The J-School Debate: Are Liberal Arts universities and their journalism programmes ready to work together?

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Abstract:

The revolutionary pace of change in the communications industry is forcing journalists to re-evaluate their mission in a world in which vast amounts of news and information are now freely available at the click of a mouse. Technological change is also prompting university journalism programs to re-evaluate their place in the academic world, to review their objectives, and to consider what they should be teaching the journalists of tomorrow. This article examines the delicate relationship between journalism schools and the university community, with the view that present circumstances offer a powerful incentive to finally settle their many long-standing differences. Journalism programs still have much to contribute to the liberal arts, while the universities have an opportunity to help create a new kind of journalism – one that can prosper in the emerging media environment and help maintain the vibrant public discourse that democracy requires.

Biography:

Michael Camp is an Assistant Professor and chair of the Journalism/Communications Programme at St. Thomas University. He started teaching journalism on a part-time basis in 2003 and has been working as a full-time professor since 2006. Michael has a Master's degree in Politics from the University of New Brunswick and a BA from Trent University. He started in journalism in the early 1980s at the Telegraph Journal in Saint John, NB. After three years in print, he joined the CBC, filing radio and television reports from Northern New Brunswick. He later worked at CBC operations in Moncton, Saint John, Fredericton, and Toronto, in positions ranging from legislative reporter, program host, news announcer, network producer, and finally editor in the CBC's online news service. In addition to his work at St. Thomas, Michael is an on-going member of the New Brunswick political panel, heard weekly on CBC Radio. Recently, he worked as story consultant and writer on a CBC co-production called 'Up Against the Wall,' about the global proliferation of high-security barriers between nations, regions and cultures. Up Against the Wall was nominated for the Gemini Award in 2010 in the category for best Canadian documentary.

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Introduction

Ever since they were first established more than a century ago, [1] university journalism programs have had an awkward and sometimes adversarial relationship with the academic community (Foote, 2008). From the start, professors in other disciplines questioned the legitimacy of journalism as an academic subject and argued that it was essentially a craft, or trade, that should be taught in a technical college or trade school (Fedler, Carey, Counts, 1998). Even if they accepted the idea of journalism as a profession requiring an advanced education, many universities still opposed teaching it, particularly at the undergraduate level (Sine, 2009). True professions, they claimed, belonged in graduate schools, as was the case with engineering, medicine and law (Sine, 2009). This opposition may have softened over the years, but negative attitudes toward university journalism programs persist (MacDonald, 2006). As Columbia University's Gannett Centre for Media Studies has noted, the academic world is still trying to make up its mind as to whether universities should be teaching journalism at all (Desbarats, 1996).

Nonetheless, graduate and undergraduate universities continue to teach journalism, and students continue to enrol in ever-increasing numbers – a surprising fact, given the current turmoil in the journalism industry. Under the headline, *Journalist Bust, J-School Boom*, Lauren Streib reported in Forbes.com that journalism schools were enjoying a surge in popularity while professional journalists lost their jobs by the thousands as a result of relentless pressure from

[1] Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, claims the credit for being the first in the world to offer courses in journalism, starting in 1860. In 1908, the first comprehensive university journalism programme opened in North America at the University of Missouri. Columbia University followed in 1912. Source: The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

internet sources of information. In spite of it all, one survey conducted by The Pew Research Center found student enrolment in journalism programs at Columbia, Stanford, NYU and other prestigious American universities had risen by as much as 38 per cent in the past decade (Streib, 2009).

Despite full classrooms, the rapidly evolving circumstances in the industry have forced journalism schools to engage in a continuous evaluation of their teaching objectives and priorities (Bronstein and Vaughn, 1998). What kind of education does a journalist really need today? How much emphasis should be placed on the social media and other emerging communications technologies? If the older modes of journalism are fading away, what new ones should be taught? What will journalists need to know to succeed in a vocation that bas become almost unrecognizable from what it was twenty, or even ten years ago? To state the obvious, universities cannot ignore the communications revolution we are witnessing today. Times are changing and this alone brings a new urgency to the old J-school debate.

Concerns for the future of journalism as a career and as an academic discipline have intensified the feeling of isolation many journalism professors experience on campus (Foote, 2008). In 2007, when the World Journalism Education Congress (WJEC) held its first international conference, one of the first issues the delegates wanted to address was their strained relationship with the rest of the university community. According to the delegates, journalism professors have developed something of an inferiority complex (Foote, 2008). In an effort to promote the teaching of journalism at the university level, the WJEC passed a statement of principles. The first principle stated, somewhat defensively, that journalism was indeed a genuine academic discipline. "At the heart of journalism education is a balance of conceptual, philosophical and skills-based content," the WJEC resolution read. "While it is also

interdisciplinary, journalism education is an academic field in its own right and with a distinctive body of knowledge and theory" (WJEC, 2007).

The declaration had no perceptible effect on the status of the discipline in the academic world, but it offered some support to all those journalism professors who have become weary of defending their presence on campus (Foote, 2008). That aside, the continued scrutiny of journalism programs has produced some benefits. It has ensured, for example, that journalism professors are always confronting questions about what they do, and how they fit into the mission of their university (MacPhail, 2010). These matters are often raised but rarely resolved to the satisfaction of anyone in the university community (Tate, 1989, and Dennis and Everette, quoted in Desbarats, 1996). Disagreements linger unresolved, and journalism programs have had to adapt to the sometimes illogical requirements of their academic hosts. In response to the problems posed by their journalism schools, many universities have jury-rigged a number of solutions, or at least the means to accommodate their journalism program with special protocols and contract concessions.[2] These may remedy an immediate problem, but in the longer term, arrangements of this nature may have the unintended consequence of making journalism professors even more isolated from their faculty colleagues.

