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Part One: Reforming Journalism

Lee Pitts

Dordt College, lee.pitts@dordt.edu

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Part One: Reforming Journalism

Abstract

"Part of a journalist's job is to encourage people, compel them—maybe even chide them a little—to turn their heads towards the plights of others. To notice."

Posting about a Christian perspective on journalism from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/part-one-reforming-journalism/>

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Comments

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in things

January 15, 2019

Part One: Reforming Journalism

Lee Pitts

A painting hangs in a museum in Brussels, Belgium, featuring the mythological moment when Icarus crashed into a green-blue sea. The story of Icarus' ambitions is well-known. However, his failure as depicted in this work is not what draws the eye.

The drowning occurs in the lower right-hand corner of the canvas. All you can see of Icarus are his flailing legs. The rest of his body already has disappeared under the sea. His tale is nearly over.

The centerpiece of this rendering are villagers caught up in the day-to-day. A plowman drives his horse. A shepherd tends his flock. A fisherman stares into the sea, searching for his next catch.

Nobody notices the fate of Icarus.

As W.H. Auden writes in his poem about this painting, "Musee des Beaux Arts,"

"[E]verything turns away, / Quite leisurely from the disaster." Auden speculates: "[T]he plowman may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry." It must have been an amazing sight, Auden argues, "a boy falling out of the sky." But even a trade ship painted near the drowning Icarus keeps riding the wind towards the horizon. "[It] had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on," Auden muses.

I like to begin some of my journalism classes by projecting this painting onto the projector screen.

"Why?" I ask the class.

“It is a major news event,” is the usual answer. “And this class will teach us how to cover such events.”

“Yes,” I reply. “But there’s more.”

I tell them that part of a journalist’s job is to encourage people, compel them—maybe even chide them a little—to turn their heads towards the plights of others. To notice.

In the painting, life went on without interruption for the plowman, the shepherd, the fisherman, and the sailors. Life often should go on. But wouldn’t it be better if people at least paused to recognize and reflect on other people’s triumphs and tragedies—even if the event does not directly affect other villagers? Perhaps such musings would lead to efforts to improve things so a similar downfall did not happen to others. That trait—we can call it empathy—is what turns a village into a community. And helping to build that is part of a journalist’s job. Maybe the biggest part.

That is a big paradigm shift for many young journalists. They come to class thinking journalism is a fact gathering. No, I tell them. That is what encyclopedia writers do. (In these times I should perhaps say that is what Wikipedia writers do.) Journalists are storytellers. Storytellers who craft true tales that inspire and implore a community to care. Storytellers who should report with a spoonful of empathy and write with a teaspoon of it.

It is an important task. A calling. And a hard one. That is especially true in a Wi-Fi connected world where too many people know more about the latest exploits of the Kardashian sisters than they do about their neighbors.

To make matters worse, Americans’ trust in the media sank to a record low in 2016, according to a Gallup poll. Just 32 percent of respondents said they possessed a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media. That was a drop of eight percentage points from 2015. Trust in the media dropped across all age groups.

This is dangerous for a democracy. Thomas Jefferson once said, “[W]ere it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.”

Jefferson understood that a press has a vital role in preserving liberty. A free society needed a free media. He believed in this so much that he was willing to abandon the very government that he helped create if it meant preserving the press. This message is forgotten today.

I see it in the eyes of high school juniors and seniors and their parents when they visit Dordt. These students love to read and write. They are curious about the world. These are key raw skills for journalism. But when the students ask me about becoming a reporter, you can sense the skepticism. It is as if I am asking them to join the dark side.

This trend is not isolated to Dordt. A December 2017 article in the *Washington Post* contained the headline: “Their family and friends call the media ‘fake news.’ Nevertheless, these students want to be journalists.”

This piece focused on journalism students at Christian colleges. TJ Davis, a Liberty University senior from Leesburg, Virginia, told the *Post* that, in the view of many conservative Christians he knows, the media “seems to be contributing to a lot of bad in the world right now.”

Davis added: “[A]nytime I mention journalism, people, especially older people, say, ‘That’s such a terrible, dark field.’”

Davis’ response to the *Post*? This “just encourages me to pray: “God, use me as your vessel to bring You glory.”

We need to train and mentor more like-minded journalists who are willing to serve in this broken but important field. If Christians should be about tending God’s earth, then the media is one weed-infested professional garden that we cannot shun. Why? Because it has an oversized influence on the rest of creation.

This shunning of journalism as a body of believers is risky. We lessen our influence and our witness if we remove ourselves from the public square.

Media bias, fake news, celebrity obsession, the world of “infotainment,” reporters who carelessly look for a fast quote, and media outlets who race to post first before being sure about accuracy – these are all signs of journalism’s brokenness. This is nothing less than a democratic crisis because corruption goes uncovered. The voiceless remain silenced.

In the midst of this, we need young reporters who can see the newsroom as a sort of mission field.

Journalism and the media are not going to go away. Ignoring it will not make it better. We need students of faith to join the media and do journalism the right way. A reformed journalism will lead to a better democracy. In the next part of this article, I will describe my experiences with this different kind of journalism—a journalism that listens to and notices the stories of the people around us.