

**Fourth Estate planning: An exploration of perspectives that have shaped
the past and present – and those that may determine the future – of journalism education**

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In a free society, so little – and yet so much – is expected of journalists.

Here and in other nations that purport to cherish liberty, the traditional roles of the Fourth Estate can be summed up aptly in the words of Sparks (2006). To wit: “(G)ood journalism, which is the free reporting and analysing of information, and the exchange of opinions based on that information, creates and sustains democracy. It is in fact an integral part of democracy.”

This fairly simple yet profound thought speaks to the notion – typically traced to the American Founding Fathers and their First Amendment (U.S. Department of State, 2008) – that journalism above all else is an instrument of free speech.

The U.S. news media without question have been indispensable in that regard. But unfettered expression’s value is to a large extent commensurate with the enlightenment of those who exercise that right. Put another way, the marketplace of ideas cannot sustain profitability if all the merchants are peddling ignorance.

This, then, highlights a less often emphasized but still potentially powerful function of journalism: to serve as “Schoolmaster to the People” (words that adorn the “journalism arch” at the University of Missouri [Fisher, as quoted by Parsons, 1986]).

Though seemingly quaint, such a concept still does emerge from time to time in discussions of journalism’s duties.

As posited by Hinchliff (2009), “Journalism is important to democracy because it is intended to educate the public and create a healthy public discourse about issues of the day.”

Others have written in more specific terms:

- “(T)he press or mass media have the responsibility to educate the citizens on national politics, geography, history, people and cultures” (Onike, 2008).

- “It is the media who inform and educate the public about the courts, spark discussion and debate about their work, instill public trust and confidence in the institution and its function, and help protect judicial independence” (Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts, 2010).

- “I think we’ve got a role in educating the public as to what the science really is, so people can make informed decisions, so we as a country can go in the right direction” (Secko, quoting an anonymous science journalist, 2007).

Couched in those terms, the significance of the Fourth Estate’s instructive capacities seems altogether certain.

However, little about journalism today can be seen as certain.

Drastic, ongoing changes related to the emergence of new media and financial instability have wrought turmoil within the field of journalism. Many now working within – irrespective of platform – perceive seismic shifts in internal standards and audience expectations, and so are unsure of their responsibilities, much less how to fulfill them (Owens, 2007).

And so, the question must be asked: In what ways should journalism education evolve in order to meet such challenges?

For if journalists indeed are to serve as *de facto* schoolmasters – if they are to teach an ever-shrinking world – then they *and* those charged with teaching them have lessons they first must learn, and learn well.

Where we’ve been

Journalism education throughout its history has, of course, been to a large extent a reflection of the journalism profession’s contemporaneous state. The point, after all, has been to mold young people into competent practitioners of the trade.

But what are the origins of this practice, and what has it entailed?

The first pioneer of collegiate instruction for journalists, according to O'Dell (1935), was a major historical figure, albeit one whose name is hardly synonymous with the concept. Robert E. Lee, former Confederate general, accepted the presidency of Washington College (now Washington and Lee University), in Lexington, Va., mere months after the Civil War's end. In 1869, mindful of the earlier excesses of the Penny Press, and possessing a "conviction that journalism education would serve as rehabilitating factor throughout the stricken South" (p.5), Lee proposed such a program for his school.

The idea (whose timing roughly coincided with rise of the "inverted pyramid" reporting style [Scanlan, 2003]) drew much interest, even prompting a visit from a New York Sun reporter (O'Dell, 1935). However, Lee died in 1870, not having had an opportunity to fully develop the curriculum, and it was discontinued in 1878. Nevertheless, he is credited with "laying the foundation for a program of education in journalism" (p. 17).

Meanwhile, the concept continued to spark much interest and debate. A prominent proponent was New York newspaperman Charles F. Wingate, who in his work engaged in much discussion of the subject.

