

STATE OF THE EDUCATION BEAT 2016

A Field With A Future





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FOREWORD

Dear Colleague,

It's been more than 30 years since I got my start covering schools from a daily newspaper's bureau in the basement of a town hall in southern Connecticut. My tools of the trade back then were pretty simple: notebook, pen, telephone, and manual typewriter. Yes, I did say manual.

Three decades later, we've come a long way. In today's digitally driven knowledge economy, how, where, and when people interact with journalists and their work is dramatically different from when I started. The education beat has been as affected as any other by these transformational changes.

Against this backdrop, anecdotes abound about how the education beat has evolved in ways both good and bad — but often with the emphasis on the bad. I would have retired to the Riviera by now if I had a dollar for every time I've heard how the beat is a shadow of its former self. Or that reporters no longer can find the time or energy for in-depth stories. Or that education remains a beginner beat where reporters mark time waiting for a more prestigious opportunity to come along.

Yet as the saying goes, the plural of anecdote is not data. And education journalism has to date suffered from a dearth of information about the field itself. Without solid data, how could the Education Writers Association or anyone else assess the accuracy of the conventional wisdom about the field — let alone all the individual stories, personal impressions, and lived experiences of education journalists across the nation?

That's where the *State of the Education Beat* project comes in. Driven by a desire to know more about the working lives of members of the media who cover education, my EWA colleagues and I talked to numerous potential research partners to undertake this initiative. We couldn't have been more fortunate in our ultimate choice of the Education Week Research Center, which is itself affiliated with a respected independent education news outlet. Led by education-reporter-turned-researcher Holly Yettick, the center was the perfect research outfit to take the pulse of the profession for this first-of-its-kind report.

Working closely in partnership with EWA, Holly and her talented team conducted a robust national survey and in-depth telephone interviews. They probed core questions and produced a host of original data — from the demographics of the education journalism workforce to information on professional challenges, career paths, and confidence in the quality of today's education coverage. The result is new knowledge — and vital baseline data — about the people and news organizations that inform the public about the critically important topic of education.

If you're anything like me, you'll be surprised by much of what they found. Throughout the report, I suspect you will learn things that strengthen your resolve and heighten your sense of purpose. Call me quixotic, but one thing that drives me is a strong desire to help more talented journalists see the field of education reporting as a true specialty, even a profession within a profession. That's certainly how I have seen it for many years. That's why I was so heartened to learn that nearly eight out of 10 *State of the Education Beat* respondents say education journalism is a career path they are committed to pursuing. The same share report being satisfied in their jobs. Nearly as many see education as a prestigious beat. And only 17 percent view the beat as a steppingstone to a better one.



FOREWORD



Another thing that motivates me personally is a belief that the work of education journalists truly matters. I feel uniquely privileged to work at the crossroads of journalism and education — both bulwarks of American democracy. That’s why I was so inspired to learn that 95 percent of *State of the Education Beat* respondents say their journalism makes a positive impact on education. That’s right: 95 percent. And many of those who participated in follow-up phone interviews offered tangible and compelling examples of impact. Apparently, I’m far from alone in my conviction that education journalists are making a difference.

As an optimist, I never stop believing that for all our challenges, education journalism will emerge stronger than ever from the period of transformational change that has made my old manual typewriter an antique. That’s why I was pleased to learn that more than half of *State of the Education Beat* respondents express confidence that U.S. education journalism is going in the right direction. More than two-thirds say the same about coverage of the subject at their own news outlets. And guess who’s most optimistic? Millennials. Journalists born since 1980 are substantially more likely than their elders to have confidence that the field is going in the right direction. To me, that sounds like a field with a future.

Original research can’t be done for free and I am thankful for the supporters that helped make this study possible. The Wallace Foundation agreed to my request for initial support, and I appreciate that early vote of confidence. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, and the Walton Family Foundation all provided much-needed additional financial support for the project — and none of them sought to influence the research in any way. Simply put, they trusted us, and I am grateful.

I am equally thankful for the hard work of the dedicated EWA team, especially Deputy Director Erik Robelen, as well as the EWA Board of Directors and Journalist Advisory Board. Together, the EWA staff and board intend to draw extensively on the *State of the Education Beat* findings to improve our programs and services and chart a course for the future.

Yet as useful as the report is to EWA, we did not undertake this project to inform ourselves. We undertook it to inform *you*. We pursued this project to provide a service to the field. With that purpose in mind, I urge you to spend time with this report. Please consider it a mirror to hold up to your own experiences and a tool for self-reflection and improvement. I hope your newsroom colleagues will view this report as a reference point for your work together as well. Finally, I invite those who are not working journalists but who care about education journalism to use this report as a resource to better understand the field.

Afterward, I am hoping you’ll come away feeling as I do: The state of the education beat is strong.

Caroline Hendrie
Executive Director



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education journalists have the critically important task of informing the public about education at the local, state, and national levels. But little is known about this sector of the news media. What does this workforce look like? Do education journalists believe their work matters? Are they satisfied in their jobs? What challenges does the field face to better informing public dialogue on education?

Last fall, the Education Writers Association (EWA) teamed up with the Education Week Research Center to answer these and other questions in a first-of-its-kind online national survey and follow-up interviews. The result is this report, *State of the Education Beat 2016*.

The report offers comprehensive new data that provides the field with important baseline information. The findings can be used to inform decisions about resources devoted to the education beat, and for assessments by media outlets of how they cover – or do not cover – education.

State of the Education Beat also tells a compelling story, and a hopeful one. Two-thirds of respondents say education journalism is going in the right direction at their news outlets. A majority hold that view of the field as a whole. The report challenges the widely accepted narrative that education is a steppingstone beat with negligible prestige.

The survey's more than 400 respondents revealed that the typical education journalist is 36 years old with 11 years of experience. The report further shows how education journalists differ from journalists overall. Seventy-one percent of education journalists are female, compared with 38 percent of journalists as a whole. Also, one-in-five education journalists is nonwhite, compared with 9 percent for the profession at large.

State of the Education Beat indicates that 79 percent of education journalists are very or fairly satisfied with their jobs. They are committed to their beats and believe deeply that their reporting is making a difference in their communities, the data and interview responses show. Here's how one journalist put it: "I wrote this big story that got picked up across the state. Now it's like one of the most heated discussions in the state. Nobody knew about it until I wrote about it."

But this is not to say education journalism is without challenges – some of them significant and reflective of the long-term health of the field and public access to high-quality education coverage. Two messages in particular stand out: Education journalists want more time for in-depth coverage and colleagues with more education expertise.

Many also are concerned that pressure to generate web traffic can put popularity above substance in editorial decision-making. "I could spend all week working on something that I thought was really great or really earth-shattering and the next week maybe my traffic has risen by a tenth of a percent. It's kind of deflating," said one reporter.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KEY HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE REPORT

- 1. Education journalism is a field with a future.** Education journalists see the beat as a capstone, not a steppingstone: 79 percent of survey respondents say education is a career path they are committed to pursuing. Millennial education journalists have substantially higher confidence levels, a finding that bodes well for the future of the field.
- 2. Journalists believe their work has a positive impact on education.** One of the most dramatic — and heartening — findings to emerge from the *State of the Education Beat* study is that 95 percent of all education journalists feel their work is making a difference.
- 3. No shortage of challenges.** Sixty-five percent of respondents say responsibility for covering (or supervising coverage of) too many aspects of education leaves them little time for in-depth education journalism. And one-third find it difficult to get in-person access to schools and college campuses.
- 4. Education journalists have high levels of confidence in their field.** *State of the Education Beat* introduces the Education Journalism Confidence Index, which uses 13 survey questions to assess respondents' overall perceptions of their field. Seventy-six percent express confidence in their sector. Also, 67 percent say education journalism at their own news outlet is going in the right direction.
- 5. Inequality is undercovered; testing and budgets and finance will be the top stories.** Asked to name the most under-covered issue in education, inequality stood out. The most commonly cited “top stories” for the 2016-17 school year are testing and budgets and finance.
- 6. Television gets low marks from peers for coverage of education.** If the Confidence Index has an outlier, it is the perception of TV news. Just 5 percent of study participants express confidence in TV education news, compared with 72 percent for newspapers.
- 7. Public relations efforts are an important part of education coverage.** News releases, news conferences, or public relations professionals are the top sources of story ideas for education journalists who took the survey.
- 8. Teachers and faculty members are key sources.** Asked to identify sources they turned to in the last month to inform coverage, journalists report a virtual tie for first place between teachers/faculty members (89 percent) and news releases, news conferences, and PR professionals (88 percent). Other top sources? News coverage, local educational leaders/school districts, and school/campus visits.
- 9. Is the education beat shrinking? Yes and no.** Although 32 percent of respondents say their education news staffs had declined over the past two years, 27 percent report growth and 41 percent say the size didn't change. However, education-focused news outlets are more likely to indicate growth than general-interest media.
- 10. The salary gap.** As with the overall journalism workforce, a wage gap exists for education journalists by gender. Full-time male education journalists make about \$3,000 a year more than their female counterparts.



PART 1: A NATIONWIDE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, new technologies and economic pressures have transformed the Fourth Estate. Legacy print and broadcast outlets have struggled to adapt revenue models and news coverage to accommodate developments like smartphones, social media, and new competitors online. In the midst of these changes, the Great Recession delivered an additional blow. Traditional news outlets downsized, folded, and merged.

As news organizations have evolved, the jobs of journalists have changed. Many reporters face greater pressure to produce more copy more quickly for their online audiences. With smaller newsrooms, they often are expected to cover more ground. They also are using social media to find sources, share stories, and gather feedback. They're increasingly being asked to include multimedia features, such as video and audio in their coverage.

The same forces that battered the legacy news media have opened the floodgates to a fresh breed of digital news outlets in a world in which launching a news operation no longer requires an expensive investment in a printing press or a satellite truck. A cacophony of competing voices have emerged. Some have adapted traditional, late 20th century journalism to new platforms. Others have skewed left or right on the political spectrum, or focused on parents, or operated in a gray area blending news, analysis, opinion, and advocacy.

It is easier than ever before to reach and attract audiences who are exclusively or mainly interested in news about particular issues, including education. From the nationally focused *Inside Higher Ed* to the local *Chalkbeat* network, a new crop of education-oriented, digital outlets have taken the stage. Some legacy outlets have responded with education-related innovations of their own, from the 2014 launch of the NPR Ed website to the Associated Press's 2015 announcement of a new, multimedia "national beat" education team.

Change is the constant. But amid so much change, it's imperative to take stock of the field of education journalism, and to better understand what these shifts mean from the perspective of working journalists. How do they feel about their jobs, their field? Are they optimistic or pessimistic about the future of education journalism? Do they think their work matters? Where do they turn for story ideas and information? What challenges do they face? And what does today's education journalism workforce look like?

These are among the many important questions the Education Writers Association seeks to answer with the *State of the Education Beat* report.

PART 1: A NATIONWIDE STUDY



The *State of the Education Beat* study gathered this information from those closest to the subject matter at hand: education journalists themselves. For the purposes of this project, “education journalists” included individuals working full-time, part-time, or on a freelance basis at newspapers, broadcast outlets, and online-only organizations throughout the U.S.

Because there is no comprehensive, authoritative list of all the education journalists in the nation, the study recruited participants via two major sources. First, the project drew on the list of journalist members of the Education Writers Association, a national, nonprofit membership organization. The second source was a commercial list of contact information for education journalists.

During October and November of 2015, roughly 400 education journalists participated in a detailed online survey about their work, their perceptions, and the challenges they face. To increase the honesty of the responses and protect the privacy of the journalists, the study was anonymous. For this reason, this report does not name participants.

The study also included a series of follow-up interviews with a subset of education journalists who volunteered to be interviewed when they took the survey. In early 2016, researchers invited all 197 of these volunteers to participate in phone interviews and were able to schedule, conduct, and transcribe interviews with 61 of the volunteers. Interviews lasted 14 to 52 minutes each. Interview participants were similar to survey respondents in nearly every measurable way. The goal of the phone interviews was to explore the project’s focal issues in greater depth and probe intriguing findings surfaced by the survey.

For further details about the survey and interview methodologies, see the Appendix.

Drawing upon both survey and interview results, the remainder of the report elaborates upon these and other findings about the current landscape of education journalism in America.



PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

WHAT IS AN *EDUCATION JOURNALIST*?

The answer to this question is not immediately clear. New technologies have reshaped the definition of “journalist” in an era when any parent with a smartphone now has the ability to reach millions with a tweet. Is this parent a journalist? Legal and professional debates swirl around questions like these. Even if there were general agreement around the definition of “journalist,” questions remain when it comes to defining an **education** journalist. Must they focus exclusively on education issues? What about freelancers? Teacher bloggers? The nuances seem endless.

Into this complicated environment stepped the *State of the Education Beat* study. With an eye toward simplicity and inclusivity, the following definition was crafted for the purposes of the study:

*An **education journalist** is defined as anyone actively involved in producing education journalism or supervising the production of education journalism that appears in independent news outlets. Education journalists do not necessarily spend all or most of their time on education: They may also cover other beats. They include full- and part-time employees, as well as freelancers and contractors.*

More than 90 percent of those responding to the survey fit this definition and were included in the analyses presented in this report. Most who did not were excluded because they had retired, left journalism for other careers, or were working for publications, such as alumni magazines, that were clearly not independent news outlets.

WHO ARE THE *EDUCATION JOURNALISTS*?

Understanding how education journalists may be distinct from the larger profession is a key goal of the *State of the Education Beat* study. Throughout this report we compare our study results against findings from *The American Journalist in the Digital Age*, a nationally representative study led by Lars Willnat and David H. Weaver.¹ That 2014 project is the latest in a series of academic studies building upon the work reported in the 1976 book, *The News People*.² An important caveat is that the *EdBeat* survey is national in scope but we do not know for sure if it is nationally representative. (See the Appendix for more methodological details.)

