonymity, said that "... morale is down among photographers... photographers – good photographers – at our station are looking for other jobs. They're looking to get out of the business." (p. 29) Not all photographers at KUSA-TV resisted the call for change, however. Dave Delozier, the 1988 National Press Photographers Association's Ernie Crisp Television News Photographer of the Year award, embraced the challenge of becoming a solo video journalist in the autumn of 2008 (ibid.). "I don't think you should ever rule anything out in your career because if you do, you're giving up possibilities" he told *News Photographer*. "This has opened up doors and challenges I hadn't dreamed of" (Jensen, 31). Delozier's work as a solo video journalist has been lauded, recognized by the NPPA in 2010 as the Solo Video Journalist of the year (NPPA Best of Photojournalism, 2010).

Daniels and Hollifield (2002) found that newsroom employees at CNN, when faced with changes in technology and personnel reorganization, reacted with similar discontent as many of those at KUSA-TV had, especially when perceiving that the changes implemented by management would adversely affect their ability to cover the news. Journalists at Nashville's WKRN had similar reactions when approached with the

VJ model in 2006 (Cornish, 2006). “It was a nightmare” said veteran news photographer Al Devine, when asked by National Public Radio’s Audie Cornish about first learning of his new job responsibilities. “You couldn’t sleep at night because you were thinking ‘How do I get this story?’ All of a sudden, you had to use a whole different side of your brain.” (Cornish, 2006). Aside from the stresses of multitasking, the safety of SJVs, being alone in dangerous situations, or distracted while trying to research their story while driving, are concerns (Malone, 2008).

Today’s video journalism is becoming increasingly multi-faceted; where at one time, a newsroom could be expected to produce a singular product for an audience to consume, such as a printed newspaper or a television newscast, many of today’s newsrooms operate under a content center<sup>8</sup> model, providing information on a variety of platforms for mass consumption. In this multimedia environment, delivering original content has become the main responsibility of journalists (Bettag, 2006). Clint Brewer, president of the Society of Professional Journalists sees opportunity in traditional broadcast journalists embracing the Web and solo video journalism. “Truly good reporters will pursue new ways to tell stories to their audience, not shun these new methods” (Brewer, 2008, p.3).

Newsrooms’ efforts to move their operations toward Internet and multiple platform delivery is justified by research conducted by a Pew Research Center for the People & the Press report from December of 2008, that showed for the first time that more people get their news from the Internet (40%) compared to newspapers (35%). The

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the Gannett-owned CBS affiliate in Washington DC, *WUSA-TV*, no longer has a “newsroom”, but rather an “Information Center.” This rebranding goes beyond the name of the physical plant, where ‘digital correspondents’ have replaced ‘reporters.’

same survey found that 70% of respondents said they get their news from television. Data from 2010 shows that this migration online continued, as television was the only platform to out-perform the Web as a news source (“State of the media”, 2010).

### **Today’s News Consumer**

The goal of news managers is delivering their product to an audience; one which is becoming more fractured and mobile in their habits. According to a 2010 study by The Pew Research Center for The People & The Press, the average news viewer’s habits are evolving with changing technology (“Americans Spending more time Following the News”, 2010). One consideration is how often viewers seek their news – at regular times by appointment, or by “grazing”. They found that in 2010, 57% of those surveyed considered themselves “grazers”, while 38% got their news at regular times. When compared to a similar 2002 Pew study, which found a nearly even split in responses (49% regular times, 48% grazers), the 2010 responses demonstrate a noticeable shift in audience habit. Study authors attribute this change to the widened availability of the Internet, and increased original content available on 24-hour news channels (p. 44). While the numbers of older viewers also reflect this trend, the study points out that those who identify themselves most as “grazers” represent the 18-29 year old population (74%). The habits of the youngest news consuming population suggest that this trend will continue to be a major consideration for news decision-makers for years to come.

A different survey in this 2010 Pew Center study demonstrates that the number of those who choose local television news as a source decreases as the demographics skew younger. While 50% of the total respondents say they watch local television news on a regular basis, adults 65 and older watch with the most regularity (64%). The numbers

progressively decrease (50-64 year olds: 61%; 30-49 year olds: 48%; 18-29 year olds: 31%) (p.25). These statistics also suggest that the youngest news consumers are leaving traditionally scheduled television newscasts in favor of other outlets, again signaling television newsroom managers to find more ways to distribute information expeditiously. Solo video journalists, with their abilities to transmit video quickly from the field, fit into this ideal.

Overall, the 2010 Pew data suggests that consumers are still spending more time seeking news from a source that at least offers video as part of the delivery system. Numbers published in this study from 2000 (before the Internet was an option for response) show that the typical American spent 28 minutes a day watching TV news. 2010 data (which does include the Internet as a source) reflects that time spent on television increased to 32 minutes a day. When the Internet was added to the survey in 2004, the average American spent 6 minutes a day getting their news content online. The 2010 data shows that number more than doubling, to 13 minutes a day spent on the Internet seeking news. During this period, TV news viewership retained its total time, while radio news dropped slightly (17 minutes to 15), and time spent on newspapers dropped sharply (from 17 minutes to 10). The Pew data also shows that the overall time spent on news consumption, from 2004 to 2010 dropped by two minutes (72 minutes in 2004, to 70 minutes today), but is still at levels similar to the mid-1990s (p.19). News received via smart-phones and other mobile devices was not fully measured in these surveys, but will likely be included in future studies (Rosenstiel, 2010). All of this suggests that Americans still seek news, and do so increasingly from a source that uses video, thus demonstrating increased opportunity for solo video journalists.

In a commentary about the study, Tom Rosenstiel, Director of the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, found several reasons for the data. Rosenstiel posits that the producers of news content are finding better ways to communicate information, customizable to their audience's interest, while replacing a one-size fits all mentality with one that takes advantage of each platform's strengths. "Another factor," Rosenstiel writes, "is improved connections and faster speeds that bring the technology's potential to life" (2010, p. 80). Finally, he adds that the news consumer has become savvier; understanding that each unique platform has its own strength, and therefore, the individual audience member chooses the medium based on what it is he or she is seeking. "[T]he medium may not quite be the message as Marshall McLuhan argued two generations ago, but the medium does make a difference. Different platforms serve us differently, and there is now more evidence people are integrating all of them into their lives" (2010, p. 81).

Additionally, as the Internet continues to expand the news consumer expects video to be available on their demand. As broadband and high-speed Internet becomes more available to the general population, the news viewing public expects to get more video content, and the ability to interact with the newsroom rather than be solely receivers of information (Pavlik, 2008). Newsrooms have done their best to keep up with the expectations of their audience, by providing video and live streaming on their websites, and toward the end of the decade, expanding their reach by catering to smart phone and mobile users. They have also encouraged citizen contributions, with content, story ideas, and commentary on news reports. Data from The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press suggests that the Internet will continue to be a main source for

news consumption, as its usage among adults between the ages of 18 and 29 – the main news consumers of tomorrow – roughly equals television<sup>9</sup> (2008). 2010 Pew numbers show this trend continuing, that nearly half of consumers in that age range seek news from online sources every day (“Americans spending more time following the news”, 2010).

All of this suggests that the culture of on-demand news consumption is replacing the appointment television mindset; giving additional fodder to those who advocate getting content to the audience as quickly as possible as a factor of newsroom success. The ability of the solo video journalist to gather information quickly, produce a report, and file it back to the newsroom fits neatly into this paradigm.

