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# The MMJ became a McJob: The McDonaldization of Multimedia Journalism

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**Abstract:** Broadcast news corporations want to make the Multimedia Journalist (MMJ) a vital part of their future employee structure. This study examines the present use of the MMJ method in television news production. A sample of television news professionals, from all DMA markets, was surveyed. The results show expertise in one skill is not required, but overall ability to complete tasks is desirable. The consequence is a "McDonaldization" of the profession. TV managers give new hires minimal training and work is routinized. The MMJ is becoming a "McJob"; attracting young workers with transitional goals for future career employment opportunities.

**Keywords:** Multimedia Journalism, News production, Labor Process Theory, burnout, news business

## Introduction

The success of the MMJ or multimedia journalist, in local newsrooms in the United States, can be said to be in a mythical state at present. There is the technological deterministic belief among many news executives in broadcast corporations that the multimedia journalist will become the most utilized method of newsgathering (Steensen, 2011, p. 311). The argument for the change in production methods comes from the belief that technology enables the shift in work production. Corporate leadership is amending the methods of newsgathering in local television news stations. Technology may be the reason for the change in worker skill sets, but economics is cited as the catalyst. During the last decade, local television news stations in the United States have been competing to retain audiences who are turning away from their traditional broadcasts and heading toward other platforms such as websites, social media, and live streams. The competition has inspired innovations in news gathering, most notably the implementation of the Multimedia Journalist (MMJ).

Historically, local television stations structured their newsrooms around teams of reporters and photographers. Smaller television markets would use 'one-man-bands' to lower costs by requiring reporters to videotape their stories without the help of a trained photographer (Goedkoop, 1988). The 'one-man-band' was viewed as an entry level requirement of most reporters. A reporter expected that they would not be required to do all the work by themselves as he or she moved up the career ladder. Technology changed the hegemonic expectation when

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the more cumbersome equipment became lighter and more manageable for one person (Hemmingway, 2008).

Starting in the early 2000s, the adoption of the multimedia journalist model began in many markets. The new position was termed, 'backpack journalist' or 'solo journalist' but it was essentially a 'one-man-band' (Potter, 2001). Eventually, the term multimedia journalist became the proper vernacular for the reporter who shot and edited their own stories. For over a decade, local television news journalists have conducted 'news work' without being tethered to a technician. This study will look at the changing definition of the television news journalist, the hegemonic state that exists and the intentions of ownership to require their journalists to multitask. This study looks at the 'news work' as television news organizations find strategies to deal with convergence.

Media organizations are fundamentally industrial in their nature and they impact cultural, economic and political aspects of media communication (Radošinska, Kvetanova, and Visnovsky, 2020). The industry, ruled by timeliness and productivity, feeds the masses a constant flow of information. The process is fascinating and complex. The daily grind of newsrooms producing news stories on a deadline basis has been studied for decades (Molotch & Lester, 1974), (Underwood, 1988), (Nappi, 1994), (Allan, 2010). Underwood (1988) examined how the business of news production was impacting the newsroom, as well as Nappi (1994) and Allan (2010), indicating that the industrial side of journalism requires academic surveillance. This study looks at local television news as a media industry, in the similar view as Stuart Moss, as a specific group of companies and production strategies. The individual entities of local affiliates share goals and produce similar products in terms of form and content (Moss, 2009).

Hemmingway (2008) and Lee (2015) believe the heightened processes of acquiring news threatens journalistic standards. Audiences demand constant updating of breaking news, putting journalists at risk of reporting false or inaccurate information because of the necessity to report. "The quest for speed is a double-edged sword (Lee, 2015)." The ability to perform quality journalism is threatened by the resistance to change to both the performance of journalism and the technology utilized by journalists. The balance of speed, practice, and technology requires an evaluation of the actors (Hemmingway, 2008). The actors or forces impact the efficiency of producing news. Work routines and technologies change the 'news work' and the 'news texts' (Erdal, 2009).

Bob Franklin, former editor of Digital Journalism, influenced other researchers to look skeptically at local newspapers when the local newspapers were flourishing, and the number of journalists were declining. Franklin asks is contemporaries if efficiency is compatible with quality journalism and refers to George Ritzer's research as a suitable response. George Ritzer (1998) created a metaphor of a fast food restaurant to describe evolving methodologies of journalism focused on efficiency, predictability, control, and calculation. He believed it was a symptom of modernity and a cultural trend toward convenience. Ritzer coined the term "McDonaldization" to describe the encroachment of business tactics into journalistic practice. The creation of the Multimedia Journalist or MMJ was not needed. It seems to be a counter intuitive response for the increased need for products and production. The increase of platforms and competition was viewed as a threat to ratings used to establish commercial sales rates, and news corporations decided, using Franklin's description (cited in Allan, 2005, p. 138), news should no longer be a culinary feast of elaborate creation but simplified into a McNugget sized meal.

Consumer demand and consumer behavior change with the multi-platform methods available. The audience consumption habits are changing rapidly, as news consumers embrace multiple sources of information on multiple devices (Ran & Yamamoto, 2020). The audience's media practices change with it. "Media convergence has nothing to do with technology or

architecture. It has everything to do with the mindset” (Quinn, 2004). The introduction of the Internet and other media, into newsrooms, stimulates the acceptance of new requirements. The consumers wanting news 24-hours poise the requirements, seven days a week, online and available when they want. New positions are created to allow for flexibility and expanded coverage necessary to remain competitive with the new demands (p. 119).

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, online communication was heralded as a transformation of human communication and has developed deep roots into the media industry. The interactions between journalists and the public has changed but hasn't changed is the increasing trend of media ownership accumulation and concentration (Radosinka et al, 2020). The Telecommunications Act of 1996, expanded the ownership of large broadcast companies and many local television stations were being bought by corporations looking to lower costs as well as dominate market share (Crandall, 2005). Originally, the concept of the MMJ inspired ideas of increasing the staff and broadening the reach of the news organization (Hemmingway, 2008). Technological innovation of smaller, light-weight equipment is believed to be the incentive for the widespread use of MMJ (Cedeño Montaña, 2017). However, new technologies could have created specialists or 'crafts' individuals similar to the past evolutionary stages of technology. Instead, the marketplace influenced the implementation of the MMJ. Economic and technological considerations seemed to perpetuate the notion one person eliminated redundancies. Instead of increasing specialization the creation of the MMJ allows for broadening roles and more demands. The one worker's valorization rises and with it the value of their work.

