

An Analysis of Mission Statements of University Journalism and Communications Schools in the United States

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Abstract

Mission statements are considered a staple for higher education institutions and are used to express the values and purpose of the university to various stakeholders. This research specifically looks at university journalism and communications programs in the United States and their use of mission statements. Qualitative content analysis was used to identify the prevalence of certain themes in 68 different mission statements. Findings indicated that more often than not, mission statements by communications schools merely scratched the surface when discussing elements included within. The findings suggest a possible shift in the priority that universities place on their mission statements to communicate their values and purpose to external stakeholders, especially with increasingly more information being made available on their websites.

I. Introduction

Mission statements have been employed by organizations for decades, showcasing their values and their purpose to both internal and external stakeholders. The prevalence of mission statements is unquestionable, being an almost mandatory element for organizations' websites, but their impact is often questioned. Nevertheless, a mission statement reflects the image an organization wishes to project, a form of reputation management. Analyzing mission statements therefore allows the self-concept of an organization to be examined, as well as the principles and values it holds to be important.

This study aims to analyze the website mission statements of schools and departments of journalism and communications in the United States. Past studies have focused on the content of mission statements in higher education institutions, but there have been no similar studies that particularly look at specific programs of journalism and communications within these institutions. With the rapidly changing media landscape, the role of professional journalists is more important than ever. This analysis of the mission statements of the programs that help shape these future professionals will reveal valuable information as to what principles are being emphasized and prioritized. In addition, universities operate in a competitive landscape, so analyzing how they differentiate and prove their value to stakeholders will yield valuable insights into their approaches to reputation management.

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II. Literature Review

Mission Statements

Although the effectiveness of mission statements is often debated, there is a general consensus among scholars as to what mission statements are. Pearce (1982) writes that a company mission statement “reveals the image the company seeks to project, reflects the firm’s self-concept, and indicates the principal product or service areas and the primary customer needs the company will attempt to satisfy” (p. 15). Similarly, Bart and Tabone (1998) define a mission statement as a “written, formal document that attempts to capture an organization’s unique and enduring purpose and practices” (p. 55). Morpew and Hartley (2006) outline the main benefits that are offered by mission statements: they help dictate and instruct to members of the organization what activities align with the institution’s goals, they can motivate those within an organization by rallying them around a shared purpose, and they communicate the organization’s key values and purpose to external stakeholders. Common themes throughout these definitions suggest that mission statements seek to establish an institution’s purpose and means of achieving it.

Past studies have supported the assertion that mission statements offer these benefits and serve a real purpose. Baetz (1998) studied 136 large Canadian organizations and determined that firms whose managers said they were satisfied with their mission statements were more likely to have strong sales growth, and employees were more likely to cite the influence of the mission statement on their work. This implies that in order for mission statements to impact firm performance, they must be crafted in a way that resonates with employees. Similarly, Davis, Ruhe, Lee and Rajadhyak (2017) sampled senior business students at 16 universities in order to determine if content in their institutions’ mission statements had an impact on their behavior. Their research found that students whose universities’ mission statements placed strong emphases on ethics had stronger ethical values than did students at other universities (Davis et al., 2017).

Mission statements can also impact public perception. Lin and Ryan (2016) determined that there was a positive relationship between an airline’s mission statement and their passengers’ perceived trust in the airline. However, mission statements still fall under heavy scrutiny. Ran and Duimering (2007) suggest that the nature of mission statements themselves and their role in casting the organization in a positive light diminishes their purpose. They write that mission statements are, “likely to include only categories that make the organization look good and to define boundaries and internal structures of identity categories in ways that suit the interests of the organization” (Ran and Duimering, 2007, p. 179).

Mission Statements in Higher Education Institutions

Mission statements are a cornerstone of higher education, from the institutional level down through individual programs. Morpew and Hartley (2006) note that “accreditation agencies demand them, strategic planning is predicated on their formulation, and virtually every college and university has one available for review” (p. 456). Mission statements at higher education institutions should identify how the organization is positioned within the larger educational market, and they “will explain the purpose of the organization, its direction and the ends to which it will function” (Davis et al., 2007, p. 101). Mission statements serve as a type of identity claim that is part of the reputation management function for these institutions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Therefore, a mission statement posted on a university website may project the image of the institution in a different way than, say, an advertisement for the university.