After more than a century together on campus, journalism departments are still less than full partners with universities. If they want to improve their relationship and work toward worthy and mutual objectives, journalism and academia will need to do more than make side-deals to smooth

[2] St. Thomas University is among the universities that have made contractual concessions to allow its journalism programme to hire sessional and full-time professors with significant professional experience. The contract states that the academic requirement for journalism professors is a Master's degree, rather than a PhD. (Source: Collective Agreement, St. Thomas University, 2007-2010).

out their differences. What is needed is a much broader acceptance of journalism on campus and a more thorough integration of journalism programs with the other liberal arts. Certainly, journalism schools and universities stand to benefit from a more enlightened co-existence, one that promotes the survival and integrity of professional journalism while contributing to the value and relevance of a liberal arts degree.

Pulitzer's vision of journalism schools

With so much attention focused on technological change, journalism schools are under considerable pressure to concentrate more of their teaching and research on the new media environment (Pryor, 2006). However, it would be a serious mistake for university journalism programs to become fixated on technology. Even in these extraordinary times, there is a strong case to be made for the education model proposed by the New York publisher Joseph Pulitzer in the early 1900s, when communications technology was relatively primitive and newspapers were the only medium capable of reaching a mass audience.

Pulitzer (1847-1911) was one of the early advocates of teaching journalism in university, certainly the most accomplished and most devoted to the idea (Swanberg, 1967). His inspiration was rooted in his concern for the future of the American republic and his belief that journalism would play an important role in shaping its destiny (Swanberg, 1967, Pulitzer, 1904). He believed journalism was a powerful means for the public to assert its interests while acting as a counterweight to the growing influence of the corporate sector and the associated concentration of political power in a small number of hands (Swanberg, 1967, Pulitzer, 1904). Pulitzer argued that newspapers were the lifeblood of a democracy and that nations prospered or declined in direct relation to the rigour and integrity of their journalism (Swanberg, 1967, Pulitzer, 1904).

This idea, of course, is central to the contemporary study of citizen engagement in the political process. As several researchers have observed, a modern democracy is virtually inconceivable without the news media to inform voters about the issues and the political leadership of the day (Howe, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Kovach, 2001). Numerous studies have also shown that the more people follow the news, the more likely they are to participate in the political process, or at the very least, to vote in civic elections (Howe, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Kovach 2001).

Pulitzer limited his public advocacy on the issue of journalism schools to a single published statement, but, in private, he was devoted to the cause of raising the education standards and the professional status of journalism (Swanberg, 1967). In fact, Pulitzer was willing to part with a significant share of his personal fortune to make his vision of well-educated, professional journalists come true (Lewis, 1993). At the turn of the 20th Century, he offered $2 million to the universities of Columbia and Harvard to establish journalism programs. A bronze plaque still hangs at the main entrance of the Columbia School of Journalism, paying tribute to Pulitzer's generous initiative. His own words are inscribed on it.

> Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and the courage to do it can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mold the future of the Republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations (Joseph Pulitzer, 1904).

Pulitzer predicted that by the end of the 20th century, journalism programs would be an established feature of university campuses across America, and that they would ultimately be seen in the same light as schools of law, medicine or engineering. He envisioned young journalists emerging from these university programs with the "class feeling" of true professionals (Pulitzer, 1904). In addition to their journalistic training, Pulitzer wanted these graduates to be

well-schooled in the liberal arts, with a heightened sense of public service, a devotion to high ethical standards and the tenacity to use their skills to confront whatever stood in the way of the public interest (Pulitzer, 1904; MacDonald, 2006). No doubt, Pulitzer believed his own words and had faith in his mission. But the universities he approached in his lifetime were clearly not swayed by his arguments. The trustees of Columbia and Harvard both said no to Pulitzer's generous offer. Several years passed before Columbia had a change of heart, announcing in 1912 that it would use money from Pulitzer's estate to establish a professional program in journalism. Sadly, by that time, the publisher was dead.

The J-school debate

Several factors influenced the universities' reluctance to accept journalism as a suitable discipline at either the undergraduate or graduate level. In their view, no matter how one dressed it up, journalism lacked the substance and specialized knowledge one associated with a true profession (Lewis, 1993). It is open to speculation where they acquired these attitudes. As some delegates observed at the WJEC conference in 2007, opposition to university journalism program may stem from the generally negative attitudes that academics appear to hold toward the mainstream news media. Their complaints about contemporary journalism range from its simply being inaccurate, shallow and dumbed-down to, according to more radical critiques, its being a propaganda arm of corporations and their political associates, whose primary interest is creating consent for an exploitive, global agenda (Chomsky, 1988).

The transient nature of journalism may also undermine any hope of it being taken seriously by academics. Even in the internet age, journalism resembles the daily newspaper, something to read one day and throw in the trash the next. Perhaps the very disposability of news suggests to

the critics that most journalism is of momentary value only, particularly when measured against the scholarly texts that for centuries have given gravitas to other university disciplines. It could even be argued that considerations of class and culture have played a part in the universities' opposition to journalism schools (Woo, 2003). Journalists of the early 20th century were on the lower end of the scale in earning power and occupational status. As one researcher has remarked, the newspaper business was simply not regarded as a suitable career for educated, refined members of society (Woo, 2003).

