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License to Spill: Credentialing in 20th Century Journalism Education

Nate Floyd (Miami University)

In a 2012 article published by *Information, Communication & Society*, Seth Lewis explored the tension between professional control and open participation in the field of journalism.¹ Lewis adopted the conceptual framework of boundary work to examine the logic of professional control in journalism and its incompatibility with the ethos of open participation in the digital sphere. Inspired by Lewis's work, this study investigates a previously underexplored dispute in the history of journalism education that raises similar questions concerning professional control and open participation. It takes a critical approach to the establishment of credentialing and specialized accreditation for journalism in the United States by highlighting the inherent conflict between the open participation ethos of the First Amendment and the form of professional control pursued by a self-selected group of educators, editors, and publishers during the mid-twentieth century.

This study begins with a war of words between industry insiders and journalism educators in 1947 regarding the establishment of the American Council on Education for Journalism (ACEJ). Although the accrediting agency for journalism education was still a year away from announcing its first list of accredited programs, discussions surrounding how to elevate the status of journalism and regulate entry into the profession had been ongoing since at least 1923, involving metropolitan newspaper editors and journalism educators. This study explores a plan formulated during the interwar period, involving metropolitan newspaper editors affiliated with the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) and journalism educators from prestigious programs known as Class A programs within the American Association of Schools and Departments of Journalism (AASDJ). This plan proposed to introduce a credentialing system that would privilege graduates of accredited journalism programs in metropolitan newspaper work.

This study draws upon a range of valuable primary sources, including transcripts and meeting minutes from influential academic and professional organizations. It gains

new insights by examining folders and boxes containing personal papers and correspondence among working journalists, editors, and educators. It uses the extensive records and oral histories available in the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Records (1912–2003) held by the Wisconsin Historical Society, as well as stakeholders' commentary on journalism education in trade press publications such as *Editor & Publisher* and *The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, as context. Finally, the study adopts a sociological perspective to analyze the interrelationships and power dynamics that shaped the development of journalism instruction in higher education.

"Bureaucratic Monopoly"

Whatever his colleagues in the newspaper industry thought of him, there was no denying that Basil 'Stuffy' Walters had earned his nickname. In fact, even from a short distance, one could easily mistake him for Stuffy McInnis, the first baseman for Major League Baseball's Philadelphia Athletics.² Walters began his career as a reporter for the *Richmond Palladium* in Indiana in 1915.³ After serving as the editor of the U.S. Army's newspaper in Milan during World War I, Walters worked as a telegraph reporter and correspondent for the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Indianapolis Star*, and later as an editor for the *Des Moines Register* and the *Minneapolis Star-Journal*. In the summer of 1947, Walters was the executive editor of Knight Newspapers, one of the largest national newspaper chains in the United States, when he became embroiled in the long-standing tension between the so-called Class A and Class B schools and departments of journalism.⁴ Speaking before educators representing the Class B members of the American Society of Journalism School Administrators (ASJSA) in Chicago, Walters expressed his concern that the recently established American Council on Education for Journalism (ACEJ) accrediting program might lead to the licensing of newspaper professionals.⁵ Walters was not referring to a government licensing system but rather to an accrediting system that would result in professional credentials issued by educators and recognized by the industry.

It is understandable that Walters was alarmed by the potential implications of educational control. Scholars in the sociology of professions have extensively examined the role of education, credentialing, market dynamics, and monopoly control in the

process of professionalization.⁶ In *The Rise of Professionalism*, Magali S. Larson framed the professional project as an effort to attain market control.⁷ A key aspect of this market control, from the perspective of the profession, involved the protection and endorsement of the elites. Larson departed from purely descriptive, essentialist definitions of professionalism that relied on traits or characteristics. Like many others, Larson's focus shifted toward understanding the struggles for cultural authority among various occupational groups, rather than simply determining whether a particular occupation had achieved professional status based on specific traits. Larson emphasized professionalism as an ideology that rationalizes "inequality of status and closure of access in the occupational order."⁸ Larson wrote that the "core of the professional project is the production of producers in the modern university," an institution embedded in a state-controlled monopolistic education system, arguing that "the central principle of legitimacy is founded on the achievement of socially recognized expertise, or, more simply, on a system of education and credentialing."⁹