### **How Economics have Changed News**

Economic instability has also had an effect on how newsrooms produce their product, and in the proliferation of the solo video journalist. The addition of SVJs to newsrooms is “not a journalistic decision;” says social documentary producer and consultant Brian Storm, “it’s not a decision being driven around telling better stories. It’s a decision being driven by creating stories in ways that are more economical, more fiscally responsible.” (as quoted in Ludtke, 2009, p.21)

In the aforementioned 2010 Pew report, the revenue outlook for television is dim. Surveys of news directors show that 41.9% of newsrooms slashed their 2009 budgets, which is more than triple the number of newsrooms that reported reducing budgets in 2007. The average audience for local television news has also fallen for every time period

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<sup>9</sup> Respondents were asked to define their “main sources” for news. Both Internet and television were mentioned 59% of the time. Respondents were permitted to give more than one answer.

(early evening, late, and morning news) during sweeps periods; with the loss between 2008 and 2009 dropping nearly twice as much as the previous year (“State of the media,” Local TV, Audience, 2010). Along with an eroding audience base, revenue dropped as well, with some figures in the Pew report showing 2009 to have the lowest total television revenue in the seven years of data available (*State of the media*, Local TV, economics).

The loss in advertising revenue has many traditional television newsrooms scrambling for ways to cut their overhead, while increasing their content production along with the demand of the consumer. One approach has competitors in a local television market sharing resources on stories; in Chicago, four newsrooms share camera crews, and in Philadelphia and New York, the NBC and Fox-operated stations share helicopter footage (Stelter, 2009). Washington DC has its own news sharing project, known as *LNS*. WUSA-TV, WRC-TV and WTTG-TV each contribute staffers to a pool, which shoot stories that interest the three newsrooms and share content via a fiber optic line (William McKnight, personal communication, 2009). While some stations, such as Scranton/Wilkes-Barre PA’s WYOU have shut down their newsrooms altogether, most stations are trying to avoid that route since nearly half of a television station’s revenue comes from the advertising sold on their local news product (Stelter). All of these budgetary fixes center on cutting staffers, which makes solo video journalism an appealing option for newsrooms.

Employee salaries fit into the equation too; and when considering that the solo video journalist can combine the efforts of two staffers, the benefits become more attractive for a newsroom. After all, as the previously cited 2010 Pew research points out,

more than four in ten newsrooms have reduced their budgets – and the money needs to come from somewhere. Bob Papper, Distinguished Professor of Journalism and Chair of the Department of Journalism, Media Studies, and Public Relations at Hofstra University, found in a 2010 salary survey of television newsrooms, the median annual compensation for a major market photographer (such as those working in Washington, Philadelphia, Chicago or New York) was \$50,000. Papper also found that the median salary for reporters in those major markets in the same time period was \$65,000. When combining these photographer and reporter salaries, a traditional two-person newsgathering team in the nation’s largest markets would have a total median salary of \$115,000, according to Papper’s figures.

While Papper’s numbers do not provide data for solo video journalists, analysis of the responses of those contacted for the study presented in this text demonstrate none of the solo video journalists interviewed is receiving compensation equal to the combined salary of two people. Trimming back on some of these traditional staff positions to employ solo video journalists who are capable of handling less complicated stories on their own is a strategy some newsrooms in larger markets presently use for both economic savings and expanded coverage (Heist, 2010). “It’s an accountant’s dream but an editor’s nightmare,” said Michael Scully, a journalism professor from the University of Rhode Island (Malone, 2008, p. 9). Essentially, the work of three people is done by one, but “the quality of the work is diminished” (ibid.).

Cutting back on single skilled employees to add solo video journalists is a method network newsrooms are currently employing. When ABC announced a 25 percent reduction of staff in early 2010, management said they expect their journalists to be able

to function as solo video journalists as well as working with full crews (Kurtz, 2010). In October, 2010, CBS news laid off their staff of single skilled television photographers working in the London bureau, and put the responsibility of shooting news on producers (Rosenblum, *CBS News fires its best cameramen*, 2010). In 2009, NBC overhauled its Dallas bureau and trained veteran correspondent Charles Hadlock to become an SVJ (Charles Hadlock, personal communication, March 17, 2011).

There was a time when journalists were not at all concerned with a newsroom's bottom line. In the early 1990s, scholars studying print journalists found job satisfaction to be more directed related to their ability to be good journalists than the economic condition of their newsrooms (Stamm & Underwood, 1993) (Pollard, 1995). However, more recent data suggest that is changing; reporters are no longer isolated from the business side of producing news (Daniels & Hollifield, 2002). Tom Bettag, an executive producer at the Discovery Channel's Koppel Group, cites a 2005 Pew survey that found that 55 % of television journalists felt that the financial bottom line of their newsroom were hurting television news. "Those realities are all about big money" wrote Bettag. "The words 'public service' do not even get lip service, much less 'sacred trust'" (2006, p.38). Still, the combination of economic woes, the affordability of equipment and delivery methods, and the cost savings of reducing staff make solo video journalism a presence in newsrooms of all types. "Despite fears that quality journalism will decline," wrote John Strauss of the *Indianapolis Star*, "the economics of the industry make it inevitable that more reporters will be given multimedia duties" (2008), including solo video journalism.

## Why Quality Still Matters

There is a strong case to be made that quality video storytelling has a significant role in how an audience judges a newscast. Belt and Just (2007) found in a five year study of local newscasts, that viewers reward television newscasts that put an emphasis on the quality of content with higher ratings. That assessment may disadvantage newsrooms that commonly use SVJs, as the quality of a report done by a solo video journalist is typically not as strong as a report done by a traditional team (Young, 2009).

As Strauss remarked, many journalists and critics express concern about the potential degradation of news quality at the stations that rely on the reportage and production of pieces done by the solo video journalist. “There will be a fall in quality, no doubt,” former CBS correspondent Tom Fenton told *News Photographer* magazine (as quoted in Young, 2009, p.42), when commenting on Washington, DC CBS affiliate WUSA-TV’s addition of several multimedia journalists to cover news in the nation’s capital. The journalists’ concern is that the stations are hiring cheaper labor to do more work. Fenton, for example, expressed concern about less experienced journalists telling the news. “What kind of people are you going to get? That disturbs me” (as quoted in Young, 2009, p.42). However, WUSA-TV management believes that the quantity of coverage counts as well as quality: some viewers may define a “quality” news product by the amount or range of coverage a station provides, as general manager Allan Horlick told the *Washington Post* (Kurtz, 2010). The ability to tell more stories is another reason why managers find SVJs appealing.

NBC News’ Chief Foreign Affairs Correspondent Richard Engel, who has carried a camera with him while he has been embedded with US forces, understands the benefit

of being able to gather video independently, but notes that he believes that the level of coverage suffers. “I’m not a professional cameraman. My cameraman is trained to do this. It’d be presumptuous of me to think I can do what he can do. You’ll never get the quality that he does” (as quoted in Kurtz, 2010, C01). Brad Ingram, a past board member for the National Press Photographers Association, believes that adding multiple duties gets in the way of a journalist’s mission to be able to deliver information with value to the consumer. “When you are trying to multitask everything, you lose that quality” (Ingram, as quoted in Cornish, 2006). Brian Storm also agrees (Ludtke, 2009). “I don’t know one person operating at a high level who is an independent one-man band who is telling the kind of stories that you could tell in a collaborative environment. There’s just no way.” (as quoted in Ludtke, 2009, p.21)

### **Professional Development of Solo Video Journalists**

#### *The consultant*

Michael Rosenblum, a media consultant who has advised KRON-TV, WKRN-TV, and other newsrooms worldwide, has said that “making TV news isn’t any more complicated than picking up a camera and starting to shoot” (2008). Is this simplistic view the reality that newly transformed solo video journalists are finding to be true? Or are there other factors beyond the basic operation of the equipment that make a skilled solo video journalist?

