

“Still Captive? History, Law and the Teaching of High School Journalism”

Executive Summary

SPJ Education Committee

In 2011, then-national SPJ President John Ensslin asked the SPJ Education Committee to look into the rumor that some high schools were eliminating their journalism programs because of the mistaken belief by administrators that “journalism is dying.” Three years later, the result of that exploration is a survey and a book that provides a picture of the state of high school journalism in America.

The SPJ Education Committee researched the topic and used the original study, “Captive Voices: The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into High School Journalism” conducted in 1974 and published by the John F. Kennedy Foundation, plus the 1994 follow-up study, “Death by Cheeseburger: High School Journalism in the 1990s and Beyond” published by the Freedom Forum as starting points.

The committee’s work follows up on both those reports with a look at high school journalism in 2014 through a survey on high school teachers throughout the country, traditional research of the history and laws regarding how high school journalism reached its current state, and interviews with teachers and journalists.

The survey, sent to 600 Journalism Education Association members in February 2014, received 247 responses from teachers in 47 states. More information about the survey specifics can be found in chapter 2 of the book. Specifically, the survey found:

- Teacher training: Almost half (46.6 percent) said they had some kind of professional media experience. More than one-fifth of the current study’s respondents (21.5 percent) teach only journalism courses while the majority of respondents teach both journalism courses and other subject areas (69.4 percent). Most who teach in both areas stated they taught English classes, the norm since journalism showed up in high schools decades ago. About one-fourth (24.5 percent) said they took no college journalism courses; however, more than a third (37.5 percent) reported taking 10 or more college journalism courses. Unqualified people still teach journalism courses or advise student media today, but many teachers and/or advisers have much more training and skills.
- Minority Students: The current study found participation in high school journalism was “mostly minority” students in 17 percent of the schools while “mostly non-minority” registered at 67.3 percent. In 17.2 percent of the schools, an equal balance of minority and non-minority students are involved in journalism. Yearbooks had the highest percentage of minority student participation (23.9 percent) while television had the lowest (12.1 percent).
- What is required for students to participate in student media? The responses show: 33 percent of programs required students to enroll in a high school journalism class; 23.4 percent required the students to have taken a journalism class; and 27.9 percent stated that any student was welcome.

- Who has the final OK for publishing student work? Are teachers concerned? When it comes to final approval of student work, school administrators have the final say for 32 percent of student-created newspaper work; 24.5 percent for school magazines, 15 percent for TV stations and 16 percent for yearbooks.

The current study found that 37 respondents (14.3 percent) constantly worried that their journalism teaching and/or student media advising would face reprimanded because of student work that creates a controversy while 60.3 percent reported they “sometimes” worried. Sixty-five respondents (25.3 percent) said they never feared a reprimanded. However, the study revealed an alarming trend: three-fourths of the respondents reported they constantly or sometimes fear reprimand.

- Do student media outlets have written guidelines to follow? The majority of high school journalism teachers and/or advisers in the current study (66 percent) said they have no guidelines to follow for deciding which topics are appropriate to cover for a high school audience; 33.1 percent said they do have guidelines, and less than 1 percent said they didn’t know if guidelines were available. Among the schools with guidelines, 65.7 percent of respondents said they created the guidelines as a joint effort between students and the adviser, and then sought an OK from school administration; 6.4 percent of the teachers reported administrators or a Board of Education provided guidelines.

The current study also found that 90.7 percent of schools placed limitations on what students could publish or say, with the majority of restrictions being placed on: language that is libelous (92.5 percent); that is obscene or sexual (87 percent); that invades privacy (79.2 percent); disrupts the learning process (72.7 percent); that raises pedagogical concerns about language or visuals (46.1 percent); that is too controversial/inappropriate for the school community (39.9 percent); that is too controversial or inappropriate for broader community (20.5 percent); or that is critical of school (7.1 percent).

- Censorship issues: In practice, 23 percent of administrators always check the work prior to newspaper publication (17.9 percent sometimes); 12 percent of school administrators always check yearbook (18 percent sometimes); and 33 percent of administrators always check magazines. Student TV advisers were not asked the same question, but in another question they noted 39 percent of administrators place limitations on what can be aired on student-run television.
- Who pays for producing media? More than one-third of the respondents (38.7 percent) reported they pay for their student media through a “mixture of methods,” including money from the administration, advertising sales and fund-raising. The survey found that 33.6 percent of yearbook teachers said their program is supported by yearbooks sales. “Advertising sales” was the next most frequent response (21.4 percent) as a means to pay for producing student media with “school administration” coming in third (18.8 percent). However, 16.6 percent of respondents chose “other” as a means for paying student media costs at their schools.
- How are teachers paid? Today, 81.8 percent of this study’s respondents said they received a stipend for advising student media along with their base salary; however, 13.7

percent reported they receive no extra pay for student media advising. Other responses (4.9 percent) varied between outside volunteers to part-time work.

- What support do schools receive? More than half (56.1 percent) said media professionals made no contributions to their high school student media while 53 percent said nearby colleges or university journalism programs also made no contributions. Almost one-fourth of the respondents (23.6 percent) reported they receive no help from either.
- What are the main hindrances? The primary complaint is a lack of money to update necessary equipment (38.7 percent) while 26.8 percent said there is a lack of interest from students.

An entire chapter in the book is devoted to responses by teachers explaining what they believe can be done to improve high school journalism. These were open-ended questions and the teachers provided a wide variety of solutions.

The recommendations made by the committee follow:

- Training for high school journalism teachers.
- Consistent curriculum design among high school teachers on the state and national level. *Journalism courses should be recognized as fulfilling Common Core requirements.*
- Increasing higher education's involvement with local scholastic journalism.
- College and university workshops for teachers for continuing education credits.
- Increased professional media involvement.
- Education of school administrators on how journalism teaches core skills.
- Lobbying school districts for more money.
- Identifying ways to generate enthusiasm and participation among high school students.

In addition to the survey, the work includes a specific section on the law regulating high school journalism, dating to well before and after the Hazelwood decision.

Following the survey and chapters on law, the remainder of the book provides practical applications for teaching high school journalism, including how the best programs survive, how to teach basic journalism skills, teaching journalism/teaching common core, how journalism teaches critical thinking, the use of high school workshops and how schools can (and should) work with professional journalists. An annotated bibliography offers the opportunity for follow-up on this project.

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New Forums Press will publish both in hardcover and as an ebook the complete work in early 2015. Copies of the chapters detailing the full survey or other information are available upon request.