One of his interviewees, Frederic Hudson, former managing editor of the New York Tribune, held a less than sanguine view. "The only place where one can learn to be a journalist is in a great newspaper office," Hudson said in 1875. "College training is good in its way, but something more is needed for journalism" (p. 33).

Nevertheless, intrigue persisted. And so it was that Knoxville native David Russell McAnally stirred some excitement when, in his role as head of the School of English at the University of Missouri, he offered a handful of journalism courses beginning in 1878.

Afterward, the trend began to spread throughout the Midwest and beyond. Still, it remained something of a novelty until, in 1903, Joseph Pulitzer, owner of The New York World (who also is credited with making the centuries-old rubric of “five W’s and an H” – who, what, when, where, why and how – a staple of reporting [Brainstorming, 2010]), endowed \$2 million for a school of journalism at Columbia University (O’Dell, 1935). That program did not actually begin, however, until 1912, the year after Pulitzer’s death.

But others already had been inspired by his desire to transform journalism from a mere craft into a true profession. And so it came to pass that in 1908 the University of Missouri finally succeeded in establishing what is billed as the world’s first separate school of journalism.

That year, the program’s dean, Walter Williams, said his philosophy entailed a “laboratory method” whereby “actual practical training in newspaper-making will be given” (p. 91). Answering the pat criticism that “journalism can be taught only in a newspaper office and not in a school,” he said, “So be it, but if the School of Journalism is also a newspaper office, then the objection is without weight” (p. 92).

Thus, the orthodox view of journalism education was set, and for decades – even when adapted to fit broadcast media – it was to remain largely unchallenged.

As recently as the mid-1980s, the great upheaval soon to come was well-nigh unforeseeable. Roughly a half-dozen years before the debut of the World Wide Web (which was to prompt explosive growth in usage of the decades-old Internet), Peterson (as quoted by Parsons, 1986) acknowledged the growing import of technology, but stressed a seemingly timeless truth. “Writing with clarity, logic and grace is essential to all of journalism and, in fact, to civilized existence. Reporting in a world of change, and even in the age of the supercomputer, is a

constant of all journalism,” said the former dean of the College of Communications at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Citing a dilemma that also stood as something of a running theme, Peterson (1986) said: “(A) professional program is part training, part education, and both parts are essential to the whole. The trick is to strike a happy balance between the two parts.”

At any rate, “Our aim really should be to offer students the most valuable and enduring education we can within the finite limits that confront us,” Peterson (1986) said. “And so we have to start making choices.”

Some 10 years after that pronouncement, abundant signs indicated the emergence of choices likely far beyond the scope Peterson had envisioned. Tapsall (1995), noting that “The Internet is the buzzword of the 90s (*sic*),” made a number of astute observations regarding the nature and impact of the “new” medium:

- It has international reach.
- It allows access to previously unreachable sources.
- Because of its multimedia capabilities, “some boundaries between the different elements of the profession are going to converge.”

In pondering this latter property, Tapsall (1995) questioned the effect the Web’s rise was to have on journalism education around the world.

An effective program incorporating the Internet would require considerable equipment. It would require considerable money and it would require staff who know how to use the Internet and can teach the required skills. Perhaps, though, one of the most important questions for journalism educators is that of balance. How do you fit this new media (*sic*) into already full journalism training programs? Students will need a grasp of sub-editing

and layout techniques. They will need to know how to write a headline and what makes good vision and a good audio grab. Journalism educators must somehow integrate this new development while continuing to teach the fundamental elements already contained in journalism programs.

Still, the issue at that time remained largely peripheral, as evidenced by Scott's (1995) curriculum assessment, which contains but a single direct reference to Internet training, or lack thereof.

Furthermore, it was not until 1995 that academic information source Communication Abstracts first used "Internet" as a search keyword (Pearson, 1999).

However, before the turn of the 21st century, that technology unquestionably was at center stage, with Pearson (1999) finding that "the Internet has had a major influence upon journalism which has important implications for journalism education." Employing qualitative research, he discerned widespread moves toward implementation of Web-related teaching, but also widely divergent philosophies attending it.

