

Deficient tutelage:

Challenges of contemporary journalism education

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Speaking to a group of journalism educators about what is wrong with journalism education is like encountering a pack of wolves in the woods and lecturing them about dinner etiquette. It will probably end badly.

Nevertheless, I agreed to make this speech because I believe in journalism and teaching, and because I hope we share a common commitment to improving the lives of young people and preparing them for the future.

In the interest of disclosure, I come from the University of Oxford, which does not offer journalism or media studies. Despite that choice, it has thousands of graduates working in journalism and news organizations worldwide. In addition, scholars at Oxford conduct some of the most compelling media research undertaken. Over the course of my career I have had experience in journalism schools, business schools, and social science departments so an interdisciplinary perspective informs my thoughts.

I think we can find some common ground, however. I want to remind us of things we know in our hearts and direct our thoughts to some challenges that need to be addressed if journalism education programmes are going to survive and be effective in the future.

I hope you won't show too many fangs in the process.

The journalistic world of the 21st century is fundamentally different from that of the 20th century

This reality threatens the relevance and existence of traditional journalism education. Many journalists and journalism educators view the 20th century as the high point of professional journalism because it was an era in which abundant resources supported strong news institutions. This was possible because 20th century news enterprises and the journalists that worked for them had near monopolies on daily news provision and controlled the institutions that defined journalism and what its practices were.

Yet research on the journalism of the past century has established it served to reinforce dominant perceptions of issues, people, and countries, especially those perceptions held by editors and social elites. It consistently missed the emergence of major stories—financial crises, developing international conflicts, and political scandals—until they emerged as full-blown calamities and disgrace.

Journalism training has far too often uncritically accepted and promoted the ideas that journalism makes democracy function and that democracy is not possible without journalism. These views were important to the development of the mythology of journalism in the 20th century. However, research about these relationships shows that the connections are tentative at best and that there are far better explanations for democratisation and functioning democratic processes.

The idealized view of journalism and the image of the past century as a journalistic paradise are thus dependent upon looking into a very badly distorted mirror.

Today, digital media are challenging the monopolies on informational functions formerly held by journalists and legacy news providers. There is competition in news and information distribution. Many of the information provision functions have been seized by other information providers.

However, professional journalists and journalism educators continue to maintain that only trained journalists can speak truth to power and hold power to account. These are fanciful sentiments. The concept of speaking truth to power presumes that journalists know what is true, that power listens, and that journalists don't have power and aren't part of the power system. Those are highly debateable assumptions. The concept of holding power to account presumes that there are agreed-upon standards of behaviour and that journalists have a means for enforcing accountability. Again, these are questionable assumptions.

It is important for us to remember that the prevailing conceptualisation of journalism and its role were asserted by journalists, not given to them by society. They used their near monopolies over platforms—printing press and transmitters—to claim the functions of journalism in society. Democratic society acquiesced to those claims because they proved somewhat functional.

Today, other functional forms of communication have emerged and these are every bit as important to speaking truth and holding power to account as journalism. While journalists continue to cling to the old conceptualisation, society is moving past it.

Professional journalists continue to maintain that only they are able to effectively convey information, challenge power, and threaten illicit uses of power. This fiction may make them feel self-important, but it is not borne out in the realities of the 21st century. Many other sources of information provide information about what is happening, explain the contexts, enlighten and engage audiences, and help the public sort through ideas and debates.

Today many journalistic functions have been stripped from the news media. Social media are the primary carriers of breaking news. Online news sites, blogs, and social media are far more often willing to publicly shame elites than legacy media. The locations of opinion and debate have moved to digital media. All of these reduce the necessity for and influence of news organisations.

Even specialised and in-depth news has moved away from traditional media to the web and apps. We are no longer dependent upon the professional journalists because others are providing far more attention and expert understanding to events. We are offered coverage

of specialised topics such as foreign affairs, the economy, and the environment by academics, professional experts, non-governmental organizations, and entrepreneurial collectives of specialist journalists. These tend to produce information in far greater depth and often with greater accuracy than journalistic organisations producing news for general interest audiences. In fact, they are increasingly relied upon as sources and expert commentators by many traditional news organisations and professional journalists.

The sad reality is that journalists miss most stories in most places most of the time. Developments and issues tend to be initially discovered by others and are then picked up by traditional news organizations.

In this environment, professional journalism is losing a great deal of its functionality and its significance to society.

The importance of this changing environment is seen in attacks on journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters sans frontières both report that citizen journalists and professional journalists are now being imprisoned or killed in about equal portions for challenging power and reporting on crucial developments in their societies.

The 21st century is thus a very different journalistic environment. In this milieu, journalism education must change or it will wither and decay.

