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ABSTRACT

By virtue of their licenses, local television stations in the United States must serve in the public interest of their communities. Because many stations' ownership is by corporate conglomerates, however, that public interest is often considered secondary to revenue maximization. Labor is exploited to meet this goal, with technology deployed in newsrooms to consolidate job descriptions, replace human labor with computers, and add sales-ready content platforms, while drawing as much surplus value from workers as possible. This study sought out newsroom employees, including rarely-studied behind the scenes personnel, in the 25 largest metropolitan areas of the country to find out how this utilization of technology affected their journalistic work routines and output. Their responses via online surveys and semi-structured interviews highlight the challenges of juggling ever-increasing tech-enabled job responsibilities while still providing quality reports for their audiences in a corporate ownership environment focused on profits.

Introduction

Local television newsroom workers in the United States labor under both public service and corporate profit expectations. By federally-issued license, local television stations are required to work in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" of their audiences (US Congress 1934). Traditionally, this public interest has been served through news reports designed to keep an eye on the powerful, provide information for public discussion, and focus on audience education (see, for instance, Blanchard 1977; Habermas 1991; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007; Schudson 2008). As television is still the overall choice for news viewing (Mitchell 2018), local stations remain important sources for community involvement and political understanding. Studies show using media to follow politics and current events leads to higher citizen participation in society, and following local news leads to strong community connections and consistent voting in local elections (Gil de Zúñiga 2009; Barthel et al. 2016).

However, the same local television stations providing information to the public are also business entities in a capitalist society where revenue maximization is the name of the game. The majority of these local stations are owned by national or transnational

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corporate conglomerates, whose main function is to create profit for owners and stock-holders (Croteau and Hoynes 2006). In 2018, local US English-language news-producing television stations brought in $15.8 billion in advertising revenue, 82 percent of overall local television industry revenue for that year (Matsa and Fedeli 2019). But what is profi-table is not always most beneficial to audiences, putting these profit functions at odds with those of the public interest (see, for example, Entman 1989; Pickard 2014). Audiences are taking notice; only 28 percent of the American public believes news media in general are supporting democracy "well" or "very well," in spite of 84 percent believing these outlets are critical to democracy and keeping the citizenry informed (Ritter and Jones 2018).

So how does local station ownership tie into the journalistic output it produces? The commodification of information often comes at the expense of those working in the news-room (Mosco 2009). A prevalent way of maximizing revenue is to extract as much surplus value from those providing labor as possible (Marx 1887). To save on labor costs, local station-owning conglomerates often bring in new technologies to automate or consoli-date processes previously completed by the craft skill work of humans. This replaces more expensive living labor with computerized labor that does not require health insur-ance or time off, eliminating the externalities associated with human workers (Braverman 1974; Marx 1887; Örnebring 2010).

While remaining workers often pick up new skills in learning to run the new machines, often referred to as "reskilling" (Örnebring 2010), many feel the stripping away of their craft leaves them more "deskilled" (Braverman 1974) or, as one production manager/director (13 years) lamented upon first encountering computer-automated news production: "they took my paintbrush away," replacing it instead with inflexible buttons. More flexible production is also expected (Compton and Benedetti 2010; Deuze and Fortunati 2011), with these workers filing more content more often not only for television broadcast, but also for the web, on social media, on mobile applications, and, increasingly, on over-the-top (OTT) platforms.

These processes benefit the station owner by saving on wages while speeding up pro-duction, and facilitating outcome predictability. This labor process is seen in newsrooms around the globe today. "Productivity" is equated with "more news faster" or "more news first" (Örnebring 2010, 65). This need for speed has become naturalized in the workers and provides a template for how many understand the role of new technologies in a newsroom. At the same time, journalists are taking on more work previously done by others, but are often not being rewarded monetarily for their new skills (Örnebring 2010), demonstrating the powerful role of the corporate owner in using technology to downsize employee overhead.

As those television newsroom employees provide the product for the audience, it is their labor conditions that form the basis of this study. A labor process framework is used to examine professional television newsroom experiences, including those from rarely-studied behind-the-scenes workers, to fill a gap in journalism labor literature. While many newsroom studies focus on a specific job titles, such as MMJs (see, for instance, Perez and Cremedas 2014; Blankenship 2016), or convergence in general (for example, Duhé, Mortimer, and Chow 2004; Smith 2009), there are few that take an *overall* labor view of local television news work and the impacts of corporate decision-making.