The revaluation of the employee's value has become more important as the traditional forms of revenue are steadily weakening. Between 2005 and 2017, local TV revenue as dropped 17% (Pew Research Center, 2019). Diffusion theory may explain the adoption of the MMJ model is based on economics. There is an assumption that managers adopt and maintain innovations after a cost-benefit analysis (Rogers, 2003) and with the increase in competition and less profit, the innovation of the MMJ may be viewed as a way to offset the loss of revenue by downsizing newsroom staff and demanding 'multi-skilling' of the remaining employees (Aviles et al., 2008).

By combining existing jobs and multiplying the number of MMJs of a news staff, the result could be more diverse news stories and broader community reach. If the news stations kept all their employees and trained them, they could create more news for multiple platforms and lessen the burden on the individual employee. Alternatively, the utilization of the MMJ could result in cutting the number of news gathers in half. Ultimately, TV stations and their corporate owners try to maintain the same number of production units whether they are traditional reporting crews or the MMJ. The MMJ method is used to maximize a minimal staff with the impetus of giving more work to individuals. The MMJ became a reagent to lower operational costs.

## **Literature Review**

The value of adopting new technologies may be calculated in quantifiable ways, especially in valuation of profit (Bailey & Leonardi, 2015). However, the value of a journalist may be difficult to measure. The journalist's value is altered with the transfer of skills; from a communal experience between a reporter and photographer, with job delegation, and the exchange of expertise, to an isolated solo performance with the burden of completing all the tasks. Harry Braverman's (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* focused on computerization and the removal of skills and the expropriation of surplus labor time from workers. He articulated how modernity impacts industrial

environments and shifts the hegemonic state of workers on the factory floor. The newsroom is a factory floor, according to Schlesinger (1979), Hemmingway (2008) and Greenhouse (2019). Greenhouse (2019) details how journalists are banding together to form unions in both print and digital platforms because they wish to have more of a voice on the job, as the demand for work has increased, with managers asking the journalists to do more and more with less. In this context, Braverman's analysis of work should be applied to the multimedia journalist and it should begin with an examination of labor process. The multimedia journalist is not a variation of past methodology, it is a product of journalism modernity redefined by the tasks of the multimedia journalist (Aviles et al, 2008).

The television reporter was once paired with a photographer. The intention was to maximize efficiencies and share expertise. The multimedia journalist was created by giving the reporter the camera and the photographer was eliminated. The loss of the photographer impacted the valorization of the former reporter because the new role required surplus labor from the individual. Braverman (1974) detailed the Labor Process theory as a way to describe the surplus value of workers under capitalism invisible to workers. In the process of changing the demand of the worker and redefining the journalist's role, Braverman would argue this was a degrading of the labor. Sherijarji (2019) believes the degradation of labor and the deskilling of labor is determined by the current technological paradigms of its age, supporting Braverman's claims. Sherijari states that, 'New technologies force entire nations into new forms of organization and specialized skill sets based around ever increasing speed and volume.' The multimedia journalist forces reporters to learn new technologies and meet increased volume of work.

Braverman was interested in how the forms of technology and the outcomes of the using the technologies impacts the working class. He believed the worker is changed by the formation of the new relations and hierarchies within the working class (Sherijarji, 2019). In terms of the multimedia journalist, the technology deskills the journalist as a reporter and as a photographer, as there are more tasks to complete with questionable expertise as a technician. Braverman viewed "deskilling" as a way to enslave workers into a production process and saw evidence of the deskilling on the shop floor among blue-collar workers. He predicted that one day the white-collar jobs would similarly be affected. The television reporter may be viewed by some as a white-collar position, elitist celebrity (Malone, 2011, Stelter, 2013) but the multimedia journalist model transforms the reporter into working class. Braverman would view this transformation as a way profession were increasingly brought under the capitalist labor process with the degradation of the work and pay structures. The skilled elites merged with the blue color workers (Jonna & Foster, 2014).

Deskilling is central to Braverman's assertions. Sallaz (2014) goes as far as to say that Braverman believed labor deskilling is not peripheral to capitalism, but its essence. Braverman believed one of the conditions for the purchase and sale of labor power, and most relevant to the multimedia journalist, is the condition that firms employ labor in order to enlarge their capital, that is, earn profit (Braverman 1974). The first impediment to the process was the power of the traditional crafts. Braverman asserts management views specialized crafts individuals as static and could not help the company keep pace with the competition, 'they were limited by their inability to change the processes of production (p. 63).' In the view of the traditional grouping of television reporter and photographer, the stations were limited, and deskilling allowed for flexibility and labor value.

According to Sallaz (2014), Braverman was proposing an alternative view of American capitalism that was in line with Marx's first principle that the interests of capital and labor are fundamentally opposed. Work is steadily cheapened, deskilled, and degraded (p. 299). This assertion can be applied to the multimedia journalist who went from a specialized skill to generalized execution of tasks. The incentive is not to pay crafts individuals for a finished

product but hire unskilled workers and dictate to them exactly how to perform their job. O'Doherty et al. (2001) criticized Braverman, and they contend that Labor Process Theory is subjective in its application and use. The standardization and deskilling of labor articulate the essential dynamics of capitalism of securing growth of capital at the expense of an increasingly impoverished and degraded working class (p. 113).

There are arguments against the assertion that deskilling is not a degradation of work. The deskilling leads to adaptive practices that are not standardized, and the skill sets are altered, not diminished. Leiter (1993) found that while management looks to streamline production, the reality is different. The workplace becomes chaotic because low pay leads to high attrition. Meanwhile, there is a constant number of new workers rushing into the profession without mentoring. The labor process is standardized, but workers find ways to circumvent the standardization, making it unique to their methods. There are limits to the routinization of service work (Leiter, 1993). A recent study by Parahita, Monggilo, and Wendratama (2020), supports the philosophy that teaching unskilled workers technical skills, such as operating the camera equipment, is relatively easier than teaching the worker written language and journalistic competencies.

