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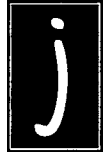
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# Radio journalism training and the future of radio news in the UK

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## ABSTRACT

For nearly 20 years, the majority of radio journalists in the UK have been trained on courses which both the BBC and the commercial sector have endorsed. Radio news was seen as having certain constant and essential elements – whether it was broadcast on a three-minute bulletin on a tiny independent local radio station in Scotland or on a BBC network flagship news programme. But competition now means that journalists in both sectors are operating in an increasingly market-focused culture, having to adapt to new definitions of what interests the public and what the public needs to know, and it appears that the consensus on news values may be breaking down. Using original data collected from radio news editors and radio journalism trainers in the UK, this article looks at what type of journalist will be needed in the future. It analyses the skills and knowledge required for the job and what personal qualities are deemed essential. It argues that journalism training courses are caught in the middle of a divided and fast-changing industry where long-held ideas about public service and the function of news are being challenged both internally and from new media and that their own move towards increased professionalization is adding to the confusion.

KEY WORDS ■ journalism ■ professionalization ■ radio ■ training

## Introduction

There have been dismal predictions about the future of radio news in the UK. The criticisms that journalism generally is being ‘dumbed down’ are well known. The concern most often expressed is that local commercial radio stations – mainly non-speech formats – are increasingly popular, making it highly likely that many and, in some areas, most radio listeners are getting their news from a three-minute bulletin every hour. The latest audience figures show that local commercial radio has a 38.6 percent share of listening while local/regional BBC has just over 11 percent (RAJAR, 2000). It is true that independent radio has been putting public-sector broadcasting in Britain

under increasing pressure for years. The 1990 Broadcasting Act brought an explosion of independent radio stations and relaxed the rules on media ownership, which enabled some powerful radio companies to buy up smaller stations and so consolidate their positions. The BBC has admitted publicly that it fully expects its audiences to fall further in a market place, which will become even more crowded when digital broadcasting becomes more widely available (Forgan, 1995).

The implied criticism in the concerns expressed is that commercial radio news is of less value to the audience. There is less of it than on BBC services and it is audience-driven, rather than wedded to a public service ethos. It is clear, though, that the BBC is also driven by its need for good audience figures, particularly without a long-term guarantee for its licence fee. It has to prove to the government that it caters for a substantial community which would not otherwise be served and to its competitors that it is a major player in the broadcasting world of the future. The BBC's commitment to digital broadcasting, despite its cost, is an indication of its determination not to become marginalized as public-sector broadcasters have elsewhere. BBC Radio is also under pressure with its importance being marginalized in the BBC bureaucratic hierarchy at times (Franklin, 1997: 138) and local radio finding itself ever the poorer relation with respect to its powerful television siblings.

It is no secret that BBC managers are constantly trying to ensure that public-sector broadcasting remains at least in, if not ahead of, the ratings game. A recent major review into BBC television news resulted in what is being called a more 'audience friendly presentation style' (BBC, 1998), prompting yet more speculation that style is replacing content in a bid to win audiences. Although that review was confined to television, BBC radio managers are also re-examining their output to ensure their stations remain competitive against the commercial radio sector.

Journalists, therefore, are operating in an increasingly market-focused culture within both the BBC and commercial radio and, as such, are having to adapt to new definitions of what interests the public and what the public needs to know. These definitions define the speech output and, in turn, define the extent to which audiences are both informed and to which they are able, via the radio, to engage in issues which directly affect them and their immediate communities. One way of predicting the kind of radio news likely to be broadcast in the future is to look at how radio journalists are being trained.

This article examines original data to establish what radio stations want from their new journalist recruits. It examines what they are taught, what general and specialist skills and knowledge are thought essential for the job

and what personal qualities are required. It argues that journalism training courses are caught in the middle of a divided and fast-changing industry, where long-held ideas about public service and the function of news are being challenged both internally and from new media, and that their own inevitable move towards increased professionalization is adding to the confusion.

## **Methodology**

This paper on training draws on data supplied by two constituencies.

### **The industry**

A total of 215 questionnaires were sent to news editors in BBC and commercial radio stations.<sup>1</sup> This questionnaire formed part of a much wider survey into journalist training across the three sectors of newspapers, radio and television. Of these, 130 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 60.5 percent. Of these, 33 came from the BBC and 97 from commercial radio stations. Questions focused on the educational qualifications required by news editors from their new recruits, where editors recruit from, the skills, knowledge and personal qualities deemed essential for the job and reasons for recruiting or rejecting newly trained journalists.

### **Pre-entry radio journalism courses**

These are courses which have been validated by the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC), the body funded by and composed of industry, National Union of Journalists and college representatives, which is charged with drawing up guidelines for radio, bi-media, television and on-line journalism courses and validating those which meet its standards. BJTC-accredited courses are based mainly in higher education and have traditionally been one-year postgraduate diploma courses, although this has changed over the last decade with undergraduate courses becoming more widespread and different modes of delivery coming on stream. Questionnaires, similar to those sent to radio stations, were sent to all colleges which run validated courses. The response rate was 69 percent. Answers to questions about how courses had changed were also analysed and compared with the requirements of radio news editors. The survey was carried out in January 1998.

