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**Association of Schools of Journalism
and Mass Communication**

Remarks by

Lee Stinnett

Former ASNE Executive Director

**2003 Recipient of the Gerald M. Sass
Distinguished Service to Journalism and
Mass Communication Award**

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**2003 Gerald M. Sass
Distinguished Service Award
Presentation**

**honoring
Lee Stinnett**

former Executive Director of ASNE

Thursday, July 31, 2003
Hyatt Regency Crown Center
Kansas City, Missouri

Lee Stinnett–

Lee Stinnett, former executive director of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, was recognized with the association's highest honor during the 2003 AEJMC Convention. Renamed the Gerald M. Sass Distinguished Service to Journalism and Mass Communication Award in 1996, the award pays tribute to outstanding achievement and service to the field of journalism and mass communication.

Stinnett served as executive director of ASNE for 16 years, retiring in 1999. He was a strong supporter of accreditation, serving on several site-visit teams, and on building alliances between the academy and industry. Stinnett was instrumental in forming the Council on Newspaper Education (CONEE), which brought together ASJMC, AEJMC, ASNE and other print groups in the mid-1980s.



Searching for Consensus

By Lee Stinnett

It is indeed an honor of a lifetime to receive this award, to be associated with Jerry Sass, and also to be included in such a distinguished list of men and women who have spoken in this forum. I have known many of the previous speakers well. Four of them were my boss when they were president of ASNE.

I first laid eyes on Jerry Sass 26 years ago, in 1977. I have a very precise memory of Jerry from that meeting of the ASNE Minorities Committee in Oak Ridge, Tenn. Jerry and I were invited observers at that gathering at which preparations were made to launch ASNE Year 2000 Goal for minority employment. It was to be a landmark in the development of newspaper journalism's social conscience.

I recall that Jerry Sass tried to slip discretely out of the meeting a bit before it concluded so that he could go to another meeting. As he headed toward the door, he was asked if he had any final wisdom. He told the group to think big. And don't worry about the funding, he said. He was sure that the funding could be arranged.

In my grubby little mind that kind of talk about funding made a lasting impression. And as the years went by, Jerry, the Gannett Foundation, and later The Freedom Forum, walked the talk.

Before I get too wound up in my remarks, I want to make certain that I mention Reed Sarratt, my boss and mentor at the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association for 11 years. He taught me, among many other things, to love and respect journalism education.

Well, four years ago, I headed out the door myself and retired as executive director of ASNE. Now, I'm back in the tent again and asked to make a speech, for heaven's sake.

Please indulge me if I reminisce a bit about how I came to make a life's work in journalism.

After I enrolled at the University of Kentucky, I discovered that UK operated on the semester system. What a blessing that turned out to be! Otherwise I would have changed my major three times a year rather than only twice a year.

Eventually, I just took courses I enjoyed and discovered good writing, new ways of thinking, and occasional examples of greatness in the human spirit.

After UK awarded me a Bachelor's Degree, I felt that my education was incomplete, so I continued at UK in the English Department's Master's Degree program, with vague notions of an academic career. The Department gave me a teaching assistant job, and I actually taught Freshman English composition classes.

Journalists, it seemed to me, got paid to be students and they didn't have to take exams.

I didn't much care for the classroom aspects of my job, but I loved the accoutrements of my new academic status. I liked to hang out with other graduate assistants in our assigned office room in McVey Hall. Freshman students could find us there for counseling. What was the most fun, though, was posting dumb quotes on the blackboards from students' compositions. You know, "Bach had 23 children, and kept a spinster in the attic to practice on." "Spinster" rather than "spinet."

Well, nobody can be a student forever, and I had to start thinking about a job. I hadn't yet heard John Quinn's famous quip that "journalism is the most fun you can have with your clothes on." But I think I had the concept. Journalists, it seemed to me, got paid to be students and they didn't have to take exams.

I squeezed in a Journalism 101 class during my last semester of graduate school, and I starting sending out letters of application to newspapers. When my parents took off for New Orleans to attend a conference, I bummed a ride so that I could apply in person for a reporting job at the New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. I can hardly express the joy – and fear – I felt when I received an offer to work for the *Picayune* as a general assignment reporter.

When I reported to work, the City Editor gave me my job orientation to journalism. He seemed in a bad mood. "Give me a rewrite," he snapped, handing me a press release from the Philippine Dance Society. "Make two carbon copies, double space and single slug."

"Yes, sir!" I responded robustly. Then I quietly picked a nearby reporter, introduced myself, and asked him, "What's a slug?"

The general assignment reporter, I think, has the best job in journalism. Every day is an unplanned adventure. One day I found myself in a one-

on-one interview with the great pianist Arthur Rubenstein. Another day, I had 15 bucks in my pocket to loose at the gambling joints across the river and then help write an exposé.

The book editor, Mable Simmons, gave me a review copy of Jean Paul Sartre's newly published biography of Jean Genet. Ah, the power of the press! Jean Paul Sartre's *Sainte Genet* sales dependent on a favorable review by the 24-year-old Lee Stinnett!

We nightside reporters answered the phone when it rang, even on deadline. Rarely, it was a hot news tip. More likely it was a student, looking for material for his overdue homework.

One night I took a call from a lady who had a question about language use. Lucky lady – she had got the newsroom guy with the Master's Degree in English!

"I'm writing a letter and I want to know what you think of an expression," said the caller, who seemed to be a rather dignified person.

"Okay, ma'am, what's the expression?" I said, trying to move this along.