Rosenblum was a producer for the long-running CBS News show “Sunday Morning” in 1988, when he first began to envision the revolution that he now calls “videojournalism” (Rosenblum, 2008). With the introduction of 8mm (or Hi8) broadcast quality television cameras that were relatively small and less expensive when compared

to their much pricier counterparts, Rosenblum believed it was only a matter of time before the multiple technician crew would become obsolete for newsgathering (Alter, 1993; Brune, 1993). After seeing the advancements of technology, the cost savings to news providers, and the opportunity for solo video journalists to dive deeper into subjects than their large crew counterparts, Rosenblum left network television to begin consulting newsrooms (Rosenblum, 2008; Rosenblum, *Who we are*, 2010).

Early on his video consulting years, Rosenblum believed that everyone has the skills required to produce quality video (Sharkey, 1994). “Any idiot can make TV, we’re all video literate” he told *The Independent* (London) in 1994, “we all know, if only subconsciously, the conventions of TV” (Sharkey, p31). However, later in his career, Rosenblum acknowledged that there was a learning curve for skills acquisition, writing that “[T]he multiple skills necessary to produce good television can not (sic) be garnered in a few weeks or a few stories. They take years of experience. That doesn’t mean that they can’t be learned or applied by one person with a small camera. They can. But it takes time and experience and practice” (Rosenblum 1998). In an article for *Neiman Reports*, Rosenblum acknowledged that his philosophy may be hard to swallow for television professionals, but in order to produce real journalism using video everyone must know how to use the medium effectively (Rosenblum, 2008). On a blog post on his website, Rosenblumtv.com, he equates television photographers with elevator operators and firemen on a steam locomotive – two highly specialized jobs that advancements in technology have made obsolete (*CBS fires its best cameramen*, 2010). Rosenblum also argues that the independence a solo video journalist has in his “videojournalim” model

will create a stronger product – SVJs are freed of the logistics associated with multiple person crews (Alter, 1991).

Rosenblum's ideas have not always sat well with those who find the VJ format to be a threat to their professional livelihood (*Making peace with Michael Rosenblum*, 2007). However, Rosenblum does not view his model of journalism as forcing camera operators or producers to lose their employment, but rather re-invent their careers (ibid.). Since 1998, he has introduced his videojournalism model to television and online newsrooms including The BBC, The New York Times, NY1 (which he helped establish), as well as local television newsrooms WKRN-TV in Nashville, and KRON-TV in San Francisco (Rosenblum, *Clients*, 2010). The KRON-TV makeover will be discussed later in this chapter.

#### *Scott Broom: A very public work in progress*

After 26 years as a self-described “coat and tie reporter”, Scott Broom has reinvented himself at Washington's WUSA-TV as a digital correspondent; a term used by some Gannett outlets for the role of the solo video journalist (Broom, 2010). Broom has embraced this new role publicly, blogging about his transition on his website *One Man's Band*, and utilizing social networking sites Facebook and Twitter to relay information about the stories he's working on (Kurtz, 2010) along with the challenges he faces covering news by himself. Broom shares tips for becoming a solo video journalist on his *One Man's Band* website, and on his personal twitter feed; [twitter.com/scottbroom](https://twitter.com/scottbroom).

To transform from a daily single-skilled reporter to become a solo video journalist, Broom received three days of boot-camp style training by Gannett (Kurtz,

2010). Broom finds working alone to be an advantage, especially when approaching a timid subject who may be intimidated by a full newsgathering crew (Kurtz). On most days, Broom leaves the coat and tie behind for a golf shirt and khakis, balancing the need for comfort with camera-ready attire (Scott Broom, personal communication, 2010). Besides the normal tasks of the solo video journalist, Broom has also engineered and presented his own live shots in unique situations, including reporting from behind the wheel during a blizzard in 2010 (Hanlon, 2010).

Broom's very public transition, from Statehouse reporter for Baltimore's WMAR-TV to solo video journalist, has attracted attention from both those in the industry and those who comment on it. His techniques are recognized as a demonstration of how local television journalism will be practiced in the near future (Hanlon, 2010). While observing one of Broom's daily "juggling acts," *The Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz remarked that solo video journalism is "cheaper, quicker and more nimble – but cannot produce the deeper sounds of a small journalistic orchestra" (Kurtz, 2010, p. C01).

### **KRON-TV: A Newsroom Makeover**

While Broom is an individual transforming his career to become an SVJ, in some instances an entire newsroom operation experienced the switch. It was 2005 when San Francisco's KRON-TV took on the solo video journalist model, making it the first large-market television station in the United States to require all of their field newsgathering staffers to do so (Jardin, 2005).

The station, at the time considered the "gold standard for local broadcast news" in San Francisco (Russell, 2006), reassigned all of its field journalists to become SVJs,

creating a product that one *San Francisco Weekly* critic panned as “more akin to home movies than news programming broadcast to the nation's sixth-largest TV market” (ibid.). *Grade the News*, a San Francisco media watchdog website based at San Jose State University’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication, compared it to the production value of MTV’s reality show *The Real World*, saying it looked neither “amateur or totally professional,” (sic) criticizing both the reporting and videography (“At KRON, reporters, videographers and editors now do all three jobs at once,” 2005). The analysis also notes that many of the reports filed previously single- skilled photographers “ignore obvious story angles” (ibid.). Reviews like these suggest that the initial work of the new SVJs was substandard, at least when contrasting it to the level of quality the newsroom previously produced.

Still, commitment to the all-SVJ model persisted at KRON. While the perception of quality may have dropped, in the opinion of those who critique news coverage, management also moments of success that would not have been possible with the station’s previous workflow. KRON’s News Director at the time Aaron Pero told *Broadcasting & Cable’s* David F. Carr that there is an undeniable advantage to having every staff member skilled at shooting video, including in instances of breaking news:

When it comes to breaking news, we can just inundate a scene... We’ve had a couple of examples in the last year or so. We had a guy in San Francisco who was driving down the sidewalks, and we had 14 VJs on the story that day. During the (Lake) Tahoe fires, we had 8 VJs and

two satellite operators working the story, and we were able to have 8 reporters on the air.

Pero, as quoted in Carr, 2008

In 2005, Brian Shields, KRON's online news manager during the transition, told the blog Media Orchard that he views the re-distribution of duties in the newsroom as a necessary departure from the way local news used to be presented ("Will KRON save local TV news from itself?," 2005). Shields viewed the traditional operation of a newsroom as "still just six crews covering the market on any given day...never taking risks... just getting the easy stuff...the crime and the regurgitated newspaper story from the morning" (ibid.). Shields believed that kind of news philosophy catered to an audience that really didn't exist anymore, calling it the "we talk you shut up and watch" model (ibid.). The decision to move toward an all SVJ model was something that "makes sense within today's economics and that at the same time fixes many of the existing problems with the genre" (ibid.).

The economic climate that Shields alluded to was very much a point of concern for the station. Years prior to the newsroom reorganization, KRON-TV had its share of financial problems (Pompilio, 2000), exacerbated by the loss of its NBC affiliation in 2002 (Spitzer, 2002). Without the backing of network programming ratings slid, and eventually the owners of the station, Young Broadcasting, declared bankruptcy ("KRON-TV, the VJ model, files for bankruptcy," 2009). The station continues to operate, as a member of the "My TV" network, with the SVJ model still in place (Jeremy Carroll, personal communication, 2009). While Shields' comments suggest that the move to the

SVJ model was driven at least in part by the economic conditions at KRON-TV, it is evident that the reassignment of staffers as solo video journalists did not cause the station's eventual bankruptcy – but neither did the move to SVJs save the station, either.

