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Underfunded, Overworked, Essential: Experiences of Student Journalists Across the Country

By Elin Johnson

In a rapidly changing media field, student journalists and college newspapers across the country are often left out of the narrative of the impacts on journalism. But these young reporters and editors face scant budgets and less-than-cooperative administrations obsessed with their public image.

Student papers offer key services to their campus communities, such as providing [independent perspectives](#) and covering communities that would otherwise be [news deserts](#).

“The student newspaper means a lot to me. I think it’s an underfunded, under-communicated resource,” said Ximena Bustillo, a senior at Boise State University.

Bustillo is currently at the Idaho Statesman, but from her freshman to junior year she worked for the student publication [The Arbiter](#), which services the largest public school in Idaho. She said that not only are student publications essential to a university, but news deserts across the country rely on them to fill their gaps.

“There’s really nobody covering universities like student newspapers do,” Bustillo said. She stressed the importance of reporting the challenges facing and accomplishments of college students: college students across the country are facing food insecurity or inventing necessary tools — all things a community should want to know about.

There are an estimated [1,600 college newspapers](#) in the United States, and they don’t go unnoticed on campuses.

In fact, [76 percent of college students surveyed](#) had read their campus publications in the past 30 days, and 82 percent had read their papers in the past 90 days. Additionally, 90 percent of respondents said that the campus news section was the [first section they turned to](#).

“Student journalism to me means preparing people for the real world. The Appalachian is the best place at my school to get that experience and to build a portfolio.” said Moss Brennan, the editor-in-chief of his student paper The Appalachian, at Appalachian State University in North Carolina. Brennan, a junior studying journalism with minors in political science and media studies has been with the student paper for three years.

“My experience has led me to internships and connections,” Brennan said. “I don’t think I would be in the position I am at without working on the paper.”

But student journalism isn’t a cake walk. Student media often has to contend

with an institution that restricts their voice, as well as earn the respect of their communities.

“I don’t like the term student journalists because we are journalists who happen to also be students,” student Sandra Sadek said. Sadek is the former news editor and current news reporter at the University Star, the publication for Texas State University in San Marcos.

Sadek said that sometimes when reporters identify themselves as working for the student paper sources don’t take them seriously.

This belittles the fact that the University Star covers city and county news as well, like local elections and policy proposals. They’ve even broken local news stories before any of the other publications in the county.

“The people who live in communities with large student populations — don’t be afraid to read the student publications: We still give good news coverage.” Sadek said that just because they are students doesn’t mean they don’t provide good coverage.

Sadek said that through the Star she’s learned “everything I needed as a journalist.” Including how difficult the business is. She said it’s good to practice these skills in a student newsroom, which have less at stake than a full time professional newsroom.

Colleges are obsessed with their image now more than ever: universities **across the country** have **threatened** or even **punished** their student papers for publishing unflattering **material**. Institutions are relying **more heavily** on public relations positions, and as a result becoming **less forthright** with sharing information to student media.

Student news budgets seem to be the **first to go** in this changing collegiate landscape where many institutions are tightening their fiscal belts.

The University of Colorado announced in **December 2019** that the independent student-led media **CU Independent** would no longer be funded and transition to a faculty-led model. Lack of funding also threatened to shutter **The Daily Titan at California State University, Fullerton** earlier last year.

Tight Budgets & Little Pay

And these tight budgets can mean that student journalists — who take hours out of their already busy weeks to work for the paper — can end up working for little to no pay.

Brennan from Appalachian State said that while he does get a scholarship for being editor-in-chief, his hourly rate works out to a little over \$2 an hour.

At the University Star, all reporters are volunteers and only editors receive a monthly stipend.

“Personally I do not think it was enough of a stipend because it wasn’t hourly,” Sadek said. “We all put a lot of hours in to make sure the paper is running smoothly. I personally think it was enough to cover the hours we put in.”

