

# **Media Convergence and Changes in Québec Journalists' Professional Values**

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**ABSTRACT** *This article compares the results of surveys from the 1980s, the 1990s, and the first decade of the twenty-first century in an attempt to understand the evolution of the professional values of unionized journalists at French-language news organizations in Québec during this period of media convergence and rapid technological change. In addition to tracing Québec journalists' professional values over time, the article examines whether journalists working for different media corporations had different values.*

**KEYWORDS** *Journalism; Professional values; Québec; Survey research*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Dans cet article, les auteurs comparent les résultats d'enquêtes menées dans les années 1980, 1990 et en 2007 afin de comprendre l'évolution des valeurs professionnelles chez les journalistes syndiqués des entreprises de presse francophones au Québec, dans un contexte de convergence médiatique et d'importantes transformations technologiques. En plus de faire le suivi des valeurs professionnelles chez les journalistes québécois au fil des décennies, la présente contribution vérifie si les journalistes qui travaillent pour différents conglomerats médiatiques ont des valeurs différentes.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Journalisme; Valeurs professionnelles; Québec; Sondages*

The media landscape throughout North America has been transformed over the past three decades, altering the environment for journalistic work in fundamental ways. Although many factors contribute to changes in journalism (Charron & de Bonville, 2004; Hanitzsch et al., 2010), two phenomena are especially notable in Québec. The first is concentration of media ownership, which became a concern in North America (including Québec) in the late 1960s and early 1970s and which has proceeded largely unchecked since then. The second is the development of the Internet, which by the first years of the twenty-first century had become both an

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important source of news for citizens and a critical component of mainstream news organizations' strategies for survival.

In the 1970s and 1980s concern about media concentration in Canada focused on newspaper chains, but by the turn of the century many newspaper companies were morphing into media conglomerates as they purchased broadcast properties and created Internet portals that featured audio, video, and text. The convergence that resulted was technological (all content could be disseminated via a single multimedia platform), economic (the business activities of different forms of media were combined), and journalistic (news people who had been disseminating their product at fixed intervals found themselves under constant pressure to place new information on their conglomerate's website).

This article focuses on how the technological and business aspects of media convergence may have influenced the professional values of unionized journalists at French-language news organizations in Québec. We draw upon data from three surveys of journalists—one from the 1980s, one from the 1990s, and one from the first decade of the twenty-first century—to trace the evolution of journalists' values during a period of rapid change.

Our findings show that while the values of Québec journalists have changed over time, the change has not been uniform. How, and perhaps even whether, journalists' values changed depended to a great extent upon which media organization they worked for. We also found that while most journalists express considerable concern about the effects of media concentration on a societal level, they seem to see little effect of it in their day-to-day work.

### **Journalists' professional values**

Journalists' professional values are important because they influence the news that gets reported (Miljan & Cooper, 2003; Plaisance & Skewes, 2003), not in terms of political bias but rather because journalists' values "shape perceptions and the recognition of how things ought to be done" (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989, p. 5). Journalists with different role conceptions will tend to produce different stories (Graber, 2002; see also Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). For example, a journalist whose most cherished professional value is disseminating news quickly will generate different kinds of news stories than one who believes that the most important role of journalism is analyzing public-policy proposals.

Research on the professional values of Québec journalists rests on a foundation of studies that described the demographics of various groups of journalists, including print journalists (de la Garde, 1975), broadcast journalists (de la Garde & Barrett, 1976), and women journalists (Dubois, 1988; Saint-Jean & Labarre, 1995). The political values of Québec journalists were in the spotlight in the late 1970s, especially when a magazine published the results of a survey of journalists at prestigious news organizations in Montréal and Québec City (Godin, 1979). The article generated considerable attention by reporting that two-thirds of the journalists favoured the independence of Québec.