"Forever and a day," she said.

"Well, it's grammatically correct, but it's a cliché ," I pronounced.

After a pause, the lady said, "Well, I don't know. I hear it all the time!"

Well, those were good ol' days. And the days and years that followed were good as well.

During my ASNE years, people sometimes made sympathetic remarks about my working for a newspaper editors association.

"Poor, you," someone might say. "Every year you have to work for a different boss, who might live way on the other side of the country." Poor me? I always considered that an advantage!

People rather often asked what it was like to work with "geniuses." And I would say, "Yes, what a blessing it is! I work with a great ASNE staff!"

When I was invited to address the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communications, the topic that most interested me was how newspaper editors and journalism educators can work together more

effectively. This was an area of emphasis during my three decades at the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association (1970-1980) and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (1981-1999).

Among the questions that enticed me were:

- How similarly and dissimilarly do editors and J-school directors view their shared landscape?
- Are editors from Venus and educators from Mars when they think about what's happening in newspaper journalism and journalism education today?
- If there were areas of consensus, could we more easily solve problems?
- If we knew where consensus was lacking, should we work on building understanding before we run off to create solutions?

Relations between newspapers and journalism/communications schools are, of course, an old question. When ASNE was founded in 1922, the first task of the newly created Journalism Schools Committee was to conduct a survey of editors and journalism deans to see how they could communicate better.

Many of the findings from this 80-year-old survey sound familiar in 2003:

- The deans, in 1922, saw a “crying need” for a greater funding from newspaper companies, especially for scholarships.
- The editors had their own “crying need” for “good copy editors.”
- The educators defended their programs, citing the practical newspaper experience among their faculty members.
- The editors said too many students were going into “trade journalism” and “publicity work” — what we’d call public relations today.

A few of the editors confessed that maybe the “small salaries” paid by newspapers to “cub” reporters was part of that problem. But one editor mounted a defense of newsroom pay scales:

“We decline to raise that,” he said, referring to pressure to improve salaries, “because it seems to me that we ought to test these fellows by fire and determine whether or not they are sincere in their desire to remain in the profession.”

The “let-them-eat-cake” attitude presumably died at some point in the last century, but the other issues raised in ASNE’s first journalism education survey resonate today.

In order to identify today’s areas of consensus among newspaper editors and J-school directors on some of the broad issues affecting journalism education, a new survey was devised. The ASJMC

headquarters in Columbia and ASNE in Reston offered their cooperation. In June 2003, questionnaires were e-mailed to 90 randomly selected ASNE members and 90 members of ASJMC.

When ASNE was founded in 1922, the first task of the newly created Journalism Schools Committee was to conduct a survey of editors and journalism deans to see how they could communicate better.

A few caveats before we proceed any further:

- In survey projects such as this one, the data may be colored by the self-selection of the responders. Do editors who are interested in journalism education, for

instance, respond at a higher rate than those who are not that much concerned about J-schools? As we shall see shortly, it seems clear that in this particular survey response, the respondents may perhaps be skewed in favor of editors and directors who are connected with the other group.

- Jennifer McGill, AEJMC/ ASJMC executive director, points out that ASJMC members tend to be more involved in national and state issues than are non-members. The same generalization could be made about ASNE members. So the two groups are similar and the assumption may be made that the data in this survey are influenced by a predilection of ASNE and ASJMC members to be involved in group efforts.
- An educator notes that junior faculty may be more likely than a school’s top administrator to take summer jobs in the newsroom and the newspaper’s city editor or investigative reporter more often may be invited to meet with a journalism class than the top editor. So in this way, the

survey sample of the top editors and J-school administrators may understate the degree of involvement between the schools and newspapers.

- And here's a final grain of salt to sprinkle on our survey: newspapers are local and to some extent so are journalism schools. How much the individual editor or J-school director really know about schools and newspapers beyond their immediate areas?

Duly forewarned, we may now proceed to explore the survey data.

Survey Results

As in the 1922 survey, the journalism deans were better than editors about returning the survey forms: 53 percent of the J-school directors returned the surveys and 38 percent of the editors responded.

The questionnaire asked each respondent to check any activity on a list in which he or she had been engaged during the past 24 months. The editors and journalism directors were given parallel lists of activities and each respondent was asked to place a checkmark beside each activity in which he or she had participated during the past 24 months.

- J-school directors were asked to indicate if they had visited a newsroom, observed a news-budget meeting, attended a meeting of news professionals, met one-on-one with a newspaper editor, etc.
- Editors were asked if they had met with a journalism class as a visiting professional, attended an educators' conference, met one-on-one with a J-school director, etc.

In Chart 1, putting the two lists together, the J-school directors are the team in the left column and editors are in the right column. The J-school team is the clear winner. In every instance but one, the J-school directors had more contact with newspapers, than newspaper editors had with journalism education. Still, the level of activities of both groups – journalism school administrators and top editors of daily newspapers – seems extraordinary. Some of these numbers in Chart 1, particularly those from the editors, seem just too good to be true. It is doubtful that 47 percent of all American editors, for example, observe a journalism class in a two-year period.

CHART 1

Which, if any, of these activities have you engaged in during the past 24 months?



The responses to the questions in this survey, therefore, should be viewed as optimistic. If, for example, the consensus between the two groups is strong, in the real world it may not be that strong. If one group is critical of the other – editors express some dissatisfaction regarding a certain aspect of journalism education, for example – then the cautious reader of this report might conclude that in reality criticism is more widely felt.