Some scholars argue that mission statements are generic and rarely reflect the unique organization. Newsom and Hayes, studying mission statements of 114 colleges and universities in the United States, found they were, “amazingly vague, vapid, evasive, or rhetorical, lacking specificity or clear purpose ... full of honorable verbiage signifying nothing” (Newsom and Hayes, 1991, p. 29). Similarly, a study of the top 50 schools of social work in the United States found mission statements were “written and framed in ways that reflected their own political or institutional needs” (Holosko, Winkel and Briggs, 2015, p. 232). Morpew and Hartley (2006) suggest that mission statements for higher education institutions should include elements that are commonly understood by people to be foundational to the mission of higher education. This could lead to commonalities appearing in mission statements that could make them hard to distinguish from each other, a common critique of mission statements in general.

The Changing Media Landscape

The field of media has been undergoing massive change, particularly in the case of journalists. With the rise of the Internet, the way people access information looks vastly different than it used to. With the media landscape being transformed by new technologies, new challenges have arisen that media professionals must tackle, which, according to Kaul (2012), include “new relations with audiences (Interactivity), new languages (Multimedia) and a new grammar (Hypertext)” (p. 1). According to Hayes, Singer and Ceppos (2007), “new mass media technologies have evolved to challenge the print and broadcast industries’ control over gatekeeping, framing, agenda setting, and other traditional media roles. In doing so, they have redefined conventional notions of news and the types of individuals who gather, edit, and report it” (p. 263).

Although the exact definition of journalists’ roles and the way they function is in flux, “The overall goal remains what it has always been: to provide credible information that citizens in a democracy need to be free and self-governing” (Hayes, Singer and Ceppos, 2007, p. 275).

However, one threat to the current role of journalism professionals is the lack of trust American citizens have in the media industry. According to a 2016 Gallup poll, only 32% of Americans said that they had a great deal or a fair amount of trust in the media (Swift, 2016). Grappling with the implications of this loss of trust is something emerging and established journalists will have to address, and therefore the manner in which programs educating future journalists tackle this issue will be important. With public trust falling, a renewed emphasis on ethics in journalism may be more important than ever before.

Research Questions

This study fills a gap in knowledge of how universities are dealing with these changes in the industry, as signified by their mission statements, by proposing the following research questions:

RQ1: What main themes are present in the mission statements of schools of journalism and mass communication?

RQ2: Do the mission statements of schools of journalism and mass communication reflect the changing nature of the media industry?

RQ3: To what extent are ethics emphasized in the mission statements of schools of journalism and mass communication?

This study aims to address the nature of mission statements from schools of journalism and mass communication. Most studies on mission statements of higher education institutions have only focused on the primary institution itself, not individual programs within it, making this study distinct. This study seeks to determine how the programs tasked with shaping the next generation of journalism professionals are preparing to do so as reflected in their mission statements.

III. Methods

This study used a content analysis to examine the mission statements of 68 schools or departments of journalism and communications in the United States, as they appeared on their respective websites. The sample of universities selected for this analysis were taken from a list of fully accredited schools by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC). This is the organization that reviews and evaluates professional journalism and mass communications programs in colleges and universities. The council ensures that the programs meet rigorous educational standards and places an emphasis on the importance of innovation within the programs.

There are currently 112 fully accredited schools by ACEJMC, and 101 of these are in the United States. For the purpose of this study, the mission statement of every third U.S. school on the list was analyzed. Upon gathering this data, it was determined that a larger sample would benefit the study. Therefore, from the list of remaining schools, every other listing was chosen for analysis, resulting in a final total of 68. These schools and their respective programs are listed in Appendix A. The mission statements were

accessed online through the university program's website. If the mission statement could not be found directly on the website, its absence was noted.