## Chapter 4

### METHODOLOGY

The research conducted for this study consisted of a series of qualitative interviews, conducted in person or over the phone depending wholly on respondent availability. The selection of respondents was based on the following criteria:

1. At least one year of experience as a professional journalist, previously working in television in a single-skilled capacity as defined in Chapter 1.
2. A transition of job duties into the role of a *solo video journalist*, whose chief responsibility lies in producing stories using narrative storytelling techniques with video, under daily deadlines and without direct assistance from any other journalist.

Qualified respondents for the study did not need to have their work disseminated on broadcast television; however, their work needed to reflect attributes of traditional television news reports, such as video, narration and recorded interviews. Many of today's solo video journalists create an online product for newsrooms which are traditionally broadcast, print, or national wire service. Understanding this contemporary model of a newsroom, it would serve little use to the community of knowledge to exclude participants who work for newsrooms that were not engaged solely in broadcast reporting. For example, more than one participant worked for a company whose legacy media is newspaper, but was employed by that organization as a solo video journalist, as defined in the parameters of this study. In all cases, every respondent had been

traditionally trained in a single-skill for a *broadcast* newsroom initially, and at the time of participation was doing the work of a solo video journalist for their employer.

Interview questions were open-ended; the quest to make certain that respondents could interpret them freely, and answer with as little or as much detail as they choose to share. These questions appear in Appendix A. While the respondents were told to expect the interview to last approximately 30 minutes, many chose to offer more insight than expected, and conversations often approached, or even exceeded, an hour.

The initial respondents for this study were discovered at the National Press Photographers Association NewsVideo Workshop, held at the Oklahoma College of Continuing Education on the campus of the University of Oklahoma in Norman in April of 2009. These respondents provided names and contact information of other journalists who fit the study's criteria, creating a snowball sample method of identifying additional respondents. In total, eight practicing solo video journalists were interviewed in-depth for this study.

To ensure the credibility, each respondent provided at least two examples of their work as a solo video journalist from the month preceding their interview. The respondents performed the work of a solo video journalist nearly every single day; however, two respondents were still in the transition of learning this task, and at the time of participation performed the role of solo video journalist most days, while continuing their original role as a single-skilled journalist on rare occasions. This latter group is of high interest for this study, because as they were in the middle of this professional change, they have a fresher insight on the problems that face the population as a whole.

After initial contact for the study, each respondent signed a University of Maryland Institutional Review Board approved consent form (Appendix B). To facilitate an open and honest exchange of ideas, each respondent was granted anonymity. One potential respondent contacted his station's news director after the initial query, which resulted in a request by his management to "review the questions" before any interview would take place. This researcher chose to deny the request, and ultimately rescind the invitation to participate.

In this text, respondents are only referred to by their current and former job title, basic region of the country in which they work, and pertinent information concerning their previous and current work experiences. The identity of the respondent's employer has also been withheld. No proprietary information regarding any respondent's employer was sought, discovered inadvertently, or used in this research or the presentation of results.

### **The Respondents**

Of the eight respondents who participated in this study, four had identified their single-skilled experience as being a reporter, and the other four said they were former television photographers. The gender breakdown was one female to three males in each group (previous reporters and previous photographers), or two females and six males overall. The range of total experience in journalism was from four years to 37, with the mean years of service being 14.9. The range of experience as a solo video journalist was one to five years, with a mean of 2.5 years of service.

The geographic distribution of the respondents reflects diversity among market sizes and geographic regions. Six of the respondents were working for a local audience,

four of which in markets designated as Top 20 by Nielsen Media Research in 2009. The remaining two SVJs serve a national audience. Geographically, two respondents were in Texas, two in the upper Midwest, two in the Rocky Mountain region, one in the Mid-Atlantic and one in the central Midwest. All respondents work for newsrooms based in the United States.

When asked about their level of knowledge about the other (new) skill set before taking on this new career role, two of the four previous reporters, and one of the four previous photographers claimed to have very little or no exposure (3 out of 8 of total respondents). Two of the four previous photographers felt they had some knowledge from working alongside their former reporter partners in newsgathering over the years, while none of the former reporters answered they had learned from observing their previous photographer partners (2 out of 8 total respondents). Three of the respondents, two former reporters and one former photographer, felt their previous experiences made them very familiar with both skill sets prior to taking on this new role (3 out of 8 total respondents).

For half of the participants, becoming a solo video journalist was a change in responsibilities inside of the same newsroom, while for the other half it was a move to a new employer. Three of the four journalists who made the move to a new employer left television to work inside of a Web based newsroom whose legacy medium is textual. Those who changed employers had a variety of reasons for doing so, including the opportunity to work in a larger market, an increase in pay or job status, seeking personal growth in skills for a changing industry, and as one respondent claimed, because he did not believe he had the proper appearance for high-definition television as a reporter.

For all four of these respondents who changed employers, their new responsibilities as solo video journalists happened immediately after being hired. Those journalists whose shift in responsibilities occurred inside the same newsroom made the transition gradually over time. All of these journalists have said their managers approached them in such a way that would have allowed them to decline the opportunity without penalty. Three of the four internal respondents said that as they predict changes in the industry, they took the new role as a chance to learn the skills gradually, rather than wait until a time in the future in which being a solo video journalist would be required in order to maintain employment.

## Chapter 5

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

For ease of reference, a number will identify each respondent:

#1: A female solo video journalist, working for a local television station in Texas, who prior to becoming an SVJ had three years of experience as a political reporter.

#2: A male SVJ, working for an online newsroom, in a large market in the upper Midwest, who prior to becoming an SVJ had 15 years experience as a television news photographer.

#3: A male SVJ, working in a small Midwestern television station, who prior to becoming an SVJ had four years experience as a beat reporter.

#4: A male SVJ working for an online newsroom with a national audience, who prior to becoming an SVJ had 12 years experience as a television reporter/anchor.

#5: A male SVJ, working in a large market in the upper Midwest, who prior to becoming an SVJ had 37 years experience in television production, mostly as a photographer.

#6: A female SVJ, working in a large market in the mountain west, who prior to becoming an SVJ had 13.5 years experience as a photographer.

#7: An SVJ, working in a large market in the mountain west, who prior to becoming an SVJ had 12 years of experience as a photographer.

#8: An SVJ, working for an online newsroom with a national audience, based in the Mid-Atlantic, who prior to becoming an SVJ had 11 years experience as a newspaper and television producer/reporter.

**Research Question 1: How do successful solo video journalists approach their stories when they are switching between using production skills and reporting?**

Each solo video journalist has his or her own unique approach to a story, which is part of the subjective nature of the craft. A lot of this technique comes from their background experiences before becoming an SVJ, with adjustments made to satisfy the demands of the extra work, and utilizing available technology to perform their duties. While most journalists approach their stories by working backward from a fixed deadline, these journalists in particular find themselves balancing their conflicting skill sets and increased workload, in order to complete their daily tasks.

*Prioritization of duties based on skill*

Despite having a common goal of producing a video news report for a mass audience daily, there were a variety of responses given when asked how they prioritize their duties while on assignment. Five of the eight (#1,3,4,7,8) answered that factors pertaining to only one of the two primary skill sets – reporting or production – concerned them. The remaining three (#2,5,6) felt that factors unique to their given assignment dictated their priorities in the field.