The remaining items in the survey were identical questions posed to the J-school directors and editors. In most instances they were asked if they agreed or disagreed with a statement.

This report presents the questions and responses roughly in order of descending consensus. We will start with agreement and move gradually to disagreement, from consensus to non-consensus. On several questions there was nearly perfect consensus. The statement that generated the strongest consensus between the two groups was, “Compared to five years ago, research undertaken by

schools of journalism/communications today is..." The allowed responses were:

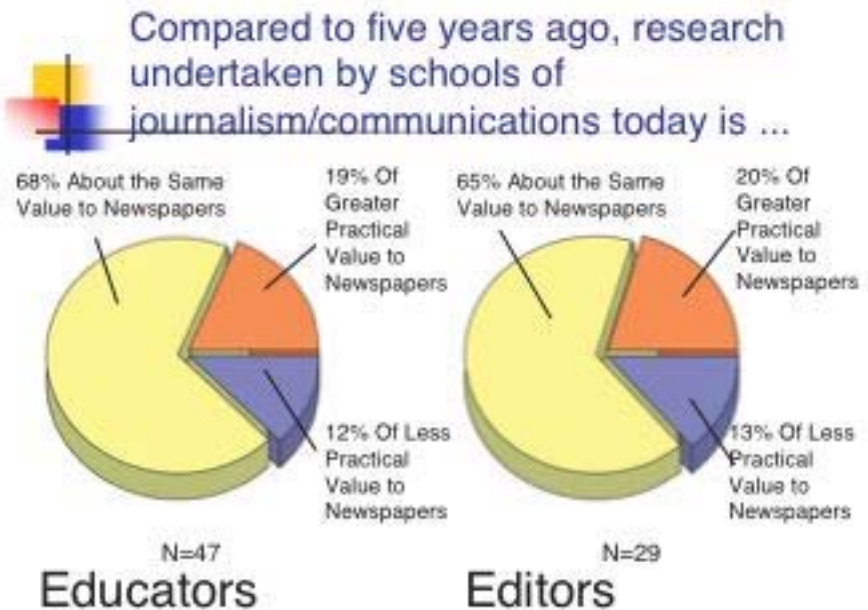
- "About the same value to newspapers."
- "Of greater practical value to newspapers."
- "Of less practical value to newspapers."

Most editors and educators feel that the value of J-school research today is about what it was about five years. In Chart 2, the pie charts are virtual identical twins.

One J-school director commented on the survey: "Academic research can help with long-term planning, but it is not as useful with short-run tactical business decisions."

Several of the editors commented on the value of the readership research being undertaken at Northwestern University.

CHART 2

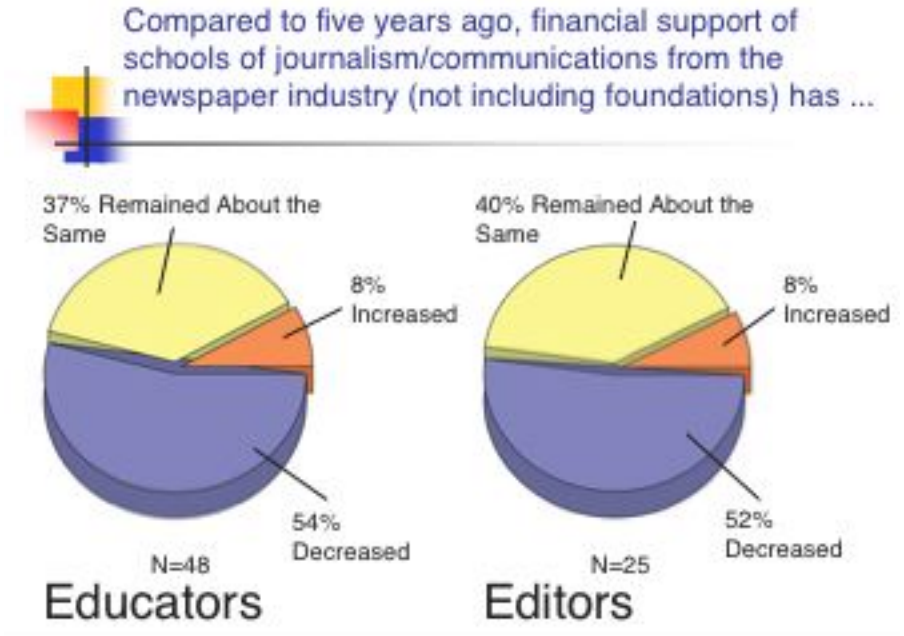


The survey asked about financial support from newspaper companies. The two groups were in sync: more than half of the directors (54 percent) and editors (52 percent) believe newspapers' financial support has decreased. Again, the pie charts are virtually identical (see Chart 3).

A J-school director wrote: "Much of our financial support from the industry has come from associated foundations. Individual newspapers have been generous with speakers and in-kind support, but not direct financial support."

An editor noted: "Newspaper companies have less money."