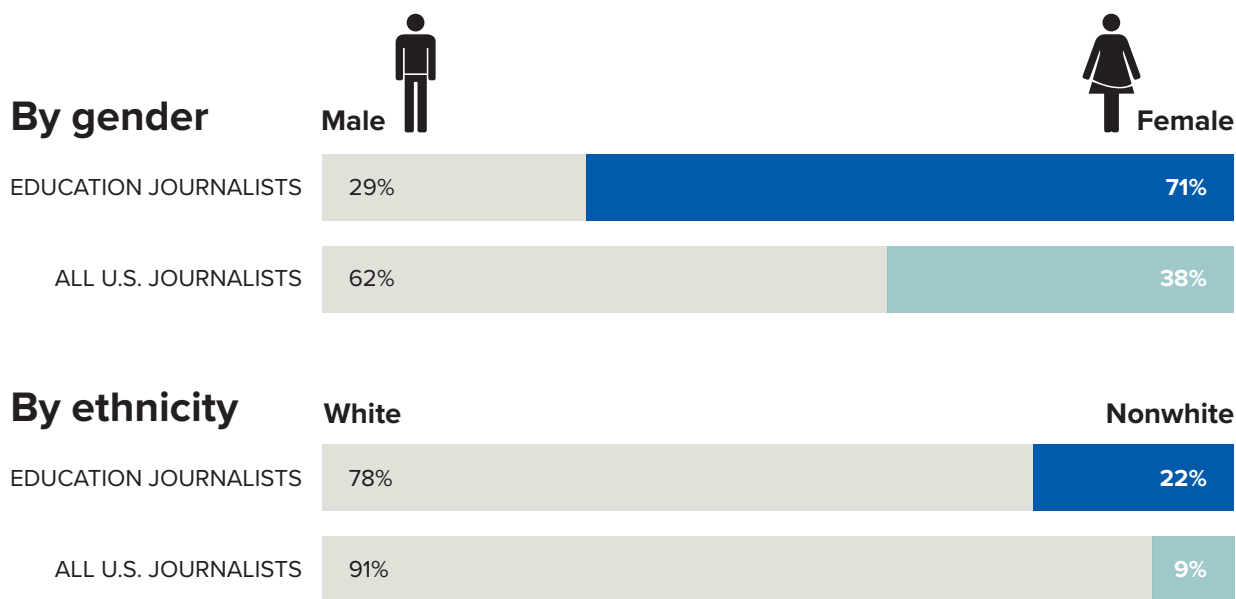
The *EdBeat* study, by contrast, finds that the typical American education journalist is a 36-year-old white female with 11 years in journalism.³ By contrast, the typical American journalist is a 47-year-old white male with 20 years of experience in journalism.

Like the field of education itself, the education journalism sector is heavily female, whereas males make up the majority of the profession as a whole. Compared to the overall pool of full-time journalists, full-time education journalists are nearly twice as likely to be female.



PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

Demographic Profile: Gender and Race/Ethnicity



Note: The data in this chart includes full-time employees only.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016; Willnat & Weaver, 2014

Education also appears to draw relatively more journalists of color than the journalism profession as a whole. Roughly a fifth of full-timers on the education beat are nonwhite. That’s more than double the share found among journalists at large.

That said, the ranks of education journalists do not reflect the diversity of the nation, where half of public school students are nonwhite, as is nearly 40 percent of the adult population.⁴

Since postsecondary degrees are nearly universal in the field of journalism, it might be more appropriate to compare the racial makeup of journalists with the demographics of the nation’s college-educated population.⁵ Yet even here, diversity falls short: Roughly 30 percent of Americans with at least a bachelor’s degree are nonwhite, compared to about 20 percent of education journalists and less than 10 percent of journalists.⁶

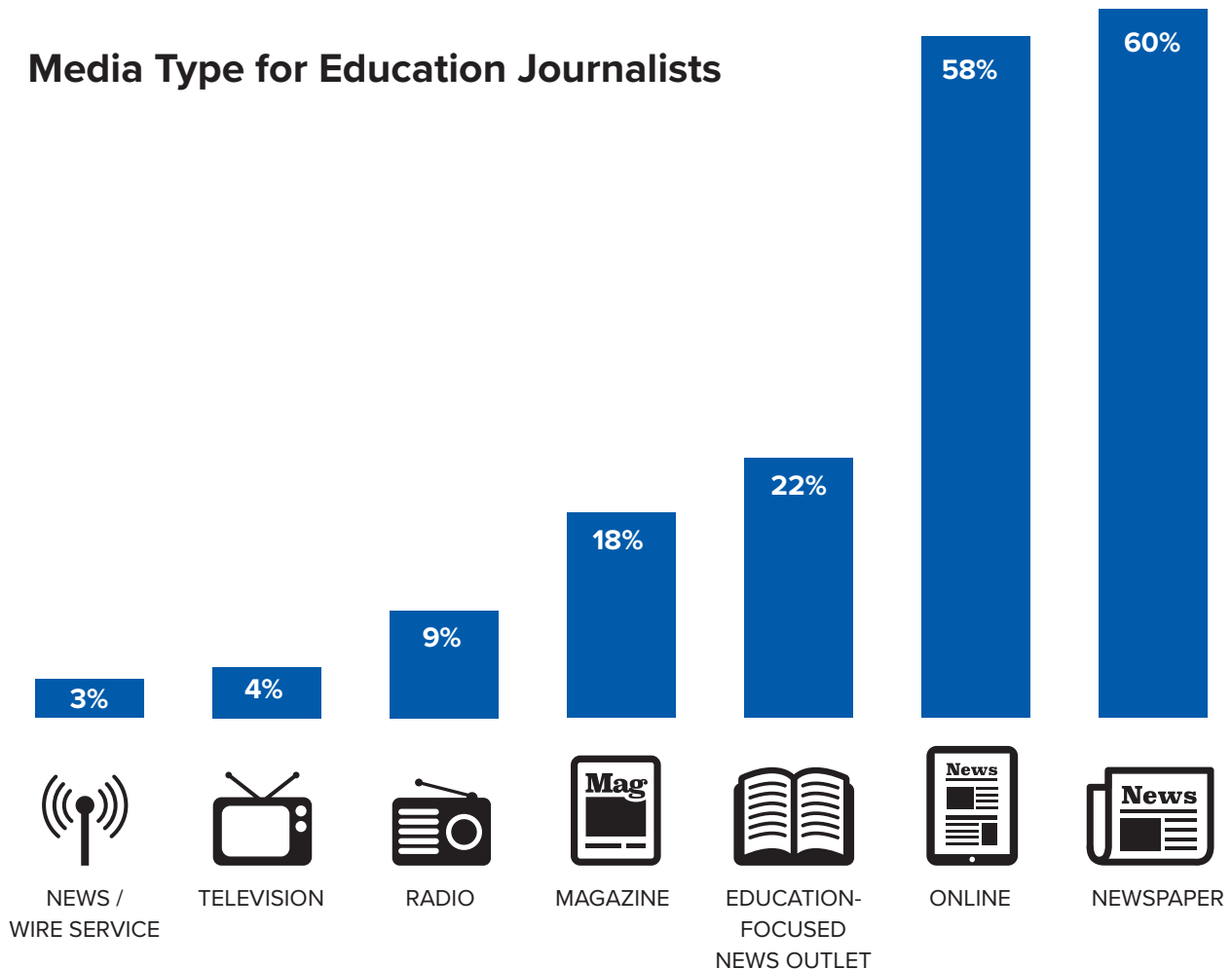


PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

WHERE DO EDUCATION JOURNALISTS WORK?

Online and newspaper media dominate the *EdBeat* study. Well over half of education journalists report working at newspapers and/or outlets that produce news online. Since virtually all news organizations now have a web presence, many respondents who work at newspapers, magazines, or other outlet types also selected the “online” news category. Less than 10 percent say they work in radio, and less than 5 percent work in television. More than one-fifth (22 percent) of respondents report working for an education-focused organization.

Media Type for Education Journalists



Note: Totals do not add up to 100 percent because journalists could select more than one category.

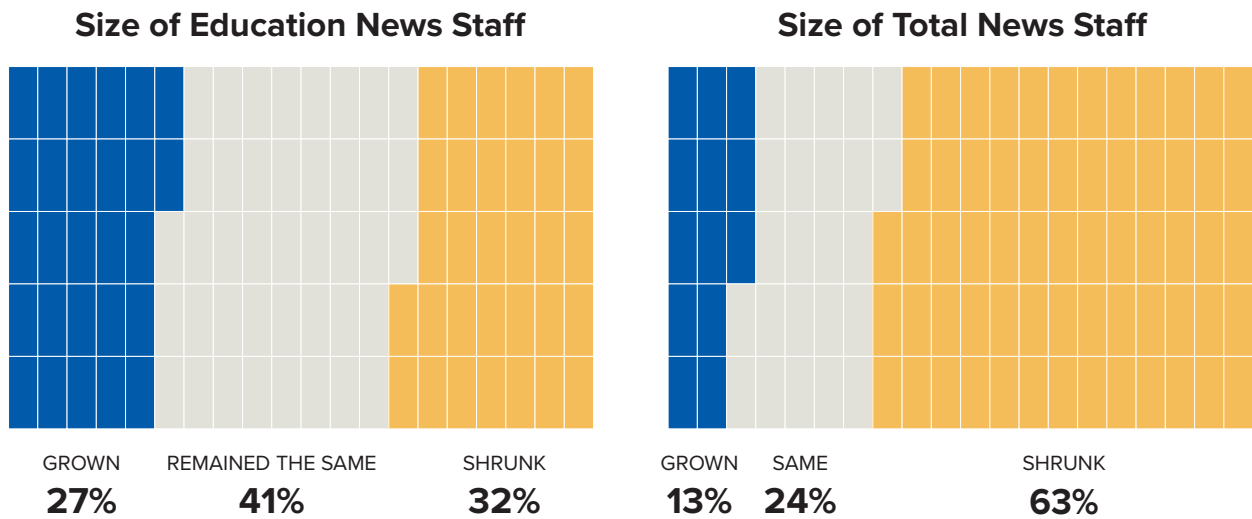
SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016



PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

CHANGE IN SIZE OF NEWS STAFF

The incredible shrinking newsroom has become a well-worn narrative in the past decade. But the *EdBeat* survey results tell a different tale. Just 32 percent of participants say the size of their education news staffs had declined in the past two years. By contrast, reports of overall news-staff shrinkage are nearly twice as high among participants in the most recent *American Journalists* survey. It is important to note that *American Journalist* participants were asked about staffs and *EdBeat* respondents were asked about education staffs.



Note: Results include full-time employees only.

SOURCE: State of the Education Beat, 2016; Willnat & Weaver, 2014

It is possible that timing is responsible for part of the difference. *The American Journalist's* survey was distributed in 2013, when the lingering effects of the Great Recession may have been more keenly felt. The *EdBeat* survey came two years later, in 2015.

Education journalism also may have escaped some cutbacks made to other beats. In interviews, several journalists noted that education has sometimes, though not always, been spared even as outlets eliminated or reduced other areas of coverage. In explaining their confidence in the current direction of the field, multiple journalists also cite examples of legacy organizations that had added education news staff, or mentioned recently launched education-focused outlets.

Are growth rates higher among *EdBeat* study participants because trade publications weathered the recession better than generalist outlets? On the survey, staffs at education-focused outlets do report higher growth rates. However, education journalists at generalist outlets are also twice as likely as *American Journalist* participants to say that education staffs have grown.



PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

EDUCATION-FOCUSED OUTLETS: A DIFFERENT ANIMAL

Education-focused news outlets are not newcomers to the scene. But the past decade or so has seen an expansion in the number of digital news outlets that specialize in education.⁷ Examples include *EdSurge*, *Idaho Education News*, and the *Chalkbeat* network.

Roughly 1 in 5 *EdBeat* survey respondents report an affiliation with an education-focused outlet. And journalists working in those outlets stand out from their peers.

For one thing, their organizations are more likely to be growing: 42 percent of journalists at education-focused outlets say their education news staffs have grown in the past two years, compared to 24 percent of their peers. They are also about half as likely to say that their staffs have shrunk.

Increase in Size of Education Staff



Note: This chart only includes data from full-time employees.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

Journalists at education-focused outlets also differ from their generalist peers in their distinct professional roles, beats, and perceptions. For instance, a larger share of *EdBeat* participants from education-specific outlets than from generalist outlets identified themselves as editors. It's worth adding that editors at generalist outlets may not be included in the *EdBeat* study. That's because, unlike their counterparts at education-focused outlets, managers at generalist organizations typically oversee multiple areas of coverage. So they don't necessarily think of themselves as education journalists, even if the subject is one of their responsibilities.

Beats represent another difference between journalists from generalist and education-focused outlets. Compared to their generalist peers, *EdBeat* participants from education-focused outlets are more likely to cover national education news, and to concentrate on either K-12 or higher education, instead of following students from cradle to career.

Journalists from education-focused outlets also have different perceptions of their work. Compared to their generalist peers, they find just about every coverage-related problem we asked about less challenging. And they are more than twice as likely to be "very satisfied" with their jobs.



PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

WAGES

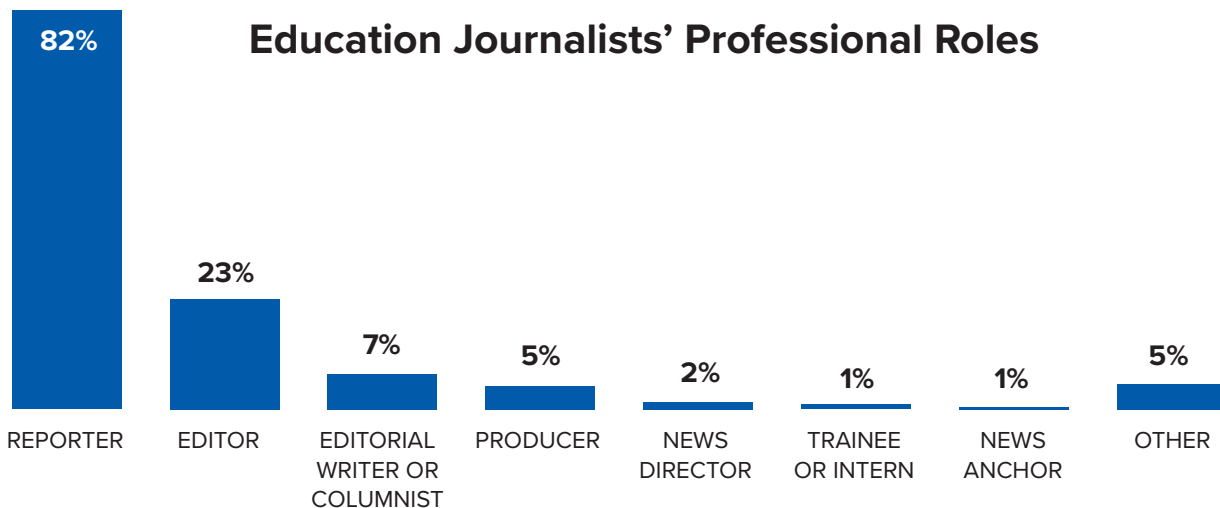
Most education journalists are full-time employees with benefits. The median annual salary for full-timers is about \$55,000, similar to the median salary for journalists as a whole.

The data indicate a wage gap by gender in the field. The average salary for full-time male education journalists is about \$3,000 per year higher than the average salary for full-time female education journalists. However, this salary gap is smaller than the gap between male and female journalists in the nation as a whole.

THE WORK

What do education journalists do at work and how do they go about doing it? What is the focus of the news coverage they produce? Questions like these are distinct from, although certainly not unrelated to, who journalists are and where they work.

Most study participants (82 percent) are staff reporters and nearly a quarter identify themselves as editors. But respondents also include a sound engineer, a CEO, a news librarian, a videographer, and an assortment of editors, bloggers, part-timers, and freelancers. The majority consider themselves “education journalists,” but about 14 percent do not.



Note: Totals do not add up to 100 percent because journalists could select more than one category.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

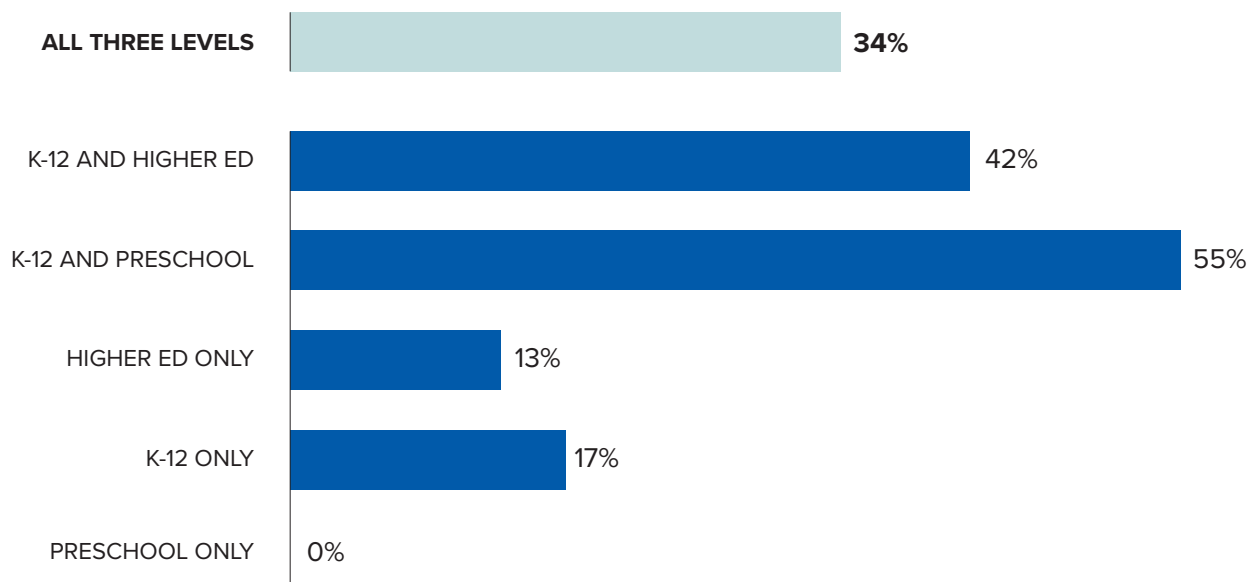


PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

Just 39 percent of all U.S. journalists focus on a specific topic or beat. But *State of the Education Beat* survey participants at general news outlets spend 74 percent of their time working on the education beat. Among survey respondents from generalist outlets, the share of time spent on education ranges from 1 percent to 100 percent, but very few (less than one in five) spend under half their time on the beat. This suggests that the study sample may be more representative of dedicated education journalists than of the broader pool of journalists who more occasionally contribute to education news.

For most survey respondents, the beat is big and broad. Only a small minority of education journalists concentrate exclusively on K-12 or higher education. No one who took the survey specializes in preschool alone. The majority of education journalists focus on preschool as well as K-12. More than 40 percent focus on both K-12 and higher education. And about one third cover all three levels.

Education Beat: Sectors of Coverage



Note: Totals do not add up to 100 percent because journalists could select more than one category.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016



PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

Where the beat tends to narrow is in its geographic focus. Like the structure of the education system itself, the structure of the education beat is largely local. The largest share of education journalists (37 percent) report on hyper-local issues — schooling or schools in metro areas or communities within a state. Another 19 percent cover statewide issues. For nearly a third of respondents (31 percent), the education beat has a national or international scope.

Geography of the Education Beat



Note: Totals do not add up to 100 percent because journalists could select more than one category.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

THE SOURCES

Teachers/faculty members barely edged out news releases, news conferences, and PR professionals as the top source journalists had consulted in the past month in the course of reporting stories. Other top sources? News coverage, local educational leaders/school districts, and school/campus visits.

Another survey question asked about sources of story ideas in the past month. Public relations efforts are the top source. This reliance on PR for both story ideas and sourcing is not unique to education journalism. It aligns with longstanding research suggesting that public relations generates a large percentage of overall news coverage.⁸ News coverage, educational leaders/school districts, and public meetings/legislative sessions were also among the top sources journalists had turned to for story ideas in the past month.

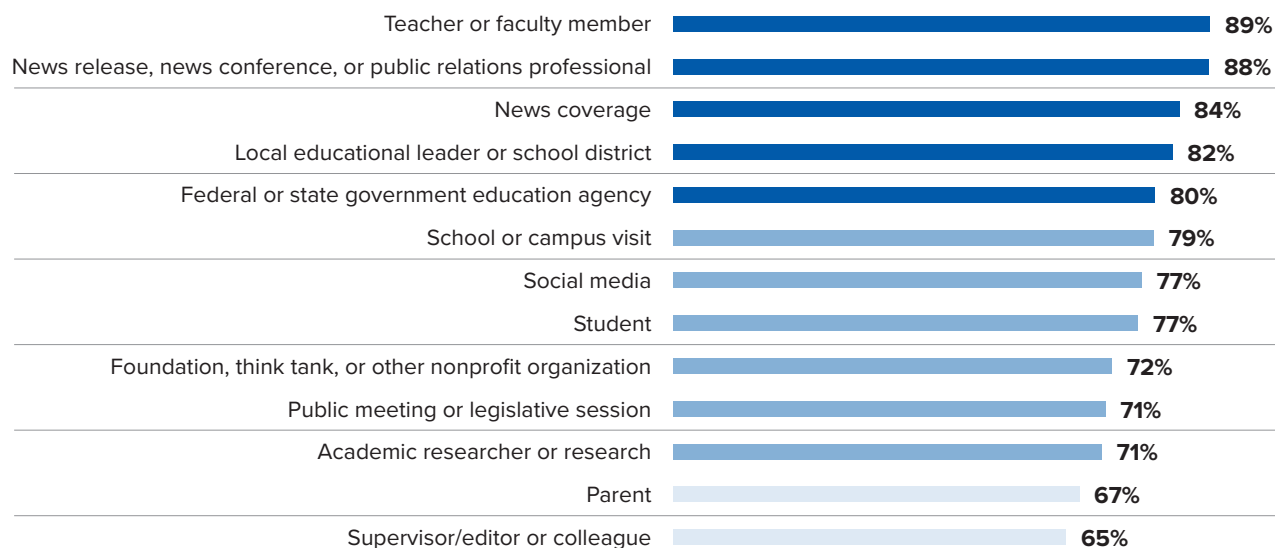
Parents and students were not a top source of either story ideas or information gathered while reporting.

Education journalists look far and wide for insight. In the past month, the average survey respondent had consulted 11 of the 13 sources we asked about during the reporting process and gotten story ideas from seven sources.

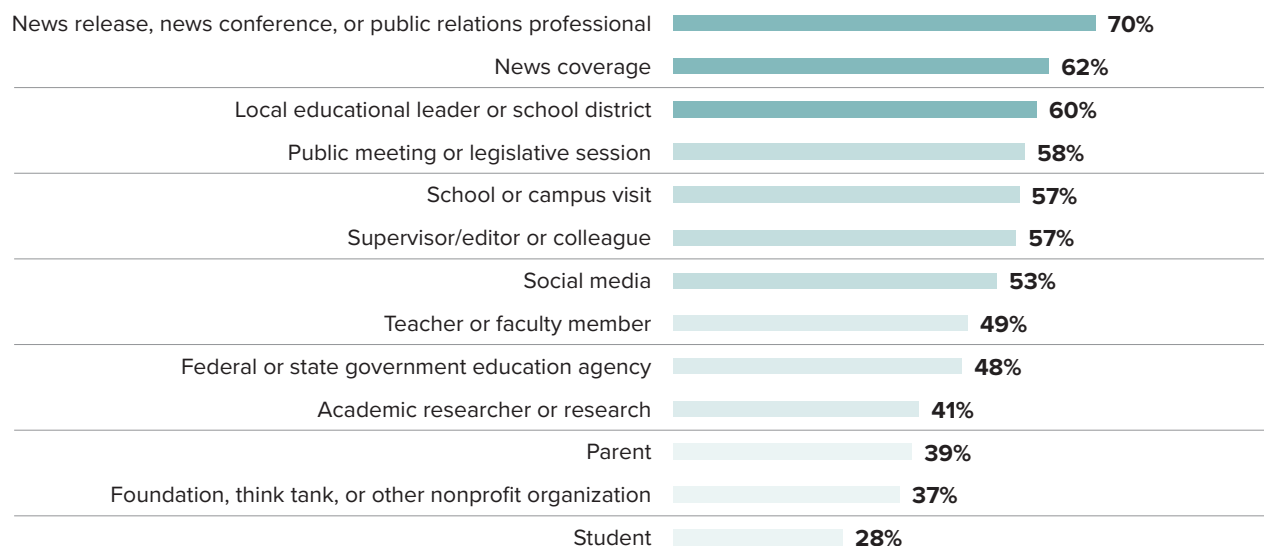


PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

Where Do Education Journalists Turn for Information When Reporting?



Where Do Education Journalists Get Their Story Ideas?



Note: Totals do not add up to 100 percent because journalists could select more than one category.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016



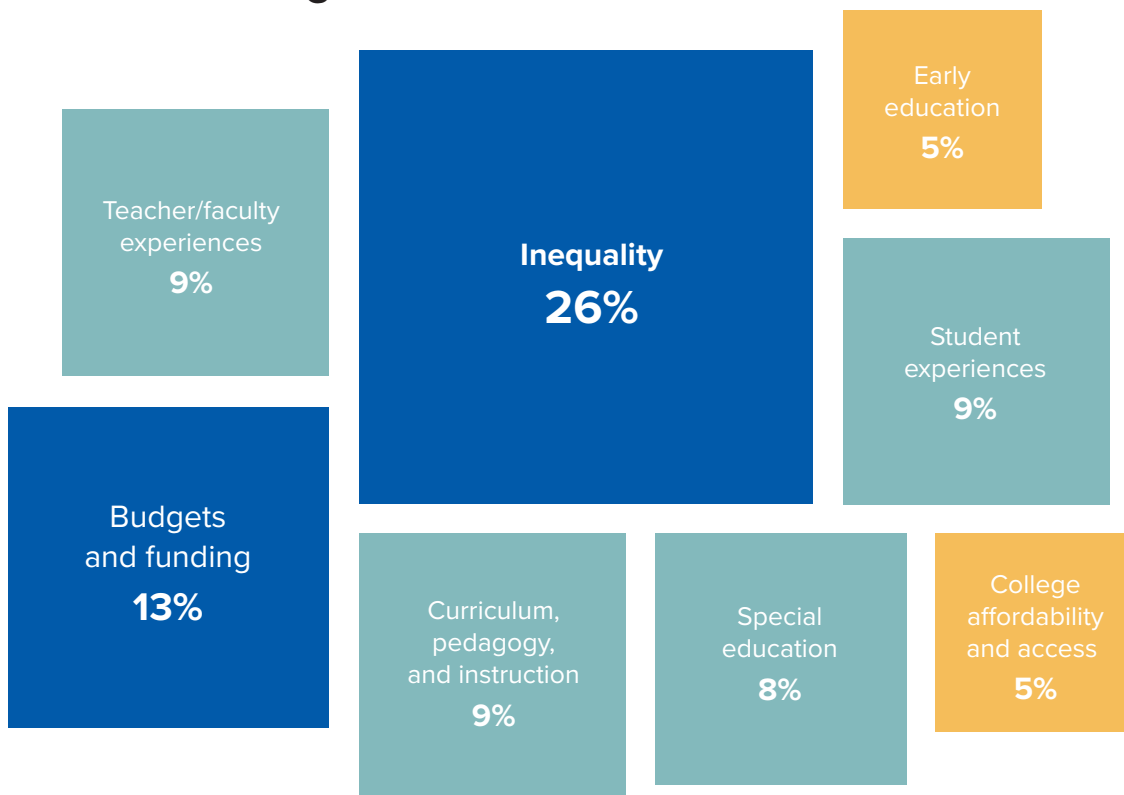
PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

THE NEWS COVERAGE

An open-ended question on the *EdBeat* Survey asked journalists to identify the education topics that get the least attention from the news media these days.