And with that, the stage was set for great tribulation.

Where we are

Now, true to Tapsall's (1995) vision, Web access and Internet-savvy faculty are long since a given in journalism classes practically everywhere. Far from resolved, though, are questions of how, or even if, higher education ought to prepare its recipients for a career in the news media.

Among traditional U.S. news media (newspapers, television, radio) – about half of whose collective work force is estimated to comprise journalism school graduates (Wilson, 2009) – these are anything but the best of times.

From a strictly financial standpoint, newspapers are by far the most troubled medium. Since 2007, according to Smith (2010), layoffs and buyouts (including employees from all

departments, not just newsroom staff) have totaled in excess of 34,828. In that same period, newspapers that have closed (some of them transitioning to strictly online operations) number 165.

Meanwhile, although “most Americans (59%) see news organizations as ‘highly professional,’” according to The Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (2009), “the public’s assessment of the accuracy of news stories is now at its lowest level in more than two decades of Pew Research surveys.”

New media, on the other hand, present problematic dynamics all their own. While generating new jobs, the Internet also has given rise to the hotly debated concept of citizen journalism. Herein, according to widespread perception explained by Allen (2010), readers get “independent, unsanctioned blogging or roughshod user-generated content.” Or, worse still, “we see sanctioned news organizations hiring armies of random feet-to-the-street contributors without editorial protocols in place.”

And so, even though “News via the internet is on-demand and instantaneous, ... media rich and highly interactive,” as per audience expectations (Pavlik, 2004), it continues to receive lower credibility scores than those given “legacy media” (Bellmont and Rumpza, 2009).

In terms of economics, image and identity, then, all news media are beset with problems that perhaps should give pause to any youngster with journalistic aspirations.

But if seeking to assign blame for this state of affairs, Wilson (2009) wrote, journalism educators ought first to offer a *mea culpa*.

“(A)rguably, the performance of journalism schools has something to do with the current sub-par performance of the profession,” he said. “And the performance of journalists working in independent, high quality media has a lot to do with the fate of our American democracy.”

How, then, might our schools be imperiling journalism and, by extension, our way of life?

Taking a broad view, Stephens (2000) wrote:

The model of journalism that still dominates our core courses is one that was practiced most enthusiastically at newspapers — mainstream American newspapers — mostly during one specific historical period: about two thirds of the way into the twentieth century when journalism won some glorious victories and most of today's journalism school administrators were young enough to be inspired by such victories. Other kinds of journalism — practiced, say, in France or England, or at alternative publications, or at other times in American history — are generally mentioned, if they are mentioned, as mere curiosities. Architecture schools, art schools, drama schools, on the other hand, not only explore a tradition that is much broader — culturally, geographically, and historically — but they encourage experimentation with new methods, new forms.

Regarding emphasis of time-honored, fundamental principles such as the five W's and an H, “Journalism programs do serve a function by repeatedly insisting on the tried and true,” Stephens (2000) wrote. “But it is, in the end, a limited function.

“A narrow focus on the basics leaves these programs, in manifesto language, enchained — unable to make more original contributions to journalism. We need a more advanced, more adventurous approach. Journalism education needs a heart transplant.”

In more specific terms, “Within the realm of journalism studies of new media, what seems to be emerging is, at best, an ambivalent sense of the impact of new technologies on traditional practices,” Huesca (2000, p. 7) wrote.

“(P)revalent in journalism education,” Huesca (2000) continued, “are books and articles that advocate the adoption of new technologies in ways that are congruent with existing, industry practices, leaving the fundamental norms and conventions of journalism uncontested” (p. 8). The result, he wrote, is “a confusing sense of where online journalism is going” (p. 8).

Thus, Huesca (2000) concluded, journalism studies stand “at the crossroads of invention and departure from the past in one direction, and the continuation of the status quo in the other direction” (p. 10).

