

**Summary of Findings and Preliminary Strategic Implications**  
**Executive Interview Process**  
**NOVA Study on Dislocated Journalists**

**The Natelson Dale Group, Inc.**

As part of the information-gathering phase of the overall project, TNDG conducted interviews with executive-level informants familiar with the current market conditions and technology trends affecting the career prospects of journalists. The interviews were intended to provide a “big picture” perspective that corroborates and enhances the data collected from the surveys of individual journalists and employers. A list of the interviewees is provided at the end of this summary. Since the interviews were conducted confidentially, this summary report does not identify the sources of specific comments. The “strategic implications” listed in this initial report are preliminary and will be refined and expanded based on an integrated summary of the ideas emerging from the interview and survey processes.

**Highlights of Important Findings.** The interview responses can be briefly summarized in terms of the following key themes:

- Journalists currently face an extremely difficult job market for both staff positions and freelance work, and these conditions are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.
- There is a strong trend of condensing what used to be specialized jobs, carried out by multiple people, into a single employee. This has the effect of both eliminating jobs, and requiring the remaining employees to broaden their skills. For example, reporters are now often required to take their own photographs, and edit their own material. Photographers used to have editors, but now often do their own editing in the field on laptops. Separate people used to handle audio, and those people have generally disappeared.
- Although many laid-off journalists are attempting to pursue freelancing as a means of continuing their writing careers, relatively few have been able to generate reasonable incomes from it.
- Over the longer term, the interviewees are hopeful that journalism (in its evolved forms) will again be a viable career. However, these improvements are not likely to come soon enough to help the large number of journalists who are currently unemployed or underemployed. As a result, many journalists – whether they want to or not – will need to navigate transitions into other occupations.
- The good news is that journalists have a unique set of highly-demanded skills that are directly applicable to a range of other industries and occupations, especially activities that are communications related.
- In order to be competitive in the communication-industries job market (whether competing for the few available journalism jobs or transitioning to other communications-related careers), most journalists need to shore up their

technical skills. The days of being able to survive on one skill (writing) are gone. Journalists now need to be “one-person media centers.”

- The system by which existing training programs are delivered does not appear to be adequately addressing the need for journalists to enhance their technical skills. Virtually no training is provided by employers, either for laid-off workers (i.e., as part of a severance/outplacement package) or for their remaining employees. Although some programs are available through normal educational channels such as community colleges, these tend to be under-publicized and present challenges in terms of costs, time commitments, etc. for individuals who are unemployed.
- In addition to technical training, most unemployed journalists would benefit from basic career counseling services. In particular, many of them need support in reassessing their career and life goals, improving their adeptness at networking and getting more comfortable with self-promotion.
- The challenges facing journalism – and the potential consequences to society in terms of a less informed public – are clear. The solutions are not so clear. Whereas there is general consensus among the interviewees that the media will ultimately “figure out” new business models that are profitable and fulfill the need for quality information, no single or obvious answer has yet emerged. In this regard, however, patience might be rewarded if the market sorts out clear successes.

***Current and Anticipated Job Market for Journalists.*** Journalists currently face an extremely difficult job market for both staff positions and freelance work. Compared to conditions several years ago, the current market is characterized by far fewer openings, lower pay and benefits, and increasingly frustrating working conditions. There is a strong trend of condensing what used to be multiple jobs, carried out by multiple people, into a single employee. In an environment where most newspapers are in a cost-cutting mode, individual journalists are expected to “do more for less,” utilizing specialized technical skills that traditional reporters/writers did not need to have. The increasing demand for multimedia competence, coupled with a pervasive focus on cost reduction, has created an environment where most journalists over the age of 30 or 35 are at a severe disadvantage. Older journalists tend not to have the technical skills needed in today’s media and are accustomed to higher compensation than the current market can typically support. As a result, many journalists are questioning the viability of remaining in traditional media careers. Although it is possible, barriers of costs, etc. aside, for them to acquire contemporary technical skills in a relatively short period of time, the jobs accessible to them (if they can find jobs at all) upon the completion of technical training are very likely to be lower-paying and less fulfilling than their former jobs in traditional newsroom settings.

Over the longer term, the interviewed informants are hopeful that the media industry will develop new economic models that allow for high-quality investigative reporting and lucrative journalism careers. However, these improvements will take time to evolve and are therefore more likely to benefit younger journalists than to help the many newsroom veterans currently looking for work. Whereas it may be reasonable for a recent college graduate to take an entry-level job for \$30,000 a year with the expectation that his compensation will gradually grow as the overall financial strength of the industry

improves, many older journalists simply cannot afford to wait (for perhaps ten years) for conditions to improve. For experienced journalists who are either unemployed, underemployed (e.g., as struggling freelancers) or facing the prospect of layoffs, transitions to other occupations that leverage their journalism skills are often the most viable option.

