Journalism Employability in the Modern Newsroom: Insights From Applicant Resumes and Cover Letters

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Abstract
What skills, attributes, and experiences are needed for a visual journalism job in a contemporary print and digital newsroom? Previous attempts at answering this question examine it through insights from hiring managers or news editors, often collected retrospectively or at arbitrary times of the year through surveys; analyses of position descriptions, which are often framed in normative terms; or through analyzing journalism curricula, which perpetually struggle to adapt nimbly to evolving industry demands. This signaling theory study adopts a novel approach by examining, through qualitative thematic analysis, all applicants’ resumes and cover letters submitted by candidates for a visual journalism job posted in 2019. The hiring organization sought a candidate who could not only tell newsworthy stories through images but also one who could “write their own stories,” “have strong organizational skills,” and be “knowledgeable about current digital technology and applications for smartphone photography.” The results provide insight into the types of applicants who apply to such a position; the skills, attributes, and experiences employers regard as worthy of shortlisting; and the strategies candidates adopted in addressing the position description and selection criteria.

Keywords
visual journalism jobs, skill sets, journalism education, journalism training, journalism hiring, journalism jobs, journalism employability

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Introduction

The hiring process in journalistic organizations starts with the drafting of position descriptions, which list vast and varied skill sets (Santana & Russial, 2013) that attract untold numbers of applicants who vie to be shortlisted and to present their case directly to the organization. Such position descriptions specify minimum requirements, such as a college degree, years of professional experience, or the ability to work well under deadline pressure, and then list additional “required” and “desired” characteristics unique to the role or organization in question. As discussed in the literature review, such documents have been one of the primary ways journalism studies scholars have understood “what it takes to be a journalist” and have studied them for insight into journalism training and curricula.

After the position description has been drafted and advertised, applicants began crafting their own application materials: often resumes or CVs that list past experience, credentials, software competencies, and references, in addition to a cover letter that responds to any selection criteria and contextualizes information found on the CV or resume. These cover letters and resumes are a vital link in the process, as, through them, candidates are sorted with relatively few making it into the shortlist, which reflects candidates whose resumes and cover letters signal they meet the necessary requirements outlined in the position description and have the highest potential to bring value to the organization, sometimes quantified in terms of age, experience, skill sets, awards, credentials, and honors or more qualitatively assessed in terms of diversity or portfolio content.

This study is interested in the changing nature of journalism and the candidates journalism jobs attract. It is also interested in how closely the signals flagged in the position description match those used by management to shortlist candidates. For example, if the position description calls for an undergraduate degree in journalism, would newsroom hiring managers be willing to shortlist a candidate without a degree at all or a degree in an unrelated field, if the candidate could in other ways signal they had unique value they could bring to the organization? The study thus examines the credentials, backgrounds, software competencies, skills, and experiences that hiring managers regard as requisite for shortlisting and analyses the strategies candidates use to respond to position descriptions. It studies these topics through a qualitative thematic analysis of more than 30 applicant resumes and cover letters for a visual journalism job in the United States that was posted in 2019. Although visual journalism jobs have been among the hardest hit by job cuts in the preceding decades (American Society of News Editors, 2015; Anderson, 2013), the visual dimensions of journalism have also been historically understudied and undertheorized, despite the ubiquity of visuals in journalistic outputs as the news has moved increasingly online (Goggin, 2004; Kress, 2000; Machin & Polzer, 2015). This lack of historical attention and the rare opportunity to study something as sensitive and shrouded in secrecy as the journalism hiring process offers compelling justifications for the present study. Examining journalism employment and hiring processes are important because such organizations play an integral role in determining who gets to be a professional journalist and
who does not, and which skills and attributes are perceived as relevant and desirable on the job market (Young & Carson, 2018).

**Literature Review**

Convergent technology and the resulting democratization of media production and distribution have confused the question of who is a journalist. However, recent estimates place the number of professional, unionized journalists at around 600,000 worldwide (Cokley, 2019). This figure excludes those working in non-union environments and freelancers, which in the United States, account for more than half of the visual journalism that is produced at top American news outlets (Thomson, 2018). To provide baseline insight on what the visual journalism industry looks like and the types of people we might expect would be applying for these jobs, an overview of the field will be offered first that will allow juxtaposition between the applicants in this specific case and sector-wide averages. Following this, literature on hiring in journalism, on thematic analysis, on signaling theory, and on the skills, attributes and experiences that employers value, will be presented to support and ground the study’s research questions.

