

Introduction

American agricultural journalism originated in the 1790s as an effort by agricultural societies to spread useful knowledge (Marti, 1980). As interest in agricultural innovations grew over the decades, a few publications were able to expand their circulations, and some, such as the *Southern Planter*, had several thousand weekly subscribers. With commercial success, journals became independent of agricultural societies and began turning to colleges for innovations in agricultural science, especially in chemistry and crop science (Marti, 1980).

During this time, horses were used for transportation, farm labor, and, to a lesser extent, sport (Greene, 2009). But in the early 19th century, America's growing fascination with sports gave rise to the first attempts at American equine journalism by sports journalists like John Stuart Skinner, who wrote articles covering thoroughbred racing news in the *American Farmer* in 1819 and *American Turf Register and Sporting Magazine* in 1829 (Betts, 1953, p. 40). Though the popularity of horse racing, and subsequently racing journalism, suffered during the Depression of 1837 and the Civil War, in the 1920s on-track betting at thoroughbred races became legal (Riess, 2014), and American equine journalism began to grow in earnest. *The Blood-Horse*, one of the oldest American equine publications, was established in 1916 and would then develop from a monthly Kentucky racing bulletin to a weekly national racing publication that continues today (Exclusively Equine, 2012). From its origins in thoroughbred racing, the scope of equine journalism has expanded to hundreds of publications covering not only all breeds and disciplines of competitive equine sport, but topics, such as blood stock, equine health science, farm management, and lifestyle (American Horse Publications, 2019b). Equine journalists today have been communicating about science, agriculture, sports, lifestyle, social phenomenon, and equine industry news, all of which require in-depth knowledge of different facets of the equine industry.

This kind of specific industry knowledge can be gained through education and first-hand experience in the industry, both on the job and through pre-career experiences (Dunwoody, 2012; Kurtzo et al., 2016; Takahashi & Parks, 2018). Individual development has been found to be influenced by a person's motivation (Larson, 2006; Ryan & Deci, 2000), making motivation towards a career important to consider, as it has been found to influence educational pursuits, types of industry experiences sought out, and an individual's effort towards professional development (Dvorak & Choi, 2009; Greller, 2006; Kinnison & May, 2013).

A contested body of work has argued that due to the increasing specificity of audience interests and complex nature of subjects reported on, journalists have needed to re-orient their practice towards knowledge-based journalism (Donsbach, 2014; Nisbet & Fahy, 2015; Patterson, 2013). When considering specialized topics covered by journalists, research has suggested having additional subject area knowledge has enabled journalists to communicate more effectively, determine the newsworthiness of stories, ask critical questions, and find appropriate experts (Donsbach, 2014; Nisbet & Fahy, 2015; Takahashi & Parks, 2018). Additionally, agricultural communication experts identified knowing or understanding agriculture on a broad scale, as well as the technical details and terminology, as an important skill of agricultural communicators (Kurtzo et al., 2016). Yet Sprecker and Rudd (1997) found agricultural communication instructors and practitioners emphasized that, while agricultural knowledge is helpful, communication skills are more important to performing the job of an agricultural communicator.

Due to the wide range of subjects covered by equine journalists, such as equine sport, breeds, health science, farm management, and lifestyle, there has not been research that currently

encompasses the entirety of equine journalism. Nevertheless, the study of agricultural communication possesses many parallels to equine journalism and, therefore, can be used as a guide for directing research in equine journalism.

Purpose and Objectives

As the equine industry has continued to grow economically, the demand for equine journalism has evolved along with it, yet the current state of equine journalism had not been explored. The purpose of this study was to assess the current landscape of equine journalism by gathering information on the demographics, industry experience, motivations, and professional development of equine journalists.

The research objectives of this study were to:

- Identify the demographic characteristics of equine journalists in the United States in 2020.
- Determine the factors that motivated equine journalists to pursue a career in equine journalism.
- Determine the years of equine industry experience and type of journalistic experience held prior to someone taking on the role of an equine journalist.
- Identify how equine journalists professionally develop on the job.

Literature Review

Because no prior research on equine journalists has been conducted, the demographics, career motivations, and pre-career skill development experiences of American journalists, agricultural communicators, and equine industry professionals were included as they may offer some insight into the characteristics of the equine journalist population.