Randall Collins took the relationship between the professional project and education a step further in *The Credential Society*.¹⁰ Published in 1979, the book charted the growth of the educational credentialing system through case studies of medicine, law, and engineering. Building on Larson's closure or monopoly model of professionalism, Collins showed how social boundaries were established to restrict access to high-status professions, thus legitimizing and perpetuating inequality. He argued that "the rise of a competitive system for producing an abstract cultural currency in the form of educational credentials" was "a major new force shaping stratification in twentieth-century America."¹¹

The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) enlisted the Class A journalism programs of the American Association of Schools and Departments of Journalism (AASDJ) in its endeavor to elevate journalism into a respectable profession.¹² Like other professional organizations during the interwar period, ASNE's leadership believed that aligning their professionalization project with elite academic institutions would bolster their claim that journalism deserved recognition as a true profession.¹³ However, skepticism persisted regarding the professionalization project led by the editors. Many within the industry still held the belief that the most effective way to acquire the necessary skills for journalism was through an immersive experience in the newsroom. Besides the debates surrounding the best methods to train journalists, there

were also those who doubted the professional status of journalism.¹⁴ Jean Folkerts wrote about the tension between these contrasting perspectives in a 2014 monograph, *History of Journalism Education*.

Despite conflicting perspectives, the editors, the Class A programs, and a few newspaper publishing associations came together to establish the ACEJ in 1944. By the summer of 1947, that accrediting body was only one year short of releasing its first list of accredited programs, although the effort to raise standards in journalism education had been underway for many years.¹⁵ Walters addressed the 1947 ASJSA convention at the invitation of Perley I. Reed, a journalism professor at West Virginia University who organized the group in 1945 to represent the interests of the Class B schools. The editors and the Class A programs had excluded these quality institutions from the new accrediting plans, which meant the voices of the Class B schools, women's colleges, and historically Black colleges and universities were absent from the new accrediting initiative. Only publishers, editors from metropolitan press, and educators from the Class A schools and departments of journalism were granted a say in the accreditation program. Asked about the creation of the organization for the Class B programs in a 1972 oral history interview, Reed explained that ASJSA was formed to represent educators from programs that valued independent thought and action. "They didn't just subscribe to the idea that a few persons had a monopoly on what the best journalism would be," he said.¹⁶

Walters was a prominent member of the editor group and supported the financing of the accreditation plan. However, on that summer day in 1947, he told educators from the Class B schools that he "always had a fear in the back of my mind" about licensing.¹⁷ He said he was worried that the ACEJ would turn into a "bureaucratic monopoly...effectively putting the stamp of approval or disapproval on the man or woman who wants to write."¹⁸ He added, "I gag at the idea of trying to set up some sort of screening formula based on formal schooling." Walters expressed concern about more than mission creep. He criticized the journalism schools as being run by "howers," rather than "doers." He had experienced both excellent and poor teachers and believed that the ACEJ was ill-equipped to deal with such variations. The "howers," he continued, "have permitted themselves to drift toward a system which tends to establish a monopoly in education."

Walters found a receptive audience among the educators who had been

excluded from the accreditation process. However, the editors and the educators from the Class A programs ridiculed him in the trade press for weeks for his comments about the accreditation plan. Even his colleagues in the newspaper industry were not supportive. Holt McPherson, the managing editor of the North Carolina *Shelby Star*, representing the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association on the accrediting committee, told *Editor & Publisher* that “Mr. Walters sets up a straw man and proceeds to tear him apart.”¹⁹ Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the editor of the *Tulsa Tribune*, wrote in *The Bulletin of the American Society of Newspaper Editors*, “What did Stuffy have to drink at that convention? Who dealt him up that Blue Moon of gin, vinegar, bitters, happy dust and a maraschino cherry?”²⁰ Dwight Marvin of the New York *Troy Record* called it an “absurd hyperbole.”²¹ Walters was “a little late,” he said, and his concerns had been presented repeatedly “and to my mind, definitely answered.”²² Marvin then asked, “Isn’t Mr. Walters seein’ things at night? It is incredible that he, a working newspaperman, can be scared by such a synthetic ghost.” His remarks then got a bit more personal. The dangers of bureaucratic monopoly were “not half so dangerous as multiple newspaper ownership—the growing number of networks of chain organizations—in which Mr. Walters himself has been a willing participant.” Walters had one thing right, though, Marvin said. The whole idea was to make a profession out of journalism.