Inequality is by far the most undercovered issue in education today, they say. About 26 percent of respondents mentioned this issue, which included segregation, achievement gaps, and poverty. Other undercovered subjects were budgets and funding (e.g. state funding formulas, contracting and corruption) and teacher/faculty issues, such as salaries, evaluations, and professional development.

Journalists Identify the Most Undercovered Issues in Pre-K-12 and Higher Education



Note: Topics cited by at least 5 percent of respondents are shown. Journalists could mention more than one topic.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016



PART 2: THE PEOPLE, THE ORGANIZATIONS & THE WORK

THE EDUCATION FORECAST

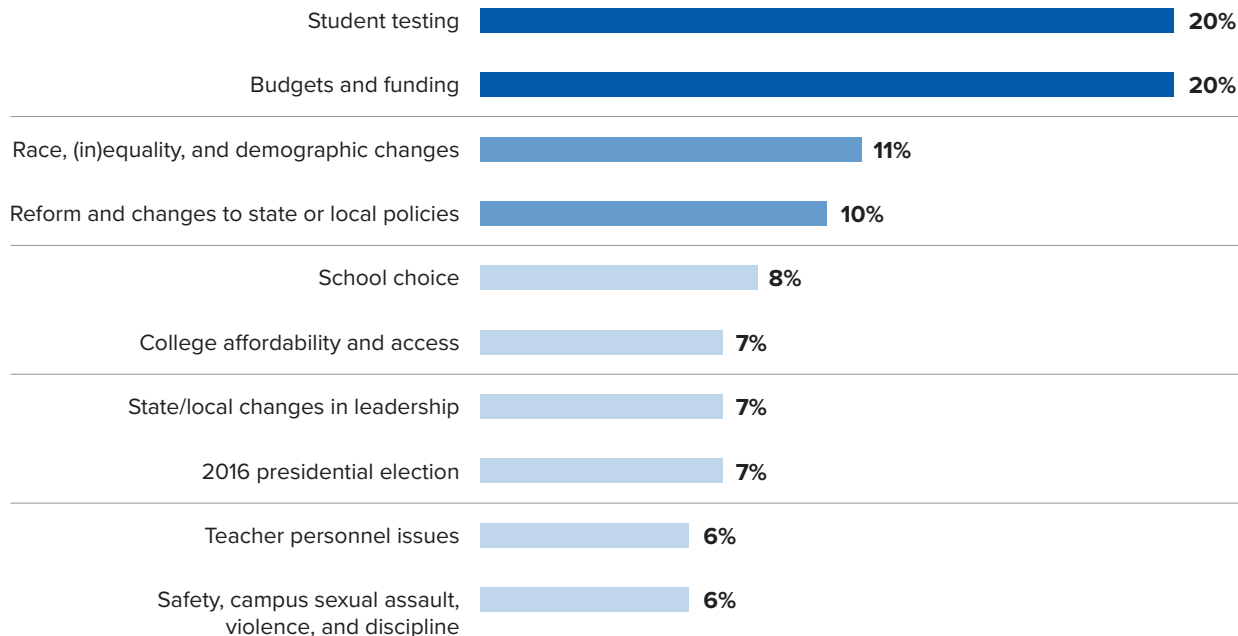
In another open-ended survey question, journalists predicted the top story of the 2016-17 school year.

Two topics tie for top story. Testing and budgets and finance both received 20 percent of the vote. The testing prediction is not surprising, given changes to college-admissions exams, the reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and recent attention to the testing opt-out movement. Budgets and finance are a perennial issue. Journalists predict that 2016-17 stories in this category will include such topics as local school district bond issues and battles in state legislatures over higher education funding.

That's not to say testing and budgets and finance will be the only stories covered. In the spirit of their diverse and locally focused beats, education journalists project heavy news coverage across a wide range of topics.

Top stories also include inequality, and demographic changes (e.g., the achievement gap, refugee education); and changes or reforms to state or local policies (e.g., consolidation, state takeovers of struggling schools).

Top 10 Pre-K-12 and Higher Education Stories of 2016-17



Note: Journalists could mention more than one topic.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

PART 3: EDUCATION JOURNALISM, A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



“There has been almost an inferiority complex on the part of people assigned to education writing. This was particularly true among men who had grown up with the idea that education is a woman’s field.”⁹

So said legendary New York Times education editor Fred M. Hechinger in 1960. This attitude persisted for years to come, as did the field’s reputation as a beginner beat and a steppingstone to better things.

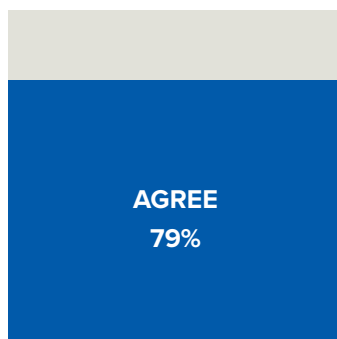
Yet it may be time to relegate this stereotype to the realm of the old wives’ tale: Upwards of three-quarters of *EdBeat* survey respondents say they are committed to the beat and that education journalism is a prestigious career path. And while they may not have gone out of their way to seek out a job in the field, interview results indicate that their preconceptions were not negative. The following sections explore these findings by examining how education journalists were initially attracted to the beat and why they stayed.

A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

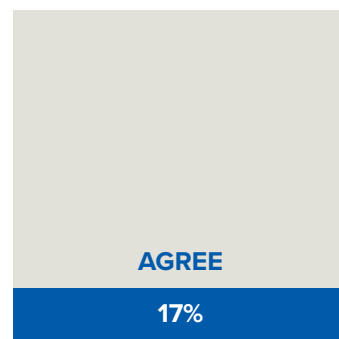
Despite its (seemingly antiquated) reputation as a short-lived fling, the education beat is viewed as a long-term commitment by the majority of journalists who participated in the *EdBeat* survey. More than three-quarters (79 percent) say education journalism is a career path they are committed to pursuing. Just 17 percent view the job as a steppingstone to something better.

Perceptions of the Field

Education journalism is a career path that I am committed to pursuing.



Education journalism is a steppingstone that I hope will lead to a better beat.



SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016; photo from The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media

PART 3: EDUCATION JOURNALISM, A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



Interview findings bear out the survey results. The vagaries of the news business permitting, two-thirds of interviewees see themselves still working in education journalism five years from now. More than half hope to spend the remainder of their careers on the beat.

The most experienced journalist interviewed hasn't lost his enthusiasm, even after more than three decades reporting on education issues. "It's rewarding," that journalist said. "Since I'm the only one in the [community] that has been on education for that long, I have something unique to bring to it."

At the other end of the spectrum, the least experienced interviewee had been an education reporter for less than six months. She expects to remain in her current job for five to 10 years, maybe more. "For now, it's indefinite," she said. "I really like doing this more than I thought I would."

The most frequent reason why interviewees expect to remain on the beat is directly related to the daily activities of the job. They want to dig deeper into a subject matter they find fascinating.

"I'm just working so fast," said a freelance education journalist who hopes her next career move will be to a position in which she gets to spend more time on each long-form education story. "Some of it just really either haunts me or sticks with me and I want to pursue it and really delve into it more and see what various places around the country or even around the world are doing."

Even those who consider leaving the beat usually plan to remain in journalism. Upwards of 80 percent of interviewees believe they will still be in journalism if they leave the education beat behind. Just 5 percent mentioned the possibility of following the well-worn path from journalism to public relations.

PART 3: EDUCATION JOURNALISM, A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE BECOMES A LOVE MATCH

Although the education beat might have acquired a better image in recent decades, it is not necessarily the case that young journalists are born with a burning desire to cover education. As is likely the case with many other beat areas, interviewees entered the field for at least some reasons that are unrelated to the area of coverage. Some needed a job and the education beat was the only available opening. For others, the beat proved at least somewhat more appealing than the other available alternatives, if only because it got them off the night shift. Sometimes, an editor added aspects of the education beat to a journalist's plate and things evolved from there.

For those who do seek out the beat, or choose it over another option, the appeal is typically personal. Their own educational experiences make them curious. Family members and/or friends work in the field, or parenting has piqued their interest. Sometimes, they encounter the beat while covering a different topic. A few worked in the education field prior to becoming journalists.

Reasons related more directly to the subject matter include the sense that education is influential and engaging for audiences, and the perception that the beat is prestigious. Sometimes, these perceptions of prestige combine with happenstance, as with this education reporter who was assigned to the beat after a colleague quit.

"I remember being kind of shocked because I thought it was a beat that I wouldn't get until much later in my career," she said. "I think [I] had barely had three years of reporting ... and then I was sort of tossed into this beat and I don't know, it just surprised me. I thought it was something you had to work your way up to."

PART 3: EDUCATION JOURNALISM, A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



First Comes Marriage...

Although they subsequently fall in love, education journalists don't necessarily seek out the beat from the start. Here, four of them share their "how we met" stories.

THE
ARRANGED MARRIAGE:
JOURNALISTS' STORIES
OF BLIND DATES WITH
THE BEAT

"Honestly, no one else wanted to do it. When we were talking about it, everyone wanted to do political reporting and everyone wanted to do the shiny bits. I wasn't there for that meeting, and so when I came back they were like, 'Oh, how would you like to do education?'"

"Let's start with the fact that I am 60 years old, and I'm a female. Back in the day ... when I started in the business, education was very much a girl's job. Rightly or wrongly, that's just the way it was, but I started doing it and found I really liked it."

"I was working the night cop shift when the position opened up. ... [A]t that point, I was ready to take anything that would get me off the night shift."

"I interviewed for a high school sports job. ... It was a week later I got a call from somebody else that I hadn't interviewed with, who said, 'Right now we have one reporter and we really need two covering the [education] beat.' Honestly, I said 'I'm not turning down a full-time job in journalism right after graduation, so OK.'"

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

PART 3: EDUCATION JOURNALISM, A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



AND THEY SAID IT WOULDN'T LAST

Even if the initial introduction to education journalism is not all moonlight and roses, the arranged marriage blossoms. Only a small handful of interviewees remain on the beat just because they lack other employment options. To the contrary, interviewees most frequently stay on the job for reasons directly related to the beat itself. Roughly half remain because they feel the subject matter is influential and important.

"I think it's maybe the most important beat at the entire newspaper right now," one journalist said. "It's key to the future of the region and the city, and I'm from [this area], so I have a personal stake in it, and I feel like I'm doing important work in the community."

Roughly half also stay on the job because they love the subject matter. Often they describe education journalism less as a beat than as a lens through which one might view nearly any subject. It is sometimes compared to covering several beats at once.

"I really enjoy the blend of what the beat is," a newspaper reporter said. "It kind of offers a little bit of all aspects of journalism, whether you want to delve into public records, [or] sometimes there's breaking news. Also, you can cover features and more lighthearted things when you're dealing with the kids."

The people they encounter also keep education journalists interested in the beat. They sense that audiences are interested in their coverage. They enjoy connecting with students, teachers, professors, and other sources.

"I'll say something really cheesy: the kids," a veteran radio journalist said. "I really love being able to talk to kids."

Given their frequent interactions with schooling and schools, it is perhaps not surprising that multiple interviewees appreciate opportunities their beats provide to further their own educations by becoming better journalists, developing expertise, and learning new things.

"Radio reporters are the consummate generalists," said the same radio journalist who expressed enthusiasm about talking with children. "I always feel as though I'm getting a Ph.D. in something. ... You're going much, much deeper than you do on general assignment. ... Every day I find things that I don't know a thing about within this beat. I'm kind of happy just continuing to learn."

PART 3: EDUCATION JOURNALISM, A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



YOUTHFUL OPTIMISM

Are professional opinions positive because all the poor matches have ended in divorce, restricting the study sample to a collection of hardcore veterans? Evidence points elsewhere. Just as there's an achievement gap for students, there's an outlook gap for education journalists. And that gap skews millennial: Compared to their older peers, education journalists born after 1980 express more favorable views of multiple aspects of the field.

In fact, millennials have more favorable views on 10 of the 13 EdBeat survey questions that comprise the Education Journalism Confidence Index, a measure of overall confidence in the field introduced later in this report. For example, millennials are more likely to say education journalism is going in the right direction in the nation as a whole and less likely to say it is going in the wrong direction.

Young Journalists Are More Optimistic About the General Direction of the Education Beat

Going in the right direction



Going in the wrong direction



Don't know



Note: Totals may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding.