When examining those five who mentioned a skill, four of those five (#1,3,4,7) choose their non-native – or newly acquired – skill as the one that gets the highest priority. Three of the SVJs who started as reporters said that their top priority on a story

was getting video, while only one of the previous photographers surveyed was first concerned with gathering interviews or information. All four of the respondents who claimed their non-native skill as their top priority said so because it was the part of their skill that they were still developing and less comfortable in performing. The one respondent who mentioned his native skill as their top priority (#3) was traditionally trained as a reporter. However, like the other four respondents who mentioned their non-native skill as a priority, the reasoning this SVJ offered was also based in coping with the expanded duties of his current job title. His given reasoning was that if he can get the interviews done first, he can focus on his photography and editing (the non-native skill) and therefore, it will be less time consuming. With this reasoning, it is fair to say that all five of the respondents who mentioned a particular skill as their top priority, made this decision based on added workflow and feeling uneasy with their non-native skill.

Even those whose first priorities focused upon their newest or ‘non-native’ skill still had to work on relearning how their native skills fit into their new workflow. Among those SVJs who were once news photographers, almost all found a significant downsizing in their equipment to be a challenge. Going from a large shoulder-mounted camera with an independent broadcast lens, to a hand-held camcorder with an attached lens was an adjustment, even to those who have been shooting video images for a long time. “I basically had to relearn how to shoot,” said respondent number 7, who had more than a dozen years experience as a full-time photographer before taking on the new role. The cameras are smaller and lighter, making them easier to carry for a journalist who is working alone, but the need to get used to the unique operation of the smaller cameras offset the convenience, at least initially. The optics in the lens of smaller cameras are

much different from traditional broadcast cameras, along with weight distribution and location and size of operational switches. For respondents who had a photography background prior to becoming an SVJ, there was a significant change in the equipment, which affected how they initially approached their new duties.

### *Perception of effort*

The amount of effort each journalist was putting forth while reporting in this new role increased according to the responses. This should come as little surprise. Each respondent noted the increase in their daily duties, with varying degrees of emphasis on its physical and intellectual toll. Respondent # 1, a traditionally trained reporter, remarked that her new job is “more challenging, physically exhausting and emotionally draining.” However, when describing her work, she remained positive. Respondent # 5 noted that his new title brought “increased responsibility” and therefore an increase in workload. Respondent # 6 explained that he spent a lot of time working on his writing and that if he had more training and experience, he would be able to diversify his time more evenly and perhaps produce a better product.

Four of the eight respondents (#1-4) also have the additional challenge of learning the intricacies of a new newsroom. These respondents changed employers for this opportunity; and beyond remembering new coworkers’ names and where the rest rooms are, they are also learning their new skill while on the job. Respondents #1 and #3 moved to a larger local news market while #4 went from local television to a national online newsroom. Respondent #2 left a television photography position to become an SVJ in a newsroom whose legacy media is print, where he feels the additional pressure of being

the only person with his skill set in the entire organization. “I’m the only person at the paper that can pull it off [solo video journalism] because of my [previous television] experience” he said.

### *Utilization of available technology*

One common ground was the technology that many of them use, and how it aids how they do their work. Several respondents (#4, 7, 8) mentioned FTP, or file transfer protocol transmission as a major contributor to how they are able to accomplish their work. Simply having the ability to do all of their duties from the field is a major advantage, because it eliminates the need to travel back to a central newsroom to file their report, saving precious time. It also allows them to have opportunities to travel that they might otherwise not have if they were a two-person team who relied on satellites for transmission of their report. Respondent #1 specifically cited the ability to cover more stories as an SVJ than working as part of a two-person team as motivation for her to make the leap. This reporter in particular recalls a time she was denied access on a military aircraft for an assignment because there was only room for one journalist. A competing SVJ was able to go aboard for the story, while she remained on the ground. This single experience was a motivating factor in her decision to change her job skills.

Each journalist brings their own approach to a story, but previous experiences, comfort level in any particular skill (or many cases, their lack of comfort), the standards and expectations of his or her employer, and available technologies often dictate how the assignment is accomplished. The solo video journalists interviewed for this study have each found a workflow that seems to work best for them; or at the very least, remain

pragmatic in their approach, depending wholly on the task at hand and the resources they have to work with.

**Research Question 2: What qualities do successful solo video journalists think are necessary to manage the demands of working alone in an environment that has been traditionally team-oriented?**

When asked this question directly, several attributes kept appearing in the responses. Adjectives such as *organized*, *energetic*, and *aggressive* found their way into many of the answers. Respondent #5 likened being a successful solo video journalist similar to being a good server in a restaurant; “positive attitude, punctual, work ethic and attitude.” Respondent #6 listed qualities that speak to the broader concepts of being a journalist, such as curiosity, integrity, people skills, and having ethical standards. Respondent #7 addressed the independent nature of the work, such as “being a self-starter, [someone who] likes to work alone”. Perhaps most intriguing, is that very few of the responses listed a natural proficiency in a specific skill – such as strong photography or writing skills – as an attribute to success, suggesting that overall these SVJs believe that being successful goes well beyond the mastery of writing and shooting video.

By examining how these journalists arrived at their present vocation, we can gain additional insight into the qualities a successful solo video journalist needs. When asked to describe their motivations for evolution into this new role, there were two primary motivations that split evenly among the group.

The first of these motivations was the ability to expand their skills as a journalist, which was a primary motivation for three respondents (#2, 6, and 7). Each of these

respondents- all three former photographers- suggested that learning a new set of skills added considerably to their job security in their present job and gives them additional marketability in the future job market. “I feel much more secure in my job than if I were just shooting,” remarked respondent #7.

The other primary motivation was the ability to control the story. Five of the eight (#1, 3,4,5, and 8) mentioned control of the product as a primary motivation, which perhaps begins to speak to the independent nature of those who are successful at this job. Of these respondents, only #5 was previously a photographer. It is apparent from the responses that not only do they like to work alone, some prefer *not to work with partners* – although nearly all could suggest times where having a traditional two-person crew would be necessary and advantageous. As several respondents suggested, sometimes when a two-person crew is on a story, there are two separate visions of how the report is conceptualized, thus causing confusion and frustration between the reporter and photographer. For an SVJ, there are no conversations about story direction, and no opportunities for miscommunication. The solo video journalist is the only one responsible for the content, and those who mentioned this as their primary motivation view this as a good thing.

**Research Question 3: What do successful solo video journalists believe would help make the transition easier to manage for those who will be asked to do so in the future?**

When asked this question directly, there were several common answers among the population. The two most frequent answers centered on intangible factors; *more experience* and *newsroom support*. Other suggestions repeated often were *more training*

*and mentoring, improved video equipment* that would produce a higher quality image and *another person* as support. All three of those who suggested *another person* (#1, 6, and 8) clarified in their responses that their answer was not another professional. Instead, the respondents suggested “someone for the interview subject to look at during the interviews” (#1) or “a second person to keep the subjects occupied while I set up the equipment or get video” (#8), or having someone to help “fact check” a story shot in the field (#6). These are duties that could be handled by a college intern, and not necessarily a paid employee. Additionally, one respondent (#3) suggested the creation of an online community to share information and tips for improvement dedicated to specifically to issues of SVJs would be beneficial.

#### *Formal training*

Only one of the eight respondents (#7) claimed to have any type of formal training specific for this position. Two respondents (#1, 3) felt as if they had little or no training at all. Four respondents (#2, 4, 5, and 6) claimed to have learned most of what they know about the other job by observing their former partners in the field in practice. Three of the four photographers turned SVJs claimed that this is how they were prepared to take on their new role. One of those three, respondent #6, found the minimal training acceptable, because newsroom management gave her as much time as she needed to develop her craft. “You’re not going to learn to swim by someone throwing you into the pool and say ‘just do it,’” she explained. Finally, one respondent (#8) said the majority of their training came from seeking experts in the field before the opportunity to become an SVJ presented itself.