The professional values of French-language Québec journalists are fairly homogeneous (Pritchard & Sauvageau, 1999), reflecting Québec journalism's well-established

professional culture. The professional culture is fostered in several ways: by journalists' unions, which are stronger in Québec than elsewhere in North America (Demers & Le Cam, 2006); by the activities and large membership of professional organizations such as la Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (Pritchard, Brewer, & Sauvageau, 2005); and by the influence of public discourse about the profession more broadly (Le Cam, 2009). Québec journalism's strong professional culture is likely why the values of individual Québec journalists are more stable over time than those of journalists elsewhere in Canada (Pritchard et al., 2005). Some scholars perceive that the relative homogeneity of Québec's journalists manifests itself in a risk-averse "bureaucratization" of journalists (Saint-Jean, 2002, p. 167) that stands in sharp contrast to the era of union and political ferment beginning in the late 1950s and ending around the time of the province's 1980 referendum.

A 1996 study found evidence of what its authors called the Canadian journalist's creed (Pritchard & Sauvageau, 1999). The creed was composed of five roles that strong majorities of journalists considered to be extremely important: accurately reporting the views of public figures, getting information to the public quickly, giving ordinary people a chance to express their views, investigating the activities of government and public institutions, and providing analysis and interpretation of complex problems. Conventional wisdom to the contrary, the survey found that French-language and English-language journalists had largely similar views about the importance of various social and political roles of the news media, including the five roles composing the creed (Pritchard & Sauvageau, 1999, chap. 5).

### Research questions

Given the widespread support in 1996 for the journalist's creed, our first research question asks whether Québec journalists' support for the creed changed from 1981 to 2007:

1. *What changes, if any, were there in the relative ratings of Québec journalists' professional values from 1981 to 2007?*

The second research question is based on the research suggesting that the organizational culture of a journalist's employer influenced his or her professional values. The 1996 survey found that journalists who worked for the CBC or Radio-Canada had significantly different professional values than did journalists who worked for private television or radio. Journalists working for the public broadcaster were much more enthusiastic about professional values related to journalism's public-service roles than were private-media journalists. Journalists working for privately owned media placed relatively more value on entertaining audience members and increasing audience size (Pritchard & Sauvageau, 1999).

Research focusing specifically on Québec journalists has also concluded that the nature of the employer is strongly associated with journalists' professional values. A study of journalists who worked at French-language newspapers in Québec in the early 1980s found that "la nature des entreprises de presse elles-mêmes semble déterminante dans la définition de l'attitude professionnelle des journalistes" (Langlois & Sauvageau, 1982, p. 21). "The nature of the news organizations themselves seems to determine journalists' professional attitudes" (authors' translation).

More recently, a survey of unionized journalists at all types of French-language media in Québec demonstrated sharp differences among journalists depending on whether they worked for news organizations controlled by Radio-Canada, Gesca, or Quebecor. The author of that study wrote: “Les journalistes des principaux médias d’information du Québec sont aux prises avec les maux de la concentration de la propriété et de la convergence des médias. Mais la situation n’est pas la même d’un conglomerat médiatique à l’autre” (Bernier, 2008, p. 169). “Journalists at Québec’s major news organizations struggle with the harms caused by concentrated media ownership and media convergence. But the situation varies from one media conglomerate to the next” (authors’ translation).

Such assertions lead to our second research question:

2. *What is the relationship, if any, between the media corporation Québec journalists work for (Radio-Canada, Quebecor, or Gesca) and their professional values?*

In addition to the questions about the professional values that contribute to the journalist’s creed, the data from the 1996 survey provide baseline information about such issues as journalists’ views of the impact of new technologies on the quality of news, the amount of freedom journalists have to decide which aspects of a story should be emphasized, the extent to which they feel that concentration of media ownership threatened to diminish the free flow of information, and the extent to which they believe that government should act to limit concentration of media ownership. We posed a series of research questions that asked whether journalists’ views about these issues in 2007 were different from their views in 1996. We could not include the 1981 survey in this comparison because it did not address these topics.

Accordingly, our third research question focuses on changes in journalists’ views about technology. We wondered whether journalists’ greater familiarity with and use of the Internet and other digital technologies in 2007 may have led them to have more positive views about such technologies.

3. *How did Québec journalists’ views about the impact of new technologies on the quality of news change from 1996 to 2007?*

Our fourth research question focuses on the amount of freedom journalists said they had to decide which aspects of a story should be emphasized, a crucial component of journalistic autonomy. We were interested in knowing whether technological and business convergence may have influenced journalists’ views of their day-to-day autonomy.

