

Journalism Education: The Future

Connacht Tribune Centenary Conference

Galway, 2 October 2009

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How can we decide what journalism education should look like in the future if we do not know what journalism itself will look like in the future?

The prophets of doom are everywhere. Some of them may yet be proven right. But history has a way of making some of the prophets of doom eat their words, if they stick around for long enough, and it is certainly true that some of those prophets who have been most excited by technological change have ended up with egg on their faces. As my colleague James Curran pointed out recently, the CD-ROM, the camcorder, and cable television were all going to revolutionise the world of communications, but somehow it didn't happen quite like that.

Some of the more recent data are simply ambiguous. A recent British survey, Professor Curran also pointed out, noted that 79% of internet users had not read a blog in 2008 during the last three months. If you look at this the way you look at a bottle that is half empty, you tremble at the thought of what will happen when the blogosphere takes over the world. If you look at the way you look at a bottle that is half full, you will wonder whether the blogosphere hasn't been a tad oversold, and whether its promises are increasingly seen as illusory. There are a number of blogs that are internationally renowned, and with good reason: but they are few and far between, and they don't necessarily make much money.

Equally, while the web has turned many things upside down, including the traditional economic model of journalism, it is difficult if not impossible to prove that these sea-changes in the economics of media have led to a qualitative revolution in journalism. Indeed, the weakness of the traditional economic model for journalism has meant more and more retrenchment in the traditional media. This has meant a diminution in the quantity of good journalism, increased centralization, narrower news horizons and hugely increased time pressures. As newspapers try to respond to the challenge of the web, their journalists are increasingly tied to monitors, editing pre-digested gobbets of information from all over the world, and without the time to go out into their own back yards. There is no sign - that I am aware of - that there is a compensatory growth in high-quality web-based journalism. Most of the good journalism you find on the web has in any case been lifted without payment from the surviving print media.

Are journalists in the same position as our hotel metal comps were three decades ago - facing a future that embodied the end of a craft that had flourished for half a millennium? Or can we begin to define a new future for journalism that will embody the strengths of the past and have implications for the education and training of those who want to be journalists?

I emphasise “of those who want to be journalists”, because it is an important truth that not everyone who does a journalism course will become a journalist, and indeed that not everyone who becomes a journalist will have followed a journalism course. Despite my track record in this department as an educator, I have always insisted that journalism courses do not produce journalists, but people who have a set of skills and aptitudes that will help them to become journalists, if that is what they decide to do with their lives and if someone gives them the opportunity.

What are those skills and aptitudes today? That depends, in the circular way I mentioned above, on what journalism is going to look like in the next few decades. A better way to ask the question is, perhaps: what does journalism do better than any of its rivals? If we can agree on an answer to this, we may be on the way to finding out not only how to finance journalism in the future but how to train and educate the journalists of the future.

The web can tell you about many of the things that are happening in the world quicker than almost anything else that has been invented. It can give you a ring-side seat at public and private events across great tracts of the globe, as they happen, and without the intervention of commentators, analysts and armchair generals.

The problem is that nobody has the time to watch, listen to, or read about everything that is happening in the world, even if they wanted to, which is very doubtful. So we need editors. And editing is at the core of the journalistic process – whether it is the cub reporter deciding which bits of an ICA meeting or a football match are newsworthy, or the editor of a major national news medium deciding what will lead her paper or bulletin, how much space she will give it, who will be assigned to report it, what will be put in and what will be left out.

When that airliner crash-landed in the Hudson River last year, the New York Times lead story on the event came to 2,000 words. They had 32 reporters on the job. Fitting the quart into the pint pot is the special genius of journalism.

But it can't be just any old pint pot. It has to be refreshing without being intoxicating, free of noxious substances, its ingredients balanced expertly against each other, leaving the consumer reasonably satisfied but also wondering whether he just mightn't have another one. Even if he doesn't have another one, he'll order the same again when he's next at the counter.

If journalism can play to its strengths and offer this to consumers, it is safe for the foreseeable future, regardless of the medium in which it is exercised. And it will increasingly be exercised across media, in a context which will re-define the word 'journalist' itself in ways that are not yet quite clear.