In Pulitzer's time, being a journalist was a marginally respectable, but certainly not high-status, line of work. The very idea of teaching university students how to write for the popular press must have seemed absurdly inappropriate to the more traditional thinkers on campuses. Even journalists of the period were skeptical. They saw universities as a place of higher learning in the traditional arts and sciences, not in something as mundane and grubby as the newspaper business (Sine, 2009; Lewis, 1993). As the prominent New York editor Horace White expressed it, a university degree in journalism makes no more sense than a university degree in swimming (Lewis, 1993).

Other critics noted that journalists were not alone in their efforts to enhance the status of their trade by giving it a body of dubious theory and calling it a profession (Lewis, 1993). It is a common strategy for boosting one’s occupational status – with sometimes humorous results – as any sanitary engineer, real estate specialist, hair consultant or hamburger technician will attest. In fact, in the maverick tradition that still lingers in the news business, many of the most prominent journalists today object to the ‘professional’ label, with its establishment connotations and the

implication they would submit to the regulatory oversight of a true profession. In the mythology of the news business, the best journalists like to run free.

One can still find journalists today who question the value of studying journalism in university because they believe it is better to learn on the job. Others feel the essential skills in journalism spring from natural gifts and from personal characteristics that cannot be taught in school. Stephanie Nolan, a multiple-award-winning foreign correspondent for *The Globe and Mail*, agrees that the best journalists have something about them, a talent that emerges under the right conditions. In her experience, journalism school merely confirmed the potential of students who had certain innate abilities, while having little positive effect on the rest.

> When I finished journalism school (at Kings College, in Halifax), the same students who had a sense of story when they arrived were the same ones who had a sense of story when they graduated. The others just didn't get it. You can't learn how to be inquisitive. You can't be taught to have an imagination or to care about something enough to want to tell a story about it. I hate to say it, but I agree with those who say you're born with those things. (Nolan, interview, 2010)

Whatever side one might take in this nature-versus-nurture debate, it is difficult to dispute the idea that a journalist's talent cannot fully develop without extensive experience in gathering information, interviewing subjects and telling stories. In that respect, journalism is the same as any craft - people get better at it as they go along. In Nolan's view, the only way to become a good journalist is to be an active journalist, working your way up the assignment ladder, from covering proverbial flower shows to telling the bigger, more important stories of the day.

Some of the continuing disregard for university journalism programs appears to be founded on an outdated conception of what people in the news business actually do. In Pulitzer's time, journalists were considered finders and transporters of information. They chased ambulances and

police cars, covered community meetings and speeches, interviewed politicians and sports heroes and now and then received important information in a brown envelope, or got a tip from an inside source (Gladwell, 2007). These practices continue to some extent today, but some observers believe there has been a paradigm shift in journalism, brought on by the explosive growth of communications technology (Meyer, 2002). Today the challenge for reporters lies not so much in getting information, but in making sense of all the information we have (Gladwell, 2007).

Until the 1970s, North Americans had relatively few choices when they wanted up-to-date news. If they lived in a metropolitan area, they would likely be able to purchase one or two local newspapers, watch one of several newscasts on television or listen to the news on local and national radio stations. Altogether, people in that era might have had a dozen or two potential sources of news and topical information. Today, broadcasters often speak of the thousand-channel universe, though the actual number of available television stations is of course significantly higher. Through satellite and broadband technology, many of these sources of information are available on demand. People in search of news online can go to an almost incalculable number of websites to find it. Oceanic quantities of information are just a mouse click away. The point has been made many times, perhaps for good reason: the primary communications problem of our era is not too little, but too much information. People who try to achieve the old-fashioned feeling of being up-to-date on current affairs are, in the current media environment, simply overwhelmed with data. They have no choice but to be extremely selective about what they consume.

In a world saturated with information but starved for insight and understanding, more and more journalistic effort is being directed to the task of simply making sense of things (Gladwell, 2007, Pryor 2006, Kovach and Rosensteil, 2001). The hunter-gatherer model of journalism, borne of the days when information was often a scarce commodity, is rapidly giving way to a new kind of journalistic activity, particularly in the realm of investigative journalism (Gladwell, 2007, Pryor, 2006). Getting information is no longer such a difficult problem for investigative reporters. As several recent financial scandals have illustrated, the bigger challenge in today's world is looking at vast amounts of readily available information and figuring out what it all means (Meyer, 2002; Gladwell, 2007).

To this point, most journalists have managed to cope without having to become specialists in any particular field. But the era of the generalist may be over. It is already apparent that investigative journalists need advanced analytical and interpretive skills to decipher what is really going on in the world of business, politics, science or any other domain (Meyer, 2002; Gladwell, 2007). According to the writer and critic Malcolm Gladwell, journalists in coming years will have to specialize in particular areas of public interest if they are to stand any chance of breaking through the clutter.

> Most accountants don't write articles, and most journalists don't know anything about accounting … Aspiring journalists should stop going to journalism programs and go to some other kind of grad school. If I was studying today, I would go get a master's in statistics, and maybe do a bunch of accounting courses and then write from that perspective. I think that's the way to survive. The role of the generalist is diminishing. Journalism has to get smarter (Gladwell, 2009, quoted in the Huffington Post).