The mission statements for these schools were coded to determine the main types of content and themes present. Due to the lack of previous literature on mission statements of schools of journalism and communications, a pilot review of the mission statements of schools and departments accredited by the ACEJMC, but not selected for analysis in this research, was performed in order to aid in the development of coding. Along with this pilot review, the World Journalism Economic Council's Declaration of Principles was consulted. This declaration outlines principles that set the standard for journalism education worldwide ("Declaration of Principles", n.d.). Relevant content coded for included: the mention of ethics, internships, research, the role or purpose of journalism in society, content skills, technology skills, the changing media landscape, and diversity.

It is helpful to further define some of these elements. Research refers to opportunities for students to conduct formal undergraduate research within their program. The role or purpose of journalism in society refers to aspects of the free exchange of ideas and the right to freedom of speech. Content skills refer to information gathering, analyzing, writing, editing, presenting and producing. Technology skills refer to software and hardware skills used for capturing and editing information in print, online and electronic media. The changing media landscape refers to new and emerging trends within the field of journalism and mass communications, as well as references to the rapid change within the media environment. Diversity refers to diversity both within the program of study and within society and how it relates to journalism.

A second coding sheet particularly looks at how ethics are included in the mission statements. Specific ethical principles, taken from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics, were coded for. The SPJ's Code of Ethics outlines four pillars that serve as an ethical guide for journalists. It is important to note that this SPJ Code of Ethics is not enforced by any law, it merely serves as a guide. These four pillars are: "Seek Truth and Report It," "Minimize Harm," "Act Independently," and lastly, "Be Accountable and Transparent" ("SPJ Code of Ethics," 2014). Each of these pillars serves as an umbrella for more specific ethical principles such as accuracy, fairness, truth, respect, accountability and transparency. Mission statements that included a reference to one or more of these ethical principles, or one of the four pillars, was classified as mentioning specific ethical principles.

IV. Findings

For this study, the mission statements were accessed online through the department or school's website. In order for the mission statement to be counted as present, it had to appear directly on the website for the university department or school, and also be explicitly labeled as a mission statement. This meant that mission statements included in documents such as strategic plans that had to be downloaded were not included, and statements found on the site but were not labeled as mission statements were not included. Out of the 68 schools and departments analyzed for this study, 39 of them (57.35%) included their mission statements on their respective websites. The schools and departments that included their mission statements on their respective websites have asterisks next to their names, found in Appendix A.

Once the presence of the mission statement was determined, each was examined for the presence of specific elements, as outlined in the methods section. The presence of these elements is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 : Presence of Specific Elements Within School Mission Statements (N=39)

	Mention of Ethics	Mention of Internships	Mention of Role/ Purpose of Journalism in Society	Mention of Specific Skills	Mention of Research	Mention of Technology	Mention of Changing Media Landscape	Mention of Diversity
Count	25	5	11	27	16	11	10	20
Percentage of 39 schools	64.10%	12.82%	28.21%	69.23%	41.03%	28.21%	25.64%	51.28%

The element that was included the most often (27 schools, or 69% of total) in these mission statements was the mention of specific skills that students would be taught and leave with. Skills that were mentioned included writing, verbal and visual communication, storytelling, gathering, analyzing, and processing information, and media literacy. One skill that was mentioned in 22 out of the 27 mission statements that included specific skills was the ability to think critically. Here is one example of specific skills mentioned in a mission statement:

By the time of graduation, mass communication majors will be able to gather, organize and process information; conduct interviews; write in a professional style to a professional level of competence; and edit and produce in printed, broadcast or digital form. (Winthrop University, Department of Mass Communication)

The second most common element included in these mission statements was the mention of ethics (64%). The degree to which ethics were emphasized within these mission statements varied, with some only mentioning it briefly, and others mentioning it more than once and expanding on specifics. Out of these 25 mission statements, 14 (56%) actually mentioned specific ethical principles. Examples of a mission statement that only mentioned ethics and one that mentioned specific ethical principles are here:

We teach students to be engaged citizens and nimble, ethical professionals. (University of Iowa)

The department will graduate students who, having received a comprehensive liberal arts education, are intellectually curious, possess skills to compete in the global marketplace, and are able to react and adapt to changes in the industry while maintaining the highest ethical standards of fairness, truth and accuracy. (University of Wisconsin Oshkosh)

As outlined in the methods section, when a mission statement did include a reference to ethics, it was then analyzed for the presence of specific ethical principles that are included in the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics. Table 2 displays the prevalence of each of the four ethical pillars within these mission statements.