Sandra Sadek holds up a copy of The University

Sadek said she wishes she got paid more but understands that the budget is tight. However, she says the experience partly compensates for the lack of pay: she’s been able to cover student protests, investigative work, immigration issues on campus, and local elections. All this will serve her well as she enters her career, she said.

And many student editors are having to supplement the meager

Star, with one of her stories on the front page. budget they get from their institutions by going old school and selling ads.

Matthew Scherger is the editor-in-chief of Christopher Newport University's [The Captain's Log](#), a primarily print weekly newspaper that distributes 500 copies for CNU's undergraduate enrollment of 5,000 in Virginia. Between 300-350 of those copies get picked up each week. The Log has a staff of 12 editors and 10-18 regular writers.

Despite the workload of a weekly paper, writers and photographers are not paid. Editors and the business manager are paid: most as part of a stipend from the student leadership organization through CNU, and about $\frac{1}{3}$ are paid from the profit of selling ads. The editor-in-chief position is half paid from the stipend and half paid from a leadership scholarship set up by a donor specifically for the position.

"We have to sell ads to make up our budget," Scherger said. The funds from the university do not cover the full cost of running the paper.

"Ad revenue has become more important even now," Scherger said, as the CNU budget has gotten smaller over the past couple of years. "We definitely rely on ad revenue to an extent. Otherwise we'd have to shrink our staff."

"If you're not interested in putting in the leg work there's not a lot of external motivation there." Scherger said that unpaid contributors do the work either because they like it or because they want a career in media.

"We're kind of a hybrid," Bustillo said of The Arbiter. Boise State has a class where students' job is to write articles — this means reporters can work for credit, or in hired positions. If hired, students are paid hourly. Reporters get 12-

15 hours a week to work, and managers get around 20 hours. Bustillo got paid \$10 an hour as a manager, which is about \$3 over minimum wage in Idaho.

“Everyone works overtime unpaid, because there’s no way you’d be able to do your work without going overtime,” Bustillo said. All pay is revenue that comes from sales or student fees, and is not funded by the department.

“I mean it’s not a field where you’re going to make a lot of money anyways,” Bustillo said about whether or not she thought the pay was fair. “It’s the nature of the field.”

“Almost everybody works two jobs. If you have another job opportunity you can’t say no to that depending on your financial situation,” Bustillo said this method sometimes can prohibit students from taking a job with the paper.

Brennan LaBrie, a junior at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, is the news editor at their student paper [The Mast](#). LaBrie said that he deals with a different sort of challenge: general apathy.

“Some months I’m the only person doing the news,” he said of his staff.

“There’s not really a news culture, or a student media culture. One of the reasons I’m not pursuing it harder is because no one cares. I’ve never had a single professor or student compliment me on my article, and I’ve written 20 this year, because no one reads the paper.”

LaBrie said that the student paper is important because young journalists need the space to get mistakes and poor writing out of the way. He says the hands-on-learning style means the paper is “literally a lab.”

He said that the lack of pay for The Mast’s staff was one of the contributing factors in the lack of student involvement in the paper.

Brennan

LaBrie He said that when students ask what working at the paper could offer them he thinks: “I don’t know, maybe experience?”

“Maybe if I was getting paid I’d have the motivation to write,” LaBrie said.

PLU maxes out credits at 17 — which means students can’t get any credit for their student media work if they take a full course load. And a couple years ago their budget got severely cut as part of university-wide cut backs.

“I’d love to be weekly or biweekly but I might need pay. Or we’d need to be an opinion paper,” LaBrie said. “I think it’s important to have and it’s disappointing the administration looks down on us for just being a monthly when maybe they should look at why that is.”

“Honestly we would just like some help from the administration and they look at us and think we aren’t a quality publication,” LaBrie said. “I understand where the university is coming from with their budget. I can kind of see PLU as not being open in a couple decades.”

Outside pressures contribute to the student sentiment as well. LaBrie said that the families of many of his peers are warning their collegians that journalism is dying, and even advisers and professors are pushing students toward the supposed safety of public relations and marketing.

“They’ve been saying [that papers are dying] since I was 9 years old,” he said with a sad laugh. LaBrie said he doesn’t want student media to die — that would be really sad.