While Walter’s colleagues had been dismissive, the journalism educators from the Class A schools were indignant. Dean Kenneth E. Olson of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University said Walters had “scared up bogeymen.”²³ Olson told *Editor & Publisher* that newspaper men and educators had taken a stand against licensing from the very beginning, citing how the licensing of journalists in Italy and Germany had throttled freedom of expression there. We do not want that, he said, but employers had a right to know the quality of the instructors and whether the schools had adequate library materials and laboratory facilities. Journalism did not need any more programs than did the fields of law, medicine, or engineering. Norval Neil Luxon of Ohio State University said he was “more than a little puzzled” by Walters’ comments.²⁴ “How Stuffy,” he said, “or any other person can by any stretch of the imagination see in the Accrediting Committee’s activities the danger of licensing persons who want to write is beyond me.” Dean F.L. Mott of the University of Missouri hoped that journalism accreditation would achieve the same outcome as in other professions by eliminating “diploma mills and quack medical schools.” The assumption

that the accrediting program "is out to kill off all but a few schools of journalism is quite without foundation," he said.

Editor & Publisher indirectly defended the ACEJ plan, acknowledging that it would improve the journalism schools and better equip graduates for their roles as journalists, even though formal education alone would never be sufficient training for a journalist. Newspaper editors of the future were as likely to come from a Class C school as a Class A school.²⁵ The accrediting program merely aimed to set minimum standards and there was "no intention to kill off those schools that are inadequately staffed or equipped."²⁶ Weeks later, Walters told *Editor & Publisher* that he enjoyed the discussions regarding journalism education, although his reservations about the accreditation program remained. "I still believe in my original contention that there is a dangerous tendency to narrow the field under an accrediting program," he said.²⁷

Principal Business

Although Walters stirred up controversy in the summer of 1947 when he raised questions about the accreditation plan of the American Council on Education for Journalism (ACEJ), the idea of issuing identification cards to graduates from the Class A programs had been under consideration for nearly two decades prior to Walters' remarks. In fact, as early as 1929, editors had signaled their willingness to recognize such cards as a prerequisite employment credential.

Journalism Quarterly, the official voice of the Class A schools, called it "the principal business" of the 1927 American Association of Schools and Departments of Journalism (AASDJ) meeting. Educators from the Class A schools voted to issue identification cards to their graduates upon completion of a bachelor's degree in journalism. The Class A schools would then ask the editors to request all job applicants to show identification cards as part of any job application process.²⁸ The plan was "laid over for consideration" for one year. At the subsequent convention in 1928, the topic of identification cards resurfaced. Addressing the audience, the president of the Class A programs suggested "that some means, approved by the American Society of Editors (ASNE), be devised to protect schools and departments of journalism from the discredit often brought upon them by students who misrepresent themselves to editors as accredited graduates in journalism."²⁹ He had identified a credentialing problem and

suggested that collaborating with the editor group was the solution. Later at the 1928 convention, Willard Bleyer of Wisconsin, who was chairman of the Class A Council on Education, presented the plan. The Class A schools recognized the need for a comprehensive classification of journalism education but lacked the resources to accomplish that task. In the meantime, they issued identification cards to their graduates and asked that ASNE members "request all applicants from schools and departments of journalism to show their identification cards."³⁰ In the ensuing discussion, many feared that most editors would not heed the request. Nevertheless, a draft of the identification card was produced within a few hours. The front of the card listed the AASDJ and the ASNE as sponsors and served as verification of the applicant's credentials. The back of the card bore a list of all the accredited Class A programs.³¹