## Results

### Education

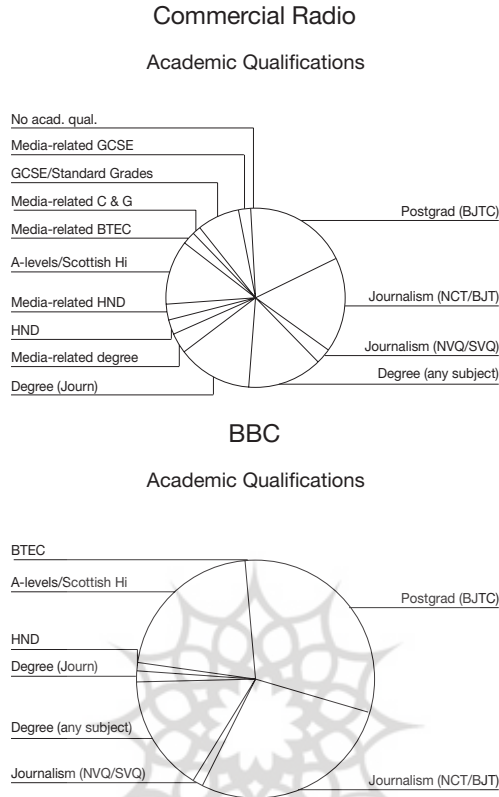
BBC Radio news editors recruited people with a much narrower range of qualifications than commercial radio. A large majority of BBC editors wanted a BJTC qualification at postgraduate level (68.8%) or lower (65.6%). This was a far greater number than in commercial radio where just 41.7 percent expected a postgraduate BJTC qualification and 39.6 percent a BJTC qualification at any level. In the BBC the lowest expected qualification was a BTEC (mentioned by 3.1% of those who replied) while 50 percent expected A levels and 37.5 percent a degree. Commercial radio news editors acknowledged a much greater spread of qualifications: 31.3 percent expected a general degree or one in Broadcast Journalism but other qualifications included HNDs (6.3%), A-levels (27.1%), media-related City and Guilds (4.2%), GNVQs (1%) and GCSEs (17.7%). Of those who replied 2.1 percent said no academic qualifications were necessary (see Figure 1).

The courses accredited by the BJTC mainly accept graduates: 63.6 percent of colleges said they expected a general degree as a minimum qualification. However, an equally wide spectrum of qualifications were also cited as minimum qualifications, ranging through HNDs (9.1%), A-levels (27.3%), media-related BTECs (18.2%), City and Guilds (9.1%) and GCSEs (18.2%). A number also cited Access Courses (9.1%) and relevant experience (18.2%) (see Figure 2).

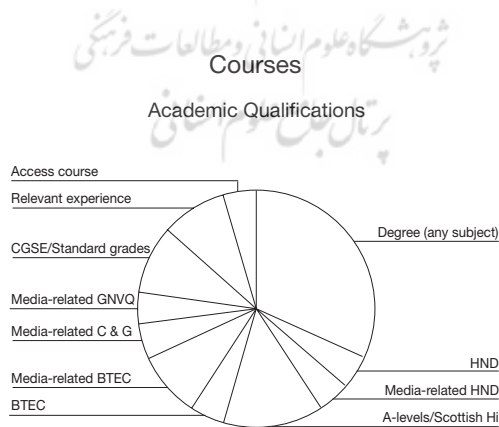
### Recruitment

The BBC is clearly more inclined to recruit from a course validated by the BJTC: 78.1 percent of BBC news editors recruited from the BJTC colleges more often than not while just 67.7 percent of editors in commercial radio did so. More crucially, 17.7 percent of commercial radio editors rarely recruited from validated courses compared to just 3.1 percent of BBC editors (see Figure 3).

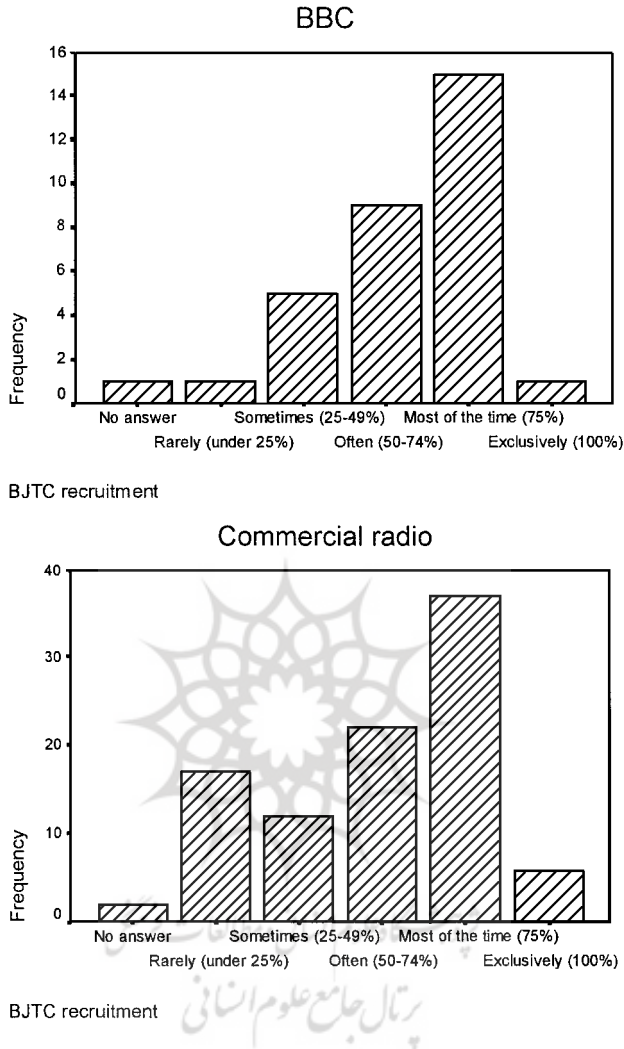
However, entry into radio was not restricted to specifically trained graduates. Recruits were also taken on from other parts of the radio world, like AA Roadwatch (commercial radio) and Community Service Volunteers (BBC), and poached from other media. However, most telling was the number of editors who recruited people who had worked with them on work experience: 56.3 percent of BBC editors recruited via that route while in commercial radio the figure rose to 78.1 percent (see Figure 4).