Rowlinson & Hassard (2000) challenged Braverman's assertions about deskilling by stating that the tendency of separating conception and execution from each other. Conception is concentrated on smaller groups of employees while most of the workers in the executing phase are increasingly meaningless. Post-Taylorist work does not have the division of design and execution, and in this sense, production has evolved. There are many arguments that Labor Process Theory lacks the complicated multi-actor relationships of modern technologically driven labor (Rowlinson et al, 2000).

Ben Scott (2005) believed capitalism is the major catalyst for changes in news production, "Left without sufficient funds from the primary market – selling audiences to advertisers – they (television news stations) are forced to think of ways to make the news itself a commodity worth buying" (Scott, 2005). Pamela Jackson (2009) identified the conflict between capitalism and journalism as a clash between "an amoral force against an ethical agency". She expresses her dissatisfaction of media ownership by using commodification theory to explain how corporate media has an inclination toward the "complete commodification of news" and claims capitalism has no social consciousness (Jackson, 2009), that news as a contested commodity. The introduction of multi-platform distribution could have led to the expansion of staff to supply the platforms. Increases in staff size did not occur instead job requirements multiplied. The Multimedia Journalist was the result.

Multimedia journalism is accepted today, in what Marx and Engels (1848) would consider 'seeping commodification.' Marx and Engel stated, 'All that is solid melts into a commodity,' and Prodnik (2015) concurred arguing the 'cell forms of capitalism' have become a part of human activities and relations. The interchange between the television reporter and the television photographer were valued and monetized. The social form of their news making can be identified as labor process. Taking away the television reporter recalculates the monetary value of the work, the labor process. Seeping commodification is described as capitalism's need to revolutionize the means of production resulting in influence on the social forms as well. The mode of production of the MMJ is changing the social groups inside newsrooms. Dobek-Ostrowska (2015) view journalistic cultures as a complex mix of journalistic values, practices, norms and media products. Bourdieu (1998) would argue that ownership is not important to the 'journalistic field' because of a 'code of ethics' journalists maintain and the journalism they create.

It is not unusual for the free press in a democracy to be challenged by the restraints of economics. Journalism is unlike many businesses because there is no inventory or products placed on shelves and there is no open market for news stories similar to groceries, albeit there

are arguments the future innovations may provide such amenities. Lazzarato (1996) coined the phrase Immaterial Labor. Immaterial Labor can be identified as the defining characteristics as labor that produces informational content of a commodity and the labor that produces the cultural content of the commodity. One type of immaterial labor Lazzarato focused on includes photography and that would indicate the multimedia journalist performs Immaterial Labor. The multimedia journalist may not be paid additional wages to perform the immaterial labor. Mosco & Fuchs (2016) would argue that the workers are being exploited by offering them a disproportionately low wage in exchange for their labor power and time.

By paying a wage lower than the amount of capital it generates, the capitalist extracts profit from the labor force of the multimedia journalist. Mergers and acquisitions of television stations, similar to any merger or acquisition of business entities, creates waves of infrastructure revisions to raise shareholders (Martyn, 2009). Dvoskin (2019) identifies the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 as the catalyst of corporate profiteering in the television industry in the United States. 'Deregulation has resulted in a gigantic corporate conglomerate ownership of the media where the bottom line takes priority.' Halstead (2000) blames the Telecommunications Act of 1996 with saddling broadcasters with billions of dollars in expenses to pay for spectrum allocation. It is no coincidence that the rise of the multimedia journalist can be traced to the late '90s and early '00s (Kolodzy, 2006, Hemmingway, 2008). Michael Rosenblum is credited as the 'father of videojournalism'<sup>1</sup> touring the country's network affiliates, training the reporters to be videojournalists and preaching about the economic savings the videojournalist would provide stations (Rosenblum, 2008). The campaigning to integrate the videojournalist seems to have been successful. The moniker 'videojournalist' was dropped in favor of others, such as 'mojo' (mobile journalist) or 'sojo' (solo journalist) (Martyn, 2009). Martyn (2009) declared that the increased pressure to do more with less, to produce more content with fewer staff was the inspiration for the changes in news gathering, citing that the multimedia journalist was created because the new technology was available and that intrinsically drove the change.

Today's journalist is expected to maintain a social media presence while on the job as well as creating 'speed-driven journalism' (Lee, 2015). The traditional tasks are required of an MMJ, but the non-traditional tasks are filling in production roles when needed, especially live production. Posting on Facebook and Twitter is a common practice and a requirement of the MMJ and is widely adopted for news coverage (Hermida, 2010).

The MMJ copes with the exchanges of traditional and non-traditional tasks by creating routines. Many times, technology such as social media changes the conventions of the profession (Lowrey, 2006) and in the adaptive process individuals are expected to take on the new and old methodologies. The rise of digital technology "contributes to the industry's obsession with speed," and journalists are expected to "do more at a faster pace, giving rise to new expectations and practices in the news industry (Lee, 2015)."

Consolidation greatly increased industry profitability. Much of the profitability came through cost-cutting. Large broadcast groups with many stations were able to centralize news operations. Sinclair Broadcast Group and Nexstar Broadcasting (the two largest broadcasting companies in the United States) were able to consolidate and share content (Stahl, 2016).

Studies on the impact of external factors on internal practices in newsrooms may have research gaps. Örnebring, Lindell, Clerwall, and Karlson (2016) found that qualitative and quantitative studies revealed two outcomes. Qualitative studies find commercial pressures have increased in the past few decades around the world. Journalists believe the pressures have impacted their autonomy. However, the quantitative studies found that the journalists said they

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<sup>1</sup> Halstead, D. (2000), *Looking Ahead to Photojournalism 2001*, The Digital Journalist retrieved at <http://digitaljournalist.org/issue9809/editorial.htm>

enjoyed a high level of professional autonomy (Örnebring et al, 2016). Autonomy is an essential element in the multimedia journalism.