At a 1929 ASNE meeting, editors further discussed the recognition of identification cards issued to graduates of the Class A programs. Henry Claus, the chair of the ASNE's committee on schools of journalism, introduced the idea of identification cards to his colleagues. In his report, Claus emphasized the value of accreditation and what editors hoped to achieve through it. He said that managing editors who were overwhelmed with applications needed to know "which schools make a serious business of training for journalism and which schools are in it for revenue or only because they feel that they must keep up with the procession."³² While acknowledging the necessity of accreditation, he recognized the financial constraints of conducting comprehensive visits to every journalism school or department, and expressed support for the Class A plan to distribute identification cards to their graduates. Until a thorough survey and classification could be completed, the Class A schools would issue identification cards to their graduates and ASNE members would "request all applicants from schools and departments of journalism to show their identification cards."³³

The topic of identification cards resurfaced again in 1936, with the Class A schools collaborating with editors on a joint committee aimed at raising standards in journalism education.³⁴ In May 1936, the joint committee recommended "the adoption of identification cards for graduates of schools of journalism."³⁵ A sample card was made and distributed to all the schools by the joint committee's chairman.³⁶ The following year, in 1937, Grant Hyde from the University of Wisconsin, who was the chair of the educator-editor joint committee, provided an update regarding identification cards to educators from the Class A programs during the AASDJ annual convention.

"We encouraged with rather wide publicity," he said, "the various schools to equip their graduates with identification cards certifying their college and professional school training."³⁷ The move to equip the Class A graduates with identification cards created tension between educators from the Class A schools and educators from the Class B programs of the American Society of Journalism School Administrators (ASJSA). A few days after Hyde's comments at the Class A convention in 1937, identification cards cropped up as a topic of discussion at the annual conference of the American Association of Teachers of Journalism (AATJ). The AATJ included educators from both the Class A and the Class B programs. During the discussion of the joint committee's actions, H.E. Birdsong of Temple University, representing a Class B program, pointed out that the interests of the Class B schools were not being considered by the Joint Committee of Class A educators and the ASNE. The plan for Class A graduates to carry identification cards, first proposed in 1927, was a perfect example, he said. Graduates from other institutions were clearly at a disadvantage, he added.³⁸

The plan to issue identification cards to journalism graduates remained a topic of discussion within journalism education from 1927 to 1947, as evidenced by its recurring mention in the minutes of various meetings. These discussions took place during the annual meetings of the ASNE, the Class A, and the Class B programs in 1927, 1928, 1929, 1936, 1937, and 1947. However, progress on implementing the plan faced setbacks during the Great Depression and World War II, which interrupted momentum towards cooperation on the matter. By the time Walters raised the topic of licensing at the ASJSA conference in the summer of 1947, the editors and the Class A programs had moved on. In 1948, the ACEJ released its first list of accredited schools and departments of journalism, comprising thirty-five institutions offering thirteen different sequences. Thirty-one institutions were accredited in the news-editorial sequence, thirteen in radio news, and two in pictorial journalism. Other sequences were advertising, community journalism, advertising management, home economics journalism, agricultural journalism, magazine writing, management, science journalism, communications and public opinion, and informative writing.³⁹ The accrediting program published a booklet on the accredited programs and distributed it to daily newspapers, university presidents, and educational organizations across the country.

The rivalry between the Class A schools, represented by ACEJ, and the Class B schools, represented by Perley I. Reed's ASJSA, erupted in the pages of the *New York*

