Reporters’ Rights and Access Survey

Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

The Chicago Headline Club (CHC), a local professional organization for journalists, commissioned the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Survey Research Laboratory (SRL) to administer a Web survey to journalists working in the Chicagoland area. This survey was funded by the McCormick Foundation and asks journalists how they access meetings, places, and information in the course of their work to provide information to the public. Beth Konrad, the immediate past president of CHC, was the Project Director for this study and worked with SRL on developing and administering the survey.

The Web questionnaire was arranged into four sections that asked about credentialing, public information, public meetings, and respondent demographic characteristics. These questions covered topics such as submitting Freedom of Information Act requests, gaining access to places like prisons and jails, obtaining press credentials, attending public meetings, and other experiences respondents may have had in gaining access to information they intended to disseminate to the public. There were also some introductory items asking respondents about the type of work they do.

THE SURVEY SAMPLE

The data were collected via Surveygizmo, an on-line data collection instrument. Respondents were sent an e-mail invitation (e-vite) containing a URL they were asked to click to access and complete the study questionnaire. People were eligible for the study if they were currently employed as either a staff or freelance journalist covering issues in the Chicagoland area. No incentive was included in this study.

The sample file was created from nine sample lists sent to SRL by Beth Konrad. The total overall sample file consisted of 1,670 cases. Of these, 1,363 were eligible and had unique e-mail addresses. The majority of these cases were included in Replicate 1 and received the initial e-vite on January 25, 2011. The remaining cases were added in Replicates 2 and 3 after the initial e-vite was sent.

Four weeks into data collection, on February 23, only 128 of the 1,349 cases to which invitations had been sent (Replicates 1 and 2) had completed the questionnaire. Between February 25 and March 10, we called the 1,101 nonresponding cases. We did not call those who were ineligible, had refused, or who had unsubscribed to the survey instrument. In addition to the follow-up reminder calls, e-mail reminders were sent to nonrespondents on January 31st, February 7th, February 11th, February 16th, March 3rd, and March 10th. Data collection ended on March 11th.

Of the 1,363 journalists who received an invitation to complete the survey, 226 responded. There were two individuals who submitted partially completed questionnaires while the remaining 224 fully completed it. The response rate for this study was 20.9%.

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1 We did not attempt to call anyone in Replicate 3, whose e-vites were sent out in early March.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Profile of Respondents

Most of the respondents are employed full-time as journalists, but there was some representation of freelance and part-time journalists as well. Journalists who work for newspapers and online media made up the majority of respondents, though radio, magazines, and television were represented by a smaller percentage of respondents. Journalists were asked what they need access to in order to do the types of reporting they need to do. The most frequently cited things were State of Illinois agency data, City of Chicago agency data, federal court records, and Cook County court records. Mentioned less often were federal retention facilities, Chicago Fire Department fire scenes, Chicago Police Department (CPD) crime scenes, and Chicago Fire Department headquarters.

Credentialing

Less than half of the journalists who responded to the questionnaire currently have press credentials. Of those that do have them, nearly half use forms of credentials other than those we specifically asked about. Those include company-issued forms of identification, Associated Press credentials, and State of Illinois credentials.

Of the respondents who indicated that they do not have press credentials from the City of Chicago, almost half indicated that they do not know how to obtain them, and more than half of those without Cook County credentials do not know how to obtain them. Respondents who do have Cook County and City of Chicago press credentials were asked to rate the process for obtaining them. Overall, Cook County’s process was rated as being easier than the City of Chicago’s.

Of the journalists who reported that they do not currently have press credentials, a majority said it does not affect their ability to perform their jobs. The most frequently used forms of identification in lieu of press credentials are the workplace ID card and the business card. Chicago Police Department crime scenes and Cook County prisons and jails were rated as the least easy to access whether a journalist has press credentials in hand or not.

Public Information

Just over half of respondents typically access public information through government websites. The sites most frequently visited include State of Illinois Web sites, court sites at all levels of government, City of Chicago sites, and Cook County sites. Just under half of the respondents access public information through the Internet, through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, and through government agency employees.

Most of the respondents are familiar with the state and federal Freedom of Information Acts. Of the journalists who reported ever requesting public information during their careers, nearly all have filed a FOIA request. Additionally, most of the respondents are aware of organizations that help journalists file FOIA requests. When asked to identify which organizations do this, the Society of Professional Journalists, Illinois Attorney General, Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Chicago Headline Club, and the Illinois Press Association received the most mentions.
Respondents were asked a series of questions about how agencies at different levels of government responded to FOIA requests. All levels of government are required to respond to FOIA requests in five business days or less, except for the federal government, which is required to respond in 20 business days or less. According to respondents, most requests took longer at all levels of government. A small percentage of requests at all levels of government did not receive any response. Most FOIA requests were ultimately fulfilled, but Chicago was the least likely to fulfill requests.

Public Meetings

The majority of journalists who responded to this questionnaire have heard of the State of Illinois’ Open Meetings Act. Over half of respondents reported that they must sometimes attend public meetings. Approximately a quarter of respondents never attend them. Of the journalists who do attend public meetings, almost none have ever been barred from them.

Demographics

Respondents were evenly split between male and female. Just under half of those that responded hold a bachelor’s degree, while nearly a third of respondents hold a master’s. Most of the journalists that responded are non-Hispanic and White. The highest percentage of them are between the ages of 50 and 59 and the lowest percentage are between 20 and 29.