If the future of television news is dependent upon the liquidity of corporate shares and market strength, then there may be doubts about the compatibility between the owner's demands and the workers' ethical responsibility. Jackson (2009) joins the voices of McChesney and Scott (2005) in a rebuke of the current tide of corporate ownership of local television news. They each believe the rising expectations of capitalism do not give corporations an excuse for neglecting the social responsibility of the press. Capitalism does not have a social consciousness and therefore immune to the moral responsibilities of the 4<sup>th</sup> Estate. Moral failure results when the news conceptualizes itself as just another commodity bought and sold in a capitalist economy resulting in a negative impact on democracy.

Ritzer (1998) identified a trend of appropriating the principles of the fast food restaurant into more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. His work provided a metaphor of the change toward more highly controlled, bureaucratic, and dehumanizing society. Ritzer updated and defended his original thesis, that the shift to the digital age may require an examination of the relationship between production and consumption, especially in the way in which forms of consumption are delivered to the consumer are changing (Ritzer and Miles, 2019).

Kellner (1999) has been critical of Ritzer's view that characterizes social relations in which individuality and diversity are limited. While McDonald's is a brick and mortar business, with limited options for consumers, multimedia journalists do not seem to be under the same social paradigm, nor are the consumers of the product produced by the multimedia journalist.

McDonaldization of jobs begins with the consumer becoming a part of the labor process. In 2017, the New York Times offered buyouts to newsroom staff to reduce the number of editors. New York Times publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr. defended the action by saying, "Our followers on social media and our readers across the Internet have come together to collectively serve as a modern watchdog, more vigilant and forceful than one person could ever be. (Snider, 2017)." Television news welcomes their audiences to help in the news gathering process by offering tips, stories, videos, photos, etc. that was once the duty of trained staff. Any platform for journalism is susceptible to the application of McDonaldization. People are costly and impede McDonaldization because the workers are independent thinkers, not robots (Ritzer and Mills (2019).

As a social theory, McDonaldization is a type of rationality, first defined by Weber (1968), as formal rationality, whereas consumption is increasing, therefore production requires more efficient ways to meet demand. More rationalized forms of consumption have more implications and in capitalist society they mean, above all, ever-increasing consumption (Ritzer et al., 2019). Feenberg (2017) believes there is a limit to rational organization in modern society. He believes technical progress is defined in the dominant culture by the substitution of machines and humans, the rational form of this progress makes it difficult to see alternatives or contingencies. The philosophy lines up with Braverman's arguments about deskilling (Feenberg, 2017) and why the multimedia journalist may be considered a rational form of technological application and replacement of human work.

The process of McDonaldization can lead to the creation of "McJobs" whereas work is a relegated process of speed and inventory. Efficiency involves 'the choice of the optimum means to a given end' (Ritzer, 1993). Maximizing the hours an employee works to create as many products as possible and serve the customer as fast as possible. Work is simplified to de-skill the employee and increase efficiency. The de-skilled work requirements are supported with rationalization within the companies on all levels. Braverman saw worker's autonomy as a function of skill (Smith, 2015). He believed there is a relationship between skill, job autonomy, knowledge, and control. Braverman did not believe that increased formal education of the

workforce did does not translate into increased skill levels. He believed that was a myth and that production, not training, was central to capitalism.

Multiple platforms increase the need for sources and consumer participation. In 1998, Ritzer identified the future role of Internet content providers as major contributors of the McDonaldization Thesis. The patron/customer/client becomes part of the labor process. There is no longer a clear distinction between worker and patron. Patrons have become unpaid workers who perform tasks that would otherwise have to be done by paid employees. They do it largely on their own and create a secondary workforce to be exploited to enhance profits (Ritzer, 1998, p. 7). Others disagree with Ritzer's assertions and claim there are larger forces at play. Smart (1999) believes the changing ways of living transform the habits of customers and the material does not classify as work but residue social activity. They may both be right regarding media work. Consumers are looking for easily accessed bits of continuously updated information, and corporations are seeking to standardize production methods to lower costs in a fast food delivery motif. It is in that context we see the modern television newsroom. The television newsroom is in a state of McDonaldization in both the way news is consumed, and in the way, the news is produced. Ritzer's (1998) 'McDonaldization Thesis' can be applied to new means of consumption. The thesis promotes the idea that nothing is "safe from McDonaldization as long as there are material interests that push it and stands to benefit from its expansion" (Ritzer, 1998).

Technological modernity plays a factor in job skills and the future adaptiveness of journalists. According to Davier & Conway (2019), when convergent strategy is rooted in print, news-gathering does not vary from one platform to others. Reporters write a piece of news that is copied from print to digital to mobile to social media. The chain of distribution may change as convergence of media is incorporating more multimedia tools such as video. Eventually, there will be more forms that the definition of multimedia will need to be updated. In recent years, the negativity over the amount of labor and technical skill has diminished. Matt Pearl (2020) preaches a positive approach to process of newsgathering as a solo video journalist. He found that a majority of the MMJs he surveyed believed they have enough time to during the day to fulfill their job requirements, however, at the same time a majority of the MMJs he surveyed do not believe they see themselves in the same role ten years from now, with a vast majority of MMJs agreeing that they feel overwhelmed by the workload.

News managers want calculability of their employee's work. The work hours are measured in product forms. The work is counted and quantified to make sure the MMJ is increasing valorization. Many MMJs will complain about the expectations because it leads to what Ritzer (1993) believes is a desire to measure their value of quantity over quality (Ritzer, 1993). Liu & Lo (2018) studied Taiwanese reporters and found that workload and news autonomy directly relate to emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction, cynicism and turnover intention of jobs. Job satisfaction acts a mediator in the relationship between burnout and turnover intention. The overwhelming workload of multimedia journalism and their autonomy lead to burnout.

The social relations of production between manager and employee can lead to worker resistance and acquiescence as there are mutual amounts of paradigm repair and social advancement. The social relations are boundaries for the labor processes of restructuring work and the control imperative. It is possible to comprehend the current state of television newsrooms within corporate owned stations by applying Gaines and Domagalski (1996) approach to Labor Process Theory. The control imperative is converting labor power into profit, in the case the multimedia journalist labor power; the valorization increases with the restructuring of the work and the cheapening of the process. Television workers may not fit into the description of factory workers because their work is collaboration, but off the shop floor of the newsroom, there is continuous tension to treat labor as a commodity while maintaining cooperation between worker and manager. Managers may issue demands of time

and output and grant workers some autonomy, but ultimately the desires of the corporation override the intentions of the middle manager.