Labor process theory studies relations of control and contestation during production, including the imposition of technology to enhance corporate power while boosting profits and decreasing labor costs (Braverman 1974; Örnebring 2010; Cohen 2015). The focus here will be on the impacts of changing labor parameters introduced via corporate-imposed technology on news workers in the 25 largest local television news markets in the United States. By being *imposed*, these new technologies are not asked for or even vetted by those forced to use them, but are instead dropped into newsroom worker routines, often with inadequate training, and are expected to be seamlessly absorbed into the deadline-laden work flow, a phenomenon described by workers in more detail below.

Local television news production requires the talents of all of these workers, and their labor experiences under corporate ownership illustrate the power of corporate profit motives, and the impact this may have on both the workers and on the audiences who rely on their reports to make crucial decisions for their communities.

Context: A Changing Local Media Environment

Since 1934, US federal law has required local television stations to broadcast in the "public interest, convenience, and necessity" in order to maintain their licenses to use the publicly-owned airwaves for transmission (US Congress 1934). The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has legally maintained this standard of public interest for the industry, even as it has succumbed to a neoliberal mindset by deregulating station ownership structures, eliminating news and public affairs programing guidelines, and allowing business interests to rule the airwaves. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 (Federal Communications Commission 1996) loosened restrictions on the total number of stations a company could control, launching an era of corporate super groups buying up as many stations as they could muster, and exploiting various loopholes to grow their holdings even further. "Sidecar" agreements are popular, allowing one owner nearly total control of numerous properties while keeping the license legally in another's name (Hagey 2013; Malone 2013). Ongoing mergers and acquisitions among some of the largest ownership groups continue to push the boundaries of how many stations one corporation can add to its portfolio. The 2019 merger between Gray and Raycom boosted Gray's holdings to nearly a quarter of US broadcast households; a similar deal between giants Nexstar and Tribune put Nexstar right under the current audience cap of 39 percent (Eggerton 2019; Lafayette 2019b).

In 2017, the FCC eliminated decades-old ownership rules that originally had been put in place to prevent the monopolization of the airwaves by one set of ideas (Johnson 2017). It also eliminated the "main studio rule" requiring local broadcast stations to maintain studios in the community they serve (Federal Communications Commission 2017). This opens the door for further spatialization by corporate entities, as they no longer need a physical presence in the local market (Mosco 2009), and can rely on computers to connect revenue-generating advertising to audiences. It has become standard practice to have a station's programing controlled by operators in another city, using technology to remove human master control crews and their paychecks at the local level (Higgins-Dobney and Sussman 2013). Some owners even use technology to produce newscasts remotely, including Sinclair's Omaha, Nebraska "local" newscast anchored out of Fresno,

California (Jones 2019), raising questions about the localness of local news. Human worker downsizing, job precarity, and job description convergence become especially prominent during economic downtimes, but continue to impact newsroom workers even in economic booms (Comor and Compton 2015).

The ongoing contraction of station ownership while widening the ability to remotely control stations squeezes certain skilled laborers out of the market while pressuring those remaining to do more work across multiple content platforms. In the realm of local television news, this means newscasts are put on the air by one "operator," eliminating workers who run cameras, video, audio, and graphics (Higgins-Dobney and Sussman 2013), using automated computer systems touted for their quick return on investment by decreasing the amount of skill needed to put a newscast on the air (see, for example, Grass Valley n.d.; Ross Video n.d.).

Field equipment is smaller, lighter, and able to be linked to a station via cell phone, allowing one person the physical ability, although no extra time, to do the jobs previously completed by two or three, eliminating the "need" for photographers and engineers. Mobile devices allow for continuous updating online in between local television live broadcasts, giving those gathering news out in the field and back in the newsroom more tasks to complete while providing material for more station revenue-generating platforms (Higgins-Dobney and Sussman 2013; Perez and Cremedas 2014; Blankenship 2016).

The computerization of news work is a profound shift from highly specialized craft talent to simple labor. Braverman (1974) describes similar labor processes as ways to deskill workers, taking away the craft of their work, while empowering their capitalist bosses, who reap the financial benefits of their labor. The loss of autonomy and control is a loss of professionalism, as the craftwork becomes part of a flexible yet routinized process to extract more work from an employee for little to no professional gain (Deuze and Fortunati 2011). The sole goal is to expand capital accumulation through the reduction of craft skill, thereby increasing the interchangeability of workers at lower pay scales (Braverman 1974).

This not only diminishes the worker, but also potentially short changes the audience relying on the information provided by these news staffers. Democracy requires that public service journalism covers important policy issues at the local, state, national, and international levels (Pickard 2014, 2015a, 2015b). To truly work in the public interest, journalists and their newsroom colleagues need to be able to use technological advances to research, verify, and share information relevant to the lives and community decision-making abilities of their audiences. Instead, corporate owners use that tech to focus on the bottom line, eliminating skilled workers while speeding up news production and forcing remaining workers to push more content to an ever-growing array of revenue-generating platforms while taking away time to verify the facts, sources, and story elements provided to those publics. This makes it more challenging for newsroom personnel to responsibly keep the "local" in local television news and potentially sets up sloppier reporting practices.