Transparency & Censorship: Dealing with Administrations

Kendall George graduated from Chico State University in May 2019, where she

worked at her award-winning student newspaper The Orion for two years. (Chico State was dangerously close to Paradise, California and the Camp fires. Their coverage of the tragedy earned them accolades from the collegiate journalism community.)

George said the journalism college at Chico and the staff who work there promoted freedom of speech, and George — who used to be the opinions editor — found that this sometimes rubbed the campus administration the wrong way.

“I know the administration didn’t always like that — especially with the opinions section,” George said. “We would write about sex, we would write about drugs, about how the college isn’t up front about [funding].”

“We were almost raunchy in some ways,” George said. “In a lot of ways I don’t think the administration was prepared for that.”

George said that the paper should have been allowed to speak with the administration more.

“The college newspaper was very essential to the university,” she said. “They [admin] supported us just because they had to.”

College newspapers cater to a different type of audience than a typical local paper. One that is a bit more comfortable with the taboo.

“I was known for writing about sex and sexuality despite me being really young and not having a lot of experience with that,” George said. She said she once wrote a piece about what it was like to have sex while on drugs.

“I had never done drugs but I was doing research about it,” George said. “We

had to turn the comments off on that one because we got a lot of negative feedback.”

Because of her audience, George said they could write more risqué opinion pieces. The articles she was writing were getting 1,000 or more views. George said she doesn't know how the general public of Chico reacted to her pieces, but that the negative comments she got were mostly from older parents with students at the university.

“I think that you wouldn't find things like that in a modern print newspaper,” she said. “Because journalism is changing a lot you might be able to find more online journalism platforms. College students are definitely more desensitized to risqué topics.”

While George was a writer for the paper she received no pay, and as an editor earned less than minimum wage. George now works as a copy editor at a professional publication, a position she couldn't have held without her student journalism experiences.

“In my three years I will say I've seen a change in how the administration interacts with the student publications,” Sadek from the University Star said. At first there was a lot of “head butting” when trying to get quotes and information. She said the administration will give them general PR responses, but some departments have become more transparent in what she described as “slow but visible progress.”

“There's not a lot of emphasis on the student paper being a student resource which I find to be a big problem,” Bustillo said about The Arbiter. She said that over time this has changed and there's been more integration and knowledge about the paper.

“Not enough people are aware of it as a resource but the people that do read it do trust it,” Bustillo said, saying that faculty will use the paper in class.

Additionally Bustillo said writing for the paper made her more connected to the university as a whole: “It really helped me understand how the university works and how all the different areas of the university functioned.”

“I have been able to build strong relationships that have led to good stories and scoops,” Brennan said about working with his administration.

“Relationships are really key in covering the administration. I have found it keeps relationships alive if I let the admin know right when we publish a story that doesn’t shine the best light on the university.”

Unique Experiences

Moss Brennan takes photos on the sidelines at a football in New Orleans for his university.

In addition to creating a paper, college journalists have to also juggle being students — something career journalists don’t have to contend with.

“[The] Biggest challenge I think is balancing everything,” Sadek from Texas State said. “I love writing and working on the student paper — I love doing that. But I’m also a student and sometimes I have a paper due the next day or exams to study for. It’s hard to balance everything when you compare it to a regular reporter who can get all their phone calls done in one day when you have to spread it over several days.”

“It definitely is challenging some weeks,” Scherger from CNU said. “We publish weekly a 16-page paper. Some weeks the workload is heavier.”

In addition to this, Scherger said he also has to work hard to ensure the paper

is respected on campus. Student papers change their staff every year, and completely turn over every four years, which means some papers must contend with a subpar legacy.

“Our paper used to have a really bad reputation on campus, I mean really bad, like atrociously bad,” Scherger said. But that was 15 years ago. He and his team have worked hard to change this. However, some of their faculty are still kind of wary of the paper because of this.

Student journalists also face backlash — just like career reporters — and have to learn from those mistakes in a sometimes unforgiving environment.