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

PART 3: EDUCATION JOURNALISM, A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



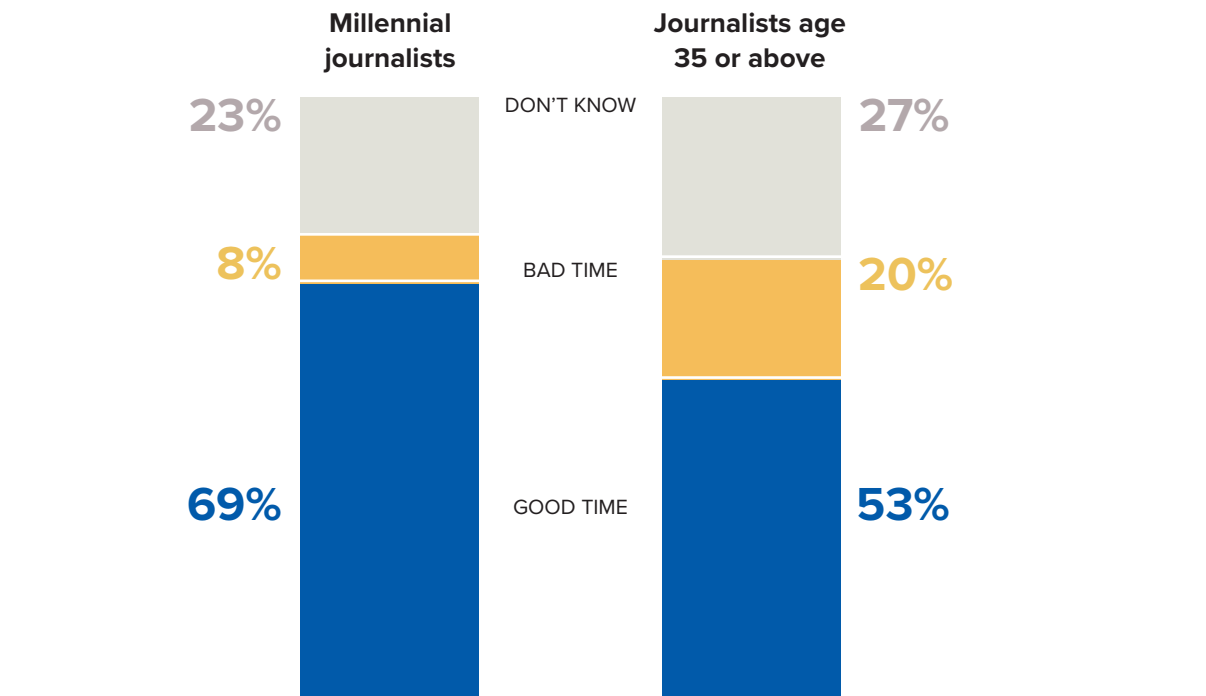
CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION JOURNALISM BY AGE

The positive outlook bodes well for the future of the field because it means that young journalists perceive the beat as a desirable path.

“Depending on trends in the industry, I hope I’m doing either exactly what I’m doing right now, or covering the same issues in whatever futuristic way we’re doing them in five years,” a 30-year-old education reporter said.

Is It a Good Time to Start a Job in Education Journalism?

An additional major generational difference is that younger reporters are more likely to say that now is a good time to start a job in education journalism as compared to another beat.



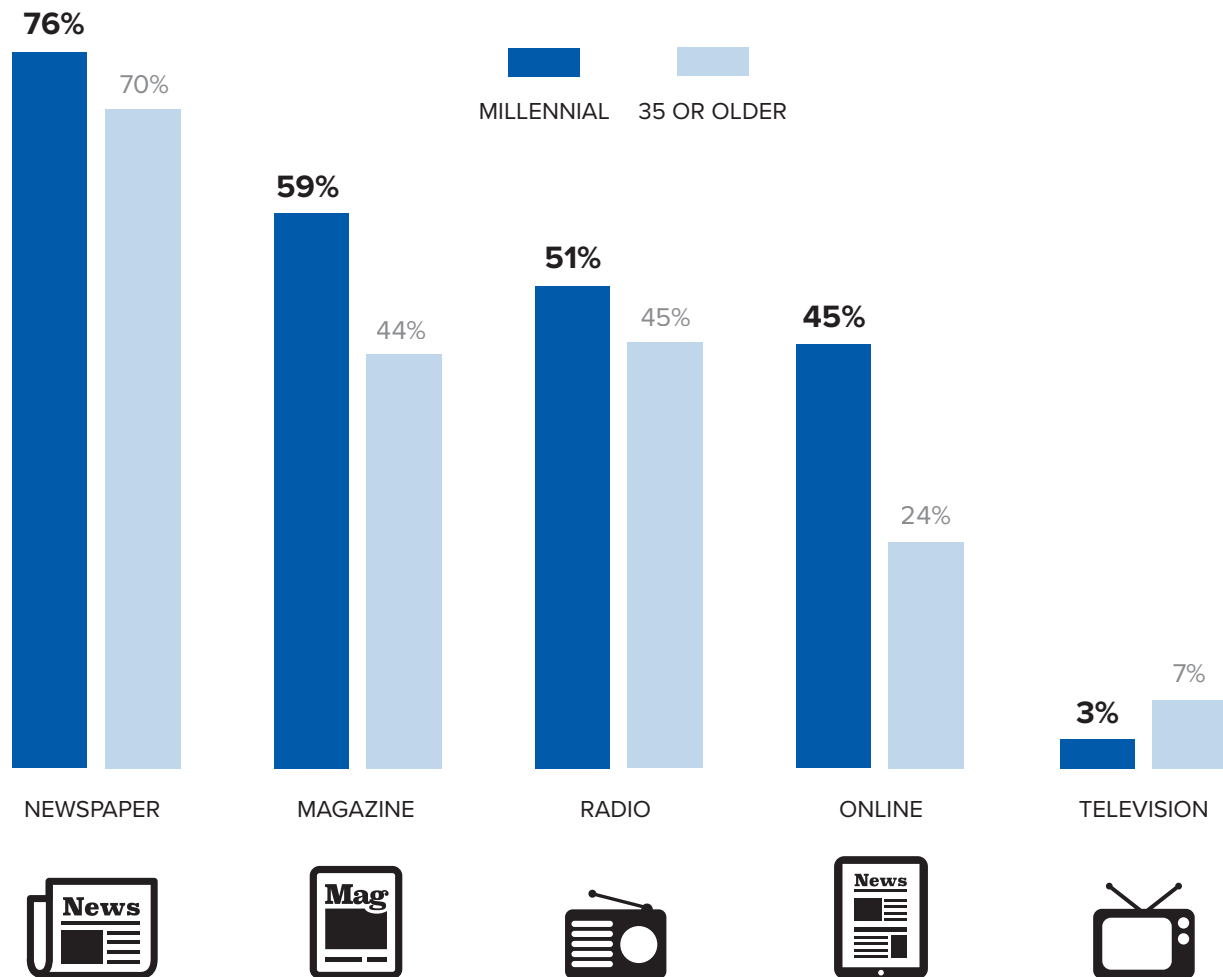
SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

PART 3: EDUCATION JOURNALISM, A FIELD WITH A FUTURE



Millennial, Older Journalists Give High Marks To Education News From Different Outlet Types

One of the biggest differences between older and younger study participants is that millennials have a great deal more confidence in education news on the internet. In fact millennials' confidence level outpaces their older colleagues by 21 percentage points. This is not surprising, given the very different experiences that younger and older generations have had with this medium. Although the age gap is biggest when it comes to education news found on the internet, millennials also have more confidence in education news associated with other outlet types. This finding goes hand-in-hand with millennials' generally sunnier outlook on the field.



SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016



PART 4: A STRONG BELIEF IN IMPACT

MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD

One of the most dramatic – and heartening – findings to emerge from the *State of the Education Beat* study is that 95 percent of education journalists surveyed feel their work is making a difference.

The survey simply asked respondents whether they thought their journalism made a positive impact on education. The vast majority answered in the affirmative. But to get beneath the surface of this finding, participants in the follow-up phone interviews had an opportunity to elaborate on their views. If they felt their work had a positive impact, we asked why.

The number one reason is that their work raises awareness or explains issues that were previously poorly understood. In fact, nearly every journalist interviewed feels their work has this type of influence.

“We really want to get people informed on the basics so that they simply understand that x, y, z exists in this world, whether it’s within their direct life or [not],” an education editor said. “That basic awareness is a good thing, ... [n]o matter if somebody is a parent, an interested party, a teacher, whatever.”

For example, this editor describes how his coverage of open meetings laws helped citizens understand what they needed to know if they wished to make a public comment during a school board meeting.

Nearly half of interviewees also say their work has influenced education more directly by impacting audiences’ real-world decisions. For example, a young newspaper reporter said her coverage revealed that student drug testing had not measurably benefited school districts in which it had been adopted. As a result, she said, her local school board decided to drop a drug-testing policy that was under consideration.

Other interviewees describe impacts such as revealing information that had previously been covered up, solving problems, and influencing public expenditures.

Finally, a handful of interviewees report that their coverage made a difference because it was often the only independent source of information on the topic. As news organizations have folded and staffing has declined in some areas, there’s not necessarily a competing news outlet around to fill the gaps. So these journalists operate with the knowledge that if they don’t tell the story, it may never be told.

“I can point to a number of pieces that I’ve written that have resulted in action that would not have taken place because there was no one [else] to cover the story,” said a journalist at an education-focused outlet.

My Journalism Makes a Positive Impact on Education

95% agree

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016



PART 4: A STRONG BELIEF IN IMPACT

STORIES OF IMPACT

Ninety-five percent of *EdBeat* survey respondents say their journalism has a positive influence on education. Here, nine journalists who participated in follow-up interviews describe how their work has helped to shape policy, raise awareness, enhance understanding, inform professional practice, save lives, change minds, and unite communities.

“There was a piece of legislation that slipped through the cracks at the end of a special session over the summer. ... Nobody was paying attention to it at all. ... I wrote this big story that got picked up across the state. Now it’s like one of the most heated discussions in the state. Nobody knew about it until I wrote about it.”

“I found that minority students were disproportionately being hit by vehicles. The following summer, a group of churches banded together ... to bring back a safety training program for incoming kindergarteners, and that was a direct result of our stories.”

“Our newspaper ended up hosting a forum. ... We had more than 700 community members come out to this Tuesday evening forum. So that was pretty surprising, and it kind of showed that people were following what was going on, and that they were wanting more information.”

“Basically part of this referendum was to build a new ... school. ... The projections that I saw, that ... school was going to basically pull all the affluent white kids out of a more urban middle school and take them out into the white suburb. I did an article on that, and the district somewhat shifted course. They were also in the process of revamping their desegregation policy. ... The district did take a step back and move less swiftly. I don’t know if that means I made a real impact. I think I just frightened them a little bit.”



“We did a story, and then a key lawmaker asked us to testify to his committee about the story that we wrote, and where we got the information and what it means. I don’t know that we will, but lawmakers have referenced us. ... We’ve caught districts not complying with state law, and they have ... amended their practices because of what we revealed.”

STORIES OF IMPACT

“I get a lot of just random social media things from people saying other teachers should really listen to this, we need to learn, we need to think of the questions that are raised in this [coverage]. You should listen to this, you should tell your colleagues about it, we should talk about this in our next professional development. Let’s talk about this at our next departmental meeting.”

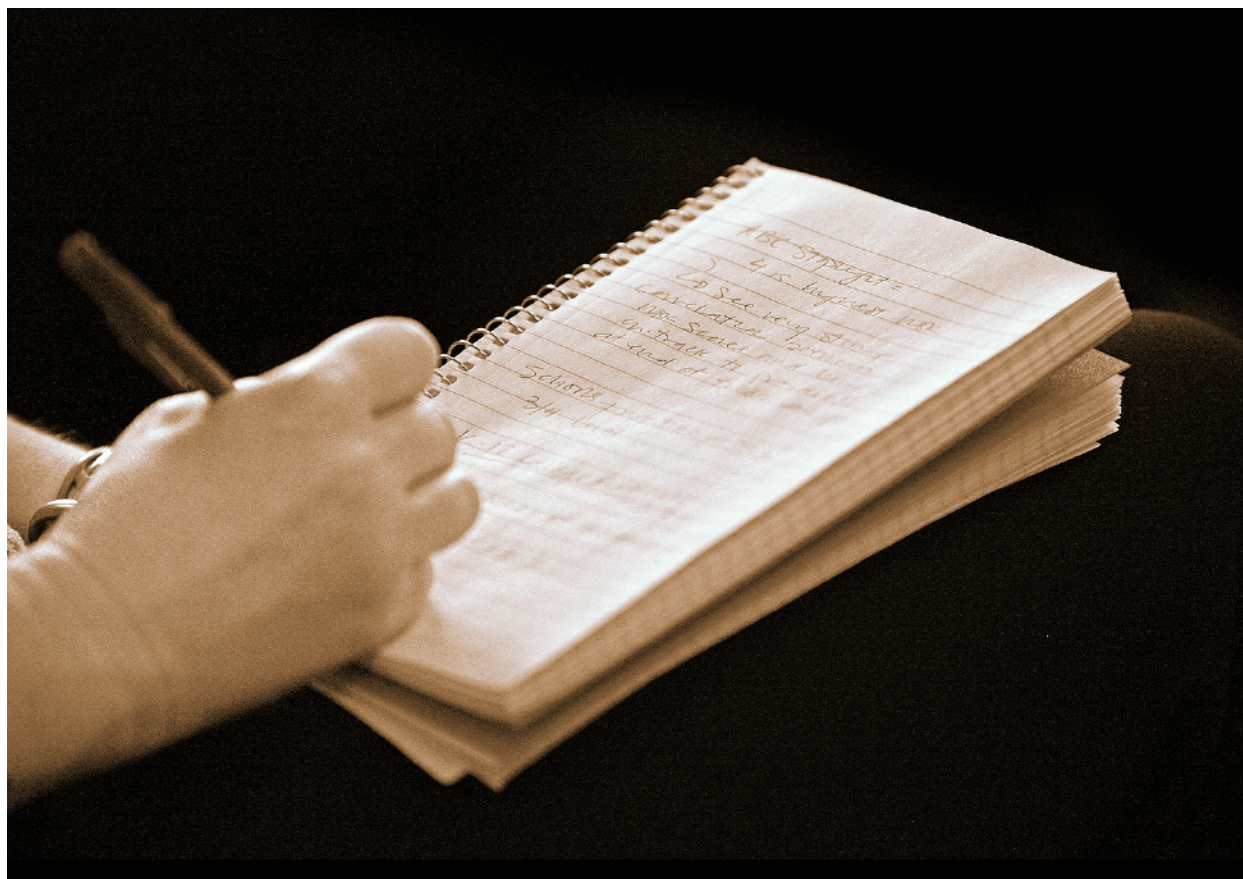
“We’re a district that was at the forefront of desegregation and of resegregation, so we’re in the thick of all that and I’ve had people who are really guiding that discussion say things like, ‘That column you wrote single-handedly changed the way we looked at this.’”