Research Question

This study looks at the effects of corporate-implemented technology on the news work practices and output of local television news employees in the 25 largest markets in the

United States to answer the research question: What impact does corporate-implemented technology have on local television newsroom workers as they go about their daily news gathering and dissemination routines?

Method

This study used a dual-method data collection strategy of qualitative online surveys and semi-structured interviews. Qualitative survey data searches for "empirical diversity in the properties of the members" (Jansen 2010, para. 11). This is different than a quantitative survey, which generally seeks a numerical distribution of variables. The survey sought out the issues a broad variety of local television newsroom workers encounter in their day-to-day journalistic endeavors. The semi-structured interviews provided a richer understanding of what is behind those issues and how they impact the workers themselves as they gather and disseminate news to their communities (Roller and Lavrakas 2015).

The survey link was distributed online in late 2015 and again in mid-2016. Postings included to the Facebook pages of the Society of Professional Journalists, the Radio-Television Digital News Directors, and the researcher, and tweets on the researcher's media-oriented Twitter page. These links were subsequently shared to others by users on those sites. Eighty-one respondents provided usable data from these efforts.

In addition to the surveys, thirty-two newsroom employees participated in hour-long semi-structured interviews.[1] This sample was snowball in nature, with participants found via numerous methods, including a question at the end of the afore-mentioned survey[2], social media postings on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, word-of-mouth, and direct and indirect (colleagues of colleagues) personal contacts of the researcher.

The interviews took place in two stages. The first stage included employees focused on the broadcast side of the local television news business and occurred in late 2016. Based on responses in interviews, a second stage was added to include more employees with digital backgrounds, which were conducted in early 2019. Because participants lived around the United States, 29 interviews took place via Skype, Google Talk, Zoom, or FaceTime video conferencing software. Rapport has been shown to often be as easily established via video chat as in person (Deakin and Wakefield 2014), while promoting scheduling flexibility for both interviewer and interviewee. The three remaining interviews took place in person.

Digital audio was recorded for transcription accuracy, and all interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The themes that emerged from both the survey and interviews form the basis for the findings below. The quotes shared represent common ideas expressed by multiple participants highlighting these themes in response to questions about their day-to-day working conditions, how these have changed over their careers, and their impact on the news product shared with their communities.

To protect confidentiality, all interviewees were identified only by a generic job title that describes a number of television news employees in their market (reporter, anchor, photographer, MMJ, director, digital manager, etc.), and at no time were data linked to a name or station affiliation. Throughout this study, participants will be identified only by these generic job titles and the number of years they had been in the local television news business at the time of participation. This will provide the reader with an idea of who responded and their levels of experience while protecting the participants and their

Table 1. Survey and interview participants.

Job title	# of survey responses	# of interview responses*
Anchor	4	1
Assignment Editor	3	0
Digital Team	6	9
Director	10	3
Editor	2	5
Engineer	6	1
Executive Producer	3	4
Master Control Operator	0	1
News Managers (Not EP)	3	3
Photojournalist	10	5
Producer	21	10
Reporter or MMJ	7	8
Writer	0	4
Other	6	2

*Totals add up to more than 32 because multiple job descriptions were often discussed during interviews.

coworkers from any potential professional retaliation, up to and including job loss and exile from a particular station owner. A list of participants can be found in Table 1.

Findings

The findings reveal study participants often feel pushed to the limits of what they are comfortable accomplishing during a work shift and are concerned about getting all of their work done in a journalistically-responsible manner. Of survey respondents, eighty-three percent indicate they are providing content and/or technical support for more newscasts than in the past. Demonstrating how stations and their corporate owners are using such measures to save money, 71 percent of employees who are doing so have not received a pay increase, and 10 percent took a pay cut while adding job duties.

Beyond their paychecks, concerns of journalistic integrity, accuracy, and professionalism abound as they complete more duties for more information platforms than ever before while learning new corporate-implemented technologies and juggling the duties of consolidated, and often changing, job descriptions. Fifty-four percent of all respondents, and 60 percent of workers with increased workloads believe their news output has been negatively influenced, compared to just over a quarter who feel the news product has been positively influenced by such changes.

There were two main areas that were heavily discussed by participants when it came to corporate technology-related work changes: the gear provided to perform their jobs and the platforms they are expected to fill with ad-supported content. The newly-incorporated gear chosen by corporate owners for their workers, nearly always without worker input, is the first area examined below. The ever-growing number of information-dissemination platforms many of the same workers are required to share content on during a work shift will be examined second.