Demographics of Journalists, Agricultural Communicators, and Horse Enthusiasts

Weaver, Willnat, and Wilhoit (2019) conducted a national survey in 2013 of American journalists and found that the typical American journalist was a white married male and 47 years of age, with about 20 years of work experience and a college degree. In 2013, the estimated full-time journalistic work force in the U.S. was 63,370, with roughly 69% working in print media.

McGovney-Ingram, Irani, and Telg's (2006) study focusing on the demographics of practicing agricultural communicators who were members of the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE) found that the average respondent was female (58%), was between 40 and 59 years of age (58.5%), listed their ethnicity as white (95%), were married (79.7%), had a master's degree (41/6%) and worked for an agricultural institution of higher education (85.8%).

The 2018 American Horse Publications Equine Industry Survey sponsored by Zoetis, an animal pharmaceutical company, found that the average horse owner in the U.S. was a woman over the age of 45 with an annual household income before taxes of over \$75,000 (Stowe, 2018). Geographically, more horse owners participated in the English riding disciplines that originated in Europe, such as dressage, jumping, and polo, in regions on the East Coast, and participated in primarily Western disciplines, developed from the ranching lifestyle of the cowboy in the American West such as cutting, roping, and reining, on the western side of the country. Though the average number of horses owned was 6.4 to 6.8, the likelihood of owning more horses

increased as one moved towards the geographic center of the U.S. Horse owners also identified equine magazines, company/product websites, and social media as their three primary sources of equine information (Stowe, 2018).

Journalist Career Motivation

Research has suggested that American journalism students' career choice is motivated primarily by their interest in writing and desire for creative work (Bowers, 1974; Carpenter, Grant, & Hoag, 2016; Schofield Clark, & Monserrate, 2011; Fischman, Solomon, Greenspan, & Gardner, 2005). Self-actualization and the wish for personal development have been found to be motivators of career preference in journalism students internationally, while social status and pay have not (Alonso, Calderon, & Perez, 2019; Endres & Wearden, 1990; Coleman, Yaschur, Meader, & McElroy, 2018; Wu, 2000). Yet, Coleman et al. (2018) found that some students have been motivated by the potential for fame offered by broadcast journalism. Student interest in specializations, such as sports media and photography, have been related to interest in a career in journalism, as well (Carpenter et al., 2016). Experiences with high school yearbooks and newspapers have also been predictors of interest in a journalist career (Dvorak & Choi, 2009).

In a longitudinal study, journalism students in Norway reported their idealistic feeling of obligation towards a democratic society continued as they spent time in the workforce after graduation, and their perceived importance of press ethics increased (BjØrnsen, Hovden, & Ottosen, 2007). The Weaver et al. (2007) American journalist survey series found one of the most reported reasons for pursuing a career in journalism was the desire to have a job with an important social or political role. As citizens have become more informationally independent through access to the internet, they have become less reliant on journalists to play an intermediary role in the news process (Bro & Walberg, 2015). These changes have influenced the priority journalists ascribe to their various professional functions, yet the overarching theme of journalism as a societally important job has continued to be a motivating factor in career choice (Carpenter et al., 2016; Weaver et al., 2007).

Agricultural Communicator Career Motivation

Hopke (1987) asserted that "the agricultural communications field includes professionals who combine (a) knowledge of agriculture, (b) skills in communications, and (c) interest in working with people" (p. 77). Tucker and Paulson (1988) found that agricultural communication college students desired a communication career within the agricultural industry rather than non-agricultural communication related careers. Watson and Robertson (2011) reported similar findings in their study where the majority of the agricultural communication students surveyed stated they desired an agricultural industry job, and 44% specified they desired an agriculture industry job within their home state. Prather, Leggette, and Rutherford (2018) found that agricultural communication undergraduates noted they wanted to make a difference in the agricultural industry in their career. Though limited, this research suggests that agricultural communication students may be motivated towards a career as an agricultural communicator as a result of their interest in having a job within the agriculture industry.