Both Bustillo and Sadek said they face a lot of online trolls who call them “snowflakes” or accuse them of being a part of the “liberal media” or “fake news.” Bustillo said that these accusations mainly come after stories about racially insensitive incidents. Once it went as far as an upset stranger unaffiliated with the university calling her on her personal phone.

However Bustillo said working at the paper was still worth the challenges and backlash. She said it “uniquely impacted” her decision to go into journalism, because before the paper she had no idea what the field was like and that being on staff was like being “thrown head first into the cold water.”

*Ximena
Bustillo
hard at
work.*

In 2017 the University Star at Texas State published an opinion column that caused a heavy amount of backlash: resulting in racial threats and Fox News coming to campus. It got so bad the **student body president threatened to defund the publication**. Sadek said the administration did not defend them, and she said some of the reporters didn’t feel safe as a result. Sadek thinks the administration didn’t do enough.

“We have faced backlash on opinion articles before that could have been edited better,” Brennan from The Appalachian said. “It was on a sensitive topic and editors, including myself, missed some language that was not taken well. There was no intent behind the language but that doesn’t matter. We did issue a letter to say we missed the language and would work to better ourselves in the future.”

Scherger said that opinion pieces tend to be especially touchy: the comment section lights up and triggered readers fire off emails. Once, Scherger said, an individual upset with how their opinion was portrayed tried to sue The Captain’s Log for libel.

“Luckily that deescalated eventually, but that was probably the most stressful two weeks of our life,” he said with a strained laugh. “Honestly I was just impressed that we had a big enough readership that people threatened to sue us.”

It’s Real Work Too

Student media provides a home for many student journalists, and a way to better engage with the campus.

For Scherger at CNU, The Captain’s Log was the first organization he joined his freshman year and the only one he has stayed with all four years.

“The paper has been my primary engagement on campus,” he said. Just last week he wrote his **senior send off**, saying goodbye to the paper that helped him pursue an interest, and where he met his closest friends.

“[It’s] been a really rewarding experience for me personally,” he said, He met a lot of different students he wouldn’t have met otherwise and built valuable

faculty relationships through the paper. “I think the Captain’s Log has really enriched my life personally.”

LaBrie said that writing at a small, liberal arts, D3 university like PLU brings additional challenges: he has to dig for the news. LaBrie said he’s found himself writing an article on the new kombucha machine and having to make that interesting.

PLU has around 3,000 students, so occasionally LaBrie will face tough choices when covering people who are also classmates, neighbors, and friends: “When I wrote an article about the president of ASB resigning I know her, she’s my friend.” (ASB is PLU’s student government.)

“This is an alternative voice, it’s the only place where administration or faculty can be questioned. They are not going to do this on their website,” he said. “[It’s] important for entertainment voices, alternate voices, and it makes the school look good.”

“The student paper for me, first of all, it reinforced why I want to be a journalist and why this is what I want to do,” Sadek said. “At the Star, we’ve been through a lot. The Star represents the student voice on campus. We’ve always been the advocates for supporting student voice on campus, in our objective way. In a way we are the voice of the student body.”

“I always look back and loved working with people who were also learning,” graduate George from Chico State said. She said that everyone on staff was supportive of each other and the paper was a safe place to make mistakes, but on the other hand they were doing important work and writing real news.

“It’s always important to advocate for student newspapers,” Bustillo said, pointing out the necessity of experience and published work. “I think student

papers should be viewed as a tool.”

“You’re doing good work, you’re doing real work. You’re not practicing journalism, your stuff is going to be published and there will be consequences,” Bustillo said to student journalists, noting that often getting validation from the administration and community is challenging.

“It’s definitely important to keep student journalism alive, it’s definitely important to teach people that they can keep journalism in their everyday lives,” George said. She said that student journalists are not too young to do important work.

“There’s real good work being done at student papers,” Bustillo said, echoing the above sentiments. “You do it because you like it but it’s also important that people are consuming the information you put out.”

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