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Michael L. Hilt

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*, mhilt@unomaha.edu

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# Recession Hits Local Television

## Omaha News & Production Workers Hurt by Economic Downturn

By Michael Hilt

**D**uring the past four years, commercial television stations in Omaha Nebraska have faced the budget axe. Whether it was called "economizing" or "budget cutting," the fact remains local news and production department personnel were usually the first to be laid-off. Newsroom and production staffs at WOWT, KETV, and KMTV are smaller now than in 1988, either as a result of layoffs or failure to replace a departing or retiring employee. In addition, a year-long labor dispute at WOWT has resulted in a 10 percent wage cut and a loss of one week of vacation. Wages at the other two stations either were raised at levels below the cost-of-living or frozen.

The reductions in personnel and benefits were accompanied by a greater reliance on technology—computers, robotic cameras, and conversion from 3/4 inch to 1/2 inch videotape, for example. Full-time employees have been replaced by part-time employees, free-lance workers, and interns.

The effect of the national recession, along with the local television budget cut and the decreasing number of jobs in the Omaha market also have had an impact on broadcast students. In July, 1991, the University of Nebraska at Omaha announced plans to eliminate its Broadcast Production sequence in 1993.

The cutbacks come at a time when Omaha is praised in the media for its resiliency against the national recession (Wiseman, 1991; Selz, 1991). So far, local companies have been able to fight off the downturn in the economy. But Omaha television stations, like broadcast stations elsewhere, seem to have been more susceptible to the vagaries of the national economy.

### Broadcasting Economics

While most businesses in Omaha have been able to combat the effects of the national recession, broadcasters feel the pinch from national advertisers. Falling national ad revenues, the bite from cable television and declining network compensation have combined to hit local stations in the wallet (Cox, 1991). It is no different in Omaha.

"There's no doubt the economy is broad-

casting is not good," said Lauren Tobia, news director at CBS-affiliate KMTV in Omaha. "Stations across the country are looking for ways to save money. The profitability the stations once saw isn't there anymore and stations are trying to do something to address that. One way is to cut personnel. Another is to cut newscasts, which I hear more and more stations will do this year."

The wage cut at WOWT was the culmination of nearly four years of lay-offs and disputes between station management and the union.

"What's going on here is indicative of what's going on across the country," said John Chapman, WOWT reporter and president of the local AFTRA (American Federation of Television and Radio Artists) union. "There are a lot of TV stations dealing with just about the same thing. Maybe not as harsh as we are. But there are other stations cutting staff, reducing pay, among other things."

One way the local stations have cut costs is through the advances in technology. Two of the three network affiliate stations in Omaha now use robotic cameras, which enable the stations to cut production personnel. KMTV began using robotics in 1989 (Tobia, 1991), and realized a savings within two years. Other changes in technology include computerized newsrooms, and the conversion from 3/4 inch to 1/2 inch. While there is an initial outlay of money, these changes will in the long run save money through cuts in personnel.

The stations have already begun to combine jobs, thus reducing the need for production assistants and videotape editors, to name just two positions. Tobia said that trend will continue.

"Stations will have to do more, or at least the same, with less people," Tobia said. "We have people who do several different jobs. Photographers who edit and report, as well as shoot, reporters who can produce. It makes them more marketable as well as helping the station."

"All sorts of industries are seeing a soft

economy, and they're trying to do something about it," Tobia said. "There's only two ways you can attack that problem—one is to increase revenue and the other is to decrease costs. What you really need to do is both. The question is, can three Omaha stations survive doing news? I think so. If only two survive, everyone wants to be one of the two."

### University Cuts

The recession has hit state budgets as well. Budgets at the four University of Nebraska campuses were cut by two-percent. At the University of Nebraska at Omaha, part of that cut meant the elimination of the Broadcast Production sequence beginning with the Fall 1993 semester. A broadcasting major still will exist, but two technical courses will no longer be offered. In addition, one faculty member will not be replaced when he retires.

Despite the cut, Communication Department Chairman Hugh Cowdin does not expect a significant drop from the current enrollment of 164 broadcasting majors. Dr. Cowdin said the department had planned for several years to consolidate its broadcasting sequences. He said the faculty wanted to return to an emphasis on broadcast news, which he feels is more consistent with the department's philosophy about journalism and mass communication.