So the education and training of the journalists of the future should try and identify and develop those core skills – some of them traditional, some of them new – that will enable journalists to fulfil their public responsibilities in any, perhaps even many, media.

The one that is probably most important of all is the one that is impossible to teach: judgment. That comes only with experience. But there are skills that can be used by journalists of any experience or none to help them along the way.

Accuracy is paramount. Forty-five years ago, when I was writing my first news story, woe betide any cub reporter who spelled the parish priest's name incorrectly. It should be the same today.

But accuracy is about more than facts. It involves not misleading the readers, listeners or viewers by leaving out significant bits of information – particularly if those significant bits of information would significantly alter the reader's perception of the issues or the personalities involved in the story. Of course it is impossible to put everything in – if it were, journalists would be merely typists. At the same time, proving inaccuracy by omission is almost as difficult as proving a negative – so the responsibility of the journalist in this regard is all the greater.

I am also old-fashioned enough to believe that the news should not be slanted simply in the interests of selling more newspapers. Of course headlines sell papers, but I am wary of what might be described as “news with attitude”, some of which seems to set out to sell papers by frightening their readers or by making them hate somebody.

There are certainly some things that should frighten us – global warming is the most obvious of them. And there is nothing wrong with pointing fingers at things that go wrong in public life, and looking for explanations. But there is a risk – and it's the oldest risk in history – that if you cry ‘Wolf’ too often, when there's only a rather cross dog barking outside, that people will become de-sensitised to real risks, and to real injustices and scandals. At the end of the day, perhaps the greatest risk is that newspapers themselves will lose credibility, and in an era when they need credibility more than ever before.

Scepticism is also a useful part of any journalist's armoury. Not cynicism – which is corrosive and destructive – but a healthy scepticism about the motives of all those who would try to manipulate you in their own interests. This is all the more important in an era when co-option and news management have become – rather than confrontation and censorship, as in the past – the preferred tactics of powerful interest groups everywhere.

That skepticism should be extended to include the profession of journalism itself. That professionalism should be stress-tested as much as any nugget of information from an anonymous source. Is it a true professionalism at the service of the public, or only a carapace of habit and mutual support designed to protect the journalist from criticism of their methods and from demands by readers for greater transparency?

Thirty years ago one of the first and best academic students of journalistic practices was surprised to find that journalists

Had little knowledge about the actual audience and rejected feedback from it. Although they had a vague image of the audience, they paid little attention to it; instead they filmed and wrote for their superiors and for themselves, assuming...that what interested them would interest the audience.

This, I think, has two further implications.

One is that journalists should be more community oriented. Fresh-air journalism is going out of fashion. If it vanishes completely, journalism will be reduced to high-level gossip among elites, tempered only by bursts of sensationalism designed to attract a dwindling proportion of an increasingly apathetic and apolitical mass public. Major media organizations, hit by financial stringencies at the moment, may have some excuse for not doing as much of this kind of journalism as they would like to. But universities and other institutions where journalism is taught have no such excuse.

Another is that journalists, while they should be web-savvy and web-literate, should not be web-dependent. Every journalist knows how errors can breed in the press cuttings files: the web is just a larger, more accessible, and even more error-prone cuttings file. Use it – but check, even if checking may ruin the story.

There is one other area in which I think one traditional aspect of journalism education might be re-evaluated. This is the placement, or internship. Of course interns should not be used to displace full-time professional journalists. But neither should they be treated as know-nothings, used only for menial tasks, and not listened to.

Today's interns are, in a way that we should pay attention to, also tomorrow's readers. They come from a younger generation which is more familiar with the world that most people live in than many journalists of an older generation. They are technologically far more fluent than many of us. They can be, for their older colleagues, a guide to this brave new world in which the media we have loved for generations will live or die.

Together, the young and the old, the interns and the hacks, can combine to make newspapers what they always have the potential to be – the best browsers in the world – and to make all the media in which they work more open, more responsive to their audiences, and more vitally necessary to the workings of community, country, and the world.