**Overview of the Visual Journalism Industry**

Through surveying more than 5,000 visual journalists in more than 100 countries, Hadland and Barnett (2018) provide a rich cross-section of the visual journalism industry in terms of the education of its practitioners, their employment circumstances, the technology and platforms they use, and their demographic characteristics. Each of these will be briefly elaborated below.

**Education.** Around three in four visual journalists are university-educated. The number of university-educated visual journalists has been rising since 2015 while the number of visual journalists who receive in-house training from their employers decreased over the same period to 21%.

**Employment circumstances.** Globally, more than half (62%) of all visual journalists report working in a self-employed or freelance capacity. Visual journalists are also more likely to be working part-time (59%) rather than engaged in full-time employment. The requirement to produce video in addition to still images is also growing (from 33% of respondents in 2015 to 39% in 2018). More than half (55%) are expected to work in multimedia teams.

**Technology and platforms.** Around 98% use digital cameras and a growing number (8%) also use drones. Instagram overtook Facebook as visual journalists’ preferred social media platform on which to showcase their work. It was mentioned by 49% of respondents as their primary platform.
Demographic characteristics. Slightly more than half (51.3) of the sector in this cross-section identified as Caucasian or White. This was followed by Asian (19%) and Latin American (10%). No other group occupied more than 4% of the remaining share. Black participants represented 1.4%. The bulk of participants in the sample (about two thirds) is between 30 and 49 and 80% fell between the ages of 20 and 59 years. In terms of gender, the industry is heavily male-dominated. As many as 85% of visual journalists identified as male in 2015 and this gender disparity has improved only slightly to 82% in 2018.

Journalism Hiring

The range of skills expected of journalists has expanded exponentially since the internet’s advent and requires continuous updating to optimize job prospects for both graduates and experienced journalists (Cokley, 2019; Santana & Russial, 2013; Wenger et al., 2018). Previous experience is the single most important attribute that news organizations look for when hiring new staff (Wenger et al., 2018). This attribute, mentioned in 72% of all 1,108 job vacancies posted in 2015 that were analyzed by Wenger et al. (2018), was followed by “web/multimedia,” which tied for second place. Video/photo skills were mentioned in 39% of all posts.

Lowrey and Becker’s (2001) study about the relationship between technological skill and journalism job market success found that success in the classroom alone, as measured by GPA, is a poor predictor of job market success and that internships and student media experience are more important. Using self-reported survey data from recent college graduates, Lowrey and Becker (2001) also found technological expertise rivaled professional journalistic knowledge as a hiring criterion and that employers keen to reduce their uncertainty tend to value technological skills more highly than a candidate’s broader experience. They predicted that as media presentation becomes increasingly complex and visual, this trend would continue. Other early work by Becker et al. (1993), also based on self-reported survey data, found applicants who specialize in the specific field in which they seek work have more job market success compared to those with more general backgrounds or those who specialize in another field. Later work, also survey-based, with journalism hiring managers (Austin & Cokley, 2006) found they preferred to hire graduates with journalism degrees.

Journalism hiring managers’ expectations differ between and among regions, such as those in Europe, the United States, and the United Kingdom (Cokley et al., 2013). Would-be European job candidates do well to pepper their application materials with the eight outcomes and 50 key competencies outlined in the 2006 Tartu Declaration (revised in 2013) while, conversely, would-be American journalists have a shorter and largely non-overlapping list of 22 attributes that employers most often request. These research outputs and others, such as a longitudinal study of 1,800 position descriptions (Wenger et al., 2018) or another that examined 669 journalism job announcements (Guo & Volz, 2019), are part of a broad stream that seeks to understand journalism hiring through the most visible and accessible part of the process: publicly available position descriptions and job announcements.
Thematic Analysis

This study adopts a different and novel approach by analyzing, through thematic analysis, the application letters and resumes that candidates prepare in response to such position descriptions for a visual journalism job at a print/digital newsroom in the United States. Boyatzis (1998) defines thematic analysis as a systematic “process for encoding qualitative information” (p. vi) with the goal of observing and understanding a person, interaction, group, situation, organization, or culture. Thematic analysis can be done with a wide variety of material, including that which is verbal, behavioral, documented, or live. The process begins with observation (seeing), continues with recognition (seeing something as), and ends in interpretation. The themes involved in the analysis can be manifest or latent and can be generated inductively or deductively. Such themes, generated through patterns, can differ depending on the researcher’s “focal length.” For example, some patterns, such as the specific software candidates say they can competently use, might only be visible at a close distance while others, such as how one applicant’s gender or education compares to the entire sector’s, are not apparent until the distance is increased. Within a journalism studies context, thematic analysis has been used to analyze YouTube comments on citizen journalism video footage (Antony & Thomas, 2010), to review past literature in the data journalism field, to parse interview transcripts with Pakistani journalists (Jamil, 2021), and to analyze journalism job listings in the United States (Powers, 2021).