***Freelancing – a Difficult Path.*** Although many laid-off journalists are currently pursuing freelancing as a means of extending their journalism careers and generating some level of income while figuring out their next steps, relatively few are making adequate livings from freelancing. One interviewee estimates that among journalists who have experienced layoffs, as many as 70% are currently involved in freelancing at some level (the other 30% have found fulltime jobs – mostly outside of journalism). Among the 70% that are freelancing 15% are doing “really well” (at least making a “decent living wage”); the other 85% are “not really making it.” Many of those who have initially been successful at freelancing are now starting to feel the pressure of increased health care costs as their COBRA benefits expire.

The compensation structure for freelancing has been negatively affected by both supply and demand forces. On the supply side, the sheer volume of unemployed and underemployed journalists has flooded the market with writers – some of whom are desperate and willing to work for very little compensation. On the demand side, much of the available freelance work is for websites or other new media ventures that are financially marginal and therefore unable or unwilling to reasonably compensate their writers. In 1965 Good Housekeeping set the “gold standard” by paying \$1 per word for freelance work. Most organizations now pay about 15 cents per word.

The Guild has recently increased its focus on improving opportunities for freelancers. The current efforts are concentrated on organizing freelancers to be better negotiators. The Guild has also considered a “hiring hall” concept for freelancers. Under this model, the Guild could carry health insurance for independent writers. The challenge with implementing this idea is that the market has collapsed to a point where some journalists are willing to write for \$25 per story, leaving little motivation for an employer to contract freelancers through a hiring hall. Several interviewees mentioned promising models in Canada and New York:

- The Canadian Media Guild has teamed with a literary agent to represent freelancers (absent this type of organized effort, very few freelancers have access to an agent).
- A freelance union, [freelancesunion.org](http://freelancesunion.org), headquartered in New York, has focused on helping freelancers secure portable health care and other benefits. This kind of model can be helpful from an economic development standpoint, as rapid change in technology, business, etc. sometimes requires relocation of the workforce, retraining of the workforce, and more entrepreneurial orientation of some portions of the workforce. For would-be entrepreneurs, healthcare is a big obstacle since potentially successful entrepreneurs are often people in their childbearing years. Current labor laws do not cover freelancers. Unions then become a source of support, as these people move around in different assignments.

Overall, the interviewees expressed mixed opinions about the need for (and ultimate effectiveness of) programs to help freelancers. Whereas everyone agrees that current conditions make it virtually impossible for most journalists to survive as freelancers, there is not consensus regarding the long-term viability of freelancing. Some of the interview respondents fear that freelancing will never again be a sustainable career path and that it therefore does not warrant substantial investment from a workforce development standpoint.

***Suitable Occupations/Industries for Journalist Career Transitions.*** Most of the interview participants are former journalists who have either made successful career transitions themselves or helped to facilitate transitions for colleagues. Based on these experiences, the interviewees identified the following fields as being especially suitable for former journalists:

- Communications
- Marketing
- Public relations
- Advertising
- Technical research/writing/editing
- Website development and management

With some exceptions, the above functions are equally relevant in corporate, government and nonprofit settings. The best “match” for an individual journalist is often a matter of the specialized areas of expertise and personal contacts developed while in journalism. In this regard, a journalist whose career has been focused on business or technology reporting is likely to have a wider range of transition opportunities than someone who has been focused on less “commercial” forms of journalism.

For corporate communications jobs, it can be challenging to orient journalists to “pitching” products and ideas. Many journalists are not comfortable moving into a “selling” mode, and for some it may even present ethical dilemmas. Some may find the corporate mode boring as it tends to be focused on a single company or product and is therefore not as diverse as the experience of a typical journalist.

***Transferability of Journalist Skills.*** The interviewees cited the following skills as the “core assets” of an experienced journalist (i.e., the skills that are considered highly transferable to other careers):

- Writing clarity
- Ability to make quick decisions
- Ability to sift fact from fiction
- Ability to provide context
- Ability to talk to people
- Ability to use multiple sources for corroboration
- Ability to analyze/synthesize information and present a clear account
- Ability to determine what is more important and what is less important

In addition to the “hard skills” listed above, journalists also tend to have the following “soft skills” that are recognized as valuable in other employment settings:

- Integrity and honesty

- Competitive drive
- Great work ethic
- Familiarity with working in a fast-past environment (deadline oriented)
- Conscientiousness about details

***New Skills Needed to Remain Competitive.*** With remarkable consistency, the interviewed informants identified a range of new skills that journalists need to have in order to remain competitive in the job market. These skills are relevant both to individuals hoping to remain in journalism and to those seeking to transition to other communications related occupations. The “supplemental” skills can be generally grouped in three categories:

1. Technical skills, including working familiarity with social media and competency in various digital/multimedia platforms;
2. Managerial skills, including budgeting, financial management and organizational leadership;
3. Entrepreneurial skills, including marketing and innovation of new business models.