Such declarations leave journalism professors wondering what, exactly, they should be teaching. Certainly, a greater effort is being made to sharpen their students' critical abilities. But even this has become somewhat controversial. According to one prominent Canadian critic of journalism schools, the very phrase, "critical thinking" is simply a code word for trendy left-wing critiques of capitalism. Senator Mike Duffy, a former network TV reporter, told an audience in Amherst, N.S., that he had noticed a certain similarity among the university-trained journalists he had encountered over the years. They tended to think the same thoughts and carry what he felt were the same negative attitudes. Canada's journalism schools, he said, have made a specialty of cranking out reporters with a left-wing bias and an instinctively anti-business point of view.

> When I went to the school of hard knocks, we were told to be fair and balanced. That school doesn't exist anymore. Kids who go to King's, or the other schools across the country, are taught from two main texts … one is a manual for critical thinking, the other is *Manufacturing Consent* by Noam Chomsky (Duffy, quoted by McLeod in *Metro*, March 16, 2010).

Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent attempts to show how the television networks are manipulated by their corporate owners to help create consensus for economic globalism and to generate public support for military efforts to protect the colonial business interests of the United States (Chomsky, 1988) Duffy says young people are enchanted by Chomsky's conspiratorial analysis, which he believes accounts for the weary cynicism that colours their perception of business and politics.

> When you put critical thinking together with Noam Chomsky, what you've got is a group of people who are taught from the ages of 18, 19, and 20, that what we stand for, private enterprise, a system that has generated more wealth for more people because people take risks and build businesses, is bad (Duffy, quoted by Paul McLeod in Metro, March 16, 2010).

The development of critical thinking is, in fact, one of the often-stated objectives of liberal arts universities (Mencher, 2002). The idea is perhaps more nuanced in other disciplines. In journalism, the concept is understood in simple terms. According to Kim Keirans, the head of the journalism school at the University of King's College in Halifax, critical thinking means challenging the accepted norms, standing up to power and demanding that the rich and politically influential take responsibility for the things they do. Keirans recently co-edited a book called *The New Journalist*, which describes critical thinking as the most important of all journalistic skills.

> We're trying to teach people to have critical thinking skills, to hold accountable anyone who is in any way in authority. It doesn't matter if it's the Conservatives, the NDP, the Green party, they're all fair game in the sense that they have to be able to be transparent. (Keirans, quoted in Metro, March 16, 2010).

Keirans said Duffy is wrong to assume journalism schools in Canada are hooked on Chomsky or have any particular attachment to his indictment of the news media in *Manufacturing Consent*. The book is held in the library and various departments of her university, but the title is not on the list of required or recommended books in the journalism school.

Several decades before Chomsky dealt with issues in journalism, Walter Lippmann argued that a critical disposition was an indispensable survival tool in a society in which many sources of information were tainted by corporate and political propaganda. His seminal work, *Public Opinion* (1922), challenged many of the cherished notions of what journalism was and what it could do. For instance, Lippmann rejected the idea that journalists could deliver on the promise of giving the public a truly comprehensive view of newsworthy events, much less an unclouded vision of the truth. The incalculable complexity of worldly affairs necessitates a reliance on generalities and conventional beliefs, making the domain of journalism one of preconceived

ideas and stereotypical ways of seeing the world. (It was Lippmann, in fact, who coined the term stereotype.) He also warned of the ease with which the news media could be manipulated to subvert the interests of the general public (Crick, 2009). However, Lippmann believed the tools of analysis and critical thinking could inoculate journalists and the general public from being unduly influenced by this form of propaganda.

The writing issue

If there is one difference between journalists and academics that is almost universally recognized it is that they tend to express themselves in different ways. Journalists are notoriously direct in their writing. They prefer everyday words and simple sentences. On the other hand, academics are known, sometimes unfairly, for their unnecessarily complex and long-winded writing style. This was especially true in Pulitzer's time, when virtually all professors adhered to a rigidly formal style, often sprinkled with words and phrases in Latin, which was still regarded an official language of the academy. Naturally, specialized rhetoric and complexity make much academic writing incomprehensible to the public at large, which may be one of the reasons for using it (Orwell, 1948). George Orwell, for instance, argued in his essay *Politics and the English Language* that academic rhetoric is a professional affectation designed to obscure and disguise the shallowness of the writer's thoughts. Of course, criticism of this sort runs both ways. Professors in other disciplines often say they suspect journalism majors of using their journalistic writing style to avoid nuance, context and complexity, all in the name of keeping it simple. It is not a groundless complaint. Difficult ideas can be simplified to the point of meaninglessness, and journalistic writing is not suitable in all applications.

What frustrates journalism professors, however, is the way journalistic forms of writing and expression are generally discouraged or simply deemed unacceptable in an academic context. Universities allow history professors, for example, to express themselves in terms that are acceptable to other history professors or their own peers in the academy. The same is true in politics, sociology, economics and the professional disciplines, such as law and teaching. In all these subjects, professors need not change their professional manner or mode of expression when they write academic articles. The academy has allowed these disciplines, and others, to develop their own manner of expression. This consideration is not extended to journalism professors. When they write articles about their discipline, they must abandon the principles that normally guide their writing and follow the stylistic guidelines that apply to academic writing. Journalism professors are willing to follow the usual conventions for citing sources. Beyond that, it may be pointless and damaging to confine journalists to the prevailing forms and styles of academic writing. Complex composition steeped in specialized language may be acceptable or even desirable in academic writing. In journalism, it is poisonous. In fact, decoding political and professional rhetoric and translating it into everyday language is a daily challenge for most journalists (McKercher, Cumming, 2004, Lanson, Stephens, 1994).