Signaling Theory

Signaling theory originated in the 1970s and concerns people faced with an investment decision under uncertainty—here a hiring manager trying to decide which candidate to shortlist and then, eventually, hire—who interpret signals to help them in this decision. Its aim is to outline “a conceptual apparatus within which the signaling power of education, job experience, race, sex, and a host of other observable, personal characteristics can be determined” (Spence, 1973, p. 356). Spence differentiates between immutably fixed attributes (e.g., age, ethnic background) and alterable attributes (such as education or work experience). He terms the former indices and the latter signals. Signaling costs refer to aspects, such as time, money, or psychic labor, that are required in exchange for obtaining a signal. A single signal, such as a university degree, is sometimes not sufficient on its own to distinguish candidates so multiple hiring criteria, or signals, are either communicated explicitly or implicitly desired. Hiring involves risk and information gaps or asymmetries (Connelly et al., 2011; Spence, 2002). Employers possess less-than-perfect information about their applicants and, likewise, would-be employees, too, possess less-than-perfect information about the nuances of the jobs to which they apply and the associated working environments. Candidates’ cover letters are an opportunity for employers to see beyond basic demographic characteristics into how they have made the most of common signals, such as university education, professional experience, and the like. As has been argued elsewhere (Powers, 2021), journalism job advertisements send important signals about what
skills and attributes employers value. Likewise, applicants for journalism jobs need to signal to employers that they possess the requisite skills and attributes to bring value to the organization and that they merit advancement to the interview stage.

**Journalism Skills, Attributes, and Experiences That Employers Value**

This study provides an understanding of how the talent pool for this visual journalism job compares to employers’ normative expectations and the types of applicants who are attracted to such a position and the strategies they use to distinguish themselves in a highly competitive market. The study adopts a two-pronged approach where applicant resumes/CVs are examined first for comparison with the position description and the field at large. Cover letters are then examined to explore how the applicant compares to the “ideal” candidate articulated in the position description.

Past research that found technological skill rivaled journalistic knowledge and that those who obtained more specialized degrees tended to fare better on the journalism job market. This study is interested in exploring how accurate those findings are in today’s more converged, complex, and visually oriented news media landscape. It is also interested in exploring the value of certain skills, attributes, and experiences that employers think worthy of shortlisting. As such, the first research questions ask:

**Research Question 1A:** What types of applicants—in terms of credentials, backgrounds, experience, and skills—applied in 2019 for a visual journalism job vacancy in a U.S. newsroom?

**Research Question 1B:** How did the shortlisted candidates compare to the overall applicant pool? Which of the skills, attributes, and experiences did these shortlisted candidates have that apparently elevated their attractiveness as candidates?

Second, considering the relatively substantial research focused on understanding journalism hiring through examining position descriptions, the study is interested in exploring how closely are applicants who apply for a journalism job mirroring the position description or are seeking to stand out by offering skills, qualities, and experiences beyond those listed in the position description. As such, the second research question asks:

**Research Question 2:** How closely did the applicants match their cover letters to the core attributes listed on the position description? To what degree did they seek to distinguish themselves through the cover letters they crafted?

Due to the presence of large-scale surveys and quantitative analysis methods that have previously been used to understand the journalism hiring process, a deeper and more nuanced approach is outlined in the next section that advances our understanding of the types of people who apply for a specific journalistic role in a print and digital newsroom; the skills, attributes, and experiences that employers regard as worthy of
shortlisting; and the ways candidates approach the position description and seek to distinguish themselves through their cover letters and resumes.

**Method**

The researchers contacted more than a half-dozen news outlets which had posted visual journalism job advertisements in 2019. After numerous rejections, the researchers finally reached an agreement with one outlet, *The Western Star*, a daily print and digital news outlet in the Western United States with more than 600,000 monthly online visitors, within a week of its job announcement going live. *The Western Star* was hiring for a full-time visual journalist and included the following three core attributes, or *signals*, in its position description:

- A bachelor’s degree in visual journalism or equivalent
- Minimum 1-2 years visual journalism experience
- Working transportation

It also requested a link to an online portfolio that included news, feature, and sports coverage though this was not listed in the bullet-point list.