Equine Industry Career Motivation

Those who participate in the equine industry have often considered equine industry involvement as part of their identity and have viewed others within the industry as part of their community, despite the existence of numerous subdivisions within the “horse world,” with each possessing its own unique customs (Latimer & Birke, 2009). No research has been conducted concerning the career motivations of equine journalists or communicators, but some research exists considering the effect of human-animal experiences on career choice among equine industry professionals and veterinarians. Foright (2018) found the co-occupational nature of human-equine relationships and social attachment with their horses was the greatest motivator for grooms to remain in a physically taxing occupation. Ilgen et al. (2003) found that veterinarians and veterinary students ranked an interest in animals and having direct personal experiences with animals as the strongest influences on their career choice. They also found that women were more likely than men to report the experience of owning a pet or a horse as being a significant career motivator. Past exposure to animals, direct experiences with animals, and growing up in a rural area were all linked to greater interest in large animal (i.e., farm animals and equine) veterinary specializations (Kinnison & May, 2013). Considering this research, past experience with equines may be a motivating factor to seek out an equine industry job.

Pre-Career Skill Development and Field Experiences

Journalism as a profession has no explicit set of requirements necessary for becoming a journalist, though a bachelor’s degree has become increasingly expected (Weaver et al., 2007). Weaver et al. (2007) also found only 36% of all U.S. journalists had specifically majored in journalism; this finding jumped to 73% when accounting for other associated areas of study, such as telecommunication, mass communication, and communication. Despite the expectations for journalists to have a professional education, only 11% of American journalists considered their education to have prepared them *very well* for the digital media environment, 62% attended short courses or workshops to develop their skills after entering their career, and 77% said they wanted more training (Weaver et al., 2019). Increasing industry emphasis on web/multimedia, audience engagement, and social media skills has not been reflected to the same degree in journalism education (Ercan, 2017; Wenger, Owens, & Cain, 2018).

Agricultural communication programs maintain many of the tenets of journalism education regarding developing writing, editing, and reporting skills, but also emphasize a variety of digital media skills such as video production, graphic design and photography as they are preparing graduates for diverse jobs that require competence in a range of communication media (Cannon, Specht, & Buck, 2016). Yet Kurtzo, Hansen, Rucker, and Edgar (2016) found that in agricultural communication education, the common model of preparing student to be generalists in all forms of communication media was considered unsustainable by current industry professionals due to the rapid rate of technological advancement; industry professionals also considered it more practical to encourage students to develop specializations (i.e., print media, design, videography) to be more effective.

Given the gaps between journalism education and industry expectations, journalists have been developing skills through internships and authentic newsroom experiences (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2016; Tanner et al., 2013). Due to the highly vocational nature of the journalism profession, experiential learning opportunities have been found to offer benefits by simulating real world journalist experiences (Steel et al., 2007). Agricultural communication instructors and practitioners have also considered internships to be a highly valuable piece of student’s educational experience (Sprecker & Rudd, 1997; Morgan, 2010). Alumni of agricultural

communication programs stated having an internship experience was critical in preparing them for their career (Morgan, 2012). Even short-term newsroom experience was considered beneficial by agricultural communication students for practical skill development (Riggs & Montgomery, 2018). Additionally, instructors who employed experiential learning in their classroom have noted the benefits of providing field experience when teaching digital photography to agricultural communication students (Kennedy, Akers, & Jackson, 2017). This research suggests that pre-career field experiences are important in preparing journalists and communicators for their future careers (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2016; Morgan, 2010, 2012; Tanner et al., 2013).

Theoretical Framework

This research was part of a larger exploratory study that investigated how equine journalists have adapted to be successful in their careers by surveying the development of professional expertise of equine journalists in the United States. Desimone (2009) argued that all effective learning experiences possess some combination of essentially the same five core features: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. Desimone's conceptual framework for teacher professional development (2009), combined with the expertise construct (Carpenter, 2009; Gou & Volz, 2019) served as the guiding models for the conceptual framework of this study. These theories combined to explain how equine journalists develop the expertise necessary to remain successful in a changing profession.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative, non-experimental descriptive survey research design to measure the demographic characteristics, motivations, industry experience, professional development and education of equine journalists. Quantitative research has been useful to convert social observations into numerical values to aid in analyzation (Babbie, 2013). A 32-question survey instrument was utilized in this study. Survey research allows for data to be obtained in a relatively quick and inexpensive manner (Ary et al, 2018). Moreover, online surveys have been useful tools for researchers to interact with the majority of the American population (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014).

