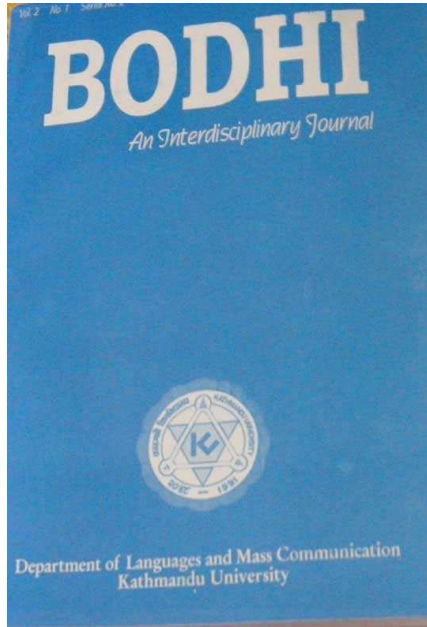


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The Disciplinary Direction and Structure of Journalism and Media Education

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Reviewing the communication industry, the cybernetics pioneer Norbert Wiener (1950) once offered a very disturbing observation: “The people who have elected communication as a career so often have nothing more to communicate.” It’s more than half a century from the days of his comment on us, but are we in any better shape now?

Apparently, Wiener saw professional communicators often act merely as a transmission belt in the flow of information without having much capacity to add individual qualities to it. In an era when even some phone companies tout their service as “knowledge business,” those of us in journalism and journalism education are hard pressed to ponder what’s “our business.”

While the world everywhere is boiling with a host of heady issues and complex problems, we just wonder if our journalism education provides any pertinent pre-service education to the future journalists. Quite a few of our students keep saying they chose journalism because they weren’t good at science, while the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the human embryonic stem-cell research and many other medical or scientific subjects continue to be on the national agenda. Quantification and numeric expressions characterize much of today’s public records and policy proposals, but we have journalism majors who say they came to us because they hated math. We say the world now is essentially a globalized setting, but we don’t require our students to pick up another language in their curriculum.

There seems to exist a gap, a very wide one.

Journalism as an Intellectual Profession

In the intellectually driven university environment, we resist the notion of seeing our journalism education as a mere vocational training. We rightfully prefer to be reckoned as a legitimate professional program, a liberal-arts unit or a social-science discipline. Calling journalism education vocational implies the unit is one that rather belongs in a two-year community college setting. Contrary to our wishes, however, we ourselves often contribute to confirming such suspicion from other disciplines with our predominantly skill-based curriculum.

Take the case of a typically routine news conference where the city mayor announces a community-based free clinic for indigent patients. If there were only one way, one “correct” way, of covering an event like this, journalism would indeed amount to no more than a stenographer’s vocation. But as we are fully aware, there are myriad different ways of presenting this news. For one, the event could be taken merely as a trigger to see a broader issue at hand, the health-care problem plaguing the poorer sector of the community. Why does an issue like this persist in the world’s richest country? It’s a puzzling issue that even experts in the field would have difficulty in dissecting its multi-factorial nature to everyone’s satisfaction.

The scenario above happens everyday in the commonplace job performance of the journalists and that in most of the routine beats—in the city hall, with public school systems, in the court settings, with police, corporate entities, and in fact with almost everything under the sun that the news media have to deal with. If we look at the subject-area beats like environmental concerns and urban affairs, the complexity of most issues there is even beyond specialists’ grasp or comprehension. But we expect our journalists to be able to think clearly, critically and contextually and reason rationally, pose probing questions, size up the magnitude of the import, relate them to relevant legal provisions or policies, look into competing views, weigh its relevance to democracy in the context of free economy and then

write them up in a manner that makes sense to the average reader.

Journalism that tackles a daunting task like this cannot but be an intellectual profession. In fact, one might say the journalists can do their news reporting to the extent they are knowledgeable about the intricate complexity of the issue at hand. Their knowledge counts. Their experience counts. Their perspectives count. Their socio-political imagination counts. Otherwise, they will be merely doing the “he-said, she-said” type of practice, thus confirming the pervasive saliency of Wiener’s decades-old observation. Even in automated assembly plants, their managers keep talking about quality control, stressing the relationship between the workers and the product. But, in our field, we often try to separate the individual journalist from the news the newsperson covers under the banner proclamation of objective reporting.