CHART 3

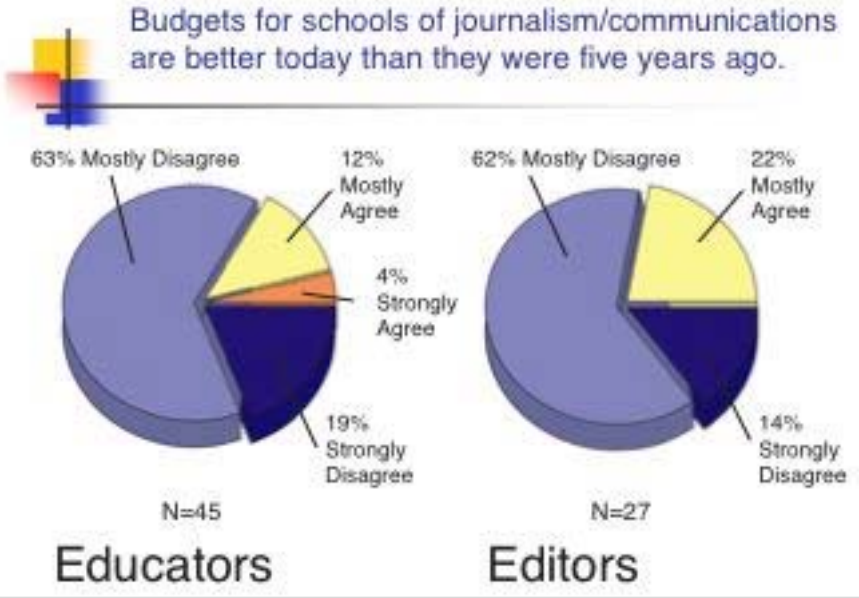


An agree-disagree statement asserted that budgets for schools of journalism/communications are better today than they were five years ago, prompting disagreement of 82 percent of the directors and 76 percent of the editors (see Chart 4).

An administrator commented: “We’re in a nationwide higher education budget crisis, with most states struggling with this...Every year we have to cut more. And there is tremendous pressure by senior administration to collapse programs together, which, in effect, destroys the more professionally oriented program.”

Many of the editors noted belt-tightening all around the nation. “Given state budget shortfalls across the country, I can’t imagine that journalism programs are faring all that well,” commented an editor from the Southwest.

CHART 4

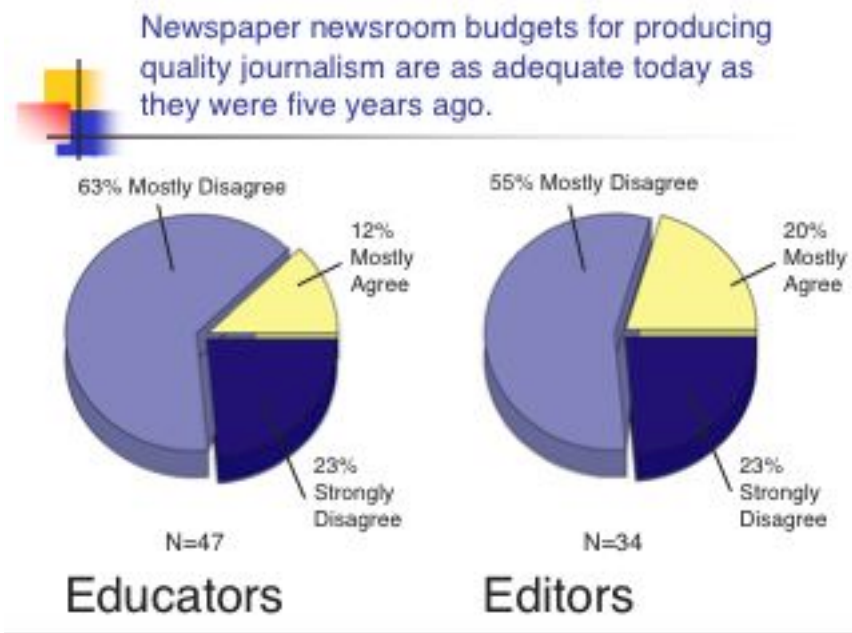


In Chart 5, there was also a strong consensus on what’s happening to newsroom budgets: 86 percent of the directors and 78 percent of the editors *disagreed* with the statement that newspaper newsroom budgets for producing quality journalism are as adequate today as they were five years ago.

To quote one J-school director: “Newsholes have decreased and folks leaving on newsroom staffs are not replaced; many are specialists and those areas of coverage have declined.”

An ASNE member wrote: “I did 30 years in newsrooms and the last five as a publisher. Trust me – newsrooms are fiscally undernourished and publishers are rewarded for starving them.”

CHART 5



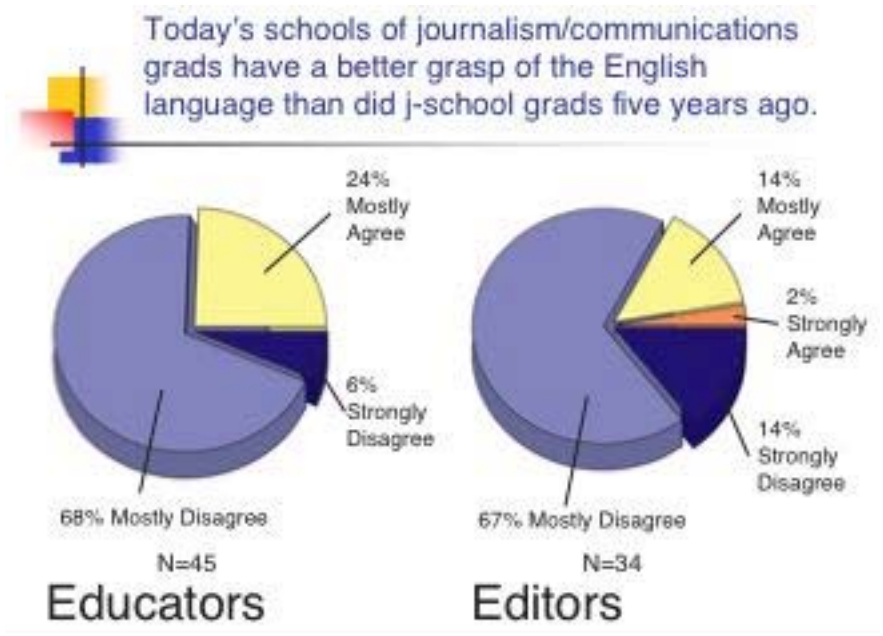
The survey asked for agree/disagree responses to this statement: “Today’s schools of journalism/communications grads have a better grasp of the English language than did j-school grads five years ago.” “Don’t think so,” said 74 percent of the J-school directors and 81 percent of the editors (see Chart 6).