Population

The population of this study was derived from the media professional membership list and the publishing media members list of the American Horse Publication (AHP) and the equine publication members of the Livestock Publications Council (LPC) as of June 2020. AHP is the national association for the equine media community and included 140 media professional members and 78 publishing media members at the time of this study. LPC is an international organization serving the livestock communication industry and included six unique equine publications within its membership. The contacts registered with AHP or LPC served as the initial contact list. In addition to this list, the websites of each member publication were searched, and, if contact information for employees holding the job titles of "journalist," "reporter," or "editor" were publicly available, they were included in the population. Once

duplicates were removed, the total population comprised 230 individuals who were media professional members of AHP or employees at member publications of AHP and LPC. Additionally, one equine journalist who was part of the population offered to share the survey with her network of professional contacts. A purposive sample of the population was used.

Since journalists have been defined in a variety of ways and have filled a variety of roles, one limitation of this study was that equine journalists were categorized by their employment at an equine publication or membership in a professional media organization, thus excluding various multimedia communicators and any equine journalists who did not hold membership in professional organizations. While a complete census of equine journalists employed by member publications of either American Horse Publications or the Livestock Publications Council or listed as a professional media member of AHP was attempted, a true census was not taken, as some journalists and equine publications are not members of these organizations. Thus, the population used for this study may not have been representative of the entire population of American equine journalists.

Instrumentation

Web-based surveys have become one of the most extensively employed instruments in research (Dillman et al., 2014). Since this was a national study of American equine journalists, Qualtrics® online survey software was used to create the survey instrument due to its ease of distribution. The demographic, education, and career sections of this Qualtrics questionnaire were adapted from the questionnaire developed by Leal (2016). Experts from the departments of Agricultural Education and Communication and Animal Sciences at the University of Florida and the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders' and Owners' Association reviewed questions related to equine journalism, professional communication expertise, career motivation, equine industry experiences, and education. Question stems and instructions were edited to provide more clarity and improve topic relevance.

The questionnaire was distributed via the Qualtrics mailer function. This service allowed the researcher to send the survey to personal email addresses, which has been identified as a method that results in an increased response rate for web-based surveys (Dillman et al., 2014). The first section comprised questions asking the manner of current employment as an equine journalist, the overall length of time in the equine journalist profession, the communication roles they filled in their current employment, and their career choice motivations. Respondents were then asked questions that covered education, methods of professional development, and number of professional development activities. Lastly, respondents were asked demographic questions, including, age, gender, ethnicity, years of involvement in the equine industry, and the participants' rural or urban upbringing.

Development of the survey instrument was guided by Dillman's Tailored Design Method to promote participation in the study and increase response rate (Dillman et al., 2014). Participants were permitted to navigate both forward and backward at any time, and a forced response was only used on the first question, which ensured consent to participate. In this study, reliability was addressed by incorporating repeated, rephrased questions to develop internal consistency of the instrument, and by deriving instrument questions from prior research (Ary et al., 2018).

Data Collection and Analysis

Equine journalists received the initial invitation email, which included an overview of the study and a request to participate on June 22, 2020. On June 23, 2020, a second email with the individual's Qualtrics survey link was delivered. Three waves of follow-up reminder emails were then sent to non-respondents one week, two weeks, and three weeks after the initial survey send date. The researcher then closed the survey one week after the last follow-up email. A total of 114 complete responses were received for a 49% response rate. Respondents' demographic information, education, type of professional development, and career motivation were summarized using frequencies and percentages. Equine industry experience, number of professional development activities, and employment length were analyzed with SPSS® using descriptive statistics.

Results

Research Objective 1: Identify the demographic characteristics of equine journalists in the United States in 2020.

A descriptive analysis was used to track the demographics of the 114 equine journalists who responded (Table 1). Respondents were composed of 84.21% females (n = 96) and 14.04% males (n = 16) and were predominantly Caucasian/white (98.24%, n = 112). All respondents surveyed had completed at least a high school diploma, with 57.39% (n = 66) having completed a four-year degree as their highest level of education. Another 26.09% (n = 30) had completed a master's degree. Nearly half of respondents grew up in a subdivision of a town or city (48.7%, n = 56), while 21.4% grew up in a rural area but not on a farm, (n = 25), and 24.35% grew up on a farm in a rural area (n = 28). Nearly half of equine journalists (49.57%, n = 57) had personal experience or family who participated in the equine industry prior to beginning their career, and (49.57%, n = 57) reported no equine industry experience. "Freelance writer" was the most common employment status at 43.1% (n = 50), with 34.3% (n = 40) employed by an equine publication, and 26.41% (n = 26) reported they did not currently work for an equine publication. Of the equine journalists surveyed, 46.96% (n = 54) had been employed in the equine industry for 20 years or more. Newer equine journalists were far less common; only 1.74 (n = 2) had worked less than a year in the equine industry, and only 6.09% (n = 7) had worked between two and four years.