Perhaps not surprisingly, when asked what skills they wished to have perfected before taking on this role, seven of the eight respondents (#1-3, 5-8) gave a task that related to their non-native skills, such as *writing*, *being on camera*, and *operation of cameras*. The other respondent (#4) did not answer the question with a specific answer, but rather acknowledged motivation to continue to grow in all skills equally.

#### *Newsroom support*

The second suggestion repeated often by respondents was *newsroom support*, or perhaps better stated as *managed expectations*. This notion was especially popular among the respondents who were remaining in their current newsrooms while adapting their careers. Those who were reliant on newsroom producers and managers to select stories for coverage expressed frustration; with two respondents (#6 and #7) explaining that daily indecision by newsroom managers routinely delays the start of assignments, which negatively affects the rest of the day by shrinking the overall time available to perform duties. Since journalists typically plan their days backward from an immovable deadline, the later of a start they get on the story means a shorter window for getting the work done, amplifying the possibilities of sloppy, incomplete or inaccurate work according to these respondents.

Another aspect of *managed expectations* is story selection. Most respondents remarked that there are just some stories that cannot be covered as well with an SVJ as they would with a traditional two-person crew. Respondent #8 explained that there is a “big disconnect between what people [managers] want and what is feasible.” Respondent #3 said that he “cannot overstate the importance of story selection in the process” of

being successful on a daily basis. The list of story scenarios presented by the respondents included court cases (because of the need to have a camera ready outside when the proceedings end), crime stories (for safety) and when doing a story that might involve a confrontation (such as an investigative piece). Several of the SVJs suggested that there were times where a story assignment would be easier with only an SVJ compared to working with two-person crew; the most often suggested being a sensitive situation where having a large crew may be an intimidating presence for an interview subject.

### *Professional Development*

A third item repeated often in the population was the benefit of *continuing professional education* in the industry. Most of the respondents claim that they learn about new practices in their industry within the confines of their organization, by either working with supervisors, getting ideas from experts in the individual skills (such as seeking a seasoned photographer for help with their video production, or a talented reporter for assistance in writing), or just solving problems with other SVJs within the company structure. Others noted that they relied on mentors, social networking, vendors, websites and trade publications for some insight. However, as previously noted, most still feel undertrained, or look at their solo video journalism as on-the-job training.

### *Learning from mistakes*

When asked about the mistakes that they have made at the beginning of their transition that we could learn from, given repeatedly was the answer *time management*. Four of the eight respondents said learning to operate new equipment, or dealing with the process of setting up stories took a larger portion of time out of their day than first

expected. Losing the ability to take notes and make phone calls while travelling to a story also stymied a few. Respondent #1, who began her career as a reporter, said that there was at least one occasion when she missed a crucial moment in a story because she was too focused on figuring out how to operate the camera. Respondent #7, a photographer turned SVJ, said that he has been guilty of “falling in love with my shots”, or spending too much time logging the video in the edit bay when the time would have been better spent writing.

### *Final advice*

At the conclusion of each interview, the respondents were asked if they felt they had anything else they wanted to add. Six of the eight offered suggestions for transitioning journalists: “be willing to accept defeat and successes”, “hold onto the skill that is your first love”, and “understand that every day is a learning experience”. Respondent #5 acknowledged that transitioning into becoming an SVJ is hard work, and he feels that the motivation to succeed needs to come from within. “You have to challenge yourself to be good enough,” said the former photographer, who with 37 years of television experience is by far the senior among the respondents. He added “you’re lucky enough to have a job in TV...it’s a privilege” Overall, the respondents were positive in their current situation, but understand that there is plenty of professional growth yet to come.

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSIONS

The previous chapter examined the responses to the original research questions that provided the spark for this study. Similarities in the responses among the SVJs interviewed for this study suggest possible trends. This chapter suggests how insight drawn from these common responses may best be best applied to the greater population, and offers potential areas for continued study to create a better understanding of this unique population.

From the research data, five core concepts appear to have an influence upon these solo video journalists' ability to have success. These concepts can be repurposed as suggested strategies for success for any stakeholder in the development of SVJs. This information can be valuable for newsroom managers who are seeking new journalists, and approaching veteran journalists to make this transition, current journalists who are preparing to reinvent their own careers as solo video journalists, current solo video journalists who want to expand their skills, and the student journalists of today, who if they choose to continue to follow the path into broadcast or Internet video journalism, will likely seek employment as solo video journalists.

#### **The Five Core Concepts for Success**

1. *Solo Video Journalism is not for everyone*

Every respondent agreed that it takes certain personality traits in order to be successful as a solo video journalist; traits that are not required of a single-skilled

journalist. It takes dedication, patience and balance between creative and organizational skills. Beyond that, there are certain, intangible attributes that act as a wall between those who want to do this and those who are successful at it. Respondent #8 a former reporter, explained frankly that “some people just won’t be ready for prime time.” From his assessment, this means not having a broadcast-ready voice, or lacking an appearance or a ‘presentable’ demeanor for a mass audience. Certainly some things can be fixed by a good makeover and vocal coach; however, not every current photographer would be able or willing to make the necessary changes to make him or herself “broadcast-ready.” As for the current single-skilled reporters, who come prepared with the requisite broadcast-ready attributes, not all of them are able to handle the increased physical demands of carrying equipment, nor are able to grasp the visual components of the job.

This first conclusion is contradictory to what some in the consulting industry suggest – that a newsroom must follow the blueprint of KRON-TV in San Francisco, or Nashville’s WKRN-TV, and reassign an entire newsroom staff at once. According to multiple respondents, it is a highly held belief in their newsrooms that their management believes everyone is suited for this job. “Our news director thinks anyone can shoot,” remarked respondent #3; a sentiment that both devalues the importance of quality field production and cheapens the effort that former reporters who become SVJs put forth to take on this new role.

Besides having the skills and stamina to accomplish this task on a daily basis, the motivation to become a solo video journalist also has proven to have a bearing on future success. As explained in Chapter 4, those journalists in the study who remained in their current newsrooms when they became SVJs had their management approach them about

the change. While none were forced to do so under threat of dismissal, these four internal employees embraced this as an opportunity to expand their skills. This enthusiasm for continued skill development is not a sentiment shared by every single skilled journalist in every newsroom. While not specifically tested, several respondents suggested that there is a certain population in their newsroom who could not be motivated into putting in the necessary work to learn a new craft in the middle or late stages of their career. What is clear from this research is that those who have been succeeding at this endeavor thus far have been highly motivated and eager to grow as journalists. Most respondents have suggested that being highly motivated to improve one's skills is the exception – and not the rule – in their newsroom.

Additionally, according to several respondents, it takes a pretty thick skin to be a solo video journalist; both inside of a traditional newsroom, and outside in the field, where fellow journalists are more accustomed to working as two-person teams. Two of the respondents (#7, and #8) reported receiving at least some verbal resentment from coworkers or colleagues in the field, especially when first starting out. Respondent #8 found that when he would show up to scenes as an SVJ he would receive some light verbal harassment from his contemporaries. “It’s easy to be intimidated by old school broadcast people” he explained, “but I think that’s when you shine. If you’re competent, you’ll go a long way.” Respondent #7, who was previously a photographer, said that he anticipated the negative backlash he received from his colleagues in his newsroom when he began the transition. The majority of the criticism came from fellow photographers. “I think people were worried that they would lose their jobs and they [the newsroom] would only have reporters who shoot. It really went away when they [newsroom colleagues]

realized that it was on a small scale, and how well we were able to do it.” Most of the journalists who have succeeded in this have been able to overlook the harassment. “I’m not trying to take the job of a reporter,” respondent #6 said, “I’m trying to secure my future.”