"Broadcasting is the most specialized sequence we have," Cowdin said. "We were not opposed to seeing future enrollment reduced, partly because of the reduced number of jobs available for our graduates. The remaining broadcasting major will be more compatible with our goal to focus on news and public affairs rather than on technology."

### Alternatives

In recent years, students also have had the option of working outside the television industry. Corporations have added their own video departments. These departments produced such things as training films, video news releases, and commercials. However, even this alternative, at least in Omaha, is no longer viable.

Omaha-based national corporations like Con Agra, Mutual of Omaha, and Union Pacific have not added employees to their video departments for at least the last year. In fact, Union Pacific eliminated its video department about four years ago. It now uses local production houses for its video work.

### Conclusion

The effect of these cuts should be of interest and concern to all broadcast faculty. The shrinking market means fewer and fewer video production jobs for students.

At the same time, broadcast faculty will continue to hear the charge from those working in the field that students are not prepared for life at a television station when they leave college (Hilt, 1991; Roper, 1988). The minority viewpoint that the university relies too much on the "how-to" aspects of the industry, while short-changing the broad liberal arts education, is heard (Thornton, 1991) but dismissed by news and production directors who claim they do not have the time to train new employees.

It may be time for broadcast faculty to say, "Enough!" Universities should place more emphasis on a broad mass communication/liberal arts education, so their students are better prepared for any job when they graduate not just a position in television. The broadcast industry always will complain, but who is more important, the station or the student?

### References

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*Michael Hilt is Assistant Professor of Broadcasting in the Department of Communication, University of Nebraska at Omaha.*

# Organizational News

## 1992 BEA Scholarship Winners

Student winners of the 1992-93 NAB/BEA scholarships were announced at the BEA Convention luncheon in Las Vegas by Pete Orlik, BEA Scholarship Committee chair. The students selected and the scholarships they won are:

**Shane Media:** \$3,000. Sponsored by Shane Media Services, Houston, TX, for study toward a career in radio. Winner: Freddy Hettel, Arkansas State University.

**James Lawrence Fly:** \$2,500. Sponsored by the law firm of Fly, Shuebruk, Ganguine, Boros, Shulkind & Braun, Washington, D.C., for study in media law or policy. Winner: David Goerisch, Southwest Missouri (for study at UCLA).

**Vincent T. Wasilewski:** \$2,500. Sponsored by Patrick Communication Corp., Columbia, MD. Winner: Stuart Esrock, Kansas (for Ph.D. study at Bowling Green State University).

**Walter Patterson:** Two \$1,250 scholarships sponsored by NAB for study toward careers in radio. Winners: Karen Saltus, Emerson College and Anthony Swinger, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

**Broadcast Pioneers:** Two \$1,250 scholarships sponsored by the Broadcast Pioneers, New York. Winners: Silvia Acevedo, University of Wisconsin, Madison and Allison Pick, for MA studies at Columbia University.

**Harold E. Fellows:** Four \$1,250 scholarships sponsored by NAB. Winners: Leona Hood, for MA studies at the University of Colorado, Rachel Mathason, University of Miami, John Paajanen, Franklin Pierce College, Alexander Webster, Washington State University.

Congratulations to all of these outstanding professionals-in-training. Applications

for the 1993-94 academic year will be included in BEA member packets beginning with the September, 1992 mailing. These may be photocopied or additional applications can be obtained from the BEA national office, from September to December. Deadline for completed applications is January 15, 1993.

Important reminder: Scholarships can only be applied to study on a BEA institutional member campus. Institutional membership must be in force as of the application deadline (January 15, 1993).

—Pete Orlik

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## Call for 1993 Program Proposals

Plans are being developed for the 1993 annual convention of the Broadcast Education Association to be held in April at the Convention Center in Las Vegas.

Panels on broadcasting and electronic media provide the core of the BEA's program at the annual convention. Panels may deal with matters of scholarly interest, pedagogy, practical considerations or productions. The range of appropriate topics of panels is suggested by the names of the divisions and interest groups.

Program proposals are invited from divisions, interest groups or individual members of BEA. Priority will be given to proposals from or co-sponsored by divisions and interest groups, but individuals are also encouraged to submit proposals. Individuals should submit program ideas to appropriate divisions or interest groups by July 15, 1992. A list of division representatives follows below. Division officers should

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