Table 1.
Equine journalist demographics

Characteristics	n	%
Sex		
Female	96	84.21
Male	16	14.04
Choose not to answer	2	1.75
Employment status		
Freelance writer for equine publication(s)	50	43.10
Employed by an equine publication	40	34.4
Do not write for an equine publication	26	22.41
Race/Ethnicity		
Caucasian/white non-Hispanic	112	98.24
American Indian or Alaska native	1	.88
Hispanic	1	.88
Age		
25-29	7	6.42
30-34	11	10.09
35-39	8	7.34
40-44	11	10.09
45-49	5	4.59
50-54	13	11.93
55-59	16	14.68
60-64	15	13.76
65-69	16	14.68
70-74	7	6.42
Highest level of education		
High school diploma	1	.87
Some college, no degree	10	8.70
2-year college degree	2	1.74
4-year college degree	66	57.39
Master's degree	30	26.09
Professional degree (e.g. JD, MD)	3	2.61
Doctoral degree	3	2.61
Residential category growing up		
Subdivision in a town or city	56	48.70
Farm in a rural area	28	24.35
Rural area, not a farm	25	21.74
Downtown area in a town or city	6	5.22

Table 1. Continued

Characteristics	n	%
Personal or family involvement in the equine industry prior to career		
Yes	57	49.57
No	57	49.57
I don't know	1	.87
Years employed in the equine industry		
>1	2	1.74
2-4	7	6.09
5-7	11	9.57
8-10	10	8.70
11-13	11	9.57
14-16	12	10.43
17-19	8	6.96
20≤	54	46.96

To gain a better understanding of what an equine journalist career entails, respondents were asked to select “all that applied” to describe the communication roles they fill in their current position (Table 2). While this study targeted equine journalists, only 10.9% (n = 46) listed “journalist” as a role they were currently filling in their employment. “Writer” was the most common response (21.56%, n = 91), followed by “photographer” (13.27, n = 56) and “editor” (13.98, n = 59). Of the 24 “other” responses, “social media management/content creation” was the most common with six responses. Additionally, several responses indicated that equine journalists were responsible for many duties.

Table 2.*Communication roles in current employment.*

Communication role	n	%
Writer	91	21.56
Editor	59	13.98
Photographer	56	13.27
Journalist	46	10.90
Marketing Specialist	36	8.53
Publisher	32	7.58
Public Relations Specialist	28	6.64
Communication Specialist	27	6.40
Videographer	22	5.21
Other	24	5.69
Total	421	

Research Objective 2: Determine the factors that motivated equine journalists to pursue a career in equine journalism.

Equine journalists reported that the greatest motivating factors for their choice of career was their interest in horses (M = 4.68, SD = 0.83), the desire for a job that fulfills their talents/potential (M = 4.43, SD = 0.86), and an interest in writing (M = 4.10, SD = 1.15). The least motivating factors were an interest in an agriculture industry career (M = 2.36, SD = 1.40),

the desire for a job with an important/political role (M = 2.23, SD = 1.33), and the desire for notoriety (M = 1.93, SD = 1.12). See Table 3.

Table 3.

Equine journalists' motivation for their career.

Motivating Factor	Mean	SD
Interest in horses	4.68	0.83
Desire for a job that fulfills your talents/potential	4.43	0.86
Interest in writing	4.10	1.15
Interest in an equine industry career	3.88	1.29
Desire for a flexible and exciting career	3.79	1.23
Desire to have a career that “makes a difference”	3.34	1.28
Interest in an agriculture industry career	2.36	1.40
Desire for a job with an important/political role	2.23	1.33
Desire for notoriety	1.93	1.12

Note: 1.00-1.49 = not at all a motivating factor, 1.50-2.49 = slight motivating factor, 2.50-3.49 = moderate motivating factor, 3.50-4.49 = strong motivating factor, 4.50-5.00 = very strong motivating factor.

Research Objective 3: Determine the years of equine industry experience, and type of journalistic education held prior to taking on the role of an equine journalist.