Directly after the application window closed, the researchers obtained for analysis redacted copies of applicant materials (resumes and cover letters) from 31 candidates (management later shortlisted five applicants, initially, and later whittled this down to two). Applicant portfolios were not provided to the research team, as this would have potentially comprised the applicants’ anonymity. Furthermore, candidate resumes and cover letters are of outsized importance in the process because though portfolio and past published content can affect the hiring decision later on, in this case, it was the resumes and cover letters that were used to screen candidates initially during the first review of the applicant pool and only later did shortlisted candidates have their portfolios scrutinized.

A sample of 31 is above average in size for a qualitative approach of a relatively homogeneous population (of people with similar backgrounds and/or skill sets who are all competing for the same position). Meta-themes can be identified with as few as six cases, or more comprehensive themes fleshed out from a dozen or more (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994). Indeed, in a sample of more than 500 qualitative studies, the average number of participants was 30 (Mason, 2010). This study exceeded that average and uses a multi-pronged approach to compare or examine two data points to provide a fuller understanding of the journalism hiring process.

Although the data in this study come from a single case, the study is not a duplication of an existing approach. Rather, it pushes boundaries and expands how journalism hiring research has previously been conducted. This visibility can inspire other scholars to adopt similar methods that will allow a greater understanding of if or how the results of this study compare across positions and organizations. In addition, single-case qualitative approaches are ideal for achieving a nuanced, holistic account of complex phenomena (Willis, 2014), especially for those who are “irreducibly subjective,”
such as is the case here where normative, ethical, and legal aspects influence hiring managers’ decisions. Furthermore, this study allows an examination and testing of a theory that yields new insights that can help journalism studies scholars better understand the hiring process within newsrooms.

**Data Coding and Analysis**

Using qualitative thematic analysis best practices (Boyatzis, 1998), applicants’ resumes and cover letters were explored initially through an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where categories, such as “applicant type” (student, full-time professional, or freelancer) or “skills” (such as knowledge of AP Style, drone piloting, or HTML + CSS), were created for coding category purposes. After this initial open coding phase, applicants’ resumes and cover letters were then subjected to an axial coding process where the data were examined in new ways by, for example, looking for connections between categories. This included, for example, exploring the relationship between education and shortlisting and the number of awards won and shortlisting. The materials were also coded in a deductive fashion based on previous literature in the journalism hiring and employment domain (Rivas, 2012) and informed by signaling theory.

**Findings**

The job opening was live for approximately 3 weeks and attracted 31 applicants through a third-party job site and through applications sent directly to the new organization. In total, 29 submitted resumes and cover letters, as requested, and the remaining 2 ignored this signal and submitted resumes only. The applicants—10 women and 21 men—hailed from 20 U.S. states in all 4 U.S. Census Bureau-designed regions (the northeast, the midwest, the south, and the west). The final-year students who anticipated graduating within 6 weeks of submitting the application submitted six applications.

**Research Question 1A:** What types of applicants applied in 2019 for a visual journalism job vacancy in a U.S. western contemporary newsroom?

The first research question explored the types of applicants (in terms of qualifications, backgrounds, experience, and skills) who applied for a visual journalism job in a contemporary Western newsroom. When possible, the attributes from the candidates in this sample will be compared and contrasted with global averages.

**Qualifications**

Visual journalists, as a group, are highly educated, with around three in four holding university education (Hadland & Barnett, 2018). In this group, 29 applicants either held a bachelor’s level degree or were in the process of attaining one. Only a single
candidate had an in-progress master’s degree (in photography) and two candidates had dual degrees or an intermediary (associate’s) degree before completing a bachelor’s degree. However, 16 candidates had completed or were working toward bachelor’s degrees in journalism, 5 had completed or were working toward bachelor’s degrees in communication, 5 had completed or were working toward degrees in photography, 1 had completed or was pursuing a degree in digital media production, 1 had completed or was pursuing a degree in family economics and management, and 2 had no tertiary qualifications listed.

**Backgrounds**

Of the 31 candidates, 10 were women and 21 were men. All spoke English and five reported being multilingual (listing various levels of fluency in Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Malay, and German). No cover letter or resume listed the candidates’ ages (an *index* in signal theory’s terminology). Some included dates for when they studied but some (most often those who were still students) did not include such information. The length of resumes ranged from one to four pages and the average length was 1.61 pages. The candidate pool reflected a more diverse gender balance than the global industry as a whole. Roughly one third of applicants were women, which is greater than the 18% that comprise the photojournalism industry overall (Hadland & Barnett, 2018).