New Job-consolidating Gear

Much of the latest equipment provided by corporate owners for news production and dissemination is chosen with job description consolidation in mind. For the field, the most-

discussed changes involved moving to smaller cameras, laptop editors, and backpack-sized live gear. For studio work, automated control systems, essentially solo crew production, was the name of the game.

The gear currently used for newsgathering in the field has changed the nature of the field crew. Lighter cameras with higher storage capacity make field reporting less burdensome. The ability to go live from a backpack at the flip of a switch means long cable runs back to a large news vehicle are no longer necessary. "We now have the ability to walk with protestors on the street or get to remote locations that a traditional microwave truck can't go" (Director Survey Participant, 36 years), bringing the audience closer to ongoing events.

This downsizing of gear, however, also means that one person now has the physical ability to handle equipment that used to be assigned to two or three workers and picking up that workload. From a capitalist owner standpoint, ease and swiftness of operation of newer, smaller equipment allows various duties to be tacked onto other jobs they have never applied to before, saving money by consolidating labor. This includes "Multi-Media Journalists" or "MMJs" who shoot, report, and edit their own video for air, and often set up their own live shots, adding to their shift workloads and eliminating photographer, editor, and live operator positions.

> Technology has allowed me to do my job more efficiently, and unfortunately other people's jobs as well. I can write my story and my chyrons[3] directly into the computer that broadcasts it on TV … eliminating the writer from the newsroom. I can also shoot my own stuff thanks to smaller cameras, edit it on my laptop and email it right back to the station, eliminating the need for tape/film/image editors, transmission people and engineers to maintain all that stuff. (Reporter Survey Participant, 25 years)

The use of MMJs has grown steadily in local television newsrooms over the last decade, although by 2017 the pace of increased use slowed (Papper 2018). Because MMJs are juggling more job descriptions individually than those working in reporter-photographer pairs, shortcuts become a way to make sure all story elements are completed on time for air and web. Multi-media journalists often feel their split attention reduces their job competence, and worry more about unexpected events out in the field because there is less leeway for recovery (Blankenship 2016).

> I'm concerned about the quality of what we're putting on the air … because the demands on our day are becoming so large that we're having to cut corners in order to get it all done. And I don't think that's a good service for the public. (MMJ, 35 years)

Perez and Cremedas (2014) found nearly 80 percent of their respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that while carrying out multiple job duties, journalism quality suffers. Another study by Gee (2019) shows stories put together by reporter-photographer teams were preferred by audience members to those produced by MMJs. This does not surprise those who work solo out in the field:

> To this day, I would say I edit most of my pieces in 20 minutes. And that's not great work, no matter how good you are … time is being used better, but it still suffers just because I'm concerned about other things. My reputation will suffer less for bad video than inaccurate information. Or a missing element to a story. (MMJ, 18 years)

The consensus by newsroom workers is that the MMJ model is here to stay: "It's just cheaper to do it that way … The stations need content. And MMJs are the content

makers" (MMJ, 16 years). This consolidation of roles is so widespread, it has become normalized among workers: "Is there anyone in local news who is not doing like 6 jobs right now?" (Digital Journalist A, 10 years).

Indeed, MMJs are not the only ones who have picked up additional duties during their work days; line producers have also added video editing duties to their already-busy schedules of writing reports, putting stories in order, and keeping track of live reporters: "I'll research the story, I'll write it, and I'll edit video for it" (Producer/Editor, 5 years). The ability to do so comes with the move to laptop editors linked to digital video servers which can be linked to show producing software. Such efficiencies further shrink the number of people contributing to the gathering and distribution of news, while also removing the time and skill available to apply creative touches to the newscasts, and the number of people available to check for mistakes. "Technology has made getting information and show elements easier. However, it has also allowed my company to downsize, asking more work out of me while others lose their job *(sic)*" (Producer Survey Participant, 14 years). In the process, many wonder about the quality of the stories they are providing for their audiences across multiple platforms, especially with fewer people to double check the work being disseminated at ever-quickening paces.

Those working in the news studio and associated production control rooms have also been greatly affected by corporate implementation of job-altering technology. Many studios no longer have human camera operators stationed behind studio cameras, correcting shots and providing direction to those on-air. Instead, cameras are run either by a remote joystick, or, in ever-growing numbers, by production automation systems. "There's nobody in the studio except the talent … we do more with fewer people, and that's in part a function of the technology that's available today" (Anchor, 40 years).