Respondents were asked, “Did you or anyone in your immediate family participate (work, ride, compete, manage, care for horses) in the equine industry prior to your employment in the equine industry?” The responses were split in half with 49.57% (n = 57) answering “Yes” and another 49.57% (n = 57) answering “No,” with 0.87% (n = 1) responding “I don’t know.” Those who responded “Yes,” were asked in a follow-up question, “How many years did you or a member of your immediate family participate in the equine industry prior to your employment in the equine industry?” Two-thirds of those who had been involved in the equine industry prior to their employment in it had been participating for over 15 years. See Table 4.

Table 4.

Years of participation in the equine industry.

Number of years	n	%
<1	1	1.75
1-3	0	0.00
4-6	8	14.04
7-9	2	3.51
10-12	6	10.53
13-15	3	5.26
More than 15 years	37	64.91

To determine the type of journalistic education held prior to becoming an equine journalist, respondents were first asked to select “all that applied” to describe the classification of post-secondary education they received that is related to their career in equine journalism (Table 5). “Major” refers to the primary focus of a post-secondary degree. “Minor” refers to a secondary academic discipline that is shorter in length and combined with a different degree major. “Specialization,” “emphasis,” and “concentration” describe a specific area of focus within a

broader major. Notably, those who responded “other” referenced their non-academic education from working independently to learn skills or learning through their job. These responses included continuing education, online courses, in-person seminars, extracurricular, trained by television professionals in videography and editing, and self-taught through other business experiences.

Table 5.

Classification of post-secondary education related to career in equine journalism.

Classification	n	%
Major	57	40.71
Minor	16	11.43
Specialization	17	12.14
Emphasis	7	5.00
Concentration	8	5.71
No related post-secondary education	14	10.00
Other	21	15.00
Total	140	

Respondents were then asked to select “all that applied” to describe the type of post-secondary education received that related to their career in equine journalism (Table 6). There were 219 choices counted, due to some individuals having degrees in multiple areas of study. “Journalism” was the most common subject area of post-secondary education (n = 49), followed closely by “other.” Of 47 who responded “other,” the two most common answers were “business” and “English,” with eight responses each. Additional common responses were “education” and “photography/ photojournalism” with three each. Telecommunications was the least common response, with only two equine journalists reporting education in this area.

Table 6.

Type of post-secondary education related to a career in equine journalism.

Subject area	n	%
Journalism	49	22.37
Mass Communication	20	9.13
Equine Sciences	19	8.68
Animal Sciences	17	7.76
Equine Studies	17	7.76
Public Relations	16	7.31
Agricultural Communication	12	5.48
Advertising	11	5.02
No related post- secondary education	9	4.11
Telecommunications	2	0.91
Other	47	21.46
Total	219	

Research Objective 4: Identify how equine journalists professionally develop on the job.

To determine how equine journalists built their professional expertise on the job, respondents were asked, “Which of the following types of professional development have you participated in to strengthen your skills/knowledge in equine journalism? (Select all that apply).” Results are provided in Table 7. The total number of responses was 421 because several individuals selected multiple types of professional development experiences. “Conferences” was the most common response (n = 97), followed by “workshops” and “webinars” (n = 84). Of the 18 responses for “other,” the most common response was “life or work experience” with five. Other notable responses included “self-taught learning” and “professional organization membership” with three each, and “peer mentor relationships,” “online classes,” and “podcasts” with two responses each. Respondents who answered, “No related professional development” (n = 10) skipped to the end to the question block and were not asked follow-up questions regarding professional development.

Table 7.

Type of professional development attended to strengthen skills/knowledge in equine journalism.

Type of professional development	n	%
Conferences	97	23.04
Workshops	84	19.95
Webinars	84	19.95
Trainings	68	16.15
Developmental Meetings	27	6.41
Focus Groups	19	4.51
Organization Mandated Professional Development	14	3.33
No related professional development	10	2.38
Other	18	4.28
Total	421	

Respondents were asked in a follow-up question to indicate, to the best of their ability, how many professional development experiences they participated in to strengthen their skills/knowledge in equine journalism during the last year (Table 8). Over half of respondents (n = 56) reported that they participated in one to five professional development activities in the last year. The next most common response was that they did not participate in any professional development activities this past year (n = 14).

Table 8.

Number of professional development activities during the last year.