## 2. *Journalists who were previously photographers have an easier transition*

It is not a requirement to have experience as a photographer, video editor, or any other video production work coming in, but the results of this research demonstrate that having a photography background is an advantage. Four former reporters and producers were interviewed for this study – all transitioned successfully to their new roles as SVJs. However, it is clear from their responses that those who had production experience had a head start in reporting because of a variety of reasons:

1. They already had a fair amount of familiarity with good story structure from working in tandem with reporters.
2. They learned how to make changes to their writing before air with relative ease, whereas poorly shot video is almost always unfixable.
3. They were more readily able to concentrate on the details of the assignment, rather than being distracted by learning how to work with new equipment.
4. They were more likely to be motivated by professional growth opportunities, rather than by an interest in controlling the message.

First, single-skilled photographers often know more about reporting than single-skilled reporters know about photography, because of the way that traditional two-person news teams interact with each other. All four of the respondents who began as

photographers believed they had a significant advantage because of their exposure to reporters, and more specifically, working with them in the process of structuring a story. These photographers were often the sounding board with their reporter partners about stories while the gathering process was unfolding, and became intimately involved with each story's final outcome while putting it together in an edit bay. A reporter, however, may gain some observational experience by proximity of a photographer, but can never really know what the image looks like in the viewfinder until they shoot for themselves. This is a disadvantage.

Additionally, most television photographers are accustomed to working by themselves on a limited basis, as it is not uncommon in today's newsroom for a single-skilled photographer to act as a field producer from time to time, according to the respondents who were former photographers. For example, a traditional photographer may be sent to a press event alone and gather basic information to hand off to a reporter or produce back in the newsroom. By contrast, very rarely does a traditional reporter get handed a camera in a pinch and sent out to cover a story.

Second, the photographer turned solo video journalist's learning process is less noticeable when it comes to the presentation of the final product. Mistakes made in video can completely derail a story, while mistakes in writing can be more subtle, and more readily fixed before air. Respondent #6, a former photographer, noted that "some of the video that reporters have shot is unairable [not broadcast quality]." If an SVJ writes a substandard script, it can be re-written by a producer or a supervisor. However, if an SVJ shoots video that is unusable – it is out of focus or underexposed – there are no other options for the material other than it must be cut out. Photographers who make the

transition to SVJs have already mastered their video skills, and therefore, can correct a failure in writing with the right supervision, whereas a reporter who has an equally disastrous video product really has little recourse.

Third, former photographers seem to be having a better experience as SVJs, at least initially. They appear to spend less time worrying about their new skills, and so have more time to practice good journalism. When asked “how do you prioritize different obligations in your daily work?” three of the four photographers turned SVJ replied in a way that suggested that it was wholly dependent on the story itself, including:

“The subject’s needs come first”

“It’s based on deadline”,

“I am concerned about being a journalist first...the facts and the structure of the story.”

By contrast, all four of the reporters turned SVJ replied with an answer that showed concern with mastering their non-native skill was their top priority, including:

“I worry about the video first”

“I’m concerned about not getting enough B-roll”

“It’s usually the B-roll”

It is important to note that many of the reporters also mentioned that getting the story straight is a high priority for them, but the top priority that each mentioned was getting video for the report. These responses suggest a lack of confidence by the former

reporters about their ability to gather the video elements of a story. By contrast, those who have learned the visual and technical skills in their previous jobs do not feel this added pressure.

Finally, by examining the answers to their motives to become solo video journalists, we can see that former photographers tend to say that personal development was the main reason they made the switch to being an SVJ. All four former reporters said that they switched because they wanted more control of their stories, while three of the four photographers said they switched in order to expand their own personal skills. While both motivations are legitimate reasons for transitioning to being an SVJ, it is arguable that by making this change in career to expand a skill set they have already found some reward in the process. For those motivated primarily by professional development, simply by becoming a practicing SVJ means that they have already found success.

### *3. SVJs need to embrace their role in the financial picture of the newsroom*

There are several, obvious economic advantages to having one employee perform the job of two. For the SVJs included in this study, the perception is that the primary motivation of their newsroom to hire SVJs is cost-savings. “The reason we’re going to this is financial,” respondent #7 bluntly explained. “I didn’t improve my salary by taking this role, but I see the skills I’ve gained and job security as a positive.” While this is likely in situations where an SVJ remains in the same newsroom where he or she worked previously as a single-skilled journalist, it does expand a journalists’ marketability for future employment. In many ways, the compensation for SVJs is additional experience, rather than additional money. Respondent #6 noted the advantages that her newly

developed skills have for her future employment. “It means you can fill any vacancy needed.”

While understanding the fiscal realities of the business are necessary, successful SVJs are able to concentrate on their new work because they have come to the realization that they will not likely see any financial reward for their extra efforts. It is a harsh reality of the current business model, but one that must be accepted. “The biggest negative is doing the work of two staff members but not seeing a bump in pay,” respondent #7 said. He did add however, that management does work to find other ways to keep him satisfied with his job, including creative freedom and the ability to set his own parameters.

#### 4. *Careful assigning of duties determines success on a daily basis*

Several journalists concluded that their ability to do their job was highly dependent on how they receive their daily assignments, and to what type stories they cover. When prompted, most respondents could mention assignments where working as an SVJ would be problematic, and even a detriment to their newsroom’s coverage. Journalists who work in states that do not have laws allowing cameras in the courtrooms would be at a distinct disadvantage when covering a hearing, for example. In order to follow the events on the bench, an SVJ would be permitted to carry only his or her notepad into the courthouse. At the conclusion of the hearing, that journalist would need to rush out of the courthouse, back to their car to retrieve equipment, and then back to the courthouse steps to try to track down the necessary video and interviews for the story. Because court cases are often highly stressful, with subjects who are reluctant to cooperate with journalists, this delay offers an unwilling subject of a story ample time to

vacate the premises. Sometimes, in highly emotional trials, a judge will order the courtroom doors closed until the parties leave the chamber, making it even more difficult for one person to cover the story alone. Finally, most public buildings, such as courthouses, have multiple exits, which only exacerbate the problems of working without a partner. Scenarios such as this caused respondent #2, when asked how working by yourself makes your stories better, to say flat out “it doesn’t.”

5. *No SVJ is an island: there is a need for more training and professional organization for problem-solving*

During several of the interviews, solo video journalists complained about the lack of opportunities for advanced training and interaction with other solo video journalists. Much of this could be alleviated with an Internet forum or professional organization that is specific to the solo video journalist community. Six of the eight respondents (#1-4, 6, and 8) report having already built up their own small network of SVJs to share information and professional tips with, but said they are eager to expand their connections with others across the country that specialize in this craft.

This concept is not foreign to professional journalists as a whole. Four of the journalists in this study are either members of – or often consult the Web site of – multiple professional journalism organizations, including *The National Press Photographers Association*, the *Society of Professional Journalists*, and the *National Association of Black Journalists*. In addition to employment postings and discussion boards, these organizations offer mentoring programs to assist those who are newer to the craft become more nuanced journalists. Additionally, three of the respondents noted during their interviews that they consult industry-based Web sites, such as *b-roll.net*,

*newslab.org*, and *poynter.org*, where discussion of issues and practical tips for better journalism can also be found. Respondent #5 said that his transition to becoming an SVJ would have been smoother had he been able to learn more by watching other's work. Respondent #3 suggested that having an Internet based forum dedicated solely to SVJs would be a benefit to the industry, especially for professional development.