Journalism and higher education have always had an uneasy relationship

Journalism isn't an art, nor is it a science. Rather it is a loose body of professional practices and techniques. Journalism education combines tutelage of those practices with sets of technical and practical skills needed to carry out journalism. Consequently, there have been debates for the past century and a half about whether journalism training should be offered in universities.

Some perceive journalism as a trade for which a non-university training course and apprenticeship should be sufficient. Others take a liberal arts approach, arguing that journalists need higher education with solid backgrounds in arts, humanities, and social sciences combined with professional training. Others argue that a full basic degree in any relevant subject—from economics to biology; from sociology to political science—should be completed prior to journalism training. Those arguing for journalism's inclusion in higher education often argue that it is a profession that deserves to be in universities just like professional schools in medicine, law, engineering, or business.

In North America, the higher education battle was won in the United States by former Confederate General Robert E. Lee, who introduced journalism education at Washington and Lee University during his presidency of that institution in the late 1860s. The University of Missouri School of Journalism was established in 1908 as the first university professional school in the field. In Canada, the dispute over whether journalism belonged in higher education continued until after the Second World War when Ryerson, Western Ontario, and Carleton universities began offering journalism programmes.

The incorporation of journalism education into universities has never been fully accepted by others in the academy, however. Even today, faculties in other disciplines in many universities look down on or dismiss the importance of journalism programmes and the research contributions of journalism faculty.

They are not completely wrong in doing so.

Journalism education has failed to develop professional knowledge and practices

In the 150 years since journalism education entered universities, it has not developed a fundamental knowledge base, widely agreed upon journalistic practices, or unambiguous professional standards. Large numbers of journalism educators have failed to make even rudimentary contributions toward understanding the impact of journalism and media on society. Some of the reasons for these failures are philosophical. Some are because we have tended to separate journalism education from media studies. Many of the deficiencies exist because journalism is closer to craft than a profession.

In the contemporary environment, this state of affairs is especially problematic because the journalism profession of the 20th century is waning. The existential crisis of journalism is being magnified in journalism education and is ignored at great peril.

Whether one believes journalism is craft, trade, or a profession, one is faced with a fundamental question: Can students study journalism and be prepared for a world of future employment? This question reveals the fundamental conflict between the concepts of journalism training and higher education.

Higher education isn't about ensuring employment. It is about shaping and sharpening students' abilities to think and about giving them skills to can use in a variety of types of activity in future years. It is about helping them understand the past, how people and societies work, what forces affect the human condition, how to deal with the inevitable changes they will encounter in their lives, and how to find their own paths to success.

No one can teach the future, of course, but we must help student learn how to discover, interpret, and navigate their ways through it. This is not impossible and is done daily in other professional programmes in business, engineering, and biomedical sciences. They do so by focusing on fundamental knowledge and practices, the means for discovering new knowledge and practices, and how to innovatively use changing technologies and practices as means for achieving goals.

Unfortunately, that is not what many journalism programmes do. Their primary contribution is to teach students to communicate well, but without having anything to communicate and with little rationale for communicating. Minimal effort is expended on teaching students how to think and critically analyze social developments. Journalists who can't think effectively will be even more worthless in the future than they are now.

Many journalism programmes teach how to use specific technologies: audiovisual editing systems, news website software packages, and design software. Far less attention is given to why practices using those technologies produce more impact in the minds of audiences than other practices or how they affect costs and strategies of operations. We teach rote operation, not contemplation about what one is doing.

Journalism education must do better.

A primary reason for deficiencies is that journalism education has been co-opted by industry

For decades, journalism programmes have been influenced by and aligned with major employers. Their curriculums have been designed to produce news factory workers who can be dropped into a slot at a journalism factory. Even today, while the locations that can offer journalistic employment are diminishing, many journalism schools can't shake off the emphasis on preparing workers to enter corporate employment.

Most journalism programmes are still preparing students to go to work for established news organizations and not giving them enough training in entrepreneurship and independent journalism where employment opportunities are rising; they are not teaching students how to establish themselves to work as individual journalists or in journalistic cooperatives.

Journalism programmes need to teach students how to become more self-sufficient journalists, provide much more training in specialized forms of journalism, and teach how to cover local communities and topics such as climate, energy, defence, and social policy. These are where value is truly created, and they all require interdisciplinary programs with tight relations with other disciplines in the university—something few journalism programmes have developed.

It is the responsibility of journalism faculty to implement the changes required in the current century, but it requires support and pressure from stakeholders of journalism programmes. Like all organisations, educational institutions change slowly unless they have to. Some schools are changing more rapidly than other, but even when programmes decide to undertake change it may take 5 to 10 years before the results are apparent.

Journalism education must do better.

