

'Financial hazing' of new journalism hires ultimately hurts all of us

A journalism student about to graduate and enter the job market recently shared on social media that she was nervous about the low-pay for her first job, wages that would be less than working at a big box retailer or at a restaurant.

One of the veteran journalists in the social media group where she posted responded almost predictably with the same advice I was given decades ago when I was about ready to graduate from college: "This is about doing what you love and not about what you're going to make. If you love what you're doing, it won't matter."

Although it certainly varies by market and by the size and type of media outlet, the pay scale for journalists has always been comparatively low, still hovering around \$25,000 as a starting salary in many places, either in print or broadcast.



(Photo via Flickr)

The median annual wage for news analysts, reporters and journalists was \$49,300 in May 2020, according to the US

Bureau of Labor Statistics. It was still higher than the median for all workers, which was around \$41,000. So we're not the worst. Yay?

It's almost a running joke on many websites focused on career and salary numbers. "Long story short, those who are skilled enough can make a living as a journalist," according to Shmoop, an Arizona-based education technology company. "Some people get lucky, and some people work hard their entire lives to make ends meet. Others barely make enough to keep the internet on—and to a journalist that's probably even more important than food."

Our business model is broken, our newsrooms are shrinking or disappearing in many places and sectors—while growing in others, and because of that perhaps, we expect to attract and recruit young journalists to come work for the cause just like we did.

It reminds me of the one-uppance that my generation—Gen X—often displays in talking about millennials or Gen Z. We survived without seatbelts and helicopter parenting. We didn't die from all of the hairspray fumes. We scraped by near the poverty line and emerged from it intact.

It's a ritual financial hazing that has to stop.

We simply cannot expect or demand that the next generation of journalists come work for us at barely minimum wage, without at least offering other workplace incentives that help offset it. Of course workplace incentives don't pay the rent. But we certainly cannot hope to attract the most qualified, diverse candidates on near poverty wages in toxic or unsupportive newsrooms, meaning our smallest new organizations will continue to be some of the least reflective of many of our communities.

We can be do better by the young people we hire, by listening to their safety concerns when we send them out along on

assignment and by creating inclusive workplace cultures.

I get it. I know that financial reality of small community news organizations that are struggling to emerge from the pandemic with decreased advertising revenue. I get that we are competing for young viewers and readers who don't want to pay because we gave our content away for free for so long that even their parents don't understand that it costs to produce good, credible content.

Because of the labor shortage, we can't find customer service representatives or carriers, and every small town publisher knows that nothing raises the ire of local readers like a late paper.

But local media outlets should not distance themselves from the reckoning over wages and work conditions even if we are not starved for employees.

Overall, the United States has more open jobs (11.3 million) than unemployed workers (6.3 million), according to the US Chamber of Commerce.

That means if every unemployed person in the US found a job, the country would still have nearly 5 million positions without a worker.

The health care, hospitality and food sectors are having the hardest time attracting and retaining workers.

Some sectors like construction and mining have the opposite problem, more available workers than jobs. The news industry is in a similar position.

There were more than 14,000 journalism degrees awarded at US colleges and universities in 2020.

The Bureau of Labor Estimates projects 5,400 openings for news analysts, reporters, and journalists each year, on average, over the decade.

A few weeks ago an editor at a medium-sized newspaper in Ohio called me to check the reference of a former student of mine, a star student whose passion for journalism and accountability reporting, whose drive and work ethic is a model for other young journalists.

The editor acknowledged that she likely wouldn't remain with the news organization for long. She was ambitious, good at what she did and would be lured by higher paying jobs in a few years.

But in the meantime, he planned to offer her mentoring and careful editing. He planned to listen to her story ideas and encourage her. He wanted to make the newsroom a healthy place for this young woman.

It was an honest conversation, and it was a start.

A version of this story first appeared in Publisher's Auxiliary, the only national publication serving America's community newspapers. It is published by the [National Newspaper Association](#). GJR is partnering with Pub Aux to reprint Jackie Spinner's monthly "Local Matters" column on our website. Spinner is the editor of Gateway Journalism Review. Follow her on Twitter @jackiespinner.