In addition to the “consensus” skills listed above, several interviewees mentioned that fluency (or at least competency) in a language other than English is increasingly valuable to journalists.

***Other Factors that Facilitate Successful Career Transitions.*** Among journalists who have been dislocated over the past decade, the degree of success in transitioning to other careers has been influenced by the following factors:

- Timing – journalists who lost jobs in the earliest rounds of layoffs have generally been the most successful in making transitions. Individuals laid off in subsequent rounds have had more difficult experiences for several reasons: the available workforce has become increasingly “flooded” with unemployed journalists; the general economy was much stronger during the earlier layoffs, providing more options for transitions; and the later layoffs tended to disproportionately affect older workers, who typically have fewer technical skills and often find it harder to reinvent themselves.
- Level and diversity of experience – the most successful transitions have been for journalists who were not “just reporters” but had management, budget or leadership experience (e.g., working across departments at a newspaper or leading a special initiative).
- Contacts and networking – the interviewees consistently indicated that aggressive networking is an *essential* element of a career transition. The networking process needs to consider all potential contacts (former colleagues, people previously contacted as sources for stories, social networking connections, and personal friends).
- Ability to “sell” oneself – journalists are often inexperienced at selling and uncomfortable with self promotion. These skills are especially critical for

individuals pursuing freelance work, and – considering the extremely competitive hiring environment that now exists – are also helpful for journalists pursuing other job opportunities.

- Entrepreneurial adeptness – the interviewees cited several examples of former journalists who have started financially successful websites. While it is probably not be possible for every unemployed journalist to launch a profitable website (or other venture), entrepreneurial skills are nevertheless helpful to most journalists seeking new opportunities. Freelancers, in particular, need to think of their work as both a profession and a business. Even journalists seeking writing or communications jobs (especially in corporate settings) are more likely to be successful if they have an entrepreneurial mindset.

***Where will the industry go from here?*** The interviewees offered a diverse range of valuable observations and predictions about the media as an industry:

- Opinions are mixed regarding the future of traditional newspapers. Some respondents are hopeful that advertising revenue and employment have “bottomed out” and will stabilize at current levels. Others fear that financial pressures will force continued cutbacks. Several mentioned the iPad as having the potential to “save” newspapers (albeit in a non-paper platform).
- Online media will continue to proliferate and take on new forms, but for the foreseeable future online news sources will not fill the void left by the decline in traditional newspapers.
- The most obvious impacts to the public resulting from the decline in traditional journalism are reductions in investigative reporting and local news coverage. “Citizen journalism” may work well for restaurant and movie reviews, but independent journalists simply do not have the resources needed to do genuine investigative reporting. A number of the interviewees cited patch.com as an interesting example of “hyper-local” online news coverage, but then strongly moderated their enthusiasm based on patch.com’s poor compensation structure for journalists (initially staff journalists were paid approximately \$50,000 a year, but this proved to be unsustainable and they now rely mostly on freelance work at \$25 per story).
- One of the real “threats to democracy” from the changes happening in journalism is that the public is no longer getting professionally edited information. This applies both to individual articles/stories and to the news as a whole. The individual articles are often poorly written because journalists no longer have the luxury of time to be thoughtful. Moreover, newspapers as “packages” are giving way to piecemeal reporting on the Internet. An important role of newspapers is that they provide a thoughtfully edited set of information. The screening, selection and packaging of articles is as important as the quality of the individual articles themselves. By reading a well-packaged newspaper, the public gets a comprehensive view of the day’s news. The Internet does not serve this function as well, because readers tend just to search for articles related to their limited sets of interest (rather than scan the full range of news on a particular day).

- The interviewees are generally optimistic that the disruptive impact of the Internet on the conduct of journalism will eventually be sorted out (perhaps over a period of ten years), allowing for profitable news organizations. The industry will ultimately figure out pricing models that work in an online environment, and the public will “push back” against the poor quality that now prevails online and be willing to pay for quality reporting. As this happens, compensation for journalists (even in online settings) will eventually get back to levels that allow for viable careers.
- In addition to improved for-profit models for online journalism, nonprofit (or “hybrid”) news organizations will become increasingly important.