**Experience**

About one quarter of the candidates (seven) reported no professional experience on their resumes. Four of these candidates were students working toward a bachelor’s degree and three were recent graduates (within 12 months of the job being posted). The remaining three quarters (24) of applicants reported varying durations of professional experience: 12 reported working exclusively in staff roles, 3 reported working exclusively as freelancers, and the remaining 9 candidates reported working a mix of both staff and freelance roles. The most recent “State of News Photography” report (Hadland & Barnett, 2018) places the percentage of photojournalists working primarily as freelancers at 62%, which is significantly higher than the percentage of applicants in this study who had freelance-only experience (9.6%).

More than half (18, or 58%) of the applicants listed student media experience on their resumes, while the remaining 13 did not. Interestingly, for the 18 who did list student media experience on their resumes, 12 did so in an oblique fashion with no explicit mention that the outlet was student-run and some even listed this under a “professional experience” heading. Only six candidates made explicit reference to the student nature of the outlet. Almost two thirds (20) of the applicant pool reported having internship experience. Cumulatively, these 20 applicants had accrued 38 internships. The number of internships undertaken ranged from one to five, and the average number of internships per applicant was 1.9.
Meanwhile, 10 applicants had received at least one professional award to their names. Together, these applicants had earned 48 awards. The most awards received were 17, with an average of 9.6 awards per applicant. Awards were classified into three categories: state/regional (e.g., an award from the Colorado Press Association or the Great Plains Journalism Association), national (e.g., a Sigma Delta Chi award from the Society of Professional Journalists), and international (e.g., an award from World Press Photo). Only first through third place professional awards were tallied and included. Nine individuals had earned 45 awards at the state/regional level and two individuals had earned three awards at the international level.

Skills

Candidates described skills on their resumes primarily in terms of software proficiencies, which responded to the knowledge “about current digital technology” signal included in the position description for an “ideal” candidate. However, 27 candidates (87.1%) listed competencies in specific software applications, or entire software packages, such as the Adobe suite or Microsoft Office package (see Table 1). These competencies were listed in either “skills” sections or in the description of their past work experience. The four who ignored this signal and listed no skills were not students and had either already completed a bachelor’s degree or, in the case of one applicant, reported no tertiary qualifications. Beyond the reference to being knowledgeable about current digital technology, the only specific software skills explicitly signaled in the position description were “knowledge of Photoshop (an image editing software) and Photo Mechanic (file management and organization software).”

In terms of skills, the position description made no mention of video; however, 14 candidates listed Premiere and 11 listed some variant of Final Cut, both of which are video editing programs. Worldwide, visual journalists required to provide video increased from 32% in 2015 to 39% in 2018. More than 90% of visual journalists would prefer to shoot stills only (Hadland & Barnett, 2018). Despite the absence of video in the position description, the job ad did make mention of the responsibility for pitching, writing, and creating at least one in-depth photo story every 6 weeks. Such a requirement does involve an understanding of visual variety and sequencing and, thus, even though video was not explicitly named in the position description, the underlying skills, such as narrative organization and visual variety, were implicitly mentioned and transferable skills required for video storytelling.

Research Question 1B: How did the shortlisted candidates compare to the overall applicant pool? Which of the skills, attributes, and experiences did these shortlisted candidates have that appear to have elevated their attractiveness as candidates?

The management of The Western Star’s shortlisted 5 of the 31 applicants. Two were women and three were men. No student applicants were shortlisted. All five had bachelor’s degrees, all in journalism. The lone applicant with an in-progress master’s degree was not among the finalists. On average, these five finalists had been out of
school for an average of 5.7 years. None was multilingual and none belonged to any professional associations, such as the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA) or the Society for Professional Journalists (SPJ). These five shortlisted applicants won four times as many professional awards compared to the non-shortlisted applicants. Together, these five shortlisted applicants won 48%, or 12 of the total 25 professional-level awards. Finalists garnered 2.4 professional awards, on average, compared to non-finalists, who garnered only 0.5 professional awards each.

Equipment experience or ownership did not seem to matter to the newsroom’s management. None of the applicants, who listed on their resumes make/model information of either flagship or high-end camera equipment, were shortlisted.