One J-school director wrote: “Our students are less well prepared out of high school and, overall, are not as strong as they used to be. Starting salaries and the job market drive many of our potentially best students to other fields.”

One editor wrote: “It’s hard to fault the J-schools for not supplying all the needed basics. I think we’re just seeing the realities of a number of young people coming out of our schools without a good grounding in the basics of grammar and usage. It’s a big problem.”

Because there is a strong consensus among editors and J-school directors that command of the language is a problem, perhaps this is an area where the two groups can work productively together to make improvements.

CHART 6



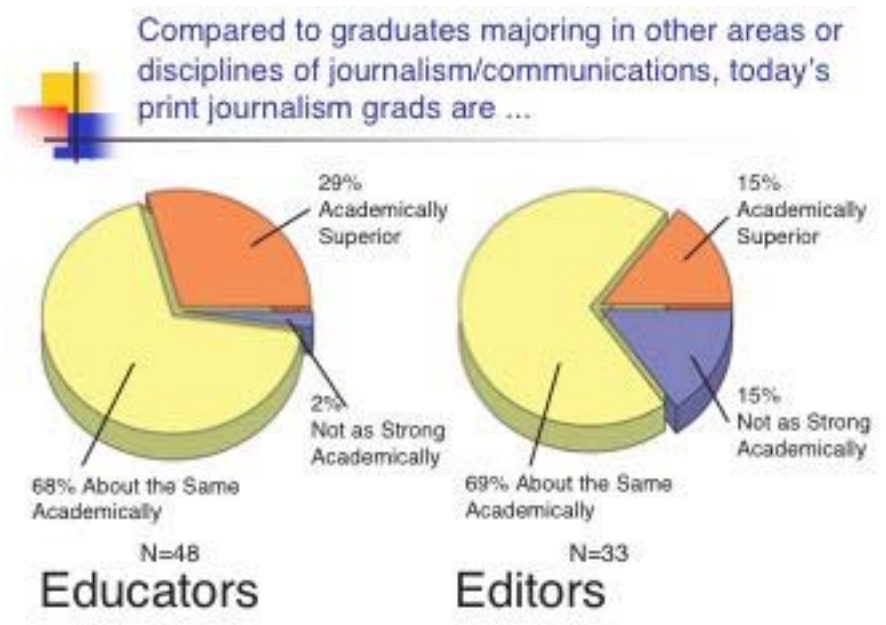
The questionnaire invited responses to this statement: “Compared to graduates majoring in other areas or disciplines of journalism /

communications, today's print journalism grads are..." Three responses were allowed: About the same academically, superior or not as strong.

Chart 7 shows that more than two-thirds of both groups (68 percent of the directors and 69 percent of the editors) believe print majors are "about the same" as other J-school majors are. The editors are more prone (15 percent) to say "not as strong" than are the J-school directors." And the educators are more likely to believe that print majors are academically superior (29 percent, compared to 15 percent of the editors).

Commented the head of one J-school: "They are academically superior but newspaper careers do not seem to excite them as much as they once did because newspaper coverage seems to be more prosaic than it was."

CHART 7



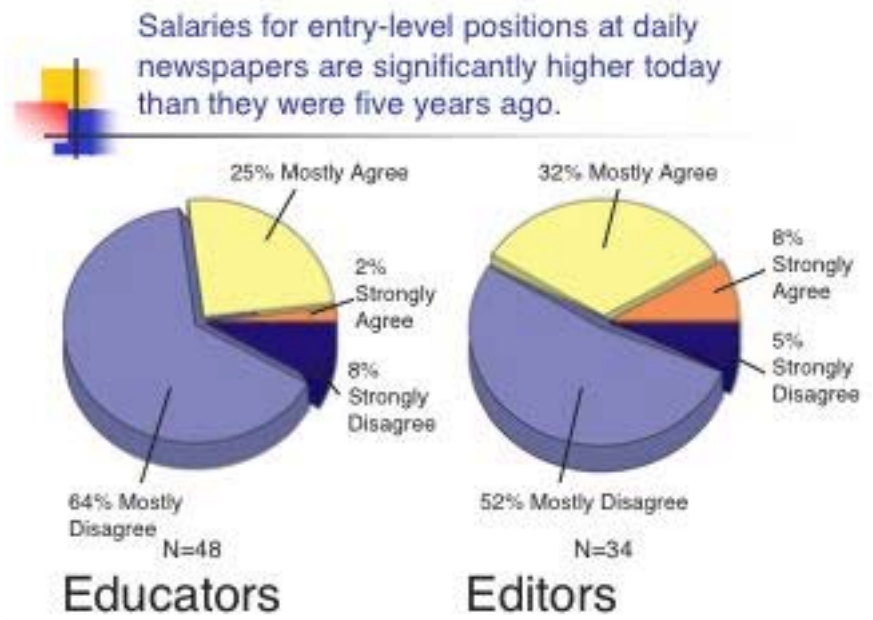
On the question of newsroom salaries, 72 percent of the directors and 57 percent of the editors express their disagreement with the statement that

“Salaries for entry-level positions at daily newspapers are significantly higher today than they were five years ago.” (see Chart 8)

One editor said: “Salaries have increased more at larger papers, not as much at smaller papers.