Times just a few years after the first accredited list was published. In January 1951, Reed attacked the Class A schools in a letter to the *Times*. The headline read, "Restricting Press Freedom; Danger Seen of Limiting Writers to Those from Accredited Schools."⁴⁰ Reed asked the reader to imagine a world in which "certain intellectuals" bureaucratized the press and radio, accredited a select few publications, and discredited all others. He claimed that the field of journalism education was experiencing the subtle beginnings of such a system. He characterized the accrediting program as "a self-created agency which, upon invitation and receipt of \$100," sends an inspection team of educators and newspapermen to rate schools and departments of journalism. Their aim, he continued, was to "disqualify the graduates of a small arts college, or a self-educated man, for publishing activity until he had been 'accredited' by some self-created agency." Reed closed his letter by pointing out that, as of 1951, the accrediting program had not yet gained recognition from the National Commission on Accrediting (NCA). The accrediting program's failure to win recognition from the NCA would remain a serious issue for some time to come. He extolled the independence and democratic nature of his organization, the ASJSA, representing the Class B programs. A few weeks later, Alfred H. Kirchhofer, president of the accrediting program in 1951, responded to Reed in the *Times*. Kirchhofer wondered if Reed failed "to understand what the journalism accreditation program comprehends."⁴¹ Since over 500 four-year institutions and 250 junior colleges were offering journalism instruction, Kirchhofer argued that it was "apparent that some measuring stick is required that will help students to avoid disillusionments and employers to avoid disappointment in the graduates they employ."

Reed referred to the accrediting program's lack of approval from the NCA in his letter to the *Times*. The NCA was a United States government agency created in response to the proliferation of professional accrediting bodies barely one year after the accrediting program published its first list of accredited journalism programs.⁴² It aimed to centralize and regulate specialized accrediting. Regional accreditors, responsible for institutional accrediting, could only recognize professional accrediting bodies designated by the NCA. Furthermore, the NCA would designate only one accrediting body per profession. By 1953, the accrediting program's lack of recognition from the NCA was becoming a serious problem. The accrediting program wanted the autonomy to enforce its standards, which clashed with the NCA's centralized control.

By 1953, the NCA notified the regional accreditors to coordinate specialized journalism education with the Class B schools led by WVU's Reed, the same organization that welcomed "Stuffy" Walters to its annual conference in 1947.

The Class A programs were shocked by the NCA's offer to Reed's organization. To avoid complete exclusion from the NCA's plans, members of the accrediting program and the educator group decided to give representation to unaccredited schools on the accrediting program committee. Finally, the Class B schools would have a voice in specialized accreditation for journalism. Longtime proponents of the ACEJ were deeply disappointed by the concession to the Class B schools and viewed it as a significant setback in their crusade to establish standards in journalism education. They were especially upset with *Editor & Publisher* for its reporting on the concession to the Class B schools and the NCA.⁴³ The headline read, "New Accrediting Code Liberalizes Standards."⁴⁴ University of Minnesota journalism professor Ralph Casey expressed his disappointment with the concession and the headline that followed in a letter to A.H. Kirchhofer, managing editor of the *Buffalo News*. He wrote: "The plain fact is that the National Commission on Accrediting got the ACEJ into an impossible position by failing to recognize the Council as the bona fide accrediting agency."⁴⁵ Casey also wrote to Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the managing editor of the *Tulsa Tribune* who had previously dismissed Basil "Stuffy" Walters' concerns about bureaucratic monopoly, to advocate for high standards and complain that the Class B schools were attacking the accreditation process.⁴⁶ Norval Neil Luxon was the chair of the ACEJ's accrediting committee from 1946 to 1953 and had ridiculed Walters' comments about a bureaucratic monopoly at the 1947 ASJSA conference in the pages of *Editor & Publisher*. He told Maxwell McCombs in a 1971 oral history interview that he considered this concession to the Class B schools and the NCA in 1953 a disaster. "This decision," he said, "by the heads of the then accredited schools, led quickly to the dilution of standards for accreditation, a dilution which, I am sorry to say, has steadily increased in the past eighteen years."⁴⁷

Conclusion

The plan to issue identification cards to graduates of accredited journalism programs was initially intended as a temporary measure until the establishment of an

accrediting agency by the Class A schools and the editors. In the meantime, educators requested that members of the ASNE recognize the cards as part of the hiring process at their individual newspapers. While the editors agreed to this at their annual meeting, there is no evidence to suggest that the practice was widely adopted. The issue of identification cards was raised multiple times between 1927 and 1947, before the American Council on Education for Journalism (ACEJ) published its first list of accredited schools and departments of journalism in 1948. Basil "Stuffy" Walters may have exaggerated his concerns about licensing journalists, but his apprehensions regarding the narrowing of the field and the potential monopoly control of journalism education were valid.