**Figure 1** Minimum academic qualifications expected by commercial radio and the BBC



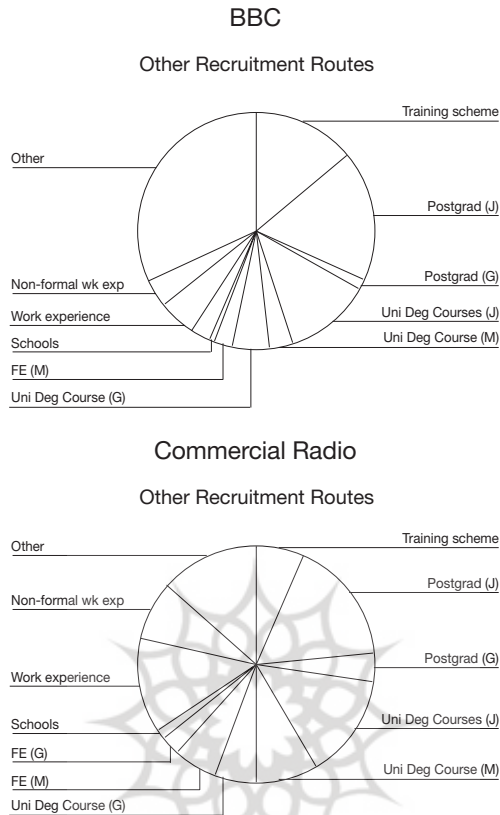
**Figure 2** Minimum academic qualifications expected by accredited radio journalism courses



**Figure 3** BBC and commercial radio recruitment patterns from accredited training courses

Accredited colleges also looked outside traditional educational establishments to recruit their students: 54.5 percent said they had recruited students who were already working in the media while 72.7 percent said they had recruited people who were employed in jobs outside the media.

The findings point to an industry which is not completely tied into a structured and nationally recognized training system. Radio news editors, while clearly respecting a BJTC qualification, do not see themselves in a 'BJTC



**Figure 4** BBC and commercial radio recruitment of journalists from other than accredited training courses (J = journalism; G = general; M = media-related)

closed-shop'. Many news editors, particularly in the BBC, do recruit quite heavily from what may be termed 'specific recruitment routes' – either tailored internal training courses or from BJTC-accredited courses. However, the commercial radio sector does not view BJTC courses as quite so important a recruitment ground as does the BBC and a larger number of journalists come in via work experience.

The industry is relatively highly educated but not graduate-only and is not homogeneous. Likewise colleges, while largely recruiting graduates onto BJTC-accredited courses, do not do so exclusively. In terms of qualifications, BJTC courses appear to broadly reflect the industry they are feeding. The commercial radio sector, however, appears to place less emphasis on the academic qualifications of its new journalist trainees than the BBC and will accept a much more diverse set of qualifications.



## Knowledge

Both radio sectors and the colleges had remarkably similar ideas about the kind of knowledge they looked for in a new recruit. More than two-thirds of both the BBC and the commercial radio sector looked mainly for knowledge of current affairs and general knowledge. The returns ranged from 96.9 percent of BBC editors to 68.8 percent of commercial radio editors. At the other end of the scale, fewer radio news editors looked for specific knowledge about subjects such as economics or commerce, Europe, commercial imperatives of the employer, specialist knowledge, knowledge of the media industry or ethical issues. A total of 25 percent of BBC editors and just 10.4 percent of commercial radio editors mentioned ethical issues. Commercial radio rated almost all categories of knowledge as less important than the BBC except knowledge of the media industry, technical knowledge and commercial imperatives of the employer (see Figure 5).

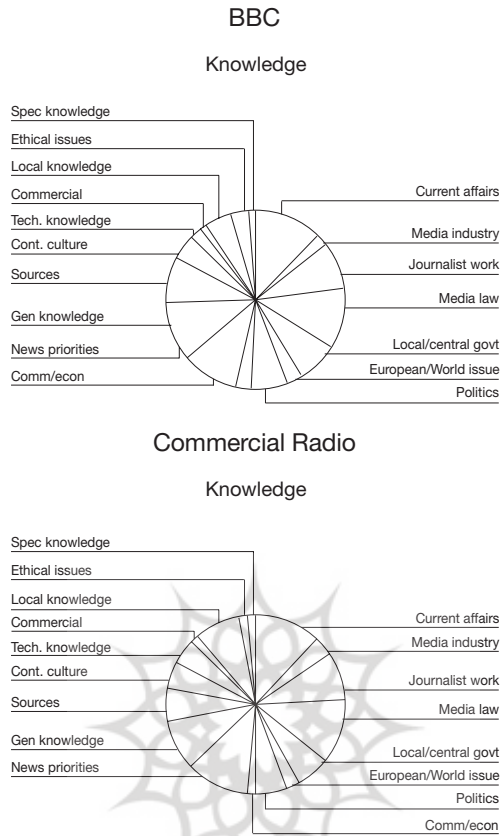
Colleges reflected the same basic pattern. An overwhelming number of the colleges also looked for both knowledge of current affairs (100%) and general knowledge (90.9%) from their new recruits and ranked other categories of knowledge similarly.

Just 18.2 percent of them mentioned ethical issues. The only major differences came in subjects which are *taught* in colleges and are clearly valued by all radio news editors, namely media law, sources of news, local and central government and news priorities. Fewer colleges expected students to have knowledge of these subjects than radio news editors (see Figure 6).