All five shortlisted candidates reported having student media experience during university and attending external photography workshops. None of them had been

| Software identified by candidates | References |
|----------------------------------|------------|
| **Adobe software aggregate total** | **90 references** |
| Photoshop                        | 26         |
| Lightroom                        | 18         |
| Premiere                         | 14         |
| InDesign                         | 10         |
| Bridge                           | 9          |
| Audition                         | 4          |
| References to an entire Adobe suite (“CS6,” “CS3-5,” and “Adobe CS”) | 3 |
| After Effects                    | 2          |
| Illustrator                      | 2          |
| Camera Raw                       | 1          |
| Media Encoder                    | 1          |
| **Microsoft software aggregate total** | **19 references** |
| References to the entire Microsoft Office suite | 8 |
| Word                             | 4          |
| Excel                            | 3          |
| PowerPoint                        | 3          |
| Outlook                          | 1          |
| **Camera Bits Photo Mechanic**   | **17 references** |
| **Apple software aggregate total** | **17** |
| Final Cut                        | 11         |
| Aperture                         | 1          |
| Soundtrack Pro                   | 1          |
| **Web-hosting software aggregate total** | **9** |
| WordPress                        | 6          |
| Squarespace                      | 2          |
| Blox                             | 1          |
| **Other “outlier” software**     | **10**     |

Note. Software name (aggregate totals appear in bold).
employed on a part-time basis and only two had ever been employed on a freelance basis. Each of the five shortlisted applicants also had full-time professional journalism experience in addition to at least one internship or apprenticeship.

The only specific software listed on the position description was Adobe’s Photoshop and Camera Bits’s Photo Mechanic. Four of the five finalists (three men and one woman) explicitly listed these software applications on their resumes. One (the other woman finalist) made no mention of software skills in either her cover letter or resume. Only one of the five finalists reported any international experience.

**Research Question 2:** How closely did the applicants mirror their cover letters to the core attributes listed on the position description? To what degree did they seek to distinguish themselves through the cover letters they crafted?

A fair degree of divergence existed between applicants’ cover letters and attributes listed in the position description. For example, even though the position description stated 1-2 years of experience was required, a quarter of applicants reported no professional experience whatsoever and the remaining three quarters reported almost 6 years experience. Candidates were not constrained to the skills and software competencies outlined on the position description, either. As examples, they made 112 references to software, such as web design or CMS software, that was not specified in the position descriptions.

Cover letters demonstrate applicants’ attempts to situate themselves between two competing professional discourses that exist in contemporary journalism. The first is the need for applicants to signal themselves as increasingly multi-skilled in digital media production, while still maintaining professional expertise (Lima, 2021). The second discourse requires applicants to signal an enduring adherence to journalism’s “high modernist” (Hallin, 1994) principles. In many ways, the position description required applicants to present themselves in this way, which helps perpetuate these discourses as professional norms. For example, the position description required candidates to have “a keen eye for news” and to adhere to high ethical standards. As a result, in their attempts to distinguish themselves in a way that made them suitable for the position, the applicants’ cover letters were strikingly similar.

All cover letters signaled the applicant as a high-quality visual journalist, who not only adhered to the professional ideologies of journalism but also had the ability to be an “all-rounder.” Even taking into account minor differences and individual variations, which are outlined in the analysis below, this mode of self-presentation was applied, regardless of the applicant’s gender or whether they were shortlisted for the position. This summary of how the candidates sought to “stand out” in their cover letters is not a criticism of their ability as journalists. Indeed, the overall lack of distinction between the cover letters, and especially among the shortlisted candidates, suggests the primary decision to select finalists for the job may have been made largely on the quality of their experience (as measured through years on the job and number of awards won), past published clips, and/or portfolios.
The cover letters reveal applicants’ discursive struggle to balance these two competing discursive positions outlined above by attempting to make a distinction between technical skills and professional skills. In reality, this balancing act is impossible and counter-intuitive as it requires applicants to reflect on the tacit knowledge that lies at the heart of professional self-presentation. Three key signaling strategies can be identified in applicants’ cover letters: (a) foregrounding of experience, (b) demonstrating their skill as a multi-skilled visual journalist, and (c) adherence to the professional ideologies of journalism.

Experience

Applicants for this position ranged from near and recent college graduates to visual journalists with decades of experience. Only about one third (n = 11) of cover letters explicitly mentioned how long the applicant had worked as a visual journalist, however. A female candidate with a bachelor of arts in journalism was one of these, who noted “I offer 5 years of concrete experience as a multimedia content creator, being young enough to have my pulse on all the multimedia trends, yet with enough experience to be a self-starter on any kind of project.”

However, 10 cover letters mentioned awards the applicants had received for their work, and 12 letters mentioned the applicant’s educational background. For applicants who had less “on-the-job” experience, discussing their student media experience while at university was an important way of establishing credibility.