4. *To what extent did Québec journalists’ views about their individual autonomy change from 1996 to 2007?*

The fifth and sixth research questions reflect the sharp increase in concentration of news media ownership in Québec between 1996 and 2007. Although the issue of media concentration has long been a concern throughout Canada (Royal Commission on Newspapers, 1981—see Sauvageau, 1981; Special Senate Committee on Mass Media, 1970; Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage, 2003; Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications, 2006), it has been of special interest in Québec

since 2001, when Gesca, which already owned four of the 10 French-language daily newspapers that circulate in Québec, purchased three of the others, and Quebecor, which owns the highest-circulation daily newspapers in Montréal and Québec City, purchased TVA, the highest-rated television network in the province (Comité conseil sur la qualité et la diversité de l'information, 2003; Commission de la culture, 2001).

5. *To what extent did Québec journalists' views about whether concentration of media ownership threatened to diminish the free flow of information change from 1996 to 2007?*
6. *To what extent did Québec journalists' views about whether government should act to limit concentration of media ownership change from 1996 to 2007?*

To answer the research questions, we drew upon data from three different surveys of journalists. Some of the questions were common to all three surveys, enabling comparisons about changes in journalists' views over time. The first survey, a mail survey of journalists at French-language newspapers in Québec, was conducted in 1981 for the Royal Commission on Newspapers (Sauvageau, 1981; Langlois & Sauvageau, 1982). Unfortunately the raw data from that survey are no longer available, which limited us to using published averages from that study in our comparisons.

The second survey, a telephone survey of 554 journalists from across Canada, was conducted in 1996 with financial support from two Canadian government agencies and two foundations associated with longtime Québec newspaper editors (Pritchard & Sauvageau, 1999). The survey included 100 unionized journalists at French-language media in Québec. We extracted their responses from the 1996 database because we wanted to be able to make direct comparisons with data from the third survey, a 2007 mail survey with 385 respondents that was financed by la Fédération nationale des communications, the labour union of which most Québec journalists are members (Bernier, 2008). Longitudinal research of this kind can help in understanding how changes in communication technology and in the structure of media ownership influence the values that help shape journalists' work.

## **Findings**

Our first research question asked whether there was evidence of a Québec journalist's creed in 2007 and, if so, how its components differed from those of the Québec journalist's creed in 1996. This question taps into journalists' beliefs about the social roles of journalism and about what journalists and their news organizations should be doing. Both the 1996 and 2007 surveys asked a series of 14 questions about professional values and how important journalists thought each was. The 1981 survey included only eight of the questions, so we exclude its responses from Table 1, which compares the hierarchy of professional values for 1996 and 2007.

In both 1996 and 2007, journalists rated accurate reporting as the highest value. (Accuracy was also the most important value in the 1981 survey.) From there, however, the 1996 and 2007 respondents diverged somewhat. The second-most-important value in 1996 was speed—getting information to the public quickly. By 2007 rapid transmission of information had fallen to sixth place. Analysis was the second-most-

**Table 1:**  
**Québec journalists' ranking of professional values, 1996 and 2007**

Professional value	Rank in 1996	Rank in 2007
Accurately reporting views of public figures	1	1
Analyzing/interpreting to the public quickly	2	6
Investigating government and public institutions	3	3
Being skeptical of complex problems	4	2
Being skeptical of chance to express views	(tie) 5	7
Getting information of business	(tie) 5	(tie) 4
Getting information of public officials	7	(tie) 4
Developing cultural widest possible interest	8	9
Focusing on news as it is being developed	9	10
Discussing public policy interests of the public	10	8
Increasing audience size	11	12
Providing entertainment and relaxation	12	14
Influencing public opinion	13	11
Setting the political agenda	14	13

important role in 2007. In a world where more and more citizens have access to the latest news via the Internet, all-news cable channels, and other technologies that were not in wide use in 1996, journalists 11 years later seemed to believe that their job had become more to analyze and interpret the news that people have already received and less to compete to be the first to provide the news. A recent study of how Québec journalists define quality in journalism came to a similar conclusion (Marcotte, 2008).