One J-school director, famous for his bluntness, wrote: “In most cases, teaching and garbage collecting pay more. Men are turning away from journalism. J-schools are 60-65 percent female, and few are headed to newspapers.”

CHART 8



Up to this point, the survey questions have generated excellent-to-good consensus among the newspaper editors and J-school directors, but the consensus begins to weaken.

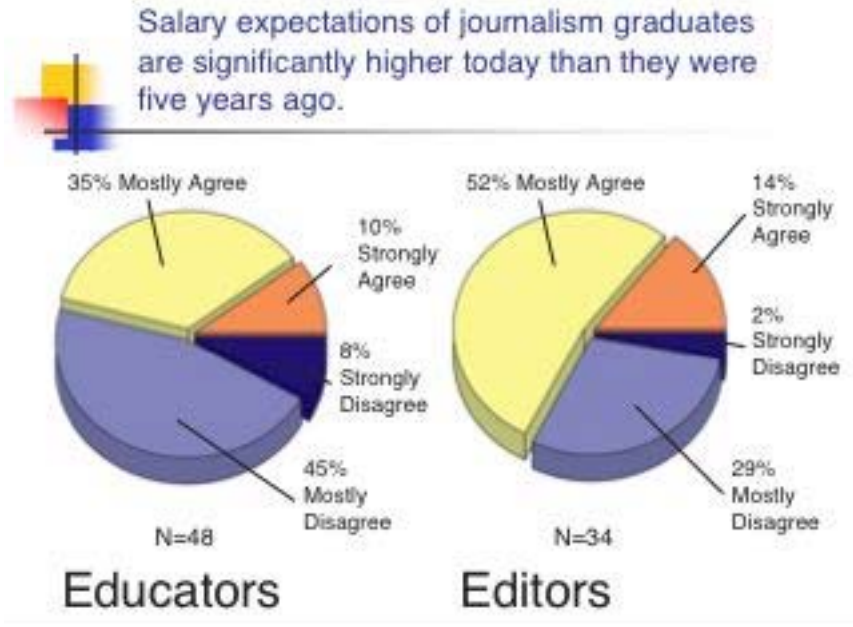
More than half (53 percent) of the J-school directors *disagreed* with the statement that “salary expectations of journalism graduates are significantly higher today than they were five years ago.” On the other

hand, 66 percent of the editors *agreed* with the statement that salary expectations have risen (see Chart 9).

Said one editor: “Smart people...are the sort we would want in our newsrooms. They know about business and the stock market and margins. They expect to be paid for quality work.”

A J-school administrator wrote: “We continue to see talented students drift to corporate communications and public relations because of salary, but not at any higher rate than we saw five years ago.”

CHART 9



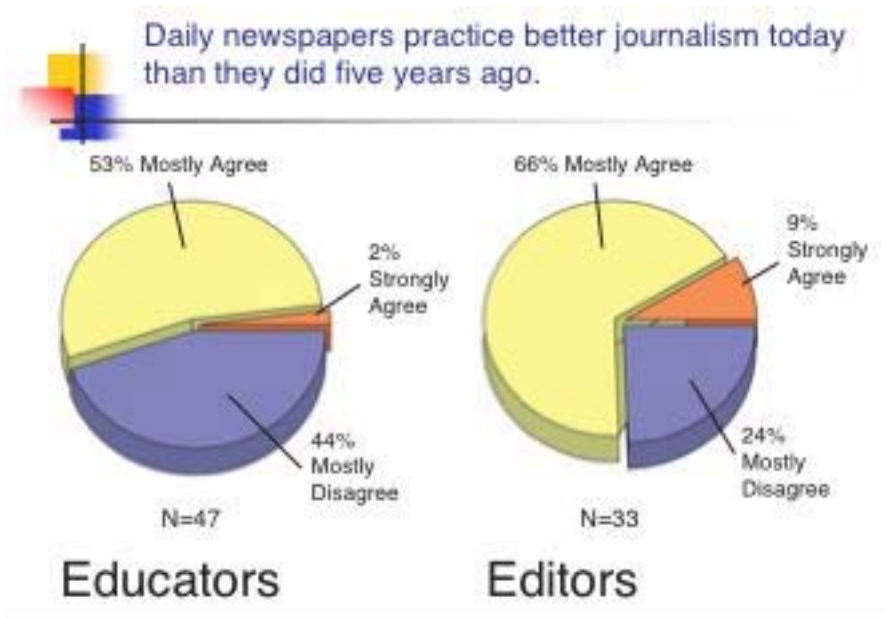
The questionnaire asked editors and J-directors to evaluate their own performance and that of the other group, and at this point, we might be reminded of the earlier admonition that the survey sample may tend to accentuate the positive.

In Chart 10, a majority of the J-school directors (55 percent) said newspapers are improving, while 75 percent of the editors, ever self-confident, said newspapers are getting better.

An editor respondent wrote: "I know we try harder to be more interesting, more informative and more valuable."

