

Study finds journalists hold strongly to professional identity, even when forced to leave field

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When meeting someone for the first time, people often ask, "What do you do for a living?" The question implies what work one performs is

one of the most essential aspects of a person's identity. But how would one answer if forced to leave their chosen field? A University of Kansas professor conducted one of the first studies to explore how journalists view the media landscape and their sense of identity once they left the profession.

American print journalism has been slashing jobs at a frantic pace for more than a decade. Scott Reinardy, professor of journalism at KU, has written about [how surviving layoffs has affected journalists](#), and he was approached to research what it has meant for those who had to leave due to layoffs, buyouts, newspapers closing or other reasons. He co-wrote a study that surveyed about 350 former [journalists](#) about leaving print media and what it meant to their professional identities, views of media since their departure, physical, emotional and financial effects the move made, and how their work changed.

The study, co-written with Lawrie Zion of LaTrobe University in Melbourne, Australia, was a recreation of a study titled *New Beats* that examined how Australian journalists navigated their professional identities after being forced to leave the profession. The new study, featuring a survey adapted to apply to American journalists, was published in the [journal](#) *Journalism Practice*. Among the most striking findings was that 36 percent of respondents said they still identify as journalists, even if they are no longer working in media.

"When you're committed to the idea that you are a journalist, that's who you are and when you're told you're not going to do that anymore, it takes a real part of you," Reinardy said. "What we do is a big part of us, and when that's taken from you, you have to address you're no longer the thing you always wanted to be."

According to Reinardy's study, 39 percent percent of respondents said they experienced emotional difficulty such as feeling devastated or

depressed, while 18 percent cited loss of household income. However, 24 percent reported they felt relieved to be leaving the field or that they were ready for new opportunities. The vast majority moved on to other work, as only 7 percent moved into retirement.

"There was a group that really talked about the emotional and physical struggle that happened and not just with the financial issues of thinking, "I have to find a new job," Reinardy said.

Leaving the field and seeing so many peers forced out also affected how the former journalists perceive newspaper journalism today. Twenty-nine percent reported they view it as dead, dying or diminished, and 22 percent said they are sad or depressed by the current state of journalism. Twenty-six percent reported they view the work as critical to democracy and are supportive of journalists. Those saying journalism is valuable but dying registered at 11 percent.

As the majority of respondents continued working, they largely moved into other fields or media-adjacent work. Some did return to newspapers, but the most common career move was to communications, public relations or marketing at 40 percent. Writer, copy editor, editor or graphic design was second at 22 percent, while jobs outside of media accounted for 22 percent, and 10 percent transitioned to education. Thirty-six percent of respondents said they still identify as journalists, even if they are now working in different jobs. Reinardy said that finding was understandable, as in previous research he routinely heard from journalists who said they view their career as a higher calling, not simply a job that provides a paycheck. He himself was a journalism professor for two years before fully realizing he was no longer a journalist, he added.

The study made several similar findings to that of the Australian study, notably that journalists are negotiating their professional identities at a

challenging time for the industry. Applying the survey to American journalists forced to leave the field further adds to the understanding of the changing face of journalism in our country.

"The study was an effort to try to explain the devastation that has happened in American newsrooms. It's part of that larger story," Reinardy said. "Now we've been able to track, through research, how important identity is to journalists. That pull that brings you to work in journalism is strong. Trying to reinvent yourself is very difficult."

More information: Scott Reinardy et al. Cutting Deeper: U.S. Newspapers Wipeout Jobs and Alter Career Identities, *Journalism Practice* (2019). [DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2019.1691935](https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2019.1691935)

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