Table 2: Presence of Specific Principles Within Mission Statements Addressing Ethics (N=14)

	Seek Truth and Report It (accuracy, fairness, truth)	Minimize Harm	Act Independently (serve the public)	Be Accountable and Transparent (accountability, transparency)
Count	10	5	6	2
Percentage of subtotal (14)	71.43%	36%	42.86%	14.29%

When a mission statement did include specific ethical principles, the pillar “Seek Truth and Report It” was by far the most frequently referenced (71.43%). Ethical principles that were included in this pillar were accuracy, fairness, integrity, truth, honesty and balance. The pillar “Act Independently” was mentioned in 6 (42.86%) of these mission statements. The ethical principles that were included under this pillar were serving the public and independence, with the idea of serving the public being the dominant principle mentioned. Five mission statements mentioned the pillar “Minimize Harm,” which included principles such as sensitivity and respect.

After ethics, the next most frequent element was diversity, included in 20 of the 39 mission statements (51.28%). References to diversity primarily took two different forms: the importance of diversity as it relates to a profession in journalism, and the role diversity plays within the actual school or department. Here are two examples of diversity mentioned in a mission statement:

Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications. (Murray State University, Department of Journalism and Mass Communications)

Provide a welcoming and nurturing learning and mentorship environment that supports the diversity and richness of expression of our student body and offer educational and professional resources that equip our students, many first-generation college students, for meaningful and productive journalism and strategic media careers. (University of Memphis, Department of Journalism and Strategic Media)

These mission statements more frequently mentioned diversity in regards to its role in a professional setting and not the role or importance it played in the program itself. Different types of diversity that were touched on in these mission statements include race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious cultures and disability.

Eleven of the 39 mission statements (28.21%) mentioned the role or purpose that journalism plays in society. Common themes within these statements of purpose include the idea of journalism shaping public discourse, helping to uphold the First Amendment, and most commonly, fostering democracy:

As the eyes and ears of society, journalism seeks to discover what is going on in the world beyond people’s doors and tells them about it. In doing so, journalism strives to reflect and transmit society’s values. The best journalism promotes public accountability of the powerful and encourages a well-informed citizenry. (University of Texas at Austin, School of Journalism)

The changing media landscape was addressed in 10 (25.64%) of these mission statements; six also included references to technology:

We must be future-oriented and keep abreast of new technologies pertinent to the production and consumption of news, anticipating and evaluating their uses and social impacts. In particular, the digitization of news and information has posed both opportunities and challenges for news organizations and audiences. We help our students master these technologies through hands-on practices and encourage them to make sense of the digital revolution through critical thinking. (University of Texas at Austin, School of Journalism)

Most of the 10 statements addressing the changing media environment, only gave it a passing reference, not elaborating on how it has changed or what implications that has for those in the journalism profession. Here is a representative example:

Prepare students for careers in journalism, communication, advanced studies and other professional opportunities in an ever-shifting media environment. (Middle Tennessee State University, School of Journalism and Strategic Media)

Opportunities that the school or department provides students to prepare them for their careers were also mentioned in many of the 39 mission statements. Opportunities to conduct research were mentioned in 16 (41.03%) of mission statements, and internship opportunities were mentioned in 5 (12.82%) of mission statements. Examples of a mission statement that mentioned research and one that mentioned internships are:

To foster the development of exemplary communicators as industry leaders, scholars, professionals and educators through innovative curricula, research, practice and opportunities. (South Dakota State University, School of Communication and Journalism)

The Department of Journalism + Media is the place to position one's self among professionals and scholars with networks and experiences that help students gain internships, produce meaningful messages, and prepare for innovative and advanced careers in building the next generation of media. (Florida International University, School of Communication + Journalism).