Technical Skills

Unsurprisingly, the applicants’ ability as a visual journalist was the skill most frequently foregrounded in the cover letters. However, ironically, the applicants’ need to make—in writing—their initial impression as an image-maker meant they had to negotiate the cliche “a picture is worth a thousand words.” As a result, the applicants were forced to talk about their skill as a visual journalist and their approach to visual storytelling before they could demonstrate this through their work. When links to portfolios and examples of work were included (which were redacted before the materials were shared with the research team), they tended to come toward the end of the letter. Only 3 out of 29 cover letters explicitly mentioned photographic skills. Similarly, only three cover letters mentioned skills related to photographic equipment (e.g., experience with different camera brands, knowledge of lens, lighting, and grip equipment).

Applicants signaled in writing their skill as visual communicators by describing the types of visual stories they had crafted. More than half the cover letters (17 out of 29) mentioned examples of the types of stories they had covered. These examples were often contained in anecdotes that attempt to demonstrate the emotional intensity of visual journalism practice (Thomson, 2021). The role of emotion is often downplayed or stigmatized in journalistic discourse as compromising the ideals of objectivity and credibility (Thomson, 2021). However, almost 60% (16 out of 27) of the applicants...
gave at least one anecdote, often revealing the emotional work that characterized their interactions.

**Ideologies of Journalism**

Signaling respect for, and adherence to, professional ideologies is an important legitimizing strategy for journalists (Coddington, 2014; Cohen, 2019; Hanusch, 2013; Schlesinger & Doyle, 2015; Tandoc & Foo, 2018). A commitment to ethical practice, objectivity, accountability, responsibility, respecting deadlines, and social justice underpin journalism’s claims to professional status (Lima, 2021). In the context of the cover letters for *The Western Star*’s position, professional ideologies also operate as a type of shorthand, allowing candidates to discuss how professional knowledge interacts with professional practice in a way that demonstrates their “professional conscience” (Lima, 2021, p. 5).

The nature of ideology as a form of knowledge makes it extremely difficult to identify (Althusser, 2006), and as such, attempts to quantify applicants’ use of journalism’s professional ideologies will inevitably be imprecise. However, based on the interpretation of professional ideology presented above, it was easily the most common mode of self-presentation used by applicants, appearing in all but two of the cover letters and being used by applicants multiple times.

The position description opened with several sentences describing the geographic features and natural landscape of the area surrounding the news outlet. However, it did not give any indication of the types of people who live there or an expectation to cover certain aspects of the community. Despite this, 13 applicants made specific reference to how their professional values allowed them to forge strong connections with the communities in which they work.

Surprisingly, only five cover letters—none of which were submitted by finalists—demonstrated any detailed knowledge of the type of news produced by *The Western Star*. However, 15 cover letters identified specific reasons for wanting the job. These reasons fell into three categories: (a) professional, (b) personal, and (c) community. There was often considerable overlap between categories.

**Discussion**

To improve one’s ability to make an investment decision (extending a job offer) under uncertainty, the news outlet relied on multiple signals by positioning the geographic setting in which the outlet was based as “beautiful” and “great” and also signaled that it was looking for a university-educated employee. However, relying on a single signal, university education, only differentiates the pool so far (recalling that all but 2 of the 31 candidates possessed or were in the process of obtaining a university degree). As such, the news outlet bundled this university degree requirement with other signals, including work experience, reliable transportation, and a portfolio. Yet work experience can be interpreted in multiple ways. Indeed, candidates without professional experience applied, for example, and students sometimes placed student media experience under a “professional
experience” heading. As such, the organization needed to rely on additional signals beyond the ones explicitly mentioned in the position description.

Although it was not mentioned in the position description, awards were a more significant differentiator and signal of quality, as only about one third of the sample (10 of 31) had at least one to their name and only two had won international awards for their work. This indicates that the strength of all signals is not regarded equally. For example, a candidate’s own account of their skills and abilities as evidenced in their cover letter is not as strong of a signal as is a more objective account by one’s peers through achieving formal recognition or awards for one’s work. Beyond the four requirements of a university degree, work experience, reliable transportation, and a portfolio, the position description narrative was also sprinkled with other desirable attributes of an “ideal” candidate. These included many intangibles, such as being “talented and versatile,” an ability to “work well” with reporters and editors, confidence in their ability to work independently, and knowledge “about current digital technology.” However, such intangibles can be difficult, if not impossible, to vet in application materials, such as a resume or CV. As such, the subsequent interviews that follow the shortlisting process are equally vital to further reducing information gaps and asymmetries between both parties and with ensuring that not only required signals, such as education and work experience, but also desirable signals, such as interpersonal skills and versatility, are met in the prospective hire.