Our second research question focused on the relationship between journalists' professional values and the corporation that employed the journalists. The 1981 survey included journalists at daily newspapers, dividing them into three groups: those who worked for Quebecor dailies (*Journal de Montréal*, *Journal de Québec*); those who worked for other dailies in Montréal and Québec City (*La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, *Le Soleil*); and those who worked for the dailies in the regional hubs of Trois-Rivières, Sherbrooke, Chicoutimi, and Granby. The Quebecor journalists were more interested in appealing to the broadest possible audience than the other journalists, especially those who worked at the broadsheet dailies in Montréal and Québec City (Langlois & Sauvageau, 1982).

A more systematic answer to the second research question comes from the comparison of the 1996 and 2007 surveys. We extracted the journalists who worked for Gesca, Quebecor, or Radio-Canada from each survey. Then we compared the four highest-rated professional values for each group in 1996 with the top four in 2007. Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c show the results.

As Table 2a shows, in both 1996 and 2007 accuracy and analysis were the two highest-rated values of journalists working at newspapers owned by Gesca. The effect of the Internet, all-news cable channels, and other new technologies can be seen in the decline of the value of rapid transmission of news, which in 2007 was no longer

among the four values Gesca journalists rated most highly. By 2007, investigative reporting, highly valued in 1996, had been supplanted among Gesca journalists by a widespread skepticism of government and business.

Table 2b shows the highest-rated values of journalists working at news organizations owned by Quebecor. In 1981, Quebecor journalists were preoccupied with attracting the biggest possible audience (Langlois & Sauvageau, 1982), although even then

**Table 2a:  
Gesca journalists' highest-ranked professional values, 1996 and 2007**

1996 (rank)	2007 (rank)
Accurately reporting views of public figures (1 - tie)	Accurately reporting views of public figures (1)
Analyzing/interpreting complex problems (1 - tie)	Analyzing/interpreting complex problems (2)
Getting information to the public quickly (3)	Being skeptical of business (3)
Investigating government and public institutions (4)	Being skeptical of public officials (4)

accuracy was their highest-rated value. Accuracy remained the highest-rated value among Quebecor journalists in 1996 and 2007, but the relative position of other values shifted in interesting ways. For example, rapid transmission of news was less important in 2007 than it had been 11 years earlier, while investigating government and analyzing complex problems were more important.

In 2007, Quebecor journalists seemed to be continuing to shed the populist, market-oriented mindset that was so much in evidence in the 1981 study. Focusing on news of the widest possible interest was tied for the second-most-important value for Quebecor journalists in 1996, but in 2007 it was not among the most important professional values of journalists working at Quebecor media.

**Table 2b:  
Quebecor journalists' highest-ranked professional values, 1996 and 2007**

1996 (rank)	2007 (rank)
Accurately reporting views of public figures (1 - tie)	Accurately reporting views of public figures (1)
Analyzing/interpreting complex problems (2 - tie)	Analyzing/interpreting complex problems (2)
Getting information to the public quickly (2 - tie)	Being skeptical of business (3)
Investigating government and public institutions (4)	Being skeptical of public officials (4)

It is difficult to ascertain the precise reasons for the shifts in the relative importance Quebecor journalists assigned to different professional values. The addition of TVA journalists to the Quebecor fold (Quebecor bought TVA in 2001) may account for part of the change, and/or the change may indicate that Quebecor journalists had become more socialized, or assimilated, into Québec's mainstream journalistic culture than was the case in 1996. It

is interesting to note that the four highest-rated values among Quebecor journalists in 2007 were those that were rated highest by Gesca journalists in 1996.

**Table 2c:**  
**Radio-Canada journalists' highest-ranked professional values, 1996 and 2007**

1996 (rank)	2007 (rank)
Accurately reporting views of public figures (1 - tie)	Accurately reporting views of public figures (1)
Analyzing/interpreting complex problems (1 - tie)	Analyzing/interpreting complex problems (2)
Getting information to the public quickly (1 - tie)	Being skeptical of business (3)
Investigating government and public institutions (1 - tie)	Being skeptical of public officials (4)

As Table 2c shows, change came more slowly to Radio-Canada journalists than to journalists at the two other major employers of journalists in Québec. The same values were considered the most important in both 1996 and 2007, perhaps reflecting considerable overlap of Radio-Canada's organizational culture and the mainstream professional culture of Québec journalism. While the media environment surrounding them has changed, and

despite the fact that Radio-Canada was a pioneer among Québec news organizations in exploiting the Internet, the professional values of Radio-Canada journalists seem to have changed very little.