Another area of confrontation concerns the long-held practice of using peer review as a means of determining whether an academic research paper is worthy of publication. No matter how much academics value the opinion of their peers, one might forgive journalism professors for seeing peer review from a different perspective. Collegiality, as it is understood by academics, is foreign to the intensely individualistic working culture of journalists. Competition is deeply ingrained in their working culture; many journalists would rather compete with their peers than seek approval from them (Hamill, 1998). Journalists resist creative control and

submit only reluctantly to the oversight of an editor or producer. To the journalist, the enclosed nature of peer review automatically suggests the potential of collusion among participants and raises serious questions of impartiality and fairness. [19] It is fair to generalize that experience has taught journalists to be deeply suspicious of any process that cannot be closely observed and scrutinized.

Journalism professors may also find it strangely ironic that the publications they write for, newspapers and magazines that people actually read, do not count as *publications* on campus. What do count are peer-reviewed academic periodicals, publications that have great significance to those in the academic community but are rarely read or even seen by people outside the university community. This may be of little consequence to academics, but one can certainly see why those engaged in the world of news and current affairs would tend to regard academic journals as being largely inconsequential in journalistic terms. This is not to say that peer-reviewed articles have no value. It is only to note the obvious fact that academic journals are written for academics. They are mostly irrelevant to the purpose of mainstream journalism, which is to engage and inform the general public by telling stories from real life. In the final analysis, the measure of journalistic achievement is how much one influences public opinion. Academics, on the other hand, look to their peers when they wish to evaluate their worth. The difference is critical and it raises an important question: Can journalism professors thrive in a liberal arts university when they are conditioned by their own vocation to forever think of themselves in a dialogue with the general public? Universities with journalism departments might be well advised to understand and acknowledge this fundamental difference in orientation – if only because it helps explain the apparent isolation of journalism program within the university community. In journalism, the only reviews of any consequence come from the public.

Journalism professors are confronted with a bewildering number of inconsistencies, or disconnects, when they write articles for academic publications. For example, the standard ethical guidelines for research papers make little sense to someone approaching a subject from a journalistic point of view. For academic researchers, it is standard procedure to obtain written consent from study participants or interview subjects. Along with that consent, these people are given the right to review their remarks and to withdraw them from publication if they wish. In an academic context, these safeguards protect research subjects from any foreseeable harm. But guidelines of this sort would make most contemporary journalism impossible, especially investigative journalism. This does not mean that journalists necessarily work in an environment that gives scant recognition to ethical issues. On the contrary, reporters must have a reliable ethical compass to navigate the often complex issues they face on a daily basis. And ideally, their ethical judgments would have been enriched by a university education that explored ethical issues in journalism.

The problem of credentials

An outstanding issue, still debated on Canadian university campuses, is the matter of determining the appropriate credentials for journalism professors (Tate, 1989). Here again, journalism and the academy are coming from two different traditions. In Canada and the United States, the craft or profession of journalism is largely unregulated, a no-fly zone for government interference or institutional oversight. [20] There is no mandatory training for anyone who wants to practise journalism. No certification process or licence is required (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1947). Professional organizations for journalists exist, but they lack the powers

held by professional associations in law, medicine, and engineering, which have peer committees with the power to grant – or revoke – professional licences to practise.

On the other hand, anyone can call himself or herself a journalist, and no matter how unskilled, incapable or unethical that person may be, there is no mechanism or professional association to remove him or her from the vocation (Lemann, 2006). Journalistic organizations can, of course, fire their weaker reporters, but nothing other than a lack of money or desire could stop those individuals from setting up their own news service.

One of the consequences of the information overload of our era is that it is becoming increasingly difficult for the public to distinguish a professional reporter from an amateur journalist, if indeed there is any difference aside from the fact one is paid and one is not. Millions of amateurs dabble in journalistic activities on the internet and what they produce is no more or no less journalistic than what professionals produce, although the quality may be poor and potential conflicts of interest may be hidden from the reader (Lemann, 2006). Even the courts in Canada have accepted the argument that journalism is journalism, regardless of the medium, the scale of the operation or the skill level of its creator (Jobb, 2006).

In contrast, consider the issue of credentials on a university campus. An academic career in a liberal arts university is signposted with degrees, certifications, and peer-reviewed publications. How is a university to measure someone's capabilities in a profession that lacks these measures of professional achievement? Or should the universities treat journalism as they would any other discipline and have it taught by professors who have perhaps studied it in graduate school but may have little practical experience in gathering and presenting news? With few exceptions, universities in Canada have opted for a mix of qualifications when hiring journalism professors.

Hiring criteria typically stipulate that a professor of journalism have at least the equivalent of a master's degree in journalism or a related field, plus significant experience in news production. In other words, selection committees give serious consideration to the working background of the applicant, while putting less focus on scholastic achievement than they would in hiring for most other programs. Presumably, universities do this because they expect their journalism faculty, at least to some degree, to teach journalism from a practical perspective. It is understood that some of their students will want more than an abstract understanding of the subject. Again, this difference in emphasis leads to troublesome questions concerning the academic standards and practices of the university (Cassandra, 1989).

Newer forms of journalism

Journalism is on shaky ground, with the more traditional forms of the news media, from print to television, facing a bewildering array of new platforms, including BlackBerrys and iPads, for online news (Sine, 2009). The breathtaking pace of technological change in the news industry is making it even more important to deal with the questions that have lingered for the past century: how can we ensure the public continues to have access to professional quality news and information, and how should we educate future generations of journalists to thrive in this constantly evolving communications environment?