The critical study of political economies of communications (CPEC) attempts to look at both the theory and research focused on the public sphere and democracy and reflect on the social role of research and researchers. The multimedia journalist may be overlooked in years to come as the practice becomes normalized and future research needs to recognize the origins. According to Wasko (2018), future developments need to be viewed historically, a fundamental starting point for the CPEC. 'A careful analysis of capitalism, its structure, the consequences of those structures and the contradictions that abound is more than ever relevant and needed (Wasko, 2018). Future studies or international comparisons should require a search for a place of origin and examination of the political economy to find a common ground.

Ritzer's (2019) reevaluation of his McDonaldization thesis concludes that McDonaldization will become more relevant in the digital future than it ever was in the bricks and mortar past. The absence of opposition to the changing forms of production, is another reason to expect the process of McDonaldization will continue.

## Methodology

This study used quantitative analysis of survey data from multimedia journalists in the United States. The survey conducted from 2017 – 2018, collected quantitative data on age, gender, specific work requirements such as writing, editing, and videotaping. Survey participants work at television stations in different size audiences and broadcast ranges. In the United States, the size of the audiences measures the ranking of the station. In the United States there are 210 areas of different sizes. New York City is the #1 market area in the country with a population of 18.2 million people and Glendive, Montana is the smallest market area with a population of 4, 935. 289 participants responded to the survey. Based on the description of a multimedia journalist as someone who shoots, writes and edits their own news stories for broadcast, as well as create web content, 172 of the 281 respondents considered themselves to be television multimedia journalists. The MMJs represented 132 television market areas in the United States. Participants were given opportunities to give personal feedback, and then the qualitative data was collected. All comments were reviewed and coded.

The survey included a respondent from all areas of the United States, including Montana and New York. The majority of the survey's respondents were from television stations outside large metropolitan areas. 106 respondents of the 172 (61.6%) were from medium or small market areas (DMAs 34 – 210).

A Qualtrics survey of 39 questions was created, IRB approved, and distributed via the Facebook group page, Storytellers. The Facebook group of 11,767 members representing a community of television journalists. Their website [tvnewstorytellers.com](http://tvnewstorytellers.com) is a resource for journalism education. Their mission statement on their website defines their role as a place where, "Journalists frequent the community to mentor, share stories, discuss ethics and inspire each other."

Storytellers is a private group with restriction on membership. Founder Matt Mrozinski, states that the page is meant as a critique forum, helping peers to improve their work. The members of this community regularly engage in discussions involving their professions. I became a member of the group and requested to post the survey to group members.

The participants were asked questions to help define the multimedia journalist, comparing them to the traditional news gathering unit of reporter and television news photographer. The survey measured the phenomenon of the MMJ in local television news by asking specific questions about the job responsibilities of the MMJ. The participants were asked questions to

establish the numbers of MMJs in the respondents' newsrooms, the ratio of traditional reporters to MMJs in their newsrooms, additional work requirements such as social media and online reporting, and managerial preferences for using the MMJ to cover particular types of stories.

The intent of this study is to evaluate the phenomenon, causal conditions, and action strategies of the multimedia journalist on local television news organizations. The survey measured the phenomenon of the MMJ in local television news by asking specific questions about the job responsibilities of the MMJ. The participants were asked questions to establish the numbers of MMJs in the respondents' newsrooms, the ratio of traditional reporters to MMJs in their newsrooms, additional work requirements such as social media and online reporting, and managerial preferences for using the MMJ to cover particular types of stories.

Drawing from the literature discussion, data analysis and observation of multimedia journalists, I proposed the following research questions:

**RQ1: What are imperative issues associated with the popularity of the Multimedia Journalism model in local television newsrooms?**

Respondents were encouraged to discuss their observations and experiences. The intent of the discussion questions was to formulate qualitative data to find the causal conditions applied to their individual experiences as MMJs. The causal conditions were coded based on the frequency of similar response, resulting in key words, "quality, quantity, burnout, gender, and safety." The intent of this question is to form a better understanding of how multimedia journalists view their work, the limitations of their professions and the challenges they experience. Do the MMJs feel that they are deskilled and "enslaved" into a production process described by Braverman (1975)?

**RQ2: Do MMJ employees feel their workload is manageable?**

'Burnout' is an issue for many MMJs. The workload on MMJs can be overwhelming. MMJs need to be proficient enough with technical skills to be efficient while using their social skills with interviews, news events, and dealing with the public while performing their jobs. Workers who are given low organizational support result in higher levels of burnout than those with high organizational support. A large part of the stress appears to be organizational in nature (Lawal, 2017). MMJs work alone and often feel disconnected.

**RQ3: Given a choice, would MMJs prefer the multimedia journalism method of production or the traditional method of a reporter and photographer?**

Does the worker identify the Immaterial Labor, described by Lazzarato (1996)? Would the MMJ want to displace the material labor if they had a choice? The theoretical prediction focuses on the effect of the working model on employees. Action strategies for employees and the company may be used to lessen the consequences of long-term stress. Retaining workers for extended periods of time or within the definition of 'careers' at one place of work is not the intention of McDonaldization as wages are meant to have a limited ceiling. Braverman (1975) concluded that businesses expected minimal costs to produce products. The working conditions are created to increase productivity.

**RQ4: Has the implementation of the multimedia journalist become the dominate method of news production?**

Are newsrooms rejecting the traditional modes of production? If the dominate form of news production is evolving towards a desire for quantity instead of quality production, can Ritzer's McDonaldization be applied to TV news production (Ritzer, 1998)? This question is also posed to see if Braverman's assertions that the new methods of work will be accepted and adopted by the workers. Plus, does Quinn's (2004) assertion that media convergence is a mindset include the acceptance of the production method?

## Findings

Management's perception focuses on workers' attitude, commitment, and motivation and task competence (Thursfield, 2017). Workers learn in five stages. The employee progresses from novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, and expert. It is by moving through these stages that skills and experience are acquired. It must be acknowledged that the evidentiary findings of this study may be based on workers who have not gone through the entire set of stages and are not considered expert workers. Similarly, the perceptions of the workforce by management may lead to misconceptions of skill as the management elicits the cooperation and consent of employees, which is necessary to the production of surplus profit and managers' performance at work.