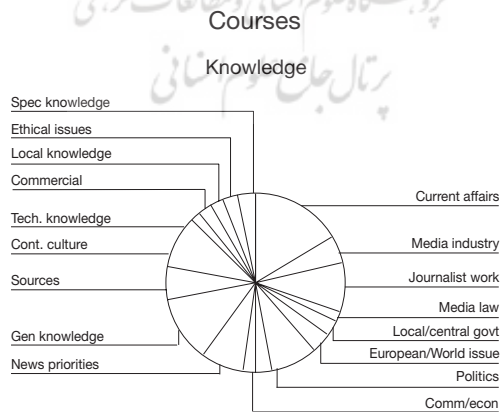
## Skills

The skills looked for by colleges and radio stations differed somewhat, understandably perhaps, as students could expect to learn their specialist skills while on the training courses. However, both the industry and colleges wanted new recruits to have the ability to write and speak English well. In both constituencies, these skills were overwhelmingly most often desired: 93.8 percent of BBC editors thought both skills were essential and this figure dropped only to 81.8 percent for colleges. Only reporting and interviewing skills were looked for by more than a third of all colleges (36.4% in each case) and some other skills, including the ability to speak a foreign language, were mentioned by no college (see Figure 7).

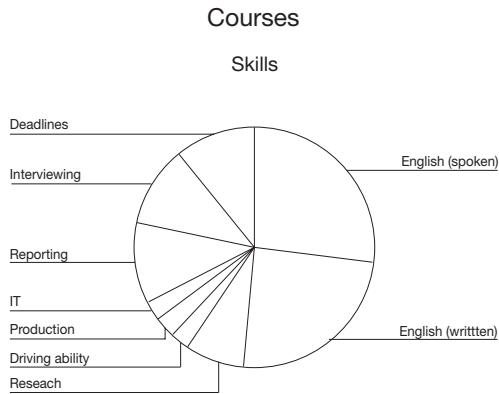
The different radio sectors varied slightly from each other in their views of essential skills. A much greater number of BBC editors looked for skills such as research, the ability to drive, production and IT skills than commercial radio editors. However, there was a relatively consistent approach to the desirability



**Figure 5** The knowledge requirements of BBC and commercial radio



**Figure 6** The knowledge requirements of radio journalism training courses



**Figure 7** The skills requirements of radio journalism training courses

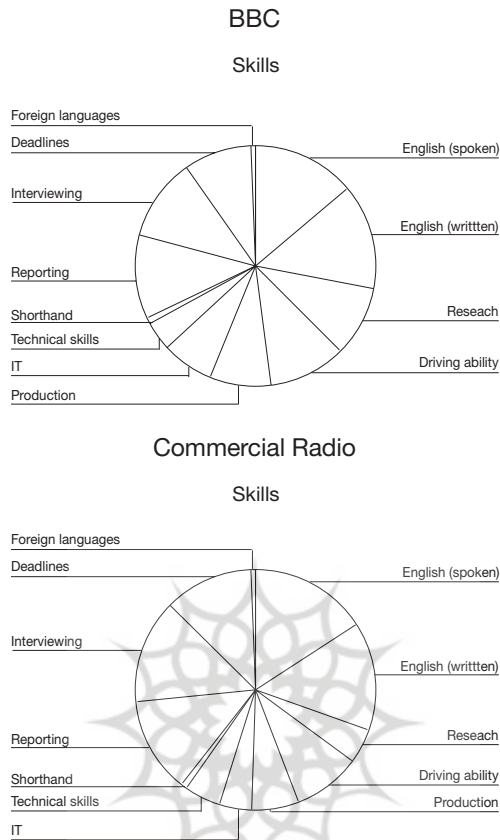
of reporting and interviewing skills, the ability to hit deadlines and the non-essential nature of a foreign language or shorthand (see Figure 8).

What is clearly evident, however, is that knowledge is of far less importance than both skills and personal qualities for both radio news editors and college courses. Personal qualities are generally seen as most important: 56.3 percent of the BBC, 50 percent of commercial radio and 72.7 percent of courses put personal qualities ahead of both skills and knowledge. Only 12.5 of BBC editors, 9.1 percent of courses and just 5.1 percent of commercial radio stations said knowledge was the most important (see Figure 9).

### Personal qualities

Between 75 and 100 percent of all editors thought being able to learn quickly, to withstand pressure, to work in a team, to have a positive attitude and to possess a good voice were essential. Other essential personal qualities included enthusiasm, the ability to do more than one task, curiosity, humour and the ability to think quickly. The BBC thought a sense of ethics, public duty, a sense of purpose, thoughtfulness and analytical skills were more essential than commercial radio did and commercial radio was more enthusiastic about sociability and having outside interests. However, few of these qualities scored higher than 50 percent. Virtually no editors felt enthusiasm for social reform was essential.

College answers matched those of the radio news editors: 90.9 percent of colleges mentioned curiosity, enthusiasm and the ability to listen as essential qualities. Close behind (81.8%) were the ability to learn quickly, to withstand pressure, a good voice, good communication skills and a positive attitude and also featuring strongly were persistence, the ability to think quickly and team-



**Figure 8** The skills requirements of BBC and commercial radio

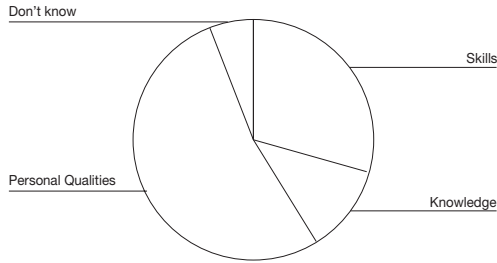
working (72.7%). In addition, 81.8 percent of colleges stated that analytical skills were essential – far closer to the BBC's views – and this consistency was echoed with other personal qualities such as sociability (just 27.3% thought it essential), the importance of outside interests (0%), ethics (27.3%), enthusiasm for social reform (0%), a sense of public duty (18.2%), a sense of purpose (45.5%) and thoughtfulness (45.5%). Only patience (36.4%) was closer to the commercial radio view (see Table 1).