As long as enrolment remains stable, universities may lack the incentive to re-evaluate their journalism programs and their place in the broader academic community. Some of the pressures are coming from off campus, from those who are alarmed by the precipitous decline in civil literacy, as illustrated by the decline in newspaper readership and the shrinking audiences for network television news programming. Audiences are getting older and smaller, as young people

turn to new and different sources of news and information – often from the blogosphere and often from unskilled amateurs, conspiracy theorists and hacks with personal agendas (Gladwell, 2008; Putnam, 2000).

Certainly, what we have known as journalism is transforming into something much more dynamic in its relationship with its audience. It is clearly more democratic than it was in the days when letters to the editor where main avenue of editorial discussion. Through the internet, people can talk back to the providers of news and do so almost instantaneously, with relatively little effort. The one-product-fits-all model of news production is being overtaken by communications technologies that allow individual self-selection. Consumers can pre-select the kinds of news they wish to consume and block the subjects that do not interest them. With minimal effort, they also have the opportunity to participate in online discussions about a story, often linked directly to the reporter, who may join in. It is ironic that this democratization of news is happening at a time when the concentration of media ownership is continuing at an accelerated pace, with more and more newspapers and electronic broadcasters falling under the control of a small group of corporations. Naturally, they are also anxious to gain a foothold online. In light of this convergence, it would appear that journalism in the early 21st century is beginning to resemble a mediated dialogue between the producers and the consumers of news. As these online interactions become more sophisticated, reporters will need additional skills just to manage the information they are trying to share with the public.

Sue Gardner, the chair of the International Wikipedia Foundation, which claims to hold the largest repository of information in the history of the world, says journalism in the future will be a much different commodity from the journalism of earlier times. Newspapers, news magazines

and news broadcasting may continue in some form or other, but it is almost certain that the internet will be the main provider of news and information. The journalist's role will be in managing and processing this ocean of data.

> Journalists are trained to have an eye for trends, for changes in public opinion, and for things that are truly new or different … things the public wants to know about, but doesn't, because people don't know where to look. I can see a role for journalists in the future, going through online sources and compiling information … making sense of it for people, leading discussions, and making the news more engaging, making it something you participate in, not just watch on TV, or read (Gardner, 2008).

In a speech at St. Thomas University, Gardner suggested journalists could also become facilitators of citizen discussion and debates online, dealing with a range of newsworthy issues. These changes are already under way, and, as the range of journalistic activities gets wider and more diversified, our concept of journalism and our idea of what a journalist does will also change. Journalism schools may in fact be producing young journalists with skills that are rapidly being overtaken by technological change, bolstering the argument in support of helping them to acquire a diversified academic background, the capacity for critical thinking and an ability to express their thoughts. It may be safely assumed that no matter how journalism changes in the future, journalists will still require an analytical mind, a range of knowledge on a variety of subjects and an ability to communicate.

In these circumstances, does it make sense to continue teaching journalism as if it were an elite profession, as Pulitzer envisioned? Or is the explosive growth of the internet making these university programs as obsolete as the daily newspaper? There is certainly no consensus on these questions in the university community, and journalists are equally divided on the issue. Writing

for *The Huffington Post*, Richard Sine challenged the trustees of journalism schools to find a mission that suited the hard realities of communication in the 21st century.

> Think you still have a role to play in the ever-changing media landscape? Great. Go forth and teach workshops in copyediting, camerawork, graphic design, the business of publishing, even journalistic ethics. Teach them at night or on weekends, and charge a grand or so for each. That will make them accessible to the hausfrau bloggers, the go-go entrepreneurs, and the neighborhood activists who will shape our media future. That will professionalize the media, if that's what you care to do. (Richard Sine, from the *Huffington Post*, 2009).

Sine says the growing number of students taking journalism in university is based more on innocent hopes for the future of professional journalism than on an analysis of where the industry is actually headed. But Sine and others who predict the collapse of journalism as we have known it may be reaching too far into the unknown. Journalism is in the process of a massive transformation, and the picture is not entirely bleak for journalists. Technologies that are pushing the old news media to the brink are also opening up new opportunities, and not only for amateurs. With the extraordinary reach and versatility of the internet, one can safely say there has not been so much unexplored potential for journalistic activity since Gutenberg invented the printing press. The problem so far has been finding an economic model that can support accurate perceptive and useful journalism – the kind that is expensive to produce. As it is now, the professional journalism available for free online is typically recycled from newspapers, magazines or television programs that generate revenues from sources other than the internet. It is an unsustainable model for professional news production, but only the most pessimistic analysis would conclude that professional journalism will never find the revenues it needs online. In fact, one could make the opposite case just as convincingly: the internet will ultimately generate more revenue for journalism, while reducing costs traditionally associated with the news business, such as newspaper delivery.

The communications technologies converging on the internet have the potential to change the very idea of journalism and certainly our conception of what it means to be a professional. The work of professional journalists must be recognizable by its quality, credibility and ethical standards. If the work of the professionals is unrecognizable or no better than what is offered by amateurs, there would be little to sustain it in a marketplace where much of the competition offers something for nothing. With their often-stated commitment to free speech, it would be hypocritical of professional journalists to disparage the rise of amateur or citizen journalism. Certainly, the free exchange of news, ideas and opinions is a good thing for society. Now that we have the technology to allow individuals to express themselves to potentially huge audiences at very little cost, the chances of creating a truly participatory form of democracy seem much more realistic. But in a domain crowded with the works of unpaid freelancers, professional journalists must be able to produce journalism that reaches beyond what the bloggers can offer. The professionals will need to concentrate more on their role of helping to create civic literacy, with high-quality reporting in areas such as politics, justice, and the most pressing issues of the day. Professional journalists should continue to examine the joys and sorrows of everyday life, not to mention the simple challenge of survival in a difficult world. But they'll have to do it better than the amateurs. They must be on the forefront of using the internet as a magnificently powerful journalistic medium, composed as it is of all the old forms of media rolled into one.