Similarly, some stations have eliminated teleprompter operators from their budgets, leaving on-air anchors to run their own prompters while keeping up with changing scripts, updating breaking news, verifying information, and moving around a studio set. "I don't see the copy before I say it. I don't interpret. I don't look for factual land mines, context, or errors. I just read. And run my own prompter" (News Anchor personal Facebook post, used with permission, 13 September 2016). If journalists are no longer given the opportunity to find "factual landmines" or fill in missing context for viewers, then the journalism, and potentially the community watching, suffers. Using technology as an excuse to force job convergence so a parent company can eliminate paid positions, consolidate work flow, and keep costs down speaks more to a marketplace mindset than to a public interest one.

Station owners also use technology to replace many of the people who work in production control rooms. Automated production control centers replace living specialist human labor with pre-coded computerized labor. In the process, workers who are skilled in audio, video, graphics, and other previously-utilized production positions lose their jobs or have to compete for a spot as an automation director. "The directors … do just about everything now … I mean, they're responsible for having the cameras set up properly, for the audio, for *everything*" (Anchor, 40 years).

Having one person with a computer control numerous pieces of equipment leads to technical and informational mistakes on the air. One director (13 years) recounts a graphic with a glaring factual mistake airing in three different newscasts over two days before finally being caught: "A lot more stuff just falls through the cracks." Another

describes the output of automated news production as "consistent mediocrity … it makes all the shows look alike, but if you want to make a little tweak or do this or that, you're stuck with what you're stuck with" (Director, 30 years).

When combined with producers who are also editing their video, reporters shooting and editing their own stories, anchors running their prompters, and directors running all production positions during a broadcast, the portrait of newsroom job consolidation is clear: owners are using technology as a means to downsize their employment obligations. These moves are not improving the journalism provided to the audience; instead, newsroom workers expressed concern about the quality of their output. But as stations decrease the overhead paid to human workers, profit margins can increase by substituting computers, gear, and technology. This is the embodiment of Braverman's (1974) labor process: increasing surplus value by exploiting labor.

New Digital Responsibilities, Same Amount of Time

In addition to their television duties, the digital realm has been a steadily growing workload presence in the lives of newsroom employees. A full 93 percent of survey respondents believe their web and mobile output and expectations will increase. Stations often have staffers dedicated to web, mobile, social, and over-the-top (OTT) content distribution applications, although most interviewees note that these areas, much like the rest of the newsroom, are understaffed.

Therefore, digital work is not done solely by digital workers; most on-air broadcasters are also expected to engage with audiences online and on social media in between gathering data, writing news stories, shooting and editing video, and going live multiple times for various newscasts. "Digital first" is a key phrase in many newsrooms, putting additional pressures on those gathering news to post or update a story online before the competition. This attitude conforms to Örnebring's (2010) observation of newsroom workers' naturalization of a sped-up news production mindset. The line between television and digital is blurring by design, not only forcing newsroom staff to do more work, but also threatening their employment if they are not sufficiently speedy and proficient sharing digital content:

> We're digital first, broadcast second. We break stories on the digital platforms. You have to be the first to break a story on Twitter. Get up your web story, picture, or video. So if you don't know how to do those things, you're not going to work. The social is *everything*. (MMJ, 16 years)

This applies even to those who are not on the air. As Facebook Lives, tweets, and web videos of events that have not been broadcast are expected from field crews, photojournalists also feel pressure to post:

> The push is to get it on the web as quick as possible. That's just where the viewers are. That's where the engagement is. And the quicker you get something on the web, the more interaction with the viewer you can have, which may develop the story later on in the newscast. (Photojournalist, 9 years)

This drive to be first is not new to newsrooms, but the immediacy of instant availability on the internet and social media means that journalists feel accuracy is sometimes sacrificed for speed when it comes to online postings. "Better technology has made things easier and

faster. But it's hurt in that easier and faster isn't always the best for accuracy, accountability or responsibility" (Executive Producer Survey Participant, 20 years).

These are widespread concerns. In a study of over 1,000 full-time US journalists, three-quarters worried about accuracy, and half felt journalism quality suffered because of social media obligations (Weaver and Willnat 2016). An investigative journalist who has been in the business for 34 years finds the concept of unsupervised social media posting quite amazing: "It just boggles my mind that we're able to tweet and post as journalists without a second set of eyes reading our stuff … everybody says that's fine."

Yet concerns about quality, accuracy, and even libel on social media do not bode well for keeping the public well informed of its community surroundings, nor for the trust-worthiness of the journalism outlet. That is why, in spite of the potential for pushback from higher-level station management, a digital manager (13 years) tells his staff: "I would rather be second and right than first and wrong. First and wrong does me nothing. First and wrong hurts me. First and wrong hurts everyone. Second and right, I'm ok with that."