A J-school director commented: "I find that editors care about quality journalism. They attend and participate in conferences, seminars, training, and encourage reporters to stay current. This carries over to the newspaper. They know the newspaper has to be a quality product if it is to survive."

CHART 10

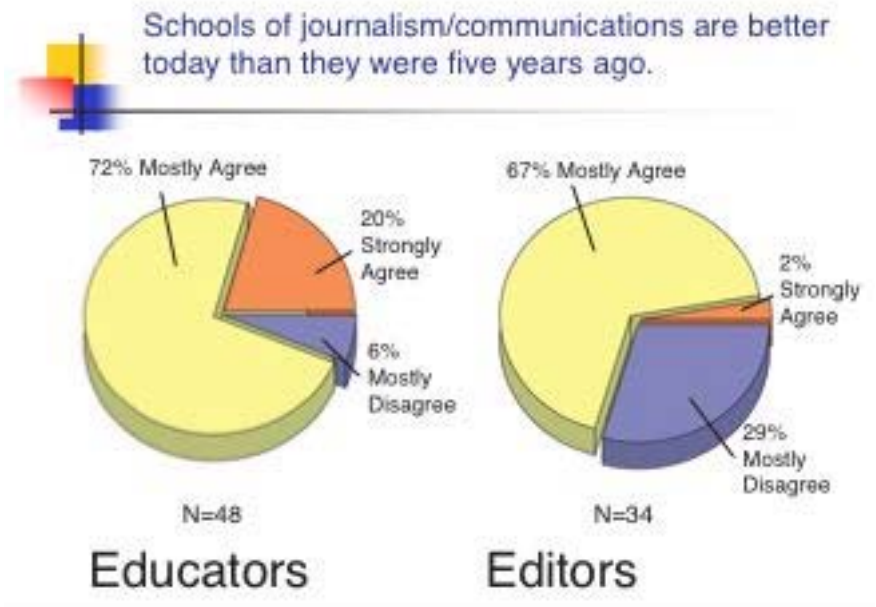


Turning the tables, the respondents were asked about the trend in journalism education. The J-school directors were virtually unanimous: 92 percent agreed with the statement that "schools of journalism/communications are better today than they were five years ago." Editors were firmly in positive territory, too – 69 percent agree that journalism education has improved recently (see Chart 11).

Editors cited database reporting, use of newsroom technology, and copy editing as areas where journalism schools are getting stronger. Some thought that more emphasis is needed on writing and the fundamentals of journalism.

One administrator said: “I believe journalism education has found a stronger foothold in academia, while increasing its ties to the profession. It has been a hard road, but I believe most journalism deans are committed to building their schools in both directions.”

CHART 11



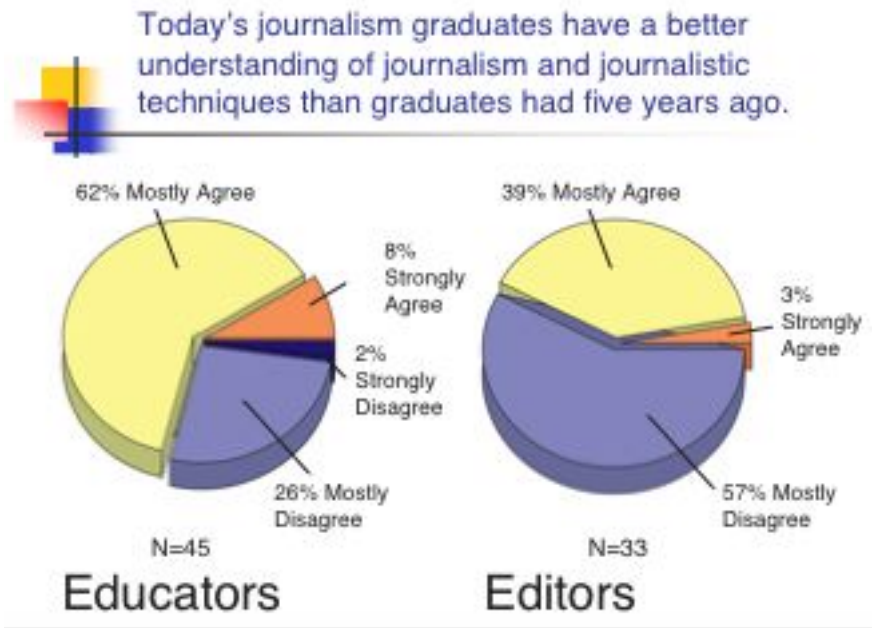
Two additional questions on the survey asked about J-school performance, one dealing with how well J-school graduates have mastered the fundamentals of journalism and journalism ethics. These questions generated the greatest divergence of opinion among editors and journalism directors.

The survey posed this agree/disagree statement: “Today’s journalism graduates have a better understanding of journalism and journalistic

techniques than graduates had five years ago.” The pie charts are reverse images, as 70 percent of the J-school directors *agreed*, while 57 percent of the editors *disagreed*, with the statement (see Chart 12).