Given all this negativity and uncertainty, one might reasonably assume that J-school is a tough sell for young people. Who wants a boarding pass for a sinking ship, after all?

But in fact, wrote Berger (2009), enrollment in undergraduate programs nationwide rose 57 percent from 1993 to 2008. (As for the older set, in more recent years, “Enrollment in graduate programs (has risen as) the economy falls as people look for ways to hide out from the job market and keep some career momentum,” wrote Grimm [2009].)

So, clearly, many still view journalism education as a legitimate means to a viable career. And this begs a new question: What are J-schools doing *right*?

Such changes as those discerned by Atkins (2009) suggest that these institutions, per Stephens’ and Huesca’s now 10-year-old admonitions, have begun to “accommodat(e) the changing realities of the journalism profession.”

Among the trends observed by Atkins (2009):

- Students are covering community events and issues, rather than staying in the classroom.
- Schools have begun to teach the ways in which social media such as Facebook and Twitter – relatively new by-products of the Digital Revolution – can assist in news reporting and production.

- In another nod to the Internet's impact on sociology and communication, some schools are teaching global journalism and interactivity.

Meanwhile, 12 American universities are taking part in the Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education, which was launched in 2005 in order to “challenge students intellectually and prepare them for careers in the news industry at this pivotal time of change in the field.” One component of this is “News for the 21st Century: Incubators of New Ideas,” or “News21,” wherein “projects (are) organized on an annual basis and overseen by campus-based professors for distribution through traditional and innovative media.”

So, yes, “Journalism education is far from perfect,” Folkerts (2010a) wrote. “But changes are happening rapidly in the academy.”

Where do we go from here?

Whatever improvements some may see taking shape in journalism education, there remains a clear consensus that much work still lies ahead. So it is that various parties have presented plans of action.

“First,” wrote Columbia University President Bollinger (2003), “we must always be aware that we have precious little time with a student. No moment should be wasted, and everything we do should be evaluated against possible alternatives that might better prepare a student for his or her future.”

Certainly, as noted previously, “there are scattered experiments in many of our best schools,” Wilson (2009) wrote. “(But) they are too few in number and too modest in impact and visibility.” Thus, to a greater extent, “We need to become centers for experimentation and innovation.”

In other words, ignoring new media, and the new realities they have spawned, simply is not an option.

“Journalists today need to understand that news is now a two way conversation between you and the audience,” said Philadelphia Daily News reporter Will Bunch (Atkins, 2009). “Don’t talk down to the audience. Audience members are active participants — they comment on stories, participate as sources, and provide information and tips. Schools can maintain their core values and work on that.”

Too, “Schools also need to teach that journalists need to think as entrepreneurs. You don’t just write a story; you have to find an audience for it. That’s been ignored by many journalists, and it’s critical today,” Bunch said.

Focusing on specific audiences, rather than on technology or themselves, students should master broadcast, print and online presentation styles, Folkerts (2010b) wrote. However, according to Lacy (2009), this should not come at the expense of understanding that writing still is “the most efficient and effective ways (*sic*) of presenting complicated news and information.”

Moving beyond skill sets as such, Bollinger (2003) wrote that journalism schools must emphasize the importance of general knowledge, so as to lessen the incidence of context-impaired work “that produces both sophomoric journalism and unfulfilled journalists.” Thus, he recommended a cross-disciplinary approach incorporating, for example, statistics, economics, history, modern political theory and philosophy. Lacy (2009) went so far as to recommend that two majors or a minimum of two minors be required.

How long should aspiring journalists reside in the world of academia, then? Folkerts (2010b) suggested that the undergraduate standard of 120 credit hours remains sufficient time. Bollinger (2003) said simply that “the minimum is the time it will take for students to absorb the distinctive qualities of mind that a university education can offer.”