The impact of online media does not stop at the computer and mobile applications. Some newsrooms choose stories for broadcast television newscasts based on how well they play on the web and social media. Station ownership groups and networks are transitioning away from broadcast ratings to overall aggregates of impressions, including online content viewership (Jessell 2018; Steinberg 2019; Lafayette 2019a), putting more pressure on newsroom workers to post.

> They're really focused on us being digital first, a digital first newsroom. And so, a lot of what we do is dictated by how is it going to play on the web … whatever's trending best for us, they always want them in the newscast in some form or fashion. (Producer, 15 years)

This should be concerning for journalism's role as educator of the public if the following analogy shared by a digital manager (13 years) holds true:

> Television news is a 5-star restaurant with reservations … The website is a diner. We serve burgers and fries and shakes. Every now and then we have a pot roast special, but people just want the burger and fries, and they want it fast, and they want it good, and they want it cheap. So, I make sure that we have plenty of burgers and fries for people to have.

In 2018, a survey of nearly 35,000 US adults found that while 41 percent preferred to get their local news from the television, a very close 37 percent preferred to find their local news online. Nearly 9 in 10 receive at least some local news digitally (Pew Research Center 2019). In order to responsibly act in the public interest of the audience, the content put out on all platforms by newsrooms needs to be more civically nutritious than "burgers and fries," and focused more on content than clickability. This latter, however, is appealing to corporate bottom lines, as stations and owners struggle to find the best ways to monetize digital spaces. If analytics posted on monitors around newsrooms show "burgers and fries" get people onto a station's website where advertisers can find them, then this is what the website will focus on (Cohen 2018). Digital journalists understand this mindset, although they do not necessarily agree with the premise. One digital producer (3 years) instead thinks news outlets need to broaden their horizons "because you need to be able to have great content that's not just regurgitating press releases," especially as digital and broadcast news boundaries continue to blur.

As digital teams are often tasked with providing 30 or 40 stories for their station websites daily, press releases and other "push alerts" from various subscription-based content generators fill space in the digital realm (Digital Content Producer, 1 year; Digital Manager, 13 years). This, too, raises questions about the content being provided to audiences under the auspices of "journalism." Press releases are written by organizations promoting something beneficial for themselves. If local television websites are focused on such releases, and television stations are relying on their websites for what to put on the air, then a vicious cycle of promotional materials is potentially being provided to viewers.

On a more positive note, some local television newsrooms are using their digital spaces for enterprising and potentially more civically-oriented topics. For example, one journalist interviewed then-President Obama and uploaded the full conversation to his station's website after only a portion aired during news broadcasts on television. An investigative team member considers the website as both a type of legal protection and a method to showcase to the audience exactly how information is gathered:

> We have the space to lay down the interview in its entirety, raw, with questions, answer, question, answer … [we can] pull the analytics as to how many people viewed it, probably way more than people actually saw it on the air. It covers us. It's a good tool. (Investigative Photojournalist, 33 years)

Additionally, for those stations that choose to dedicate the resources to the task, the website is a great place for digital-only enterprise stories. TEGNA, one of the largest local television owners in the United States, has produced web-specific investigative reports on the opioid epidemic and the insurance consequences of veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (see, for example, WXIA-TV 2016). These reports were promoted heavily via social media and debuted in their entirety online. One received 4 million page views and 160,000 video plays in less than two weeks (Greeley 2016). This use of web space can cater to the public interest and reach a much wider audience than even a broadcast signal. To be beneficial to the community, however, local stations need to provide their staffs with the resources to investigate, research, and produce such longer-form pieces. In return, through revenue generated via digital clicks, profits can be earned by the station.

The reality for many newsroom workers, however, is a lack of time and resources to explore such endeavors. Digital journalists spend time copyediting stories, sending information "pushes" to mobile devices, and scheduling social media posts, to the detriment of their enterprise projects. "I'm supposed to have time to be working on these pieces. And I have several approved stories and some stuff that I've shot and stories I've filed, but I haven't really had time to work on them" (Digital Journalist A, 10 years).

Meanwhile, multi-media journalists are writing, reporting, shooting, and editing their own stories for television. Increasingly, the expectation is for these journalists to provide iterative video and story updates for various digital platforms, as well: "When a story goes up online, an article goes up online, there has to be video that goes with it" (Digital Journalist B, 10 years). Short form videos, called "snackables," web-exclusive content, and social media interaction with the audience are also the norm on a daily basis, adding to the pile of work expected to be distributed to the online audience as quickly as possible while still making deadlines for television broadcast.