### Factors in recruitment

BBC editors most often cited talent as the main factor behind recruitment, with the right attitude and a good voice a long way behind. Commercial radio, however, wanted enthusiasm and a good voice above all else. In national commercial radio, ambition, a hunger for news and common sense were

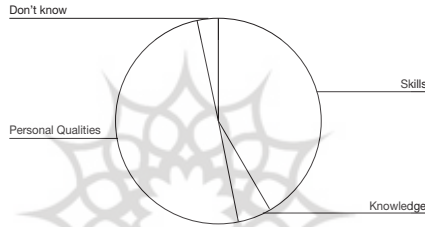
Which is most important to the BBC?

Skills, Knowledge or Personal Qualities



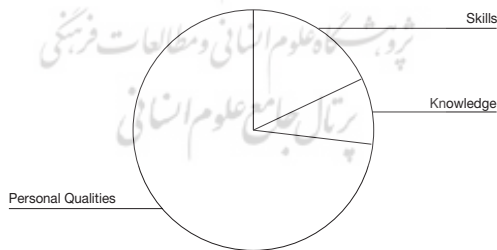
Which is most important to the Commercial Radio?

Skills, Knowledge or Personal Qualities



Which is most important for courses?

Skills, Knowledge or Personal Qualities



**Figure 9** The relative importance of skills, knowledge and personal qualities in journalism trainees for BBC, commercial radio and accredited courses

mentioned as well as good communication skills. In local commercial radio, editors also wanted a good team-worker and ‘the right person’. Arrogance was mentioned by both sectors as a reason for rejecting a candidate. No enthusiasm and a poor voice were also cited by both sectors.

**Table 1** Personal qualities sought in journalism trainees by BBC and commercial radio editors

Personal quality	Sought by BBC (%)	Sought by commercial radio (%)
Ethics	25	17.7
Sense of public duty	25	5.2
Sense of purpose	56.3	31.3
Analytical skills	65.6	40.6
Patience	28.1	33.3
Thoughtfulness	40.6	25
Sociability	31.3	56.3
Having outside interests	9.4	16.7

Colleges mentioned a variety of reasons for recruiting students including talent, a good voice or the right person. The reasons mentioned most often were enthusiasm, commitment and curiosity. Reasons for rejecting a new student were also varied and again included arrogance, no general knowledge, naivety, no commitment, talent or common sense but the most often cited reasons were poor communication skills and no curiosity.

### College courses

The BJTC issues guidelines to radio journalism courses as to what should be taught. The guidelines cover practical skills, professional practice such as ethics and codes of practice, and knowledge deemed necessary for journalists to possess such as how local and central government and European institutions operate and how the law affects journalists. As both BBC Training and the Commercial Radio Companies Association – the umbrella group representing commercial radio companies – have representatives on the Council, it would be surprising if editors disagreed vehemently with the topics covered. Radio news editors, by and large, agreed that subjects taught were either very or quite important. So uniform were the replies that small discrepancies are worth noting.

Well under a half of news editors (34.4% BBC, 42.7% commercial radio) thought any study of media organizations or their history was important. Feature writing and production were thought important by just two-thirds of editors across both sectors. Shorthand, which is no longer compulsory on radio journalism courses, was deemed unimportant by more than half of commercial radio editors. Ethics and public administration were deemed less important by commercial radio editors than the BBC. In both cases, 90.6 percent of BBC editors said the study of these two subjects were important compared with around 76 percent of commercial radio editors.

Looking to the future, two-thirds of editors from both sectors thought multi-skilling – being able to do a variety of different jobs – should be an essential component in a journalism course. Understandably, given the BBC's tri-media approach, far more editors in the BBC were concerned about journalists being able to work across different sectors. The BBC was also more exercised by new technology, both in terms of digital technology and the internet, than the commercial radio sector. Commercial radio editors were substantially more concerned about journalists having an understanding of sales, marketing and PR.

When colleges were asked the same question, 90.9 percent said digital technology should be an essential component and 81.8 percent said the internet and multi-skilling should also form an essential part of training courses, a far higher result than for either of the industry sectors. Colleges, however, were closer to the BBC than the commercial radio sector in terms of whether sales, marketing and PR should form essential parts of the course.

Editors in both sectors wanted more practical training, which kept up with new technology, and more voice training. Both sectors mentioned more training in how to get a job and the needs of the target audience. Colleges too indicated that they should also be teaching students how to get a job, how to freelance and their legal rights.

They have also shown themselves to be sensitive to the perceived wants and needs of the industry. More than half of BJTC courses say they have introduced or put more emphasis on multi-skilling (54.5%) while just under half (45.5%) introduced digital technology. The rate of change since the data were collected means that all radio colleges now must have digital editing systems. Colleges too introduced the internet into their teaching early on.

### **The journalist of the future**

It seems clear from the data that those colleges which are accredited by the BJTC and which meet their guidelines broadly reflect the industry they feed in a variety of important ways. By and large they teach topics which the industry feels are either very or quite important and they anticipate accurately the future requirements of the industry. It is interesting to note that in many cases, colleges have been in the forefront of teaching journalists about the internet (Bromley and Purdey, 1998). Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, college recruitment practices mirror quite markedly those of the industry as a whole. Students recruited, whether from education or elsewhere, share largely the same personal qualities as those demanded by the industry. Qualities such as enthusiasm, the ability to learn quickly and do more than one task, curiosity

and a positive attitude score highly with both colleges and editors. Likewise, reflective qualities were generally in less demand. Thoughtfulness and patience were not seen as quite so essential. Personal qualities and skills were in far greater demand than knowledge. Colleges and employers want their new recruits to be well-informed and excellent at writing and speaking English but are less concerned about what could be termed more 'academic' subjects such as economics, politics, a knowledge of Europe or of a foreign language. Likewise a highly developed sense of ethics was not regarded as essential, nor was a sense of public duty, enthusiasm for social reform, sociability or having lots of outside interests.