Journalism programmes will never move forward by hiring middle-aged and senior journalists

Month after month, I see journalism programmes gloating that they have hired notable journalists from major print and television companies. They circulate the news in glowing press releases about the years of experience of their new faculty. Although this helps aging journalists who have lost their employment with news organisations, it is not going to help

students develop the attitudes and skills necessary to thrive in the emerging news environment.

Why would anyone think that hiring someone from a decaying news organisation, steeped in old ways of doing things, is an effective way to try to help create the journalists and news organisations for the future? Few former journalists who have spent the past 20-30 years working for a large firm have the outlook, attitudes, and skills needed now. Although many are able to effectively convey the basic skills used in gathering and producing news, most are not able to provide skills necessary for new forms of information gathering and dissemination, data handling, data visualisation, and journalistic entrepreneurship.

I don't want to be too one-sided here; I am all too aware that hiring someone from higher education who possesses a doctorate is unlikely to fare better. Maybe we should be hiring some digital entrepreneurs in their late 20s who never completed college and think about information provision in completely different ways.

Regardless of how journalism departments go about it, faculty certainly need to change the way they think about the content of teaching. We need to be teaching about how to write and produce content for multiple digital platforms for which audiences have different requirements. We need to teach how to understand audiences and use the avalanche of user data that is overwhelming news organisations. We need to help them prepare their work and lives for new types of journalistic employment. We need to teach them to be digital developers and how to be problem solvers.

Journalism education must do better.

Some winds of change are already evident

Some journalism educators and stakeholders are already working to change the ways journalism is taught.

A great deal of support is being given the "hospital model" that combines university journalism education with actual practice. Despite the enthusiasm for the concept, it is hardly novel. Many journalism programmes have for a century had students working in newspapers, magazines, and radio and television stations they operate. Many were early creators of web-based news sites. Others have used structured internships to achieve similar results. The primary reason that the teaching hospital concept is gaining traction today is that established news enterprises are promoting it so that students will be placed into their enterprises as unpaid or poorly paid workers. It is not about education, it is about commerce. Journalism educators should not take part in projects that primarily exploit their students, do the hospital model must be considered with care.

A number of foundations are pursuing their own visions for digital and specialised journalism and providing small amounts of money to support them. Many of these programmes, however, will not solve the problems of journalism because they remain steeped in normative 20th century views of what journalism ought to be rather than what it is today.

Entrepreneurial journalism courses are becoming fashionable, but few are being taught by anyone who has ever been an entrepreneur. Many are primarily teaching students to be freelancers. Few are teaching them what is necessary to establish and operate successful small news enterprises in the 21st century.

Courses on the economics and business of media are proliferating, and they can help students navigate the emerging news ecosystem. Unfortunately, few are being taught by faculty with much understanding of either economics or business. Students are primarily being given shallow understanding of catchphrases such as business model, monetization, and return.

Digital journalism courses are now common and outside stakeholders are continually trying to influence the choice of hardware and software used because of their own self interests. Large media companies are trying to influence the content of the courses to produce employees that fit their narrow needs for specific types of skills in digital media.

Despite recognition of their importance, the number of speciality journalism courses remains limited, primarily because few faculty members have the skills to teach them and because they tend to be offered as small, optional courses that are expensive for journalism programmes to provide.

Journalism education must do better.

Where does journalism education need to move in the next 5-10 years?

I can see more of you baring your fangs at me, but I want to forge ahead and consider the question of where journalism education needs to move in the next decade.

In terms of education, we need to teach students how to be strategic and flexible in serving audiences across multiple distribution platforms. We need to teach them to focus on the environment and processes of information provision, not merely information creation. We need to teach them to be more oriented to the needs of their readers, listeners, viewers, and users.

We need to help journalists become more specialised rather than generalised, to learn how to find and use data and information created by others and then how to create stories from that data and information. We need to teach how to produce analysis and explanations of what public developments mean and how readers can prepare for what is coming next.

The transformation needed to effectively offer this type of education is problematic for many journalism programmes because it means breaking down the silos in training students for print, broadcast, or the web and ensuring wider education that includes advertising, media management, and media effects. It requires challenging entrenched self-interests and defensive attitudes that are designed to protect existing academic fiefdoms and ways of doing things.

Journalism education can only survive and be successful in the future if it becomes much more aggressive in seeking change. It has to become far more innovative than it ever has been. It is not a matter of thinking outside the box, because the box no longer exists. What is required is deciding what will replace the box or how to get along without one.

In changing, however, journalism education must seek to provide greater quality and educational value than in the past. If it does not, there is no reason for it to continue to exist and most of its functions will shift online to journalism training courses more appropriate for craft and trade approaches to journalism.

Journalism education must do better.

Thank you.

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