Social media interaction has also become such an important audience-engagement activity for newsrooms that hiring decisions are made based on how many posts and followers journalists have when they apply for a job:

> I mean all of my job interviews, they're like looking at my Twitter account, how many followers do you have? Do you engage with people?. How do you engage with people? Do you just post a link and just let it sit there or do you talk to people? … It's very important. Huge. (MMJ, 16 years)

But social media is a double-edged sword for many working in newsrooms. While it can provide tips and information about community happenings and offer a way to connect with audience members, it is also another requirement in an already-packed work day. A photojournalist (9 years) calls it "another level of clutter you have to be involved with at all times." For some, social media becomes required reading to find potentially important information that used to be provided directly to television newsrooms:

> Now it seems a lot of police departments, politicians, they don't email us, they'll just post statements on Facebook and Twitter. So if you don't see it on your newsfeed, or you're too busy and you don't have time to go through your newsfeed, you might miss something. (Producer, 8 years)

Social media can also be a distraction at a time when something else needs to be done. Live streaming in particular is called out by numerous news staffers: "There are times where I'm trying to relay information to my anchors and they're not paying attention because they're too busy on Facebook Live" (Producer, 5 years), a platform which is often a required engagement for local television journalists. Even those who specialize in digital cannot keep up with all of the social media responsibilities:

> I'm *THE* worst when it comes to updating my individual social media profiles. And it's just because I focus so much on the station's identity and the station's efforts, that I usually just forget about my own … We have some really talented on-air people here who do a phenomenal job at updating their social media profiles. I'm not one of them. (Digital Journalist B, 10 years)

These news workers are constantly connected, and for many, the expectations for pushing content across platforms and engaging with audiences does not stop at the end of a shift. Unlike broadcast, digital has no deadlines, intensifying the workflow for those tasked with doing the posting (Cohen 2018):

> I mean I work all the time. And that's the expectation … if it doesn't get done, the boss is going to say to me, why didn't that get done? And I'm going to say, well, we're short staffed. And he or she is going to say, I don't care. Get it done. (Digital Managing Editor, 13 years)

Overall Worker Impact: Alienation and Disempowerment

Technological change has been a part of information dissemination since the beginning of journalism (Pavlik 2000). The professionals who work in newsrooms anticipate such changes occurring over their careers, and often embrace the ability to streamline some of their routines. However, they also anticipate training when taking on new media, new technology, and newly converged job descriptions while still working on deadline

in the sped-up multitasking newsroom work environment. Yet these training expectations are often not met. For example, a reporter-turned-MMJ (35 years) was given an hour with a photographer to learn how to shoot video. "Every time I had a question, I had to track someone down … there were days I would come back [from the field] and barely have enough stuff to use" for his on-air stories due to lack of training. Another MMJ similarly had to lean heavily on fellow newsroom workers when he was first starting out. "I had a woman who's been in the business for 20, 30 years, and she really helped me" (MMJ, 18 years). Otherwise, his training was inadequate for the transition into solo journalism. One newsroom employee classified most training as: "classic newsroom sink or swim. We're going to throw it in there, give you a minimal explanation and hope it works" (Producer, 5 years).

When workers are trained (or not) at the whim of the corporate ownership as they are forced to add new chores to their workloads in an effort to increase revenue, they lose the ability to control their destinies (Marx 1959), turning their chosen careers into alienating work experiences. The same is true for lack of worker input on equipment decisions made at the corporate level: "They say we have input, but we don't. And I've asked for lots of things that I haven't gotten. I feel like I'm beating a dead horse every single time I ask" (Digital Producer, 3 years). Another put it this way: "I am sick to death of people who have no daily knowledge of how the digital platforms work telling me what I need. But it happens all the time" (Digital Managing Editor, 13 years). Not one person in this study felt like they have much of an influence in equipment decisions, even though they are ultimately the daily users of the purchase, highlighting the corporate influence over working conditions in the newsroom.

This is a set up for what Kalleberg (2011) calls a "bad" jobs scenario: little control over work conditions and decreased work-life balance. Stressed out workers tend to be less productive and more prone to burnout and leaving a job (see, for instance, Sethi, King, and Quick 2004). Such conditions do not support decreasing employee alienation, increasing community involvement, or even ultimately saving the employer financially in the long run. Replacing employees, even with cheaper hires, is a time-consuming and expensive prospect (Cappelli 1995). Furthermore, incorporating new journalists into the community, teaching them story context, and building the trust of sources, who ultimately provide the information shared with the audience, takes time. Therefore, decreasing alienation and its associated stress should be something newsroom corporate owners look at positively. But as this study shows, this is often not the direction media companies go.