Specialized accreditation in journalism education built a wall around the resources of journalism education, but it served the interests of educators and editors in unique ways.⁴⁸ For educators and editors, specialized accreditation was partly a power grab that allowed them to eliminate their competition, raise the profile of their programs, and validate their mission to outside constituencies. Newspaper editors, like other social groups eager to elevate their occupation to professional status, saw in accreditation an opportunity to legitimize their professionalism project by associating it with elite academic institutions, even at the cost of excluding all but a handful of students and educators in elite institutions from accessing quality education and opportunities.

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- ³ "Basil Walters, a Top Editor with Knight and in Chicago," *New York Times*, August 30, 1975, 22.
- ⁴ "Basil Walters to Join Knight Newspapers," *Editor & Publisher*, April 29, 1944; George A. Brandenburg, "Knight Acquires Control of Daily News," *Editor & Publisher*, October 21, 1944, 5. The Knight Newspapers portfolio included the *Chicago Daily News*, *Detroit Free Press*, *Akron Beacon-Journal*, and *Miami Herald*.
- ⁵ Dwight Bentel, "Walters Fears School Plan Means Licensing of Press," *Editor & Publisher*, July 5, 1947, 7.
- ⁶ Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28, no. 1 (2002): 167-195.
- ⁷ Magali S. Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
- ⁸ *Ibid*, xviii.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, 50.; *Ibid*, xvii.
- ¹⁰ Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Academic Press, 1979).
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 94.
- ¹² Earl Lewis Conn, "The American Council on Education for Journalism: An Accrediting History," *Educator*, Indiana University, 1970; Edwin Emery and Joseph P. McKerns, "AEJMC: 75 Years in the Making: A History of Organizing for Journalism and Mass Communication Education in the United States," *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 1987; Jean Folkerts, "History of Journalism Education," *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 2014, 227-99. Founded in 1917, the first

AASDJ meeting included educators from Columbia, Indiana, Kansas, Missouri, Montana, Ohio State, Oregon, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin.

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¹⁶ Perley I. Reed, interviewed by Stewart, February 21, 1972, Mss 154AF, Box 50, Folder 15, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Records, 1912–2003, Madison, WI.

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¹⁹ "Educators, Editors Assert Licensing Fear Unfounded," *Editor & Publisher*, July 12, 1947, 8.

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- ⁴⁰ Perley I. Reed, "Restricting Press Freedom; Danger Seen of Limiting Writers to Those from Accredited Schools," *New York Times*, January 27, 1951, 12.
- ⁴¹ Alfred H. Kirchofer, "Checking Journalism Schools; Accreditation Program Explained, Menace to Freedom Denied," *New York Times*, February 17, 1951, 9.
- ⁴² William K. Selden, "Accrediting: What Is It?" *AAUP Bulletin* 42, no. 4 (1956): 629-635. The NCA is the predecessor to the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. The Council for Higher Education recognizes accrediting bodies in the United States.
- ⁴³ Ralph Casey to Norval Neil Luxon, December 12, 1953, in the Norval Neil Luxon Papers #4585, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁴ "New Accrediting Code Liberalizes Standards," *Editor & Publisher*, November 21, 1953, 14.

⁴⁵ Ralph Casey to A.H. Kirchhofer, December 14, 1953, in the Norval Neil Luxon Papers #4585, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁶ Ralph Casey to Jenkin Lloyd Jones, March 12, 1954, in the Norval Neil Luxon Papers #4585, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁴⁷ Norval Neil Luxon, interviewed by Maxwell McCombs, September 26, 1971, Mss 154AF, Box 50, Folder 7, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Records, 1912–2003, Madison, WI, 8.

⁴⁸ Conn, "The American Council on Education for Journalism"; Folkerts, "History of Journalism Education."