Number of professional development activities	n	%
0	14	15.73
1-5	56	62.29
6-10	11	12.36
11-15	2	2.25
16-20	2	2.25
21-25	1	1.12
26+	2	2.25
Total	89	

The final question about professional development asked respondents to select “all that applied” to indicate the focus of the professional development activities they attended during the past year (Table 9). “Social media management” (n = 50) was the most frequently reported topic of professional development, with “marketing” (n = 47) and “journalistic writing” (n = 44) following closely. The least common topics for professional development that equine journalist participated in were “finance/accounting” (n = 5), “animal sciences” (n = 4), and “issues management” (n = 2). Of the 24 “other” responses, the most common was “photography” (n = 6). Three responses outlined professional development that focused on adapting to COVID-19 impacts in the profession.

Table 9.

Content focus of professional development attended to strengthen skills/knowledge in equine journalism in the last year.

Content focus	n	%
Social Media Management	50	14.01
Marketing	47	13.17
Journalistic Writing	44	12.32
Magazine Publication	29	8.12
Leadership	21	5.88
Business Management	20	5.60
Graphic Design	18	5.04
Web Design	17	4.76
Public Relations	17	4.76
Business Writing	15	4.20
Videography	15	4.20
Equine Management	12	3.36
Equine Science	11	3.08
Oral Communication	6	1.68
Finance/Accounting	5	1.40
Animal Sciences	4	1.12
Issues Management	2	0.56
Other	24	6.74
Total	357	

Conclusion and Recommendations

On average, equine journalists were found to be primarily Caucasian and female and were 53 years old. Overall, they are well educated, with over half having completed at least a four-year college degree and another quarter having completed a master’s degree. Nearly half of equine journalists grew up living in a subdivision in a town or city and had personal or family involvement in the equine industry prior to their career, while the same amount had no prior equine industry experience. The majority of equine journalists had been employed in the equine industry for over 15 years and often performed multiple communication roles within their current position, with the most frequent roles being writer, editor, and photographer. Equine journalists were most motivated towards their career by their interest in horses and their desire for a job that fulfilled their talents and potential. The majority of equine journalists attended between one and

10 professional development activities the previous year, with the most popular content topics being social media management, marketing, and journalistic writing.

The most commonly listed type of professional development activity was a professional conference. This may be due to the population of this study being largely members of the American Horse Publications (AHP), which hosts an annual Equine Media Conference. The next most common types of professional development experiences were workshops and webinars. The low percent of individuals who listed they participated in organization-mandated professional development suggests that the majority of professional development experiences that equine journalists participate in are voluntary and are not required by their employers. This also may be due to many equine journalists working freelance, and not necessarily having a permanent employer. Additionally, the high result for webinars may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 when many organizations had to adapt to a fully virtual environment.

More than 70% of equine journalists in this study participated in between one and 10 professional developments in the previous year. This suggests that, overall, equine journalists are actively seeking out opportunities to develop professionally. Again, these results may have been impacted by COVID-19, as AHP began offering many online webinars during the pandemic, which may have made it easier for individuals to attend than an in-person professional development opportunity.

The most frequently reported content area focus of professional development opportunities was social media management. The frequency of social media management professional development may indicate a future trend within the equine journalism profession as social media skills become more important to possess. Other frequently reported professional development subject areas were marketing, journalistic writing, magazine publication, and leadership. The frequency of journalistic writing and magazine publication suggests that equine journalists are interested in continuing to improve their traditional journalistic skills, or perhaps had not received traditional journalistic training and sought out opportunities to learn these skills now that they were on the job. Additionally, equine journalists' interest in social media and marketing professional developments may also indicate a trend in developing personal brand platforms for freelance writers.

Recommendations for Practice

The most motivating factor towards a career in equine journalism was an interest in horses. Additionally, nearly half of equine journalists had participated themselves or had family members who participated in the equine industry prior to beginning their career. Equine journalists reported that an interest in an equine industry career was a highly motivating factor towards a career as an equine journalist, but an interest in an agricultural industry career was only a slight motivating factor. This finding indicates that many equine journalists are already "horse people" before they begin their equine journalism career, but do not necessarily identify as a part of the agriculture industry. This suggests that agricultural communication academic programs may not be attractive to aspiring equine journalists as they can be perceived as being about "agriculture," rather than as an opportunity to learn about communication skills that can be applied to the equine industry. Agricultural communication programs may be missing out on potential students who are interested in equine journalism and other specialized areas of journalism, such as in the livestock industry, due to agricultural communication being perceived as oriented towards farming and commodity groups. Agricultural communication may not appear