“I have seen [a] school district in our state vote to abolish out of school suspension ... seemingly in response to my stories about school discipline.”

“We had this teacher’s strike in one of our districts. ... [S]ome of these issues ... that the union was striking over had been simmering and boiling over in the district for years. Part of the problem was ... that no one really knew outside of district administrators or the union leadership what the problems were. My reporting on the strike and the reason why the union was striking and why teachers were upset and what they wanted, it helped better identify what the problems were and what they thought needed to be done to address it.”



PART 5: PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

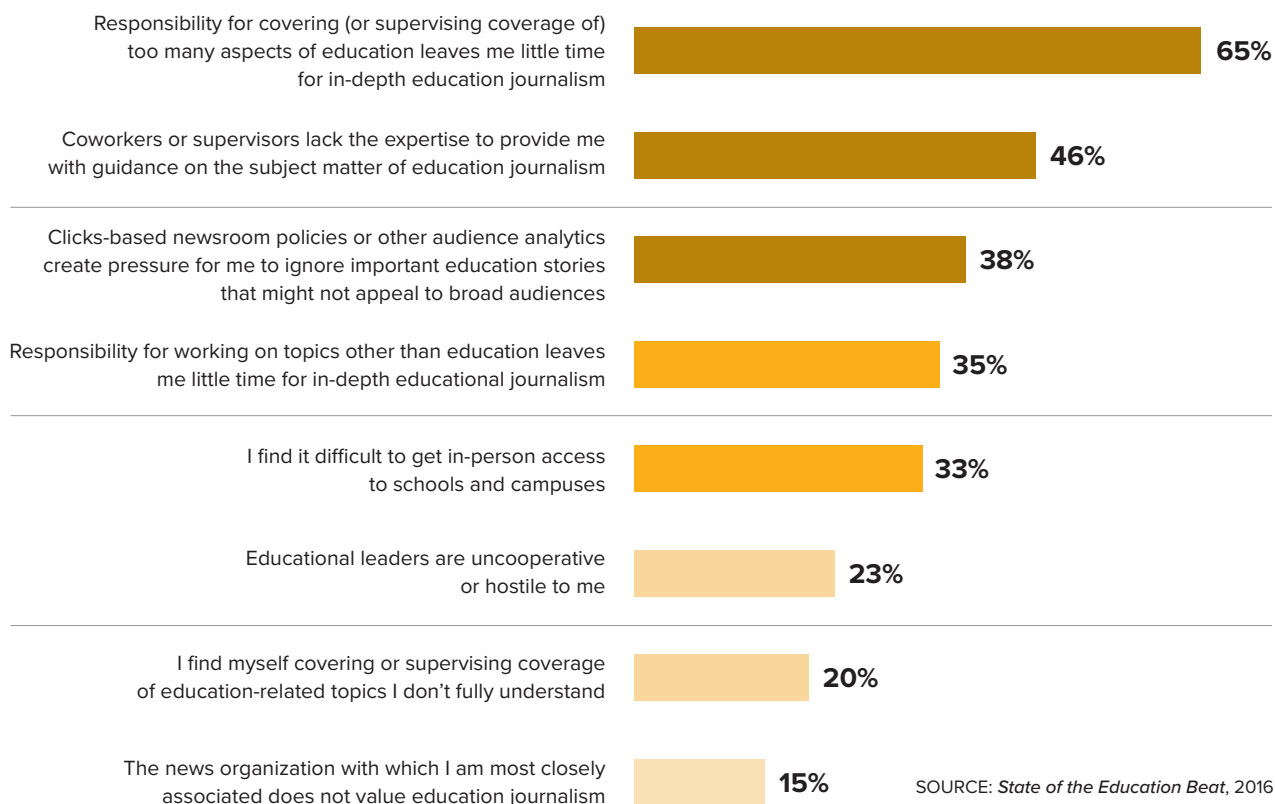


Even as the overall picture it paints is positive, the *EdBeat* study also identifies its share of challenges facing the profession. The biggest is time: Although education journalists do find ways to pursue in-depth coverage, they struggle to do so because competing priorities sap their time. Expertise is the second biggest challenge. Most education journalists indicate that they understand the topics that they, themselves, cover. But nearly half (46 percent) are concerned that colleagues and supervisors lack education-related subject matter expertise. A third concern relates to the increasing availability of a sophisticated array of audience analytics, which can sometimes create pressures to prioritize popularity over substance. An additional concern is that 1 in 3 education journalists find it difficult to get in-person access to schools and campuses.



PART 5: PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

Leading Problems Cited by Education Journalists



SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

An interesting and counterintuitive finding is that there's only one problem that a clear majority of survey respondents find challenging – two-thirds cite time-related constraints. Yet there are three seemingly thorny problems that less than one in four education journalists find challenging. About 23 percent of survey respondents have problems related to hostile or uncooperative education leaders. Even fewer say they find themselves covering or supervising topics that they do not fully understand. And only 15 percent report that their news organization does not value education coverage.

Did the fact that we presented respondents with a fixed list of choices lead to underreporting of challenges? To find out, we included an open-ended question asking journalists to tell us about any additional challenges they face. About half of them took us up on the opportunity. No clear majority mention any one challenge. The top write-in complaint was accessing sources and documents, which was cited by about one in three respondents.



PART 5: PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

TIME CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Chief among the challenges facing the field is the perception that there's too much to accomplish in too little time: Close to two-thirds of survey respondents say that responsibility for covering (or supervising coverage of) too many aspects of education leaves them with little time for in-depth education journalism.

The interviews can help us put time in a fuller context. Time is not a consistent challenge for everyone. Even as some study participants struggle to find a moment to check in with sources or brush up on the basics of important policies and laws, others have the resources and time to spend weeks deeply diving into meaty topics. Nearly every interviewee does find some time to go beyond coverage of daily events and news but can also think of something important that is falling through the cracks of her busy schedule.

What Steals Time Away From In-Depth Coverage?



Feeding the beast
(filling air time,
maintaining standing
features such as
notes columns)



Covering breaking
or time-sensitive
news



Updating
websites
and social
media



Wearing multiple
hats within the
organization
(e.g., editor
and reporter)



Attending
public
meetings

SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

WHAT WOULD EDUCATION JOURNALISTS DO IF THEY HAD MORE TIME?

If given a week, month, or year to focus on the areas they had neglected, what would education journalists do with that extra time?

Many interviewees would increase coverage of certain topics. These topics include budget/funding; inequality and race; federal, state, and local education policies; teacher personnel issues; and international education and immigration. They would also devote more time to providing audiences with background and context. Many education journalists would also like to spend more time in classrooms and schools, rebuild relations with previously neglected sources, dissect data sets, and pursue long-term and investigative projects.



PART 5: PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES

EXPERTISE

Next to time, the second-biggest challenge for education journalists is knowledge: 46 percent of survey respondents say their coworkers or supervisors lack expertise to provide them with guidance on the subject matter of education journalism.

“In terms of figuring out how school districts keep track of and spend their government funding, I’m almost completely in the dark,” an education journalist with less than a year of experience on the beat wrote in a survey response. “And lack of institutional knowledge and guidance is a big problem at my newsroom. I learn a little more on my own every day, but just based on conversations I have with involved community members, I’m sure there’s misuse of funds happening that I have no way of proving.”

As a young reporter covering local education for a general interest newspaper, this study participant fits the profile of the kind of education journalist who finds the lack of subject matter expertise particularly challenging.

Journalists at education-specific outlets are largely unfazed by issues of expertise. Just 19 percent say their coworkers or supervisors lack the expertise to provide them with guidance on the subject matter of education journalism.

As a result of this in-house expertise, an editor at one education-focused outlet said her organization had become the “go-to place, not only for people involved in education, but for other media.”

AUDIENCE ANALYTICS

Audience analytics play a complex and growing role in journalism. On the positive side, they can provide reporters with concrete and useful data about how audiences engage with their work, increasing the odds that news will appeal to more people and meet their needs. But analytics can also pose challenges.

Next to time and expertise, the biggest challenge for education journalists involves clicks-based newsroom policies or other audience analytics that create pressure to ignore important education stories that might not appeal to broad audiences. Nearly 4 in 10 survey respondents find such pressure challenging.

“My editors are not opposed to in-depth issues coverage, they just don’t provide the resources and extra manpower to get everything done,” a newspaper reporter wrote in an open-ended survey question response. “If I choose to spend the bulk of my time on investigating issues, then I lose money because they have a clicks-for-bonus system.”

Pressure to create content with mass appeal is particularly acute for education journalists who work at general-interest outlets because they may find their work in a popularity contest with coverage of such perennial favorites as football games that can draw audiences in the millions.

“The lion’s share of traffic comes from our sports people, then probably 20 percent of our traffic is driven through our crime reporters, who do a great job,” one newspaper education reporter said. “On average, I drive 2 to 3 percent of our traffic. I could spend all week working on something that I thought was really great or really earth-shattering and the next week maybe my traffic has risen by a tenth of a percent. ... It’s kind of deflating.”

That does not mean that analytics have killed education coverage. In interviews, most journalists say their news organizations track audience preferences. But most either share no particular viewpoint on analytics or express mixed or moderate opinions. Most also indicate the impact of analytics is limited or moderate.



PART 6: A FORECAST FOR THE FIELD

MEASURING CONFIDENCE IN EDUCATION JOURNALISM

If we were to step back and take stock of the climate in education journalism today, what would we find? Is the sector facing stormy skies, as the national narrative of the news business might imply? Or do more pleasant conditions prevail?

To answer these questions, we created the Education Journalism Confidence Index. Much like a weathervane can tell you whether gusts are out of the east or the south, the Index provides a general sense of the overall condition of the education journalism sector.

To assess the prevailing sentiment in the field, the Index uses 13 questions to capture respondents' perceptions of four main aspects of education journalism:

- 1. The condition of the field as a whole**
- 2. Conditions closer to home**
- 3. Perceptions of the field**
- 4. Confidence in education news coverage, by outlet type**

To calculate the index, we use a version of “net favorability scoring.” Details about this methodology are available in the appendix of this report. But the basic idea is that education journalists' responses to each of the 13 survey questions are assigned one of three possible categories: Favorable, unfavorable, or neutral (e.g., “I don't know”). The “net favorability score” for a question is the difference between the percent of favorable responses and the percent of unfavorable responses. The overall Index is calculated by taking the average across all 13 questions.

Possible scores for the Index range from -100 to +100. Scores below zero are unfavorable. Scores above zero are favorable. Scores of exactly zero are neutral.



PART 6: A FORECAST FOR THE FIELD

THREE-QUARTERS OF EDUCATION JOURNALISTS ARE CONFIDENT

Results from the first-ever Education Journalism Confidence Index are more sunny than stormy. Overall, 76 percent of journalists post scores in the favorable range, between 0 and 100. The overall average score is a favorable +25, with a substantial minority of education journalists (22 percent) expressing very high confidence levels above +50.

Just 18 percent are in the unfavorable range below zero. The remainder (6 percent) are neutral scores of precisely zero.

Score Ranges on the Education Journalism Confidence Index



SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

Peering inside the Index, it becomes apparent that confidence is not uniformly favorable. Instead, microclimates exist.

Education journalists are most optimistic about the things they know best — their own organizations and work. Most also have favorable views of the beat itself.

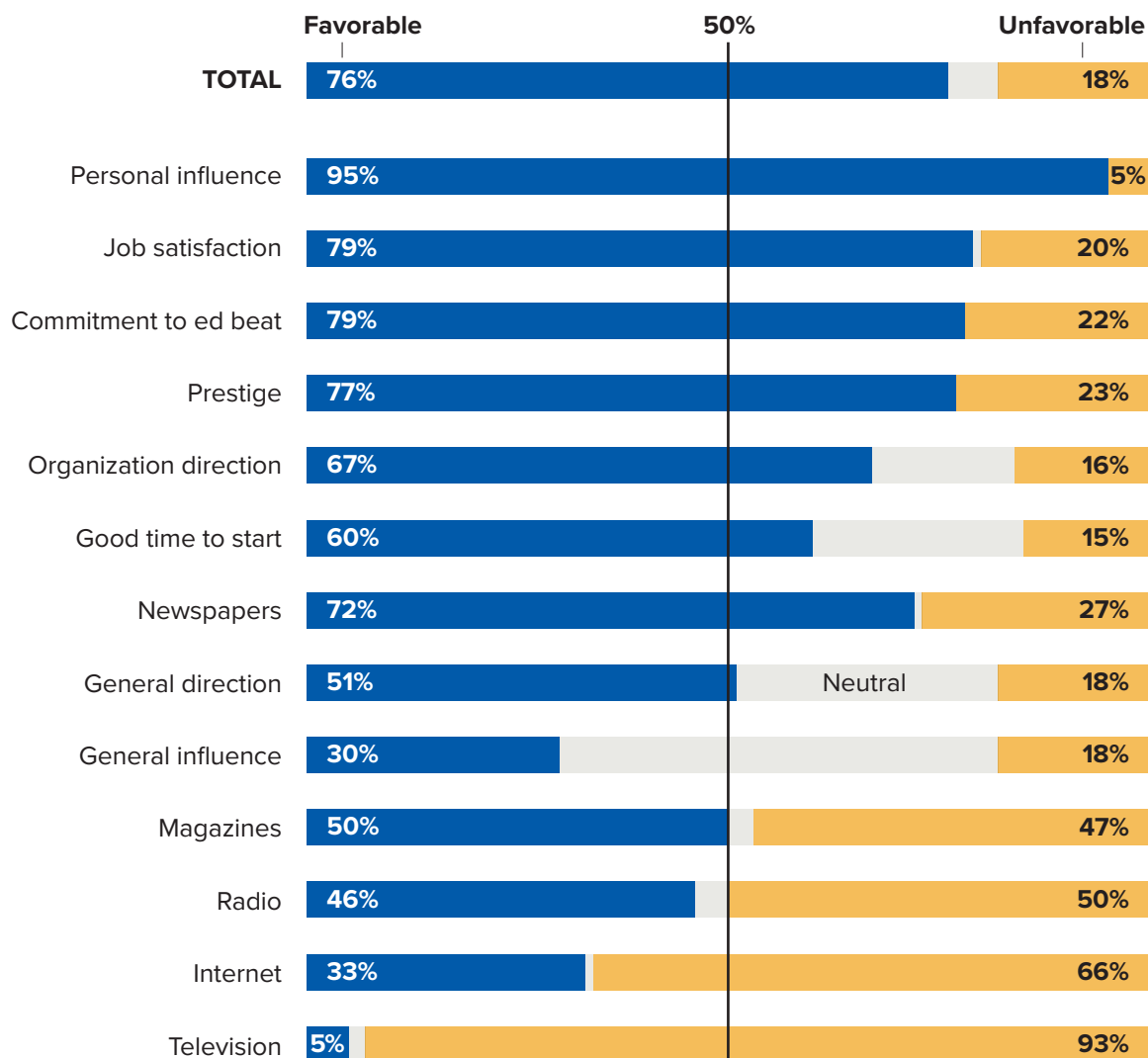
Toward the middle of the pack, clouds roll in as the viewpoint shifts from the personal and the professional to more general questions about the direction of the field. Although they are overwhelmingly confident that their own work has a positive influence on education, slightly more than half of survey respondents select the neutral option when asked whether education journalism is growing more or less influential in the nation at large. And about one in three are agnostic as to the general direction of the field.