How-to-Report vs. What-to-Report

Much as creative arts are products of craft and imagination, journalism is always a process of techniques blended into the contextual knowledge. That is to stress the point that journalism always involves how to report and what to report, both aspects intricately intertwined. However, in the United States at least, the premium in journalism education somehow has been put on the concerns about how to report. Yes, we do also emphasize the import of subject matters; we say elections are important, employment is important, global security is important, etc. Yet our emphasis here remains lip services at best because we don’t actually teach or require courses in political science, economics or international relations in our journalism curriculum.

This emphasis on skills and techniques in our field has had its merits and advantages during the formative years of the profession. Our disciplinary associations have helped set up voluntary codes of ethics and various other norms and standards

that fit our profession much as other established professions operate likewise. Journalism is made to look like a genuinely legitimate profession with its professionalization endeavors. This way, it strives to cultivate the stature enjoyed by such established professions as medicine, law, business and architecture.

But much of this effort has essentially centered around the craft of doing journalism, with a host of dos and don'ts and various standardizations. The basic newswriting course that we often teach at the sophomore's level, if not freshman's, risks defeat under its weight and import. The "dos" of the course are often conceptual, like news judgment, but the students at the lower-division level often are not conceptually prepared to tackle the dos. At the same time, the "don'ts" in newswriting like the AP style – though necessary and useful – rather suppress development of individuality and creative experimentation.

Besides news reporting and writing, we surely teach something else additionally – those ideational courses like ethics, media laws, history of journalism, international communication and so on. In all this curriculum, we somehow assume our students will pick up the requisite foundational knowledge somewhere, perhaps from their general-education courses. It's a shaky assumption at best if one looks at the prevailing pattern of general-education requirements. In a distribution model of general education, students can satisfy the social-science requirement by taking a course on human sexuality. On the contrary, medicine and law, for example, make sure their students first complete a bachelor's level of education before tackling their professional courses.

Recognizing the value of a broadly based liberal-arts education in journalism, the accrediting agency in the U.S. journalism education – Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications – requires that students take a minimum of 80 semester credit hours outside of the unit, with a minimum of 65 of which to come from liberal arts and sciences

(ACEJMC, 2006). Since the total credits for an undergraduate degree are somewhere around 125 to 130 semester hours, 80 credit hours of non-journalism and non-mass communication courses seem a generous amount of space for an extensive level of contents-area courses. However, not many journalism programs stipulate utilization of this vast number of credit hours toward enriching or deepening foundational knowledge deemed critically relevant to the profession. Being not required otherwise, students tend to fill up the 80 with a random selection of courses. It seems a hugely wasted opportunity that could have been put to use with a goal-driven curricular planning for “what to report” elements in journalism.

We may argue *ad infinitum* as to what constitutes our foundational knowledge for journalism. Some courses on American government, consolidation of democracy, religions, micro- or macro-economics, art history, logics and reasoning, or international studies could be handy examples. A course on research methods should be a must, too. Basically, each journalism unit will have to structure such foundational knowledge in accordance with its faculty’s pedagogical perspective or its institutional mission.

Besides skills and foundational knowledge, we still have the additional concern about specialization. We live in an era where barbers are hairstylists and auto mechanics are computer diagnosticians. Although the traditional generalist-reporters still serve a large number of smaller-scale local media effectively, they often encounter disadvantage in their career advance to elite journalism that demands specialization in an area of one’s interest, devotion and commitment. Some do learn on the job, but it’s like expecting family doctors to learn on the job to grow as neurosurgeons. A certain form of pre-service education for specialization would strengthen journalism’s quality, but we haven’t yet worked out a general device for this in our field. While we continue to drag our feet on this need, the world continues to grow increasingly more complex.

Ethics in our field mostly revolve around normative conducts, but perhaps the most unethical journalist would be the one who purports to inform a large number of people with skin-deep knowledge on the subject of his or her report. It was Paul Valery (1958) who once said critical judgments pronounced on an art work “judge only the judges themselves.” Since news is, in effect, the journalist’s perception of reality, there’s bound to be a very high positive correlation between the qualification of the journalist doing the reporting and the quality of the news he or she produces (Lee, 1976). The simpler days of five Ws and one H for an inverted pyramid were indeed good old days.

Many Worlds for Journalism Graduates

Karen Hughes (2004), the tall woman who used to stand next to