If one wishes to be optimistic about the future, it is possible that the vast changes in communications technology will eventually open more doors than they close for professional journalists. Some university journalism programs emphasize practical skills and the actual production of journalistic content. Others believe the most important journalistic skills are more abstract in nature. They focus their efforts on sharpening the analytical abilities of the students –

again, the critical thinking so often proclaimed by the universities as a primary objective of a liberal arts education. As Pulitzer suggested, an advanced education in the liberal arts also provides a foundation for ethical decision-making, an ability that is of particular value to responsible journalists, who frequently confront ethical quandaries in the daily process of news gathering and storytelling.

Leaving aside the question of how journalists can benefit from a university education, it should not be forgotten that journalism programs have the potential to serve their respective universities. They, too, face a blistering pace of change and a future that is far from clear. In Canada, universities are losing ground to other forms of post-secondary education, as students seek training that will lead more directly to jobs after they graduate. And during times of economic uncertainty, more Canadians question the value of a liberal arts degree as a means to get a good start in life (Source: Maclean's). In short, journalism and academia both face difficult problems, and both are going through a period of rapid change. Perhaps the circumstances are right for finding the basis for a new partnership.

For example, universities have been slow to take advantage of their journalism programs as a means to improve the connection between the public and the academy. That is beginning to change, however. An organization called the Canadian Research Data Centre Network is piloting a project this year to have journalism students write news stories and press releases based on current faculty research. Heather Juby, the co-coordinator of the network's Knowledge Transfer initiative, says it is surprising that professors involved in the many interdisciplinary projects on campus have largely ignored journalism.

> We get the sense that journalism programs are somewhat isolated on the university campuses. They tend to be left out of the research agenda because it is assumed they have no interest in academic research. And we disagree with that. We think journalists and journalism students should take an interest and be involved in informing the public … Professors have published many, many papers and studies that the public should know about, that they really should see - but the work goes into academic journals that the public generally does not read and whatever benefit might have been gained from the public awareness is lost (Heather Juby Interview, 2010).

The Knowledge Transfer links academics with journalism programs and students to spread news about research studies of potential interest to the public. One recent example was a study concerning the division of labour in Canadian families. The study found that, when both partners in a marriage work outside the home and share their domestic chores equally, the likelihood of a divorce is significantly reduced – a finding certainly worthy of a news story. The report was given to a university journalism class, which interviewed the professor about the study, then wrote a news summary and press release – a modest assignment but a worthy effort to draw more public attention to the often impenetrable world of academic research. Juby says universities know they need to give people a better idea of what academics really do.

> Wouldn't you want your study to reach a larger audience? Wouldn't you want people to read about it? That is where journalism programs can really make a difference. They can be part of this process . … Professors in other disciplines should be working with their colleagues in journalism because there is a lot they can do for each other. (Juby, interview, 2010)

Of course, co-operative projects with journalists necessarily involve some loss of control. Juby says academics need to understand, for instance, that the first thing a journalist is likely to do is remove all the jargon from the paper and translate the ideas into simple language. Some academics might prefer to avoid this kind of reductionism. But Juby says the point of the Knowledge Transfer is simply to keep people informed in a general way about university

research – something they should be entitled to, when much of the research is paid for with public tax revenues.

Discussion

Complaints about journalism as an academic subject may have caused some lively debates on campus, but they did little to slow the spread of journalism schools at the university level. With the success of pioneering journalism schools at Columbia and the University of Missouri, other liberal arts universities soon followed with journalism programs of their own. Today, undergraduate and graduate degrees in journalism and mass communications are found in almost every country on earth, with more than 500 journalism schools in North America and 3,500 worldwide. Even in China, hundreds of new journalism courses are being offered every year (Foote, 2008).

Still, the resistance from other disciplines on campus survives, some of it fuelled by competition among universities for prestige – and students. Canadian universities are acutely aware of their annual rankings in Maclean's magazine, and some faculty have complained that journalism professors tend to drag their universities down in the rankings because they typically lack the academic accomplishments of other faculty. Many are not PhDs. Many have never published a peer-reviewed article. They usually do not apply for research grants. And their previous work experience, no matter how impressive in journalistic terms, doesn’t matter to Maclean's.

Given the chronic financial challenges facing liberal arts universities in this country, it could be argued that the revenues generated by journalism have soothed some of the irritation caused by its presence on campus. However, a harmonious coexistence it is not. At best, there is a truce,

with journalism departments finding their own niche in the university environment, rather than seeking the same level of interdisciplinary integration achieved by other fields of study. And yet, one need not drill too deeply into the tradition-bound world of academia to release substantial quantities of mistrust, condescension and even contempt toward the discipline of journalism and those who teach it in university. Nor, as we have seen, do the criticisms of journalism schools come entirely from within the academic community (MacPhail, 2010; Sine 2009).