This mirrors the portrait of a journalist in popular fiction; a highly motivated person who can learn new skills easily, performs well in a work setting but is not highly sociable and is a moral 'blank-sheet' who can respond to any story and has little sense of being a journalist for a wider purpose. Skills are needed which can be learnt and practised rather than knowledge, which demands patience and reflection. The ability to grasp things quickly, but not necessarily the ability to form relationships with outsiders, is also necessary.

The data show therefore that, in the main, there are clear and strong links between the courses validated by the BJTC and the radio industry they serve. However, the findings also reveal some discrepancies. This next section will examine both the similarities and some of the contradictions.

### **The beginning of cross-sector training**

The courses themselves are well tuned to what the industry wants from its new recruits and are recruiting people who appear to be well suited for the jobs they will be required to do. This apparent cohesion is worth examining closely. It has its roots in history. The BJTC (originally the Joint Advisory Committee for the Training of Radio Journalists, JCTRJ) was founded 20 years ago. It had roughly the same aims as the accrediting body for the training of print journalists, the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), formed nearly 30 years earlier. Students had to be trained to do the job. Print journalism training was almost entirely skills-based. It grew out of the informal training on newspapers where employers had shown young journalists what to do (Boyd-Barrett, 1980). Craft skills formed the basis of training for the NCTJ. Education was marginalized. Colleges taught media law, shorthand and central and local government, the 'academic subjects', and even when block-release and full-time courses moved into further education colleges, experienced journalists were hired to provide the teaching.



The BJTC similarly lays down in its guidelines that lecturers who run BJTC-accredited courses must have had recent experience in the media (BJTC, 1999). Advertisements for lecturers' jobs usually stress 'recent' industry experience. Many employers say teachers of radio journalism must have up-to-date experience. Thus lecturers have come straight out of the media industry unaffected by other influences. They then select the students they believe will have the qualities required to do the job. Students need the potential to be 'one of us' before they begin a course. Because the BJTC judges a course partly on 'outcomes', that is, whether students get jobs at the end, such compatibility is crucial. Likewise, employers will recruit from accredited courses because they know they will acquire the 'right' sort of person and recruitment mistakes are always costly. Professional socialization is thus assured.

There is also a direct line linking journalism training to the concept of public service. One of the earliest building blocks of professional journalism training in Britain was the 1949 Royal Commission on the Press which led to the creation of the NCTJ. The report said:

[t]he problem of recruiting the right people into journalism, whether from school or from university, and of ensuring that they achieve and maintain the necessary level of education and technical efficiency is one of the most important facing the Press, *because on the quality of the individual journalist depends not only the status of the whole profession of journalism, but the possibility of bridging the gap between what Society needs from the Press and what the Press is at present giving it.* The problem is the common interest of proprietors, editors and other journalists. (Royal Commission on the Press, 1949; emphasis added)

Professional training was acknowledged then as important not just for journalism but for the health of society.

This factor is echoed in the BBC's public service ethos and has been absorbed into the fabric of radio journalism training from the beginning. JCTRJ was originally formed to set standards for new recruits to both the BBC and commercial radio.<sup>2</sup> The original committee was cross-sectoral, a structure which remains the same today. However, JCTRJ's guidelines for training were culturally related to the BBC.<sup>3</sup> This was not surprising. Commercial radio news around 1980, when JCTRJ was formed, was in essence little different from BBC local radio news. News or 'meaningful speech' was an integral and valued part of the output. There were no inter-sector arguments within JCTRJ as to what young journalists should be taught. Different styles were accepted but these were superficial differences. As one original member said, 'there was no point in re-inventing the wheel.'<sup>4</sup> Thus, historically, radio journalism training, under the auspices of the BJTC, had its roots firmly planted in vocationalism, with strong cultural links to 'traditional broadcasting' and an ingrained sense of professionalism for the public good.

## The professionalization of training

One of the most recent developments in radio journalism training is its increasing professionalization – an aspect which is producing tensions with a journalism industry which, itself, continues to debate whether it is a profession or a craft. Some of the hallmarks of professionalization are becoming more evident. In his introduction to *Professions and Professionalization*, J.A. Jackson quotes Denzin who argues that professions are like social movements. ‘They recruit only certain types of persons, they develop highly elaborate ideologies and supra-individual values, they have their own mechanisms of socialisation and they often attempt to proselytise and bring new persons into the field’ (Denzin, 1968: 376). Other definitions apply. ‘Professional authority is that enjoyed by those who have been appointed to a “sphere of competence” on the basis of qualifications attested by a professional group of peers’ (Halsey, 1970: 25).

Radio journalism training increasingly fits this definition. It is firmly ensconced within higher education, ‘the institution of the intellectual’ (Parsons, 1968: 539). Lecturers are being asked to produce academic research to underpin their teaching and, in many colleges, the study of ethics and the various codes of practice associated with radio journalism are being emphasized as a way of underpinning the intellectual component of the courses. Courses themselves are converting to higher levels. Some postgraduate diploma courses are becoming MA courses, partly, no doubt, because of the continuing expansion of higher education and the fear that other professions will compete for high-calibre students, but also in a desire to raise standards. Professional organizations are being formed, such as the Association of Journalism Educators, to discuss common issues.