to be as meaningful to these students without a clear and direct explanation of the skills the program could help them develop. Agricultural communication programs that want to cultivate communicators with specialized animal industry knowledge should consider recruiting from students involved in animal science, equine science, equine studies, or livestock programs. Agricultural communication programs that offer certificates or minors would be particularly appropriate to supplement a more specialized degree, especially since industry-focused programs may not otherwise offer opportunities for these students to take courses in communication. This recommendation applies to other specialization areas as well, that might fit under the broader umbrella of “agriculture,” such as agricultural operations management, plant science, food science, and natural resource management. Additionally, with the understanding that equine journalists often come from equine backgrounds, animal science, equine science, and equine studies academic programs could benefit from making communications courses part of their degree or certificate program. At the very least, advising staff and faculty should make an effort to encourage students who express an interest in an equine or livestock journalist career to seek out additional communication courses in journalism or agricultural communication.

The high number of equine journalists who reported attending conferences, along with the population of this study being largely associated with American Horse Publications (AHP), indicated that they are taking advantage of the opportunities their professional organization provided for them. In the future, AHP should pay attention to the content areas of professional development of which equine journalists are participating. Especially since the findings suggest that professional development is not generally required by equine journalists’ employers, the topics are likely to be selected based on personal interests. The high number of social media, marketing, publishing, and writing-related professional development opportunities suggest these are topics that many equine journalists are seeking out. Beyond professional development for current equine journalists, the opportunities AHP provides for aspiring equine media professionals should be actively promoted to university academic departments for animal and equine science as well as journalism and agricultural communication. A targeted effort to reach out to these programs may encourage greater interest in the field of equine media and communications, and may lead to greater student participation in internships, professional development, and conferences.

Agricultural communication professional organizations may be missing out on potential membership of equine journalists. Organizations, like the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Sciences (ACE), could benefit from recruiting equine journalists into their organization, and may offer opportunities to collaborate across more diverse content areas. The professional development opportunities and conferences that organizations like ACE offer could also benefit equine journalists, as it would provide greater resources to develop skills and could expose them to communication professionals across disciplines. Current definitions of agricultural communication, as closely tied to land-grant institutions and research, may be unintentionally excluding specialized groups of communicators, like equine journalists.

Recommendations for Future Research

Over half (55.05%, n = 60) of equine journalists in this study were over the age of 50, and 46.96% (n = 54) had been working in the equine industry for 20 years or more. This suggests that there has been a declining number of new equine journalists and presents some further questions to investigate. As a large portion of equine journalists may retire in the next decade,

equine publications may decide to hire back into vacated positions, or they may do away with permanent journalist positions completely and move towards using only freelance writers. They may also decide to replace traditional writing positions with multimedia jobs, as the internet continues to influence how our society communicates. Future research should investigate job openings and hiring patterns of equine and other specialized publications to understand how the job market for journalists in these areas may change.

This study did not address the pre-career experience of equine journalists beyond participation in the equine industry. Pre-career experiences, like internships, student work opportunities, and experiential learning projects are supported in the literature to be important to the development of professional skills in journalism and agricultural communication (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2016; Riggs & Montgomery, 2018; Tanner et al., 2013). Future research should investigate the types of pre-career learning experiences that equine journalists participate in and their impact on the development of professional expertise.

This research was conducted in the summer of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and so the results of this study may not be reflective of life before or after the pandemic. Future research should examine what formats of professional development are popular among equine journalists or other specialized communicators at a time when COVID-19 is no longer impacting daily life. Webinars were found to be a common mode for professional development, but it is unclear if this was due to the pandemic or related to a trend towards online learning. Future research should examine how the COVID-19 pandemic may have altered the popularity of online professional development events such as webinars, online workshops, and conferences.

In this study, the researcher did not provide a definition for what kinds of activities constituted professional development in the survey instrument. This resulted in a wide range of responses when participants were asked how many professional development activities they had attended in the last year. Future research should strive to define more clearly what kinds of adult learning experiences constitute professional development, especially when the audience may work in freelance or fulfill multiple roles. Additionally, future research should expand upon the modes and subjects of professional development opportunities and resources available to equine and specialized journalists, as well as their preferences.

This research was quantitative in nature; future research should investigate the opinions and career satisfaction of equine journalists in a qualitative manner to better understand the future of the profession. Furthermore, future research should investigate what other professional organizations equine journalists maintain membership in other than AHP.

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