V. Discussion

Presence of Mission Statements on Websites

Of the 68 schools and departments analyzed for this study, 39 of them (57.35%) included their mission statements on their respective websites. Although more than half, this number was surprising considering their status as a practically mandatory element in higher education. When the mission statement was included on the website, it was seldom displayed on the main page; when it was, it was usually not the main focus. Some websites house the program's mission statement under a dedicated tab labeled with tags such as "Mission," "Purpose," "Goals," or a combination of these. Locating these mission statements was often difficult due to the lack of consistency.

It is important to note that for the 29 schools and departments that did not include mission statements on their websites, the message was often just communicated in a different way. One way that some schools and departments decided to share their mission was through a letter from the dean of the school or department, communicating information that would typically be included in a mission statement in the form of a personal letter.

In general, websites communicated virtually everything that was coded for in this study, even if they were not crafted as mission statements. For example, while internships were seldom mentioned in the mission statements, they were discussed on every school or department website. Similarly, while diversity might have only been mentioned briefly in the mission statement of a school or department, there usually was an entire section of the website dedicated to the diversity plan. This leads to an interesting interpretation: as the websites of schools and departments get more detailed and are able to communicate a multitude of information in varying forms (including photography and video), there may be less priority placed on the mission statement. Perhaps the mission statement will become increasingly used internally, to help direct strategic functions of schools and departments, and will be shared less frequently with external stakeholders.

Themes and Trends Within Mission Statements

After analyzing the content of these 39 mission statements, a clearer picture of what schools and departments of journalism and communications prioritize emerges. More often than not, the concept of acting ethically and responsibly was mentioned but never expanded on in mission statements. Ethical behavior is a rather abstract concept that benefits from a more refined definition, something that the majority of these mission statements lacked. It seemed that these schools and departments were merely checking ethics off

a list of things they were supposed to reference when crafting their mission statements. This same trend occurred across multiple other elements that were included in these mission statements, namely diversity and the changing media landscape. Few mission statements went beyond the surface of these topics, merely mentioning the importance of recognizing and fostering diversity, and adapting to a rapidly changing industry. No specifics were provided in how the schools approach either of these factors, leaving the mission statements often feeling vague and hollow.

When discussing the themes and content included in the mission statements, the length of these statements should also be considered. The average length of the mission statements was 138 words, roughly a paragraph. However, the lengths varied greatly - the mission statement of Western Kentucky University's School of Journalism and Broadcasting was only 15 words, while the mission statement of the University of Texas at Austin's School of Journalism was 539 words. This inconsistency might help explain why some schools were able to either include more elements or explore these elements in further depth.

VI. Conclusion

The study aimed to analyze the mission statements included on websites of schools and departments of journalism and communications in the United States. This study called into question the emphasis and priority that schools and departments of journalism and communications are placing on mission statements, in an age where websites offer a plethora of information to stakeholders. The results showed that although important topics such as diversity, ethics, the changing media landscape were included in mission statements, they were rarely expanded on beyond a passing mention.

This study has implications for those responsible for crafting or editing the mission statements of programs within higher education institutions. This analysis shows that there is little differentiation between the mission statements of these schools/departments of journalism and communications, leaving vast room for improvement and an opportunity for programs to stand out from competitors in the eyes of stakeholders.

There are two limitations to note in this study both concerning the sample. The first is the sample size, with only 68 schools and departments analyzed. With only a little more than half of the programs having mission statements present on their website, this limited the content available for analysis. It is also worth noting that the sample of schools and departments were all accredited by the ACEJMC. This is notable because the ACEJMC is selective in recognizing schools and departments that meet their standards as outlined in the methods section. This sample therefore most likely represents the premier schools and departments of journalism and communications in the nation, and may not be a representative sample for the rest of the country.