At the other end of the scale, storms brew as journalists consider education coverage produced by media other than newspapers. At the bottom of the scale is education news on television: Just 5 percent of survey respondents express confidence in it.



PART 6: A FORECAST FOR THE FIELD

Education Journalism Confidence Index: Results for Each of the 13 Components



SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016

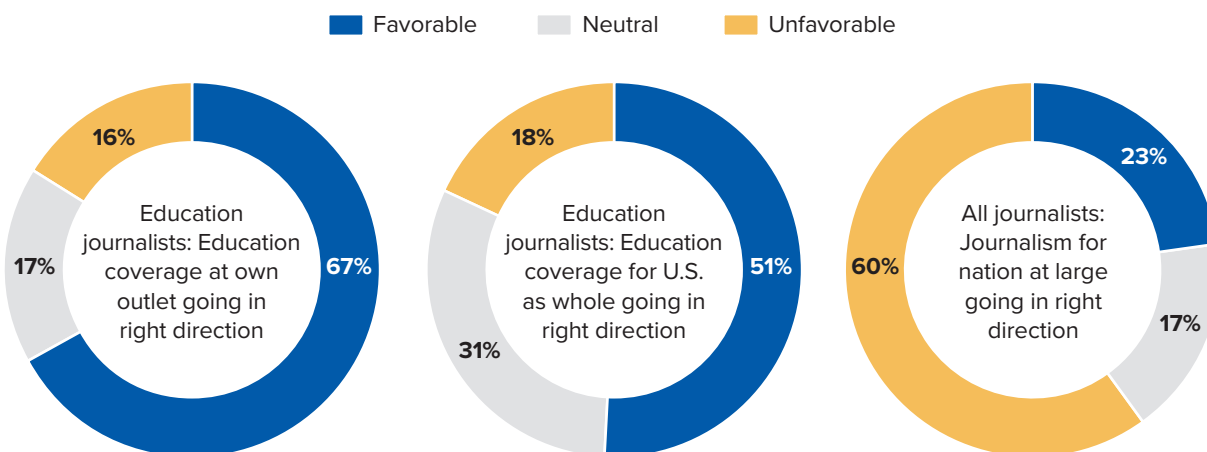


PART 6: A FORECAST FOR THE FIELD

NEARSIGHTED OPTIMISTS, FARSIGHTED SKEPTICS

Just as Americans rate local schools more favorably than schools across the nation as a whole, education journalists have nearsighted tendencies of their own.¹⁰ As described above, they are more optimistic about their own organizations and work than about the field at large. Despite this relative skepticism about the national scene, there is reason to believe that education journalists are more optimistic than their peers. Just over half of education journalists (51 percent) say education journalism is going in the right direction in the nation. By contrast, the *American Journalists* survey found that 23 percent of journalists believe journalism is going in the right direction in this country.

Education Journalists Have More Positive Outlook Than Journalists at Large



SOURCE: *State of the Education Beat*, 2016; Willnat & Weaver, 2014

Another example of “nearsighted optimism” is that education journalists are also more likely to express confidence in education coverage produced in their own corner of the news media. In other words, newspaper journalists are more confident in the education coverage produced by newspapers and less confident in that produced by radio broadcasters and other media types.



PART 6: A FORECAST FOR THE FIELD

So, what is “wrong” with the nation and “right” at home? Familiarity may play a role: Both survey and interview results suggest that education journalists feel less informed about the national scene than the picture closer to home.

Interview results indicate that uneven outlet quality may be another explanation: Although interviewees believe that some news outlets are doing a good job, they perceive that others are producing poor-quality work.

Concerns about the quality and focus of coverage top the list of reasons interviewees have a less positive outlook on the direction of education journalism for the nation as a whole.

“I don’t think we get enough reporting that’s actually bringing people into classrooms to really understand what teachers and students are doing all day long, what the impact of policies at the federal and state levels are [on] those people within the system,” a radio journalist said. “There’s a lot of sensationalism around how badly schools are doing ... and some of that is well-deserved, but it also can get in the way of a deeper understanding of what’s really behind the problems that are there.”

In addition to shedding light on the problems with the national scene, interview results also help explain why confidence is higher at home. The most frequent response again involves quality: Journalists say their own outlets produce well-executed education coverage that focuses on the right topics. At small outlets in particular, this can be more of a self-assessment than a judgment about the broader organization.

“I work at a very small weekly newspaper and I’m the only education reporter,” said one survey respondent. “We don’t have very many resources, but we have had a lot of good coverage lately, and I get a lot of leeway.”



THE PROBLEM WITH TV NEWS

Less than half of respondents have a favorable view of education news on the radio or on the internet (46 percent and 33 percent respectively), compared with 72 percent favorable for newspaper. But, on the Index, the greatest outlier is television – just 5 percent had a favorable view of TV news.

It might be tempting to conclude that this has everything to do with myopia. That is, journalists give higher marks to education coverage produced by the media in which they work, and few study participants work for TV outlets.

The data tell a different story: Not one of the 17 TV journalists included in the Index express confidence in education news on television. By contrast, longstanding polling by Gallup finds virtually no difference in the amount of confidence the American public places in news on TV versus newspapers.¹¹

TV has never played as big a role in education news as other media types. So why care?

One reason is that a considerable portion of the American public gets education news from television. Family or friends, daily newspapers, and school publications are the leading sources of information. Still, more than half of Americans get a great deal or some of their K-12 education news from local TV, and just over a third get that amount from national television, a 2010 Brookings Institution survey found.¹² The quality of TV news is especially relevant when considering whether Americans have equitable access to information about education. Both nonwhite and low-income people are more likely to get education news from television, the Brookings survey found.

What is wrong with TV news on education? *EdBeat* interview results indicate that the most common criticisms are that coverage is superficial and scandal-focused.

“Generally, most TV coverage is awful,” said an interviewee with a television background. “In smaller markets ... I think that they’re really trying to do good stories. The problem with local TV news [is] ... they’ve priced out veteran reporters, so you have lots of young reporters. ... Nationally, ... you just don’t see a lot of education coverage.”

More than one-third of interviewees hesitated to comment on the quality of TV education coverage because they rarely watch television. And even the critics are often sympathetic. They identify shortcomings with the news organizations or the medium itself. For instance, they note that TV journalists rarely get the opportunity to develop education-related expertise because they are usually required to cover everything under the sun.

When asked for ideas for improving TV news on education, interviewees most frequently suggest increasing the depth of the coverage. They also say that TV should devote more time and resources to education news and place a greater emphasis on developing expertise by assigning specific staffers to the education beat, even if it is only one of multiple areas of responsibility.



PART 7: CONCLUSION

Are we living in a golden age of education journalism? The *EdBeat* study provides some evidence that we are.

The Education Journalism Confidence Index skews positive. The typical education journalist senses that he or she is doing good work that makes a real difference in the world. Perhaps as a result, education journalists tend to like their jobs and say their news organizations are committed to covering the issue. Moreover, the beat itself has shed its reputation as a waystation for novices. Perceptions of professional prestige are strong.

Yet troubling signs remain, especially within the mainstream media where most Americans get their news. Decades of cutbacks have decimated staffs at general-interest newspapers, which have traditionally produced most of the nation's mainstream education coverage. The cutbacks limit the time and resources available for in-depth stories that go beyond quick-hit accounts of daily events and news. As layoffs and buyouts have occurred, institutional knowledge and topical expertise have likely declined. And technological innovations like online news and audience analytics have posed challenges even as they have provided solutions.

What does the future hold for education journalism? Perhaps the best barometer is the high confidence level of the young education journalists who will shape the future of the field. If the views of these millennials are any indicator, that future looks bright.



APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this report are drawn from results of the *State of the Education Beat* survey conducted by the Education Week Research Center on behalf of the Education Writers Association (EWA). The survey included a national survey of education journalists and a set of in-depth follow-up interviews.

BACKGROUND AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

In the summer of 2015, EWA commissioned the Education Week Research Center to conduct the *State of the Education Beat* study. It had been years since researchers had published a study that attempted to paint a broad picture of the landscape of the beat. The goal of the study was to collect baseline information on the current status of the field in the wake of substantial changes to both the education sector and the news business. Working with EWA, the research center established the following broad research questions:

1. Who are today's education journalists and where do they work?
2. What do education journalists do, and how do they go about their daily tasks?
3. How do education journalists perceive their field and its impact on education?
4. What major challenges do education journalists face?



APPENDIX

THE SURVEY

Questionnaire development

The Education Week Research Center developed the survey items, some of which were informed by previous studies. With an eye toward producing comparisons between education journalists and journalists as a group, survey items were modeled on questionnaires associated with *The American Journalist in the Digital Age* study conducted by Lars Willnat and David H. Weaver at Indiana University. Gallup polling on confidence in U.S. institutions also provided the model for one set of survey questions. Here the goal was to compare education journalists' and members of the public's levels of confidence in news and education news associated with different types of news media.

To guide survey development, the research center conducted panel discussions with EWA staff members, including former education journalists, and also with members of the EWA Board of Directors and the EWA Journalist Advisory Board.

Cognitive interviews were conducted with four journalists prior to finalizing the questionnaire. For those telephone interviews, the journalists were asked to review an initial draft of the questionnaire and then explain how they would answer each item. This process allowed researchers to identify wording that might make survey questions confusing or unclear. Researchers revised the survey based on feedback from the interviews. The final survey was then fielded to a diverse group of education journalists.

DEFINING AND SAMPLING EDUCATION JOURNALISTS

Since there is no single authoritative list of the nation's education journalists, the survey participants were recruited from two main sources. The first source was the membership list for EWA. The second was a commercial list of contact information for individuals who had previously been identified as education journalists.

From October 20, 2015, to November 3, 2015, the survey was made available to study participants through an online survey platform. Participants were invited and reminded to participate via email as well as notices on EWA's journalist listservs.

The Education Week Research Center received 445 total responses to the survey, with 401 meeting criteria for inclusion in the analysis featured in this report. Responses from 44 were excluded from all analyses because survey results indicated they did not fit the following definition of "education journalist" created for the purposes of the study:

An education journalist is defined as anyone actively involved in producing education journalism or supervising the production of education journalism that appears in independent news outlets. Education journalists do not necessarily spend all or most of their time on education: they may also cover other beats. They include full and part-time employees of independent news outlets, and freelancers and independent contractors who regularly contribute to at least one independent news outlet.



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The survey consisted of 34 questions intended to examine education journalists' views regarding the direction of education coverage, its impact, and other critical topics.

Although we cannot say whether this sample is representative, its respondents do include journalists in a wide range of roles (e.g., reporters, editors, columnists, and producers) and types of media (e.g., newspapers, magazines, radio, and television). Survey participants also constitute a geographically diverse group of education journalists, with at least one respondent working in nearly every state.

DEEP-DIVE INTERVIEWS

Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they were willing to be contacted for follow-up interviews designed to gather context and details on survey results.