It is clear from a comparison of Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c that journalists' professional values vary with the corporation that employs them. Accuracy tops the list, regardless of the employer, but in 1996 Quebecor journalists were more interested in rapid transmission of the news and gaining a wide audience than were journalists at Gesca and Radio-Canada, whose journalists rated analysis and investigative reporting more highly than did Quebecor journalists. By 1996, Quebecor's dailies were widely respected and had the biggest circulations in Montréal and Québec City. Nonetheless, the professional values of Quebecor's journalists in the mid-1990s remained somewhat out of the mainstream, a mainstream that was largely defined by Radio-Canada and Gesca. By 2007, Quebecor's journalists had joined the mainstream. Their three highest-rated values were accuracy, investigation, and analysis—the same values Radio-Canada journalists rated most highly.

Table 3 shows the results with respect to our third research question, which focused on possible changes in journalists' views about technology. By 2007 new technologies—the Internet, digital editing software, hand-held PDAs such as BlackBerrys and iPhones, etc.—had become a routine part of most journalists' daily lives. We wondered whether journalists' greater familiarity with and use of such technologies in 2007 may have led them to have more positive views about such technologies than they had in 1996.

The results in Table 3 show an increase (from 17% to 26%) in the proportion of journalists with very positive views of the impact of new technologies, while far fewer journalists felt that new technologies had not had much impact. Interestingly, more

journalists in 2007 than in 1996 felt that the impact of new technologies was negative. Overall, the proportion of journalists with positive views about the impact of new technologies increased somewhat, from 70% to 78%, but the proportion with negative views about new technologies' impact also increased, from 4% to 9%.

**Table 3:**  
**Québec journalists' views of the impact of new technologies, 1996 and 2007**

	1996	2007
Very positive	17%	26%
Somewhat positive	53%	52%
Not much impact	26%	13%
Somewhat negative	3%	7%
Very negative	1%	2%

**Table 4:**  
**Québec journalists' views of their autonomy, 1996 and 2007**

	1996	2007
Almost complete freedom	37%	31%
A great deal of freedom	45%	51%
Some freedom	16%	16%
Very little freedom	1%	2%

**Table 5:**  
**Québec journalists' agreement with the statement that concentration of media ownership threatens to diminish the free flow of information, 1996 and 2007**

	1996	2007
Strongly disagree	14%	4%
Disagree somewhat	9%	2%
Fairly neutral	10%	9%
Agree somewhat	36%	16%
Strongly agree	31%	69%

The fourth research question focused on the extent to which Québec journalists' views about their individual autonomy changed from 1996 to 2007. We wondered whether changes related to increased concentration of media ownership and increased use of digital technologies affected journalists' views of their day-to-day autonomy. Table 4 contains the results, which show a slight decline in the proportion of journalists who feel they have almost complete freedom to decide which aspects of a story should be emphasized, but overall no important differences between 1996 and 2007. In both years 82% of survey respondents said they had at least a great deal of freedom.

Our fifth and sixth two research questions dealt with journalists' views of concentration of media ownership in Québec. Tables 5 and 6 show the results.

In 1996, about two-thirds of unionized journalists (67%) at French-language media in Québec agreed that concentration of media ownership threatened the free flow of information; slightly less than one-quarter (23%) of journalists dis-

agreed. By 2007 opinion had shifted dramatically, with 85% feeling that concentration of media ownership threatened the free flow of information, while only 6% disagreed. Given their widespread belief that concentration was a threat to the free flow of information,

**Table 6:**  
**Québec journalists' agreement with the statement that government should act to limit concentration of media ownership, 1996 and 2007**

	1996	2007
Strongly disagree	20%	3%
Disagree somewhat	12%	2%
Fairly neutral	12%	12%
Agree somewhat	35%	17%
Strongly agree	21%	66%

it is not surprising that a majority of Québec journalists favoured government action to limit concentration of media ownership. Table 6 provides the detailed responses with respect to that issue.

Journalists in the 2007 survey were much more favourable to government action to limit concentration of media ownership than were journalists in 1996.