**Usable Quotes (these will potentially be incorporated into the final report as “sidebar” material)**

- “The business model that has dominated mainstream journalism for the past half century has been severely disrupted. Under the ‘eyeballs to advertising’ model, consumers paid virtually nothing for broadcast news and very little for print media.”
- “People no longer rely on one, two or three sources of news. This changes the way journalists need to think.”
- “Employers sometimes mistakenly hire journalists assuming that they have a public relations background and experience ‘managing the press.’ Often journalists don’t have these skills, so it would be a worthwhile training focus.”
- “If a journalist doesn’t know how to put up a video post, he’s worthless – even if he’s been an award-winning foreign correspondent.”
- “The real asset a journalist has is the ability to tell a story. It’s much easier to train a journalist to use a camera than to train a camera person to tell a story!”
- “Most journalists already have degrees. What they need now is *pure skill*. Teaching should be targeted at improving technology skills.”
- “There’s definitely a need to educate the public about the value of journalism. We need to make the case that only strong journalism *institutions* serve as bulwarks against power. A citizen journalist with a blog doesn’t have the resources to be a check against government power.”
- “There’s a large array of smart, savvy, engaged people who used to work for news organizations. We ought to find a way to leverage that for the good of everyone. There’s a huge thirst for information; journalists are perfectly positioned to meet that demand.”
- “If I were back in J-school, I’d be leaning toward learning how to record and edit video, working on stand-up extemporaneous reporting and analysis – whatever tells would enable me to tell a breaking story that most be told and retold and updated around the clock.”
- “I am a firm believer that too many journalists underestimate the value of their skills. There is a steady market for people who are smart, synthesize information fast, digest it and summarize and analyze it for an audience.”
- “Journalists will have an advantage in the ‘outside world’ if they have developed a deep understanding of a topic. The ability to tell a story, to make a presentation is a skill. The real value is in the understanding and thinking. Assuming I was picking between two equally skilled reporters, one a GA and one a business writer with expertise in my field, I’d hire the latter. It’s not the story-telling I want as much as the insights that form the foundation of the story.”

- “I’m a firm believer that a journalist’s value is partly related to the size of his rolodex. I’m now working for a guy I interviewed just a couple times, but he liked something about the way I asked questions and used my head. A couple clients are companies I used to call for news stories occasionally. Sources from my news days sometimes remain sources. I view the rolodex as the property of the journalist – and it should be developed and nurtured and tended like it is a garden. I’m now frequently quoted by reporters. I’ve found it valuable to keep in touch with friends in the business, journalists in my coverage area, etc. Those are valuable relationships in my new line of works.”

## **List of Persons Interviewed**

### **Becky Bartindale**

Communications coordinator, Foothill-De Anza Community College District  
Education reporter, Mercury News & Guild Local President

### **Chris Benner**

Associate Professor, University of California, Davis

### **James Bettinger**

Director, Knight Fellowship Program, Stanford University  
Previously had 20 years experience with San Jose Mercury News

### **Barbara Buell**

Director of Communications, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University  
Former journalist (for Business Week and various newspapers)

### **Adrienne Cabanatuan**

Human Resources Manager, Northern California Public Broadcasting/KQED  
Director Recruitment, Retention and Administration at San Francisco Chronicle

### **Jerry Ceppos**

Dean of Journalism, University of Nevada, Reno  
Vice President, Knight Ridder, 1999-2005  
Executive Editor, San Jose Mercury News, 1981-1999

### **Cindy Chavez**

Executive Director, South Bay Labor Council  
Former member of San Jose City Council

### **Sandy Close**

Executive Editor, New America Media / Pacific News Service

### **Dan Gillmor**

Director, Knight Center for Digital Media Entrepreneurship  
Columnist, Mercury News

### **Carl Hall**

Executive Officer, California Media Workers Guild  
Reporter, San Francisco Chronicle

### **Mike Langberg**

Vice President, Weber Shandwick (public relations firm with tech focus)  
Former technology columnist for San Jose Mercury News

### **Rebecca Rosen Lum**

Freelance writer and Guild unit chair for freelancers  
Former regional reporter for Bay Area News Group

**Dori Maynard**

President, Maynard Institute for Journalism Education

**Mark Schwanhauser**

Senior Analyst, Multichannel Financial, Javelin Strategy & Research  
Former business news columnist for San Jose Mercury News

**Sara Steffens**

Representative, Communications Workers of America, District 9  
Former reporter for various community and daily newspapers

**Veronica Villafane**

Freelance television reporter/producer  
Previously led the Convergence Project for San Jose Mercury News (joint venture with Telemundo/NBC)

**Khanh Weinberg**

Communications Director, SEIU Local 521  
County Government Reporter, Mercury News

**Kevin Wilson**

President, NABET-CWA Local 59051

**Steve Wright**

Vice President of Communications, Silicon Valley Leadership Group  
Former Vice President and Editorial Page Editor, San Jose Mercury News

**Industry representative who requested anonymity**