While this ‘professionalization process’ is gathering speed, radio journalism lecturers are simultaneously finding themselves caught between the organizational demands of their employers, the universities, who want to increase student numbers while maintaining their educational and intellectual focus; and the industry and the BJTC, neither of which shows any evidence of wanting to develop along those lines. On the contrary, the research shows that knowledge in its broadest sense is of far less importance than skills and personal qualities and, although the BJTC is, at the moment, placing more emphasis on ethics, this is in direct response to structural changes in the industry, namely the increase in freelance staff and independent producers and the subsequent training gap, rather than a desire to explore the ethical issues at the heart of journalism today. Broadcast journalism training is steadfastly ‘practical’. Thus, although the radio journalism courses do appear

to match the industry's needs, the context in which they are taking place is beginning to exercise contrary demands.

### **Implications for news**

The data expose other contradictions which exist in the professional training of radio journalists. The research shows that commercial radio recruits significantly less than the BBC from BJTC-accredited courses: 78.1 percent of BBC news editors recruited from the BJTC courses more often than not, while just 67.7 percent of editors in commercial radio did so. More crucially, 17.7 percent of commercial radio editors rarely recruited from validated courses compared to just 3.1 percent of BBC editors. Commercial radio seems to have a wider recruitment base than the BBC. It recruits more people from work experience, accepts a more diverse range of educational qualifications and requires less knowledge generally from its new recruits.

Other slight discrepancies are exposed from which, again, no firm conclusions can be made but inferences can be drawn. College courses match the BBC's requirements more closely than those of commercial radio. For example, digital technology and the internet, which are high priority for the BBC, are more likely to form part of a college course than sales and marketing, which are thought essential by around a third of the commercial radio sector. The personal characteristics of students match slightly more closely to the BBC's requirements than those of commercial radio: 17.7 percent of commercial radio editors stressed the importance of teaching a commercial radio style of broadcasting, not just a BBC style, when asked how courses could be improved. The BJTC stresses that both commercial radio and BBC styles must be taught on college courses but, clearly, the perception within commercial radio is that the BBC style is still dominant. These small discrepancies may well be incidental but they can be seen as a measurement of the radical changes which commercial radio has undergone in the last 20 years.

In 1980 fewer than two dozen independent radio stations existed (Commercial Radio Companies Association, 1998). Today there are nearly 250 stations, including three national stations. News is geared to the perceived needs of the target audience and commercial radio stations have great flexibility over how they handle their information and news output because of the new 'format statements' which have replaced the 'promise of performance' on licence applications. The BJTC's guidelines, meanwhile, have changed only marginally in the last 20 years. Clearly they have been adapted to include certain developments in the industry, such as bi-media broadcasting. They have not, however, matched the fundamental changes in philosophy under-

pinning news in the commercial radio sector. The basic principles of radio journalism training have remained the same. The basic principles of news for commercial radio have not.

### **Implications for training**

The data show that for the BBC, the major training need is for the digital future. The preoccupation in the BBC for multi-skilling and familiarity with digital technology and the internet clearly shows that the BBC sees the biggest training challenge to lie in this area. Colleges are responsive to this and appear to be tailoring their training accordingly. The BJTC has just developed guidelines for courses in online broadcast journalism in what is seen as a clear response to online services run by the major news providers, the BBC and ITN. Changes in news content of the BBC are likely to be influenced by technological advances rather than major changes in news culture, despite the race for ratings and the increase in competition. Certainly the BJTC shows no signs of any fundamental change in its approach and there are no signs that the BBC are less than happy with the BJTC courses. Market forces may, of course, be affecting news content but the pressures are not as yet having any obvious effects on the most common entry route for new journalists.

Commercial radio, however, does recruit less often from BJTC-accredited courses and from a wider recruitment base yet the discrepancies in personal qualities and knowledge required by new journalists are in no way conclusive enough to suggest that commercial radio requires a 'different sort of person'. Critics may claim that commercial radio, from its very start, did not take training as seriously as the public sector and that this tendency has persisted. However, many early commercial radio stations did train their new staff in the way that newspapers had originally done, by internal supervision by editors rather than by trainers on formal, internal courses. Furthermore, at that time, many radio stations, both commercial and BBC, recruited their staff already trained from newspapers, and radio training courses were originally set up primarily because of the realization that a newspaper training was not suitable for radio journalists in either sector.<sup>5</sup> One conclusion which could be drawn from the fact that commercial radio recruits less often from BJTC-accredited courses is that traditional professional training does not match the news culture of commercial radio.

Those who subscribe to the 'dumbing down' argument would say that the ever-rising professional standards of the BJTC are being rejected by commercial radio because the independent sector is 'less professional'. Consequently a

new journalist can, at no great loss, be recruited from a greater variety of entry routes in a more flexible way. Untrained journalists are also likely to be less encumbered by debts and able to accept lower wages thus continuing the de-skilling, de-professionalization process. The standards to which new journalists are trained by the BJTC are good but are simply not required. The effect is to loosen the bonds between commercial radio and the professional training courses.

Commercial radio, however, may no longer accept the BJTC's definition of professionalism, which is both historically and culturally aligned to traditional broadcasting and to the BBC's ethos of public service. Indeed, commercial radio would say that it has re-defined 'public service'. A community's needs are serviced through the totality of a station's output and not just through its news output (West, 1998). Journalists are servants of their audience, the public, rather than members of a profession with its own particular beliefs, conventions and values. News in commercial radio does not have the same function as within the BBC. Content and style are driven by the organizational requirements of commercial radio stations, that is, the need to keep people listening. That, in turn, means listening to the audience and reacting to its needs rather than responding to the professional journalist's definition of what news is.