**RQ1:** *What are imperative issues associated with the popularity of the Multimedia Journalism model in local television newsrooms?*

93% of the MMJs in this survey are under the age of 36. 63 of the 130 MMJs are 18-25 years of age. 114 of the 132 (86.36%) MMJs have seven years or less experience in television news. 23% of the MMJs have no more than two years experience in television journalism. 37.6% have no more than three years of experience. "Bigger markets want to hire journalists out of college because it's cheaper (you get what you pay for) and I think this is a detriment to the station and the news reporter. (MMJ, Paducah, Kentucky)." It appears the rise of employment for recent college graduates is rising and the percentage of older employees at local television stations is falling.

The majority of MMJs are young women. 56% of all the respondents were female. Of the 132 respondents, considering themselves an MMJ, 95 were female (71.9%). The majority of those who did not identify as an MMJ were male (46 males to 12 females). Overall 107 of the respondents were female, and 81 were male.

67.72% of the respondents believe the implementation of the multimedia journalists has become the dominant method of news production. However, 64.89% say they prefer the traditional crew of reporter and photographer over the MMJ method.

The MMJ method was considered a small market mode of production because it minimized costs and staff. The less experienced TV reporter would work in a small market as a "one-man band" and after gaining experience would move to a larger market where they would work in traditional crews. "The MMJ format does not work well in large size markets. I have colleagues who are MMJs in mid-size markets that do efficient or extremely efficient work. (Television News Photographer, Top 10 DMA)."

The large markets have different issues than smaller markets, mainly in transportation to and from a news story. An MMJ can not work while driving but a traditional reporter can make phone calls and write scripts while the photographer drives. "The expectation to do everything simultaneously. Sometimes I feel pressured to email or text while driving. The station wants Facebook live, Tweets, and station web updates by 2 pm (we don't have a mobile app so to publish to web we need to be in front of a computer). At the same time were expected to

communicate with sources and managers. I can't do all these things on my phone at once and drive place to place! The most important thing to our managers is finishing two stories by deadline and not having overtime. (Female MMJ, age 18-25, New Orleans)."

News stations are hiring younger MMJs with lower salaries. "Low salaries lead to inexperienced reporters in larger markets than they should be working in. (Male, Television Photographer, Baltimore, MD)." The lack of experience of the MMJs does not help the efficiency of their work. "MMJ is the model, but very few people care to master it. It's looked at as something that's lesser than a reporting job. Management tends to pay MMJs less. (Female MMJ, Denver)."

Safety concerns in larger cities are a threat to the MMJ. "Newsrooms are requiring many MMJs to report in dangerous situations without backup. Solo live shots are a terrible idea, no matter what neighborhood you're in. It's impossible to focus on anything but the camera, which could be you in danger. (Female MMJ, age 26-35, Washington, DC)" "Management doesn't always take safety into concern. I don't think MMJs should be doing live shots alone. - Role models for women MMJs- there really aren't a lot of older women one man banding and I worry it's because companies haven't supported them (what happens if a woman is pregnant, has safety concerns? I feel management is not sympathetic to those concerns). (MMJ Female, age 26-35, New York City).

**RQ2:** *Do MMJ employees feel their workload is manageable?*

Braverman (1975) asserts that quantity is valued over quality in the deskilling process and Ritzer's (1998) McDonaldization requires standardization of output. Workload is used to evaluate both quantity and standardization. The survey revealed that 54% (sd = .55, var. .31) of the respondents in this study believe the workload of the MMJ is too much for one person and only 2.87% believe the workload is not an issue. Workload is similar for all MMJs according to our survey. Market size did not indicate an increase or decrease in expected output. Smaller markets have a slight increase in their output, mostly online stories. 93% of the 132 MMJ respondents are expected to post pictures to social media. Facebook (51.54%) and Twitter (33.85%) are the most popular apps.

The workload creates anxiety for many of the respondents. Some of the inexperienced MMJ (18-25-year-olds) are being routinized, and in the process of improving their skills, the MMJs are often overwhelmed. "I'm exhausted every day. And I feel like my quality of work suffers cause I'm doing the job of 6 people. (Female, 18-25, Scranton, PA)"

Lawal (2017) believed a large part of worker's stress appears to be organizational in nature the respondent's comments reflect the stress that occurs because of the organizational structure. "It's too much, plain and simple. An MMJ should be able to determine their own workload, instead a boss who is not even at the story determines it for herself/himself. (Male, 18-25, Atlanta, Georgia)." "The MMJs have too much on their plate, especially with the constant push for social media content. Shooting and editing a story while also being expected to report things accurately is an excessive amount of work on its own. I also feel very badly for those who are forced to operate their own live shots. It's unsafe, and many MMJs feel this way--they're simply afraid to voice this to management. (Male, Over 36, Salt Lake City, Utah)."

Many MMJs feel the pressures to perform different skills quickly and efficiently lead to a lack of interpretation that leads to habits of selection, exclusion of points of view and emphasis on the dominant perspective. "If it's a busy day and I turn three separate stories plus live shots, and Facebook lives, I need another pair of hands, so the product won't look like crap. Burn out. I'm a storyteller. I am passionate both behind and in front of the lens. But too many hours spent gathering news for ten different platforms wears me out. (Female, 26-35, Knoxville, TN)"

“There are a lot of issues. The responsibilities of a single person are out of control. The expectations are so much higher and typically quality goes to the wayside. It's out of control. (Female, 18-25, Ashland, KY)” The necessity for more products with fewer journalists, especially MMJs who work alone, highlights the counter-intuitive nature of hiring and supporting the MMJ model instead of the traditional crew. Many MMJs view the use of MMJs as a managerial decision and not a journalistic decision. “The problem is news managers (many of whom who have no real field experience) have the same deadlines and production asks for MMJs as 2-person crews. Inexperienced news managers are a widespread problem in news-- which is part of how they get suckered into producer-vision or consultant-vision. (Male, Over 36, Washington, DC).”