As the TEGNA digital stories show, however, new technology can lead to craft worker innovation and provide new spaces for unique and in-depth journalistic output. Additionally, some workers have embraced their consolidated job duties as MMJs or automated directors. Realistically, however, there is little time for creative endeavors. Potential creativity is lost to time constraints levied by additional job duties, expected increases in content gathering and distribution, and a mindset described by newsroom workers as "make slot not art" (Facebook post, 16 April 2018).

Frank Mungeam (2019), a former vice president of digital audience engagement at local television station corporate owner TEGNA, recognizes the reality that there is no "free time" in newsrooms today to foster creativity and innovation. He advocates for newsrooms to create a "stop doing" list of activities that add little to no value to the news gathering and dissemination processes, and then look into better ways of getting those tasks done or

eliminating them all together. At that point, by reclaiming lost time, newsroom workers become more empowered to innovate new ideas and new ways of performing tasks, bringing back some of the creativity and control many news workers crave.

Limitations and Conclusions

Like all studies, there are limitations to this one. This is a qualitative study with an unknown total population size and an opt-in snowball sample. Therefore, it is not meant to be representative of all workers within the local television news business, and the statistics throughout this piece are solely descriptive in nature. The survey was intended to identify and provide a broad overview of some of the labor issues news workers felt needed to be addressed in their newsrooms, and it served its purpose.

However, examining local television newsroom work from a labor viewpoint highlights how technologies are deployed by owners to continually increase efficiency, consolidate job descriptions, and lower labor costs, even at the expense of potential journalistic sloppiness and worker unhappiness. It paints a picture of how much those covering the largest cities in the United States are juggling an ever-growing load of job responsibilities while providing relevant information to the communities they serve while lacking input on the tools they use to do so. Multi-media journalists take short cuts to save time and make deadlines across multiple platforms. Producer-editors and their automation directors make factual errors and technical mistakes while trying to do too many things at once. Digital journalists are on-call 24/7 to update information on an ever-changing array of platforms. The exploitation of these workers is the essence of the commodification of information for corporate profit sake (Marx 1959; Braverman 1974; Mosco 2009).

As the Federal Communications Commission continues to relax television station ownership rules and corporate giants buy up as many stations as their portfolios can accommodate, the commodification of media information is not going to cease. As information platforms grow and transform, local television journalists do not anticipate their jobs to become any easier. The exodus from the business by many of their colleagues for less stressful and better work-life balance jobs was brought up by numerous interviewees. Multiple suggested that current journalism majors and early career journalists have a "plan B:"

> I think it's very apropos of television broadcasting and journalism in general to have other interests that could parlay into a career when you leave. Because the reality is, almost everybody leaves. Even the people who have done this for years. Everybody leaves. (Digital Journalist A, 10 years)

The wide variety of both on-air and rarely studied behind-the-scenes personnel who took part in this study have demonstrated that corporate station ownership often adds technology to newsrooms not to generate better journalism or more creative content, but instead to consolidate employment and enhance revenue-generating opportunities by disseminating information on ever-growing numbers of viewing platforms. Fewer staffers grappling with more technical and content responsibilities are concerned about the quality of their final product not living up to acceptable journalistic standards for informing their communities. This is not serving in either the public's nor the workers' best interests, but instead caters to the commodification mindset of publicly-traded revenue-seeking corporate conglomerates running local television news stations with licenses to serve the public.

In a liberal democracy that relies on its news media for political and community information, corporate profit desires should not be a professional concern of the most seasoned news veterans in the country. Ownership expansion means fewer companies control rapidly growing numbers of local television stations around the United States. As these companies grow, they encourage further loosening of the rules governing ownership by claiming their business model is in the public's best interest.

How much more job description consolidation and dissemination platform expansion can those working in newsrooms handle before it becomes too much? This study hints that newsroom workers are hitting the limits of what they can responsibly accomplish within a shift. While corporate-deployed machines can help speed up the work process, there are limitations to what humans can accomplish within any given period of time. Given the nature and importance of journalistic information for the community, when that limit is hit, the community will be what suffers.

Notes

1. These included New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Dallas-Fort Worth, San Francisco, Boston, Washington, DC, Atlanta, Houston, Phoenix, Detroit, Tampa-St. Pete, Seattle-Tacoma, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Miami-Ft. Lauderdale, Denver, Orlando, Cleveland, Sacramento, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Portland (OR), Charlotte, and Raleigh-Durham (Nielsen 2015, 2018).
2. Following completion of the survey questions, participants were asked if they would be interested in interviewing with the researcher. The responses were not linked to data in the survey, and could not be traced back to those who indicated they would be willing to interview.
3. Chyron is a brand of graphic system used in many newsrooms. Graphics that run along the bottom of the screen during a newscast are often referred to as "chyrons."

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Disclosure Statement

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