Surveys within GWR, one of the largest commercial radio groups in the UK, have shown that audiences for their services are most interested in particular subjects, such as health, education and environmental issues and news editors are informed of these preferences.<sup>6</sup> In a world where future prospects – both for the station and for staff – are informed by audience figures, it is unlikely that news editors would easily ignore such information. And while the BBC has placed the mission to inform at the heart of its news policy, many commercial radio managers see news as having a different role, namely that which 'glues' the listener to the station. News takes its place alongside other information to keep the listeners informed.<sup>7</sup> News, after all, is a niche market. Not everyone would choose to listen to it (Yelvington, 1999). Furthermore, news is increasingly a commodity which can be obtained by a variety of routes and in a variety of forms.

If that is the case, commercial radio journalists may not need to have the broad-based training which is to be found on industry-accredited courses. Some of the skills and knowledge laid down in the BJTC guidelines, such as an awareness of different types of interview situations, the ability to make features and documentaries and a knowledge of the structure and function of public administration systems, may be redundant, whereas others, such as knowledge of audience research and segmented markets and presentation

techniques, may be of far greater importance. Indeed one commercial radio news editor has said that journalists in commercial radio should more accurately be called News Presenters as good presentation skills are crucial to success.

The influence of new media, namely the world wide web and the internet, cannot be underestimated in this debate. The definition of public service as 'community involvement', at the service of a community, is becoming ever more valid in a society where consumers are increasingly able to choose the information they want when they want it. Journalists working in a world where consumers are empowered are interpreting 'public service' literally; supplying whatever information is needed at the time it is needed, rather than broadcasting a bulletin containing a journalist's definition of news. So-called 'people's journalism' is helping surfers to find what they want, what is important for them, what is true and what is useful (Yelvington, 1999). News becomes too narrow a term for the information which is being given. Certainly it will no longer be controlled by 'broadcasters who . . . claim to know "what the public needs" . . . where success and reputation are mediated through the judgement of professional colleagues, not of clients' (Lewis and Booth, 1989: 69).

This re-definition of public service as 'people's journalism', a way of helping people find their way through the information available and making it relevant to them as individuals is a new interpretation of how to bridge the 'gap between what society needs from the press and what the press gives it' (Royal Commission on the Press, 1949).

The evolution of new media throws up a number of issues about what the journalist will need to know in the future. Whereas the 'traditional' skills of newsgathering, reporting, explaining and interpreting will still be important, other skills will also be needed. When an audience can access virtually the same sources of news as the journalist, skills, which are most evident in commercial radio, such as the ability to identify what the audience wants and supply it, will be crucial to the survival of any news operation. Furthermore, journalism training in the future could well be partly driven by the need for new recruits to be able to use the multi-media opportunities offered by the internet. The challenge of fully merging audio, text, still and moving pictures and graphics, and the need for creative design and navigation skills for web authoring could put still more pressure on journalism training courses, which are already struggling to meet the demands of an increasingly diverse industry.

The debate about the value of commercial radio news is an indication of the pressures behind today's radio and the complexity of the media spectrum.

The news which is broadcast on commercial radio can be seen as 'less professional' or it can be seen as a re-definition of professionalism which is more relevant to the highly segmented audiences of the 21st century who not only have greater expectations and choice but can also control what they want to hear to a far greater extent than ever before.

### **Conclusion – the end of cross-sector training?**

The BJTC developed the same standards for the entire radio industry at a time when the industry was more or less homogeneous. While never putting a greater emphasis on the BBC – indeed, it has expanded its commercial radio membership and consulted widely throughout both radio sectors – nevertheless it inherited a culture of broadcasting which, until quite recently, most people accepted as having eternal value. But training bodies, almost by definition, traditionally lag behind industrial developments and the BJTC is now having to operate in a context where these traditionally accepted values and formats of radio news are breaking down and there is no universally held view of the role news should play in the output. Certainly, the evidence suggests that the gap between how the BBC and the commercial sector view news is widening. The cross-sectoral training courses such as those the BJTC validates have an uphill struggle to reflect the complexity of today's news operations.

The biggest danger is a too-highly-structured curriculum which would lead to the homogenization of ideas and values for an industry which has increasingly divergent ideas and values. But, conversely, too great a flexibility in courses could lead to a disintegration of the system.

Furthermore, BJTC courses are increasingly finding themselves torn not only between the conflicting 'professionalism' of the two radio sectors but also by the increasing professionalization of their own radio journalism training sector.

Already there is evidence that the commercial radio sector is prepared to look elsewhere for its recruits and at least one editor has suggested that one way forward is for a college to train only for commercial radio. Further on-going research is needed to establish if the drift away from the validated courses is increasing. If so, the effect on professional training for radio journalists could be far-reaching. The BJTC and the cross-sectoral training partnership which has lasted for two decades in the UK could become casualties of the diverging radio sectors.



**Notes**

- 1 Questionnaires were sent to all commercial radio stations in the UK, either directly or via the Commercial Radio Companies Association, and to all BBC regional stations via BBC Training. There were two replies from BBC network editors.
- 2 Interview with Gerard Mansell, former Chair, Joint Advisory Committee for the Training of Radio Journalists, 15 July 1999, London.
- 3 Interview with Gerard Mansell.
- 4 Interview with Peter Baldwin, former member, JCTRJ and Director of Radio for the former Independent Broadcasting Authority, July 1999.
- 5 Interview with Gerard Mansell.
- 6 Interview with Simon Cooper, Director of Policy and Public Affairs, GWR, June, 1999.
- 7 Interview with Simon Cooper.

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### **Biographical note**

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