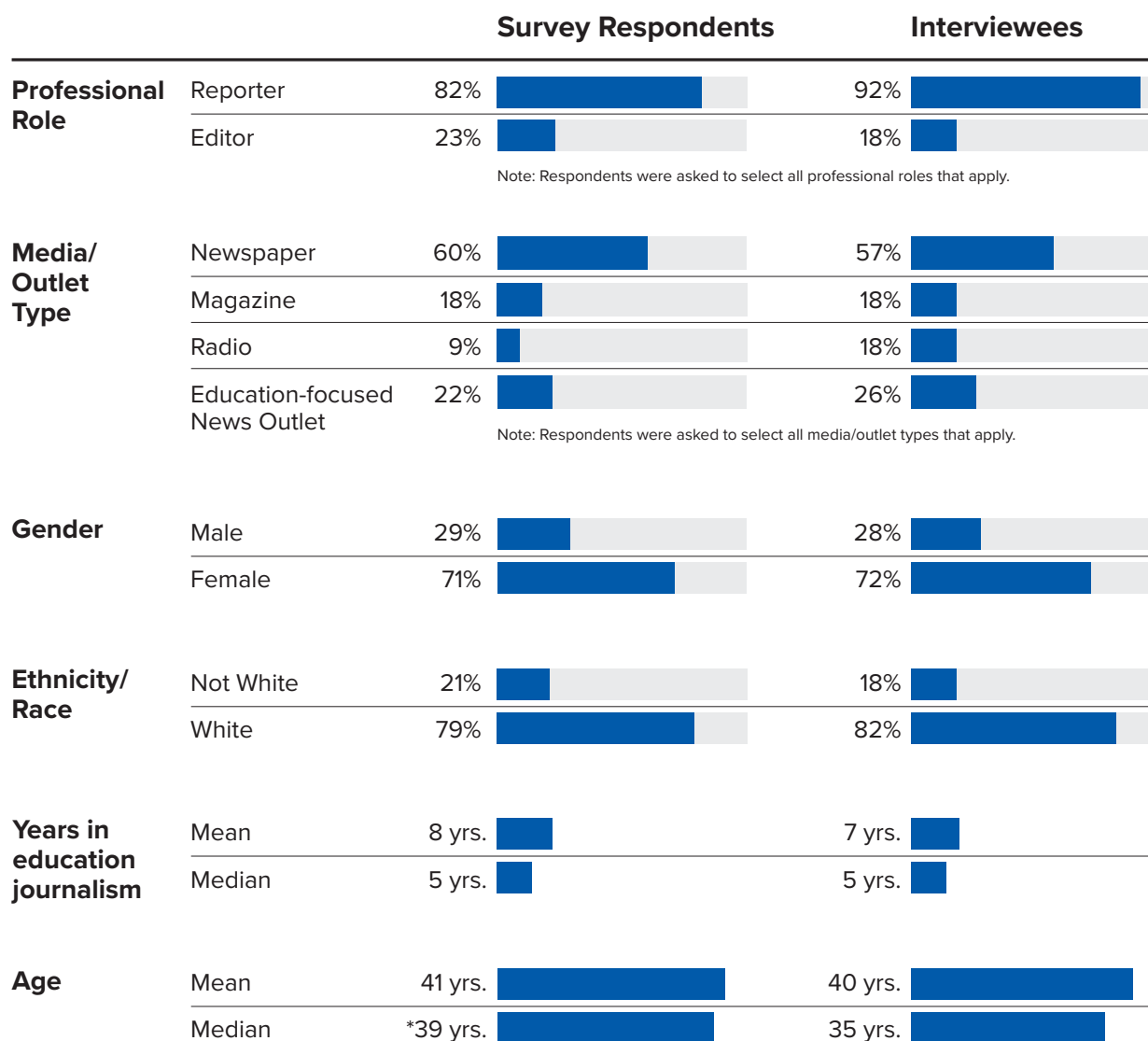
Interviews were conducted by telephone between January 11, 2016, and February 9, 2016. After collecting demographic information from the interviewee, researchers asked roughly 20 questions about the state of education journalism and (with the interviewee's permission) made audio recordings of responses, which were later transcribed for analysis.

Interviews lasted between 14 minutes and 52 minutes each. A total of 61 interviews were completed and transcribed. The demographic profile of the interviewees, as a group, largely mirrors the characteristics of survey respondents overall.



APPENDIX

DEMOGRAPHICS: SURVEY RESPONDENTS VS. INTERVIEWEES



*As reported here, the median age of all *EdBeat* survey respondents meeting the definition of education journalist is 39 years. In the main body of the report, analyses present the median age of full-time regular employees only (36 percent) to facilitate comparisons with the *American Journalist* survey.



APPENDIX

INTERVIEW CODING

To identify relevant patterns in interview data, researchers carefully reviewed each response and coded its content into categories describing major themes that emerged from the response. Coding proceeded from the ground up, with researchers generating codes to fit the responses. Coding categories went through multiple rounds of revisions with the research team.

Once categories were finalized and the questions coded, one to two additional researchers reviewed the responses assigned to each category, discussing and resolving any discrepancies. The study’s principal investigator resolved any discrepancies that remained after these resolution discussions had occurred. Patterns revealed by the coding analysis are noted throughout this report.

EDUCATION JOURNALISM CONFIDENCE INDEX

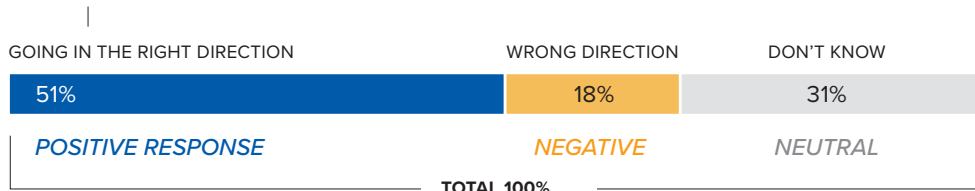
The Education Journalism Confidence Index assesses perceptions of the strength of the education journalism sector. The Index captures perspectives regarding a range of key factors, including the direction, influence, and prestige of the beat. It also reflects respondents’ level of confidence in the education journalism produced by internet news sources, magazines, newspapers, radio, and television. Thirteen different survey questions were used to construct the Index.

The calculation of the Index uses a technique known as “net favorability scoring” commonly used in political polling. A net favorability score captures the difference between the share of positive and negative responses to a question or prompt. For instance, 20 years ago in June of 1996, a Gallup poll found that 52 percent of the American public approved of the way Bill Clinton was handling his job as president, 42 percent disapproved, and 6 percent had no opinion.¹³ So President Clinton’s net favorability rating back then was +10 (calculated as 52 percent favorable minus 42 percent unfavorable).

The example below comes from an *EdBeat* survey question on perceptions of education journalism’s influence.

Thinking about the level of influence of education journalism in the U.S. today, is it:

Percent of people who selected this response



NET FAVORABILITY SCORE



51% – 18% = +33

Net favorability score is the difference between the percentage of positive (or favorable) responses and the percentage of negative responses. It can range from –100 to +100.

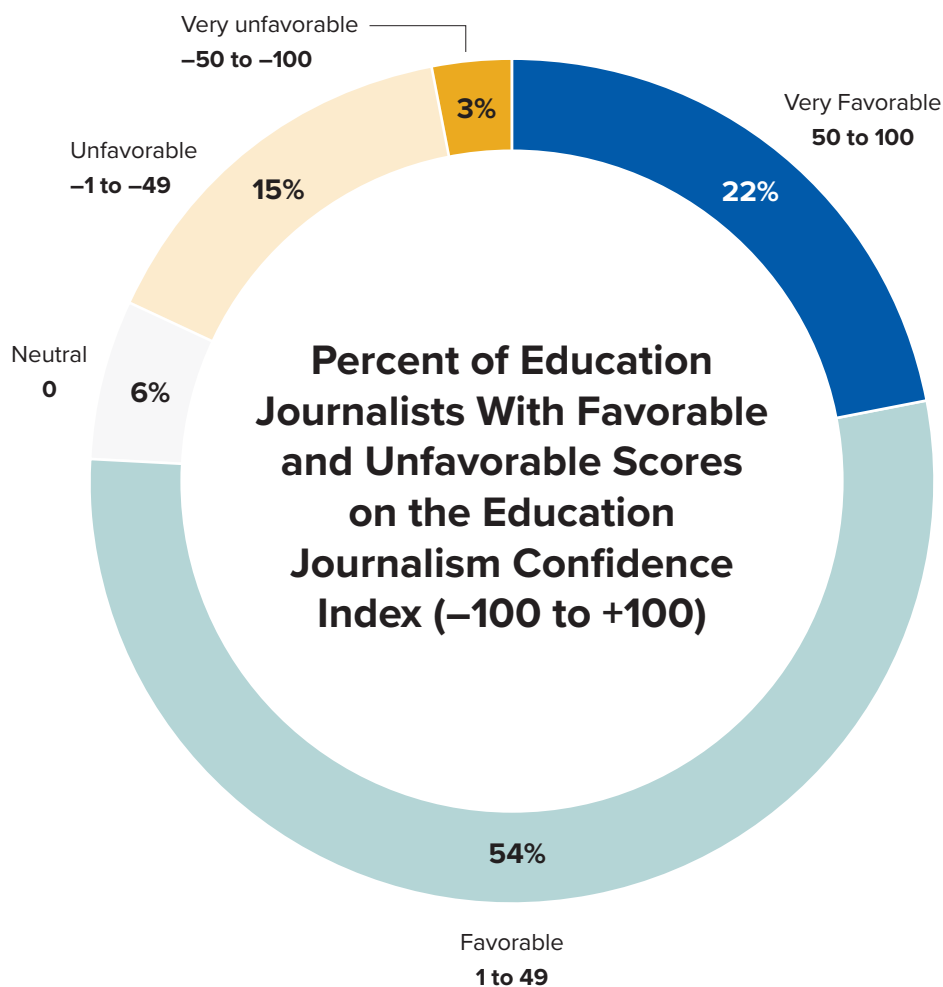


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SCORING THE INDEX

The overall Index value is taken by averaging results for all 13 constituent items across the full set of respondents. The scale of the Index can range from -100 to +100. Scores greater than zero indicate an overall positive or optimistic perspective on the state of education journalism, while values less than zero capture a generally negative sentiment.

The value for the Education Journalism Confidence index (+25) is in positive territory, indicating an overall favorable view of the profession. In all, 76 percent of respondents had a positive score on the Index, with 22 percent having very positive views (scores between 50 and 100).





APPENDIX

SCORING THE ELEMENTS OF CONFIDENCE

For each of the 13 questions used to construct the Education Journalism Confidence Index, the charts below present the percent of respondents with favorable, unfavorable and neutral responses. The applicable response categories appear above the bars. The net favorability score are also shown to the right of each item.

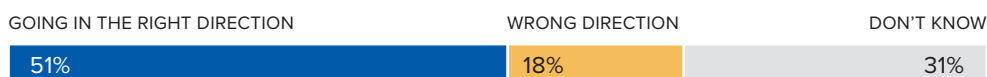
Thinking about education journalism at the news outlet with which you are most closely associated, do you think it is generally:



NET FAVORABILITY SCORE



Thinking about education journalism overall in the U.S. today, do you think it is generally:



Thinking about the level of influence of education journalism in the U.S. today, is it:



Is now a good or bad time to start a job in education journalism as compared to other beats?



Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in the education journalism [produced by] newspapers.



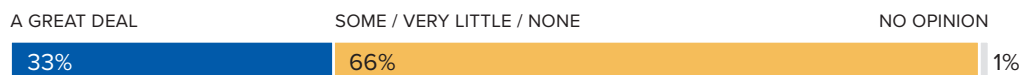
Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in the education journalism [produced by] TV.





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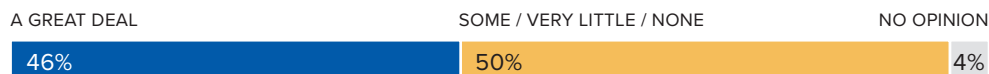
Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in the education journalism [produced by] the internet.



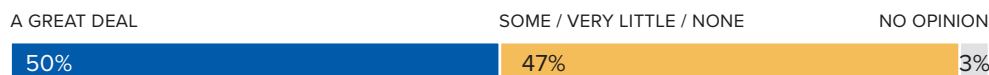
NET FAVORABILITY SCORE



Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in the education journalism [produced by] radio.



Please tell me how much confidence you, yourself, have in the education journalism [produced by] magazines.



Education journalism is a career path that I am committed to pursuing.



I believe education journalism is a prestigious beat.



My journalism makes a positive impact on education.



All things considered, how satisfied are you with your present job?





APPENDIX

ENDNOTES

¹ Willnat, L. & Weaver, D. (2014, May). *The American Journalist in a digital age: A first look*. Paper presented at the Journalism Studies Division of the International Communication Association, Seattle, Washington.

² Johnstone, J., Slawski, E., & Bowman, W. (1976). *The news people: A sociological portrait of American journalists and their work*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. Weaver, D., Beam, R., Brownlee, B., Voakes, P., & Wilhoit, G. (2007). *The American journalist in the 21st century: U.S. news people at the dawn of a new millennium*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

³ Throughout this report, medians are sometimes used for demographic data, in order to limit the impact of outliers and make results comparable to the American journalist study, which also reports medians for demographics. In addition, comparisons between the *American journalist* and *EdBeat* studies are restricted to full-time journalists because the *American journalist* study sample focuses on full-timers. When medians are used, the word “typical” or “median” is used to describe the results. The word “average” is used to describe averages.

⁴ United States Census Bureau. (2014). Quick facts. Washington, DC: United States Census Bureau.

⁵ Willnat, L. & Weaver, J. (2014). *The American journalist in the digital age: Key findings*. Bloomington, IN: School of Journalism, Indiana University.

⁶ National Center for Education Statistics. (2010). *Status and trends in the education of racial and ethnic groups*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *The condition of education*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

⁷ Walsh, M. (2015, August 5). Crowded field of online news sites focuses on education issues: National and local outlets providing a wealth of specialized content. *Education Week*, pp. 1, 14-15.

⁸ Shoemaker, P. & Vos, T. (2009). *Gatekeeping Theory*. New York and London, Routledge.

⁹ McGonigle, M. (1960, June). Sputnik spurs education reporting. *News Workshop*, New York University.

¹⁰ Phi Delta Kappan and Gallup. (2015). The 47th annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools: Testing doesn’t measure up for Americans. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappan.

¹¹ Gallup. (2015). *Gallup 2015 Confidence in Institutions Poll*. Princeton, NJ: Gallup.

¹² Brookings Institution. (2010). Sources of elementary and secondary education news. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

¹³ Gallup. (1996). Bill Clinton presidential job approval: June 27-30, 1996. Washington, DC: Gallup.