Technology may have created greater flexibility and mobility of reporting, but there are physical limitations to the multimedia journalism that are caused by the aspects of deskilling. Deskilling creates vulnerabilities (Braverman, 1975). “No matter what, something will have to suffer out of all the jobs being performed. Usually it's the photography aspect but in many cases it's the ability to have a good interview and be able to pay attention and ask the right questions. If you are worried about technical problems, you are not listening properly. If the technology fails during importing or feeding you are not able to write your lead ins etc because now you are trouble shooting. If you are in a bad neighborhood you have no one keeping an eye out for you while you are working which puts you in an unsafe work environment. (Male, 26-35, Seattle, WA.)”

The expectations of meeting deadlines and carrying a heavy workload are accelerating burnout. “Burnout” is described by Schaufeli (2008), as “exhaustion, cynicism, and lack of professional efficacy” (p. 175). Rahim (2016) explained job burnout as a syndrome of physical and mental health caused by prolonged exposure to stress involving emotional responses (p. 205). The symptom can lead to disillusionment about their job. There are three components of job burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and lack of personal accomplishment. “If one-man-bands can enhance what you can do, I'd be all for it. (But) The grind of breaking news with no staffing and two stories because it's just churn, churn, churn, no time, day in, day out, lead stories. You go nuts. (Female, 25-36, Tampa, FL).”

**RQ3:** *Given a choice, would MMJs prefer the multimedia journalism method of production or the traditional method of a reporter and photographer?*

If the respondents were given a choice, 64.89% (sd = .57, var = .33) would prefer the traditional crew of reporter and photographer overusing the MMJ method. 23.94% of the respondents prefer the MMJ model. 53% of those who prefer the MMJ model are 18-25 years of age. “There is so much news, too much land mass and traffic to get there, and not enough hours in the day before your live shot or story is due to do "one-man bands", or MMJ work. Trust me, it doesn't matter how organized you are. They prefer quantity over quality, the majority of the time in large markets. In my opinion, traditional crews work best in big markets and network television news hand down. (Female, age 36-over, Top 10 DMA).”

The question remains if it is beneficial to have one person produce the work that formerly took two people. In this context, McDonalidization is realized (Ritzer, 1993) when work becomes a relegated process of speed and inventory. Management seems to separate the work from the worker and placing too much work on the individual MMJ. “That's one of the biggest worries. Not only the pay scale, but the workload. I'm completely burnt out. I'm worked to the bone - and my station care only about quantity - not quality. I'm a grinder. And the managers are either completely ignorant, or totally insensitive to, our plight. (Male, 26-35, Hartford CN).”

Feenberg's assertion that technical progress is defined in the dominate culture by the substitution of machines for humans (Feeberg, 2017). It appears that the journalists see the

value in the traditional methods and resist the rational form of progress that is imposed on them. The multimedia journalists would argue Braverman's deskilling is not beneficial to them but the technology appeals to the administrative hierarchies. One of the results of the industrial revolution was the importance of adopting organizational practices intended to promote the efficient use of time (Pfeffer et al., 2012, p. 47). "The emphasis on cutting back on some staff means more MMJs that are expected to cover more content, lowering the quality of the stories. (Female, 18-25, Dallas, TX)."

The "one-man band" has been in existence since the beginning of television broadcasting. A significant difference between the "one-man band" and the MMJ is the number of platforms where their work is intended to be delivered. Besides all of the steps to create a TV news story, the MMJ have other types of production requirements for social media. The impact on the worker is an overload. "Too much load for quality work. We're expected to shoot mobile stories for the web and take slideshow photo essays, while simultaneously conducting interviews on ENG style cameras. Covering large events alone is impossible. And asking for help is useless since all other MMJ's are working on their own stories. Modern newscasts are built on the backs of underpaid and under-resourced MMJ's. (Male 18-25, Tyler, TX)".

Experienced reporters see multitasking as a threat to verifying the accuracy of their stories and can ultimately lead to a loss of integrity. "Certain people will try to tell you one thing and put a spin on a story that you many not have time to check out. You've got to worry about that. I think at some point, if they cover a big enough story, they're going to have to put their foot down and say, 'I'm not comfortable airing the story the way it is now. I've got to find out more.' And that might be a difficult thing to get through to a producer or a news director, but those are the times we live in now. (Male, Over-36, Syracuse, NY)"

**RQ4:** *Has the implementation of the multimedia journalist become the dominate method of news production?*

Respondents viewed the multimedia journalist as a dominate method in their newsrooms. 68.45% (sd=.46, var.= 0.22) of the MMJ respondents believe the implementation of the multimedia journalist has become the dominate method of news production. MMJs recognize management prefers to use the MMJ for certain stories and the traditional crew for other types of stories. In regard to a spot news or breaking news, 54.5% (sd = 1.13, var. 1.28) respondents believe that their managers prefer to send a photographer and a reporter to cover the story. In the case of a general news story, 53.97% of the respondents (sd = 1.08, var. 1.18) believe managers prefer the multimedia journalist to cover the story.

Respondents believe that managers would prefer that In-Depth reporting be produced by a crew of reporter and photographer (68.25%, sd = 1.09, var. 1.20). The ability of the MMJ to create an In-Depth piece is not necessarily the issue. Respondents would like to see MMJs used in different ways than daily assignments. "News Directors think MMJs replace and can efficiently handle the workload of a photographer and reporter crew, but MMJs are rarely given time to make a good story when given the same tasks as a regular team. (MMJ, New Orleans)" "There are many demands for MMJs, leaving little time for in-depth reports. All of my stories, for example, are day turns, and because my station does not give overtime or comp time, I have to work on special reports on my own time. (Female, 18-25, Lincoln, NE)"

The 2018 RTDNA Newsroom Staffing Report indicates that the use of MMJ is dominate in smaller markets with smaller staff (Papper, 2018). More than half the local television stations in the United States (DMAs 51-210) utilized a staff consisting of 59.7% MMJ employees. The other half of larger stations (1-50) utilized a staff consisting of 19.5% MMJ employees. RTDNA's study reveals that staff size is directly related to MMJ use. Newsrooms with 31-50

employees use 56.7% MMJs. Staff size of 21-30 consists of 83.9% MMJs. Staff size of 11-20 consists of 84.8% MMJs. Staff size of 1-10 consists of 80% MMJs (Papper, 2018).