Only 5% of the journalists in the 2007 survey disagreed that government should take action against concentration of media ownership, down from 32% in 1996. The proportion of journalists who strongly favoured such action more than tripled, from 21% in 1996 to 66% in 2007.

## Discussion

Our results raise some interesting questions. For example, although technological convergence creates more pressure than ever before to get news out as quickly as possible (Marcotte, 2008), Québec journalists placed less value on rapid transmission of news in 2007 than they did 11 years earlier. The interest of media corporations in rapid transmission and the values of journalists are not in harmony, perhaps because journalists gain little professional satisfaction from rushing to produce one-dimensional stories for their employers' websites. In a similar fashion, the increased value journalists gave to analysis and interpretation in 2007 may be more a reflection of their belief that they should be doing more to help put the news into context than evidence that they actually engage in more analysis and interpretation than they had in the mid-1990s.

Meanwhile, there is no denying that Québec journalists were much more concerned in 2007 about concentration of media ownership than they were in 1996, as Tables 5 and 6 showed. However, the increased level of concern—and the objective fact that media ownership in Québec was more concentrated in 2007 than in 1996—did not seem to affect journalists' professional autonomy. In both surveys, 82% of journalists said they had either almost complete freedom or a great deal of freedom to decide which aspects of a story should be emphasized. Accordingly, it is unlikely that the sharp increase in concern about business convergence reflected increased corporate control of journalists' decision-making. Rather, the heightened concern was probably the result of the prominence of the issue of media concentration in the discourse of policymakers, unions, and professional journalism organizations in Québec since 2001, when Quebecor bought TVA.

Although technological and business convergence seems to have had an impact on journalists' professional values in the areas just mentioned, it is important to note that other values seem unaffected by the changes swirling in the media environment. There is no evidence, for example, that the mainstream journalists in the surveys we analyzed have abandoned a certain conception of objectivity; in both 1996 and 2007 journalists ranked accurate reporting as the most important value. Similarly, in both years they ranked influencing public opinion and setting the political agenda as among the least important roles of journalism. In short, the evidence suggests some small but significant changes in the "creed" of Québec journalists between 1996 and 2007. Accuracy and investigating government and public institutions ranked very high in both studies, but the value of quick transmission of news declined while the value of analysis and interpretation increased.

By a larger margin than in 1996, twenty-first-century journalists say that new technologies have had a positive impact on journalism. It may be that new technologies were less familiar, and accordingly more threatening, in 1996 than in 2007. For whatever reason, new technologies now seem to be seen as more of a boon than a bane by Québec's journalists.

The accelerating pace of concentration of media ownership caused sharply increased concern that concentration will have a negative effect on the free flow of information in Québec. It thus is no surprise that journalists are much more favourable to government action to limit concentration than journalists were in 1996, even though they reported no negative effect of concentration on their professional autonomy.

Our study validated the hypothesis that the nature of the media corporation influences journalists' professional values. The results documented changes in the relative importance of professional values of journalists who work for Quebecor and Gesca, but no meaningful changes among the journalists who work for Radio-Canada. This finding may reflect the fact that privately owned media need to be more nimble as they react to changes in the economic and technological environments for news, or it may simply reflect a stronger organizational culture at Radio-Canada than at privately owned media. Whether Quebecor journalists will continue to reflect mainstream journalistic culture in the future is something of an open question, however, given the long, bitter labour disputes at the company's daily newspapers in Montréal and Québec City; the corporate decision to withdraw from *Le Conseil de presse du Québec* and the Alberta Press Council; and the corporation's proposal to create Sun TV News, a cable channel featuring conservative news and opinion that would be somewhat analogous to the Fox News Channel in the United States (CRTC, 2010).

Our study documented change over time in Québec journalists' professional values and suggested that at least some of the change may be related to technological and business convergence in the media industries. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the study did not attempt to prove a cause-and-effect relationship between convergence and the changes in values. Any such effort would be foolhardy, for change in journalism results from the endless combination and recombination of "an interweaving series of factors" (Brin & Drolet, 2008, p. 388). Convergence issues no doubt are among those factors, but the tension between the economic interests of

media corporations and a strong professional culture supported by journalists' organizations, unions, and academics also plays an important role (Demers, 2003).

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