In Canada, journalism programs are found at universities, community colleges and polytechnical institutes. In recent years, several provinces have implemented introductory classes at the high school level. Naturally, each university, college and school takes a different approach to teaching the subject, depending on its individual mission. In general, community colleges and polytechnical schools are focused on their overall mission of giving students the specific, practical skills they need to find gainful employment. In light of that objective, colleges teach journalism as a craft, as a series of activities to perform using different media and related technologies. From that perspective, it makes sense to offer skills-based journalism courses alongside other vocational programs, such as those in the construction trades, business management and the service industry. University journalism schools have taken a different approach. They may offer courses in specific skills, such as writing, editing and electronic newsgathering, but they tend to put more emphasis on theory, ethics and critical thinking (Mencher, 2002). While a liberal arts university should provide students with intellectual tools for success in life, its overall mission is surely higher and more transcendent. As the classical philosophers would define it, the purpose of an education is to teach students how to live a good life. And in the most general terms, the primary focus of a liberal arts education is humanity.

(Journalists see their own work in similar terms, as everything they do is derived from a focus on human experience).

On this basis, it would seem that an education rooted in the humanities is the best preparation for journalists because the best kind of journalism is tempered with an empathy that comes from a deeper inquiry into human nature. Perhaps that was the basis of Pulitzer's conception of trained intelligence and ethical courage. Where else, other than at a liberal arts university, would one find a curriculum designed to promote intellectual enlightenment and a sense of ethics and justice?

Journalists will always need the older skills of the profession, such as interviewing and writing. But current trends suggest they must develop new skills simply to understand the issues they will face in an increasingly complicated and inter-connected world. Climate change, for example, is one of those stories with an immensely complex political component and equally complex economic implications, as well as a scientific dimension. In order to manage their way through stories such as climate change, journalists must learn to be exceptional critical thinkers – or learn how to hide their ignorance in shallow, formulaic storytelling, which is of little use to anyone. Media organizations will likely never be able to afford in-house specialists on every newsworthy subject, and, to some degree, journalists will always have to rely on their traditional skills of analysis in the face of unfamiliar issues. In order for professional journalism to stand out, however, it must be clearly superior in depth and scope to what the bloggers and amateurs are producing. In short, reporters will need to be bright and versatile in their thinking. The more knowledge they can acquire in any area of public interest, the better they will serve their communities.

In this respect, journalism schools should encourage their students to take as many courses in other disciplines as they can manage. In fact, the current trend in North American universities is to move away from a teaching model dominated by the development of various skills, from editing text to video production (Adam, 2009). The late Jim Carey, one of the most influential thinkers about journalism since Walter Lippmann, believed journalism schools must strike a balance between teaching the skills of the trade on the one hand and a foundation in the humanities on the other (Carey, referenced in Adam, 2009). Journalists, in other words, must be thinkers. They must have cultivated a critical understanding of society and culture and an appreciation of their role and responsibilities they as journalists. Training journalism students exclusively in the various crafts of journalistic production is no more rational than training doctors to use a scalpel before they have studied chemistry, biology or even ethics. It is simply illogical to believe a community college or vocational school has the capacity to provide the kind of education espoused by Carey, and arguably by most of the professors who teach journalism today[30]. Liberal arts universities are leaders in the study of humanity and our place in this world.

For two entities as dissimilar as academia and journalism, it is perhaps unusual that they are both partners in the same mission – to explore what it means to be human and to learn how to live a good life (Plato, The Republic). Both the universities and their journalism programs would benefit if they each recognized and respected the differences in professional culture, methodology and manner of communicating. Journalism professors, for example, should be able to participate in academic research and discourse, but they should do it in a manner consistent with the values and methods of the journalistic profession. Journalists think differently and they write differently than academics, but what they do is unmistakably an intellectual exercise.

Significant journalistic work for established publishers and broadcasters should also be considered the equivalent of publishing in an academic journal. Universities must accept that the mechanism of peer review is offensive to competitive journalists who value their independence of mind. On the other hand, journalism departments should understand that, as long as they are part of a university community, they must adapt to it in a sensible manner. They must be able to collaborate with scholars in other disciplines, especially those who work in areas that are naturally suited to interdisciplinary research with journalism, such as history and politics (Reese, 2010). Universities should encourage their journalism instructors to continue their education while they teach, with the ultimate goal of having more professors with PhDs in the journalism faculties. With that parity of academic qualifications, it will be much easier to integrate journalism into the overall mission of the university and to forge closer relationships between journalism departments and the other disciplines.

The initiative of the Canadian Research Data Centre Network to use journalistic resources on campus to inform the public when a newsworthy study is released is long overdue. Much more is possible. Finally, university journalism programs should take advantage of their intellectually rich environment and encourage students to take courses in other disciplines. It is only a stronger argument for locating journalism programs on university campuses.

Even with all the technological advancements of the past century and the effect these have had on the practice of journalism, the best way to start a journalistic career is to go to university, where students can expand their range of knowledge and learn how to be critical thinkers, competent writers and ethical decision-makers. All of these are cherished goals of a liberal arts

education, and they are the objectives Pulitzer had in mind when he first proposed that universities take a leading role in molding the journalists of tomorrow.

Regardless of the ups and downs of the job market, the production of news and current affairs is important. Journalism is still essential in a democracy such as ours. If there is a way to improve public discourse on important issues, journalists will be part of that effort. And for that reason, I would argue it is in the general interest of society and the universities to ensure we have educated journalists to keep people informed and engaged in the process of governing themselves.

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