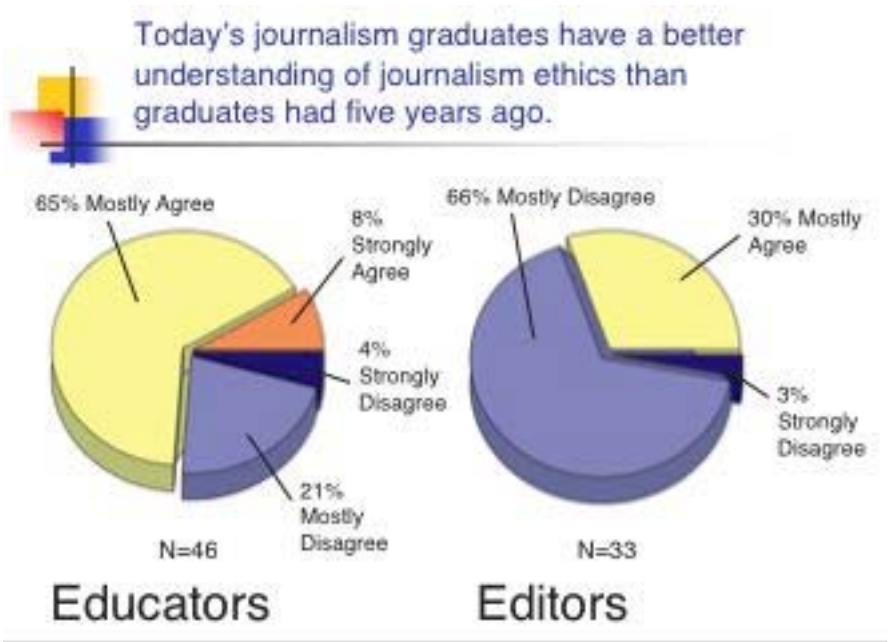
This comment by an editor was echoed by several other editor respondents: “They graduate with greater skills in using technology, not unimportant, but they know far less history, civics, politics, geopolitics, etc. than those of my generation.”

CHART 12



Journalism ethics was much in the news at the time when the questionnaire was being circulated, and ethics generated even greater differences of opinion among editors and journalism directors. In Chart 13, nearly three-fourths (73 percent) of the directors *agreed* with the statement: “Today’s journalism graduates have a better understanding of journalism ethics than graduates had five years ago.” But roughly the same portion of editors (69 percent) *disagreed*.

CHART 13



Comments made by both groups acknowledged the need for attention to journalism ethics.

An editor said: "I think the Internet has caused more borderline types to succumb to cheating."

One J-school director wrote: "If only because we've had so many ethical lapses to provide teaching opportunities."

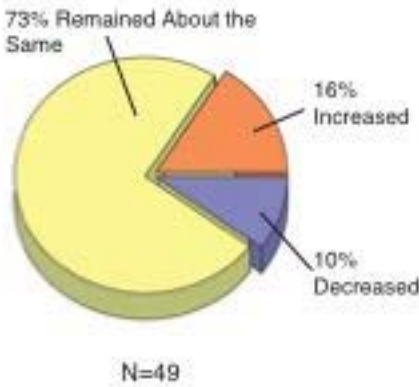
Finally, the survey asked editors and J-school directors to give their own sense of the degree of consensus between the two groups, with responses to this statement: "Compared to five years ago, consensus between newspaper editors and journalism educators about the general direction of journalism education has..." In Chart 14, nine in 10 of the J-school directors believed that consensus has increased, while a much smaller majority of the editors (58 percent) concurred.

An educator commented: "Editors still don't trust academics, but they understand them somewhat more — probably because more and more editors went through a journalism or media

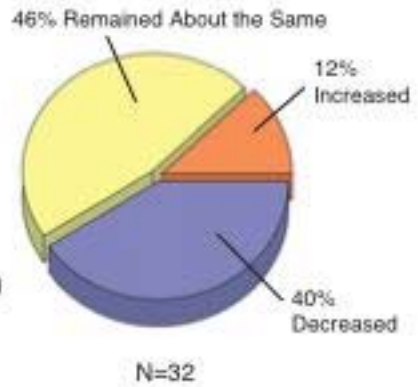
curriculum. There seems to be a lessening in the stereotypes on either side, but that hasn't decreased the chasm between these two sides of the picture."

CHART 14

Compared to five years ago, consensus between newspaper editors and journalism educators about the general direction of journalism education has ...



Educators



Editors

Conclusions

Several conclusions might be drawn from this project:

- There is an easy consensus about the respective financial situations on the campus and in the newsroom.
- There's a consensus that facility with the language is a problem. Although the phenomenon may be endemic in American society, editors and educators can work together to confront it in the person of journalism graduates.

Everybody's busy today, but building new bridges and repairing old ones are challenges worthy of our attention and energy now, as they long have been.

- In this survey, and especially in the open-ended comments made by both directors and editors, both groups are willing to acknowledgment their own shortcomings.
- The editors and educators rate their own performance more positively than each other's, but the majorities are on the positive side.
- The greatest challenge may be the lack of consensus about today's graduates having a better understanding of journalism and journalism techniques and their knowledge of journalism ethics.

In summary, J-school directors and newspaper editors agree that improving journalism students' facility with the English language is a problem, and this may be an area where the two groups can work together easily. More challenging is the question of how well the fundamentals of journalism and journalism ethics are being taught. Before the two groups launch improvements in this area, perhaps they should see if they can reach consensus on just what the fundamentals are and how they should be taught. Once they have reached a better mutual understanding, then they might get to work on making improvements.

Everybody's busy today, but building new bridges and repairing old ones are challenges worthy of our attention and energy now, as they long have been.

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The **Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication** is a non-profit, educational association of 190 schools and departments of journalism and mass communication. Originally founded in 1917 as the American Association of Schools and Departments of Journalism, ASJMC continues to foster high standards and effective practices in the administration of journalism and mass communication programs.

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