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Appendix A

1. **University of North Alabama**, Department of Communications
 2. **Arkansas State University**, School of Media and Journalism,
 3. **California State University**, Fullerton, Department of Communications,
 4. **San Diego State University**, School of Journalism and Media Studies,
 5. **University of Southern California**, Annenberg School of Journalism,
 6. **University of Connecticut**, Department of Journalism,
 7. **Florida International University**, School of Communication + Journalism
 8. **University of South Florida St. Petersburg**, Department of Journalism and Digital Communication,
 9. **University of Idaho**, School of Journalism and Mass Media,
 10. **Southern Illinois University**, Edwardsville, Department of Mass Communications,
 11. **Indiana University**, Journalism,
 12. **University of Iowa**, School of Journalism and Mass Communication,
 13. **Murray State University**, Department of Journalism and Mass Communications,
 14. **Louisiana State University**, Manship School of Mass Communication,
 15. **University of Louisiana at Lafayette**, Department of Communication,
 16. **Michigan State University**, School of Journalism,
 17. **University of Mississippi**, School of Journalism and New Media,
 18. **University of Missouri**, School of Journalism,
 19. **University of Nevada, Reno**, Donald W. Reynolds School of Journalism and Center for Advanced Media Studies,
 20. **Hofstra University**, Department of Journalism, Media Studies, and Public Relations,
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21. **St. Bonaventure University**, Jandoli School of Communication,
 22. **Syracuse University**, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications,
 23. **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**, Hussman School of Journalism and Media,
 24. **Ohio University**, E.W. Scripps School of Journalism,
 25. **University of Oregon**, School of Journalism and Communication,
 26. **Temple University**, Department of Journalism,
 27. **South Dakota State University**, School of Communication and Journalism,
 28. **University of Memphis**, Department of Journalism and Strategic Media,
 29. **University of Tennessee at Martin**, Department of Communications,
 30. **Texas Christian University**, Department of Journalism,
 31. **University of Texas at Austin**, School of Journalism,
 32. **Norfolk State University**, Department of Mass Communications and Journalism,
 33. **Marshall University**, W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Mass Communications,
 34. **University of Wisconsin Oshkosh**, Department of Journalism
 35. **University of Alabama**, College of Communication & Information Sciences,
 36. **University of Arizona**, School of Journalism,
 37. **California State University, Chico**, Department of Journalism and Public Relations,
 38. **California State University, Northridge**, Department of Journalism,
 39. **San Jose State University**, School of Journalism and Mass Communications,
 40. **University of Colorado**, Department of Journalism,
 41. **Howard University**, Cathy Hughes School of Communications,
 42. **University of North Florida**, School of Communication,
 43. **University of Georgia**, Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication,
 44. * **Southern Illinois University Carbondale**, School of Journalism,
 45. **Ball State University**, Department of Journalism,
 46. **Iowa State University of Science and Technology**, Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication,
 47. **University of Kansas**, William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications,
 48. **Western Kentucky University**, School of Journalism and Broadcasting,
 49. **Nicholls State University**, Department of Mass Communication,
 50. **Central Michigan University**, Department of Journalism,
 51. **University of Minnesota**, School of Journalism and Mass Communication,
 52. **Southeast Missouri State University**, Department of Mass Media,
 53. **University of Nebraska-Lincoln** College of Journalism and Mass Communications,
 54. **Columbia University**, Graduate School of Journalism,
 55. **New York University**, Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute,
 56. **SUNY Buffalo State**, Communication Department,
 57. **North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University**, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication,
 58. **Kent State University**, School of Journalism and Mass Communication,
 59. **University of Oklahoma**, Gaylord College,
 60. **Shippensburg University**, Department of Communication/Journalism,
 61. **Winthrop University**, Department of Mass Communication,
 62. **Middle Tennessee State University**, School of Journalism and Strategic Media,
 63. **University of Tennessee at Chattanooga**, Department of Communication,
 64. **Baylor University**, Department of Journalism, Public Relations & New Media,
 65. **University of North Texas**, Frank W. and Sue Mayborn School of Journalism, Frank W. Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism,
 66. **Hampton University**, The Scripps Howard School of Journalism and Communications,
 67. **University of Washington**, Department of Communication,
 68. **University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire**, Department of Communication and Journalism
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