Thornton (2008), on the other hand, took something of a 19th-century view, saying, “Most journalism is learned on the job.” Therefore, he continued, “Wouldn’t it make more sense for perspective journalists to take a one to two year certificate program, while getting more professional experience, instead of spending four years studying journalism?”

Whatever the durations of their stays, Stephens (2000) wrote, students must be given a role in determining the future of journalism.

Echoing a familiar theme, in Bradford and Halliday’s (2009) survey of students from the United Kingdom, the United States and elsewhere, one respondent said: “Journalism students need to be adept at both the old tricks of the trade and the new ones. We need to be qualified to create and publish content across all platforms until it is clearer what path our own careers will take.”

The degrees of dissatisfaction expressed in that regard indicate the emergence of a dichotomy, perhaps. “Our school is very good at traditional media but lecturers are still afraid of going 2.0,” one respondent noted. But another said: “At the moment I’m spending so much time mastering ways of presenting information that I’m not spending anywhere near enough time understanding what story should be told. I’m learning to do slick presentations of slim stories. This can’t be right.”

In both respects, Bollinger (2003) said, “If journalistic education is to place a greater emphasis on imparting a degree of expertise in subject matter, it will be essential to attract faculty who have demonstrably acquired such expertise themselves, in addition to their expertise in the craft of journalism.”

Regarding the interplay between journalism’s training grounds and its fields of practice, “what we teach and how we teach needs to be deeply informed by more regular conversations

with practitioners,” Wilson (2009) wrote. “Journalism professors need to reach out more systematically to media professionals in the new and the legacy media.” Bollinger (2003), on the other hand, wrote, “A great journalism school within a great university should always stand at a certain distance from the profession itself. ... Like journalism itself with respect to the general society, journalism schools must maintain an independent perspective on the profession and the world.”

As for the “theory versus practice” debate, which is as old as the journalism school concept itself, a quest for harmony still is widely endorsed.

Bollinger (2003) wrote, “To pit the teaching of craft against the teaching of intellectual capacity is to pose a false choice.”

By way of illustration, Stephens (2000) wrote, “It is not enough for students to sit in a seminar and discuss critiques of journalism; they have to be given opportunities to respond to those critiques in their work.”

Whatever philosophies and techniques eventually win out, Folkerts (2010b) said, students will not “emerge as capable journalists ... if educators continue to focus on the ‘glory days.’

There was a time when print journalists decried broadcast journalists, when broadcast folks tried to ignore cable folks. There’s no ignoring anymore. It’s time to write the future.”

Conclusion

In the long-ago past, O’Dell (1935) wrote:

Journalism education came into being in response to a social need. It has changed its form from time to time in accordance with society’s demand that it continually keep itself a malleable institution, ever aware of the service it must provide to the nation, no matter how difficult may be the labors at hand. Journalism education will prosper in the future only in accordance with the manner in which it continues to serve a changing society.

Much more recently, City University of New York journalism professor Jeff Jarvis said: “The most important skill we need to teach is change. And we can’t teach it fast enough” (Bradford and Halliday, 2009).

So the need for adaptability clearly is a constant in journalism education.

But at the same time, Wilson (2009) wrote, transformation sometimes serves to underscore the immutability of certain principles:

Since the explosion of online channels permits everyone to tell a story, we need to claim and demonstrate that the relevance of the skills and ethics of journalism have become more relevant than ever before, and journalism schools are needed more than ever, for all citizens and not just professional media mavens.

Journalism, when done skillfully and ethically, can and often does have the ability to instruct, in times of transition, in seasons of stability. Accordingly, it is able to respond to a social need of the first order. “Give light,” says the famous motto, “and the people will find their own way” (E.W. Scripps Co., 2010).

Or, as Col. A.K. McClure of the Philadelphia Times was moved in 1888 to remark, “Journalists are the greatest of our teachers, and there is every reason why special education should specially fit them for such teaching” (O’Dell, p. 44).

Such a scenario’s fulfillment, then as now, is the surest sign of journalism education’s prosperity.

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