### **Recommended Topics for Follow-Up Studies**

Below are suggestions for future research:

*A quantitative assessment of training provided by news managers and corporate employers who re-assign journalists as SVJs.*

As noted previously, many respondents of this study have concerns about the lack of formal training given to them by their newsroom leaders. It would be beneficial for all parties involved if it were known just how much training employers were offering their SVJs, and how these journalists felt that the training benefited their job performance. This could be achieved by surveying newsroom managers of their efforts for training, including in-house training, training within the newsroom's corporate structure, the hiring of consultants, and sending employees to workshops and seminars. The managers should also be surveyed on their perceptions of training and their resources to provide training for their staff, giving context to their actual training numbers. This will better allow understanding of the numbers of instances of professional development.

*A quantitative assessment of length of service for journalists who become SVJs.*

A longitudinal study focusing on the career life-span of solo video journalists would be beneficial, especially when considering the perceived burnout factor. It would

be helpful for the field to have outsiders examine the workload of these ultra-busy journalists and ask how SVJs can maintain the necessary pace. At least two of the respondents to this study have since left the business temporarily to pursue post-graduate education; one has plans to return to the business, while another is considering an academic career. Additionally, a third respondent left his SVJ job in May, 2010, for a newsroom management opportunity in a traditional broadcast newsroom. Since many of these journalists initially reinvent themselves as a way to become more marketable, it would be beneficial to understand if that is the long-term effect.

*Assessment of overall job satisfaction of solo video journalists.*

A quantitative look into the overall job satisfaction of SVJs could help newsroom managers determine how to make their operation more effective. Several respondents of this study suggested that it was to the employer's advantage to keep them satisfied. "They'd rather me be happy and do a good job, than be miserable and have to find someone else to do it," respondent #7 remarked. When considering the financial implications of job searches, relocation, hiring costs, and training, it makes fiscal sense to retain a good employee, rather than recruit a new one. Also, when viewed through the lens of the newsgathering environment, it is logical to suppose that an employee with more tenure will have a distinct advantage over those who are new on the job or in a new city. Veterans understand the particular newsroom workflow better; they will know the key sources in the area of coverage, and they will be more familiar – and likely more credible – to the audience.

*A qualitative assessment of former television journalists who become a solo video journalist inside a newsroom whose legacy media is print.*

Three of the respondents' transitions included the added pressure of switching from television to traditionally print newsrooms, bridging the two worlds of text and video. When a text-based newsroom is trying to establish strong video content to their Internet presence, the newsroom often hires television journalists to help. How do SVJs from television fit in this new environment and what can be learned from their experiences?

### **Final Summary**

In many traditional newsrooms, the transitioning solo video journalist is a reporter who has no peers. To the staff of reporters, he or she is the one that shoots; to the staff photographers, he or she is the one that reports. To skeptics they are the harbinger of a bleak future, where personnel are replaced two-for-one, and quality is sacrificed in the name of fiscal restraint and a higher story count. In an environment that for decades has thrived on partnership, collaboration, and the branding of their individual efforts as part of the "news team," being a solo video journalist means being an outsider.

But that does not mean new SVJs cannot fit into a newsroom successfully. They are increasingly being seen as part of the solution to the economic concerns of newsroom managers. Advances in technology allow the SVJs to meet the demands of current news consumers in ways that traditional two-person teams could never do. Opportunities for excellence remain for those who are exceptionally talented journalists; who can confidently take on both tasks on their own. For the journalist with the right motivation,

mastery of technology, and newsroom support, he or she may be able to report the news as well, if not better, than they could in their former occupation.

The lessons learned from this study should be used to guide the training of solo video journalists for years to come. They should also be applied to those who are joining the workforce from journalism schools, as they too need to be able to retrain their brain to think both logically and creatively. Even if the numbers of solo video journalist decline in the coming years – which most evidence suggests is highly unlikely – there will remain a need to ensure that those working with video to deliver news understand all aspects of visual storytelling, both analytical and creative. The more understanding a journalist has of both reporting and production, the more successful they are likely to become.

From this research, we can determine that excellence in video journalism can indeed be achieved by someone working alone; but it will take an exceptional amount of hard work, patience, and a dedication to excellence in reporting and visual communication – and a thorough understanding of journalistic principles.

## APPENDIX A

### Survey questions asked of respondents

1. What was your background in journalism before your current job?
2. Before you became a solo video journalist, what did you know about\_\_\_\_ (skill that respondent had to learn to become a solo video journalist).
3. How did you become a solo video journalist?
4. Why are you doing this for a living?
5. How has your workload changed since you began your career as a journalist?
6. How were you prepared to pursue both reporting and production?
7. What skills do you wish you had perfected before starting this portion of your career?
8. How do you prioritize different obligations in your daily work?
9. How has technology advanced storytelling in journalism?
10. How do you conceptualize your stories for different platforms in the gathering process?
11. In what ways does working by yourself make your stories better?
12. What would improve your ability to tell stories while working in this environment?
13. What mistakes have you or other solo video journalists made that we can learn from?
14. What qualities make a successful solo video journalist?
15. How do you stay in touch with changes in how journalism is practiced?
16. Anything else?

## APPENDIX B

### Institutional Review Board Approval



2100 Lee Building  
College Park, Maryland 20742-5125  
301.405.2412 TEL 301.314.1475 FAX  
irb@deans.umd.edu  
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

March 24, 2009

#### **MEMORANDUM**

*Application Approval Notification*

**To:** Dr. Susan Moeller  
Stanley Heist  
Philip Merrill College of Journalism

**From:** Joseph M. Smith, MA, CIM   
IRB Manager  
University of Maryland, College Park

**Re:** **IRB Application Number:** 09-0180  
**Project Title:** "Both Sides of the Brain: Strategies of re-inventino for Solo Video Journalists"

**Approval Date:** March 24, 2009

**Expiration Date:** March 24, 2010

**Type of Application:** Initial

**Type of Research:** Non-Exempt

**Type of Review for Application:** Expedited

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The University of Maryland, College Park Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved your IRB application. The research was approved in accordance with the University IRB policies and procedures and 45 CFR 46, the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects. Please include the above-cited IRB application number in any future communications with our office regarding this research.

**Recruitment/Consent:** For research requiring written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped informed consent document is enclosed. The expiration date for IRB approval has been stamped on the informed consent document. Please keep copies of the consent forms used for this research for three years after the completion of the research.

**Continuing Review:** If you intend to continue to collect data from human subjects or to analyze private, identifiable data collected from human subjects, after the expiration date for this approval (indicated above), you must submit a renewal application to the IRB Office at least 30 days before the approval expiration date. If IRB approval of your project expires, all human subject research activities including the enrollment of new subjects, data collection, and analysis of identifiable private information must stop until the renewal application is approved by the IRB.

**Modifications:** Any changes to the approved protocol must be approved by the IRB before the change is implemented, except when a change is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. If you would like to modify the approved protocol, please submit an addendum request to the IRB Office. The instructions for submitting a request are posted on the IRB web site at : [http://www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB/irb\\_Addendum%20Protocol.htm](http://www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB/irb_Addendum%20Protocol.htm)

**Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks:** You must promptly report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others to the IRB Manager at 301-405-0678 or [jsmith@umresearch.umd.edu](mailto:jsmith@umresearch.umd.edu).

**Student Researchers:** Unless otherwise requested, this IRB approval document was sent to the Principal Investigator (PI). The PI should pass on the approval document or a copy to the student researchers. This IRB approval document may be a requirement for student researchers applying for graduation. The IRB may not be able to provide copies of the approval documents if several years have passed since the date of the original approval.

**Additional Information:** Please contact the IRB Office at 301-405-4212 if you have any IRB-related questions or concerns.

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