The growth of the MMJ may have plateaued. RTDNA reports that a number of news directors have reported that they are looking to cut back on their use of the MMJs. However, the overall growth of the MMJ was 1% in 2018. MMJ new hires are up 16.9%, more than Producers (15.4%) and Reporters (9.6%). In the “average” local TV news department of 40.4 people, RTDNA attributes 6.2 employees are photographers, 4.9 MMJs, and 3.7 Reporters (Papper, 2018).

The MMJ method at local television stations is not a dominant methodology, but the numbers of MMJs are growing. According to the RTDNA/ Hofstra study of 2018, the use of the MMJ is increasing with employee replacement hiring. The numbers of replacement hires of MMJs have risen 19.5% meanwhile the traditional reporter hires are up 13.7%. The combined MMJ/Reporter hires consist of 33.2% of new employees in television newsrooms (Papper, 2018).

“Great for companies who want to cut cost - bad for quality journalism. Don't get me wrong - you can still turn a great story as an MMJ. But your attention is divided - meaning something also always suffers. And there are physical limitations as an MMJ that just cannot be replicated without a full crew. Anyone that says they can do just as good of a job as an MMJ as a competent, traditional crew, is either in complete denial or ignorant. Two is always better than one. (Female 26-35, Dallas, TX).”

## Limitations

RTDNA's 2018 survey concluded there are 27,100 individuals in local television newsrooms in the United States. Roughly 12.1% of those newsroom's staff are MMJs. This would indicate that the pool of 11,767 individuals from the Storytellers Facebook Page may not necessarily be representative of local television newsrooms. Notably, the RTDNA surveys have more access to management to collect their data and have a more representative pool, this study, utilized a rare opportunity to survey the members of Storytellers, a respected collection of professionals.

Respondents quotes were selected based on the relevancy to the research questions. One-word responses or short sentences were not considered, but small portions of longer responses were chosen, as to best reflect meaningful and accurate representation of the pool dialogue. The chosen quotes may reflect dissenting opinions more than positive affirmations of the professions. The ‘positive-negative asymmetry effect’ (Anderson, 1965; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990; Skowronski & Carlston, 1989) states that when equal measures of good and bad experiences occur, the psychological effects of the bad events outweigh the good remembrances. Perhaps there are more positive feelings that were not expressed in the survey. The positive opinions of this survey were consistently shorter one-word answers.

## Conclusion

The MMJ is an accepted and growing method of journalism production and TV news employment has now surpassed newspapers.<sup>2</sup> Efficiency is expected, and each story is a

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<sup>2</sup> 2018 RTDNA/Hofstra University Newsroom Survey, retrieved at:  
[https://www.rtdna.org/article/research\\_tv\\_news\\_employment\\_surpasses\\_newspapers#.X0gmIRLFSa4.gmail](https://www.rtdna.org/article/research_tv_news_employment_surpasses_newspapers#.X0gmIRLFSa4.gmail)

calculated commodity inventoried in its multiple formats. McDonaldization is occurring to the profession of journalism with serious aftereffects. Braverman's assertion that the disparate white-collar sectors would be brought under capitalistic labor process by the "degradation" of their work (Braverman, 1975). Quantity over quality, with little room for nuanced specialization.

Braverman (1975) would associate the traditional television news crew professionals with higher skills and higher status, a higher working class, that has been demoted to a "growing working-class occupation" with relentless degradation of their working conditions. Safety issues and emotional stress have become a growing concern for MMJs. "Burnout" was frequently cited as a concern by all the respondents. Luz et al. (2017) concluded that burnout is a defense response, even if improper, to the chronicity of occupational stress that reaches unbearable limits (pp. 238-246). Deadline pressure has always been a part of the journalism profession but it is possible to say that no other particular type of journalist was ever required to complete so much work, with so many skills, to be placed on so many formats each day than the MMJ.

Safety concerns rise because of increased burnout. Studies by Maslach & Jackson (1996) identified burnout symptoms with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and inefficacy. Burnout can lead to the risk of injury. Ahola et al. (2013) found that employee suffering from exhaustion have a 10% increase in risk for severe injuries. And those employees who experience burnout symptoms at least once a month saw a 19% increase in their risk of serious injury as compared to those with symptoms less often. They concluded that 'burnout is a risk factor for future severe injuries' (pp. 450-457).

In the United States, there is an overwhelming tendency towards the degradation of work, in a system that is heading toward oligopolistic capitalism. The need to recreate or repurpose the "one-man band," in the form of the MMJ, was nurtured by what Weber would describe as a rationalization of substantively irrational working conditions (Weber, 1968). The last ten years have been difficult for television journalists and the television news industry. In a farewell address Mike James (2017), Editor of NewsBlues.com lamented that during the last decade there had been an unhealthy transformation of TV news. He says, "We've watched a handful of broadcasting companies leverage investment money to gobble up local TV stations by the hundreds, creating ownership behemoths that threaten the public interest by centralizing news production, eliminating competition and diversity (NewsBlues.com, 2017)."

The multimedia journalist is the cell-level organism of a growing corporate organism. Government deregulations have catalyzed change at all levels of the broadcast industry. Corporate consolidation is making an impact on news coverage (Hedding et.al. 2019). The respondents in this survey support Braverman's assertion that deskilling takes place in conforming industries (Braverman, 1975) because of societal and industrial changes, in this case deregulation. Stahl (2016) would support the respondents claim that management is looking for quantity over quality, and a homogenization of the product created by shared resources. McDonaldization of the MMJ occurs because the brick and mortar corporations, like Nexstar, Sinclair, and Tegna, package and brand intangible products manufactured with deskilled workers, performing immaterial labor. All of these assertions can identify the McDonaldization of journalism. Ritzer (1998) would conclude that the respondents of this survey form a working class in the Braverman model.

## **Further Research**

Corporations are consolidating their work and "hubbing" work to be distributed between the stations. TV stations are providing content for more than one TV station. Consolidation of

television stations and mutual operating agreements are increasing the number of stations with local news to a record level. 717 local TV newsrooms are supplying news to another 328 stations. There is a record number 1,045 stations running local news (RTNDA/Hofstra; The Business of News, 2015).

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