Notably, none of the five candidates belonged to any professional journalism organizations, which, in the United States, include ones like the NPPA or SPJ. Whether this was because of perceived relevance or because of the financial cost to would-be members is impossible to understand through the available data. However, the value that such organizations bring to their members and their relevance to hiring decisions is an avenue for future research.

It is worth noting that a single position for a visual journalism job posted in 2019 in America attracted more than 30 candidates from 40% of the U.S. states, including one non-contiguous one separated by roughly 3,000 miles. The geographic diversity of the candidates (see Figure 1) is a testament to how fierce the job market currently is and, potentially, how attractive a full-time position is considering past research (Thomson, 2018) that detailed the many challenges freelancers face in terms of economic sustainability, learning and mentorship, and development.

A common perception exists that journalism is an increasingly competitive industry but this competitiveness has so far only been studied indirectly using proxy indicators, like historical job numbers, and other anecdotal evidence. This study provides empirical insights to examine the competitiveness of the journalism field directly at its heart, the employment process. Although the data in this study come from only single outlet, a case for transferability can be made to other news outlets owned by the same company with presumably similar hiring processes. However, more research in this vein that looks beyond position descriptions is needed to parse the sometimes-invisible signals that hiring managers use to assess candidates’ quality and fit.

In terms of experience, the shortlisted candidates were, in terms of raw quantitative values, overqualified for the position, which sought someone with 1-2 years of visual
journalism experience. Yet, these candidates had, on average, almost three times that with 5.7 years. The position description called for a “bachelor’s degree in photojournalism or equivalent,” yet two candidates without any tertiary credentials listed on their resumes and one with a degree in another, completely unrelated field, applied for the position. That such a credential was listed in the requirements for the position illustrates that organizations value the training and conceptual understanding that journalism graduates receive.

Although no candidates included absolute age values in their application materials (and U.S. law forbids age discrimination in hiring practices), generic references to age and life stage were still included for both younger and older candidates and strategically positioned as an asset. For those who were young and relatively inexperienced, they used their age strategically to suggest they were tech-savvy and too young to be jaded or cynical. Conversely, older applicants used their age to suggest experience and maturity. Even though absolute values were not included in the application materials, hiring committees could get a sense of approximate age through when the applicants attended university and/or how much experience they listed following a tertiary credential. The sample was sensitive to these proxy measures, as only roughly one third of the candidate pool explicitly mentioned in their cover letters how long the applicant had worked as a journalist.

Dated references to specific versions of Adobe software (from 2003 to 2007, for example) did not portray some candidates as cutting edge. That these candidates did not try to disguise the dated nature of this technology by a generic reference to “Adobe

Figure 1. Geographic diversity of applicants.
software,” rather than naming a particular, deprecated version, is illuminating and can reveal the candidates’ values: for example, that technology and software do not make a journalist and that journalistic practice, norms, and outputs are more important than the skills and tools they use to enact those, even when these values clash with what the hiring organization signals is important to it. The lack of information regarding technical production equipment in the cover letters and the fact that only three of the five shortlisted candidates explicitly referenced the required software proficiencies in their application materials also supports this view.

The homogeneity in the cover letters produces a professional echo chamber in terms of how applicants present themselves. The reason why applicants drew on the three themes of experience, technical skills, and professional ideologies is obvious as that was what the position description signaled was important. This was a job for a news media professional and clearly, applicants would be best served by presenting themselves in this way. However, media organizations—even those beyond the one that is studied here—continue to invoke “innovation” as a mantra, and the roles of news media professionals keep expanding. In this way, those seeking employment as journalists may find themselves “flying blind” when trying to make initial impressions on potential employers. How do applicants successfully present themselves as a journalist in a way that enables them to be seen as a “good fit” for a newsroom, while at the same time demonstrating the potential to survive in an industry undergoing upheaval? This question is relevant for newsroom veterans as much as it is for recent graduates. Employers continue to criticize recent graduates for not having a firm grasp on the “basics” of journalism (Ferrucci, 2018; Pierce & Miller, 2007). However, at the same time, thousands of experienced journalists have been made redundant because employers see them as now being only capable of providing these basics (Ricketson et al., 2019). A pertinent question here for further research is what now constitutes “the basics” of journalism?

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Notes

1. The name has been changed.
2. The Western Star is staffed by an editorial team of about nine journalists and focuses its coverage on a county that has a population in the mid-600,000s. Its print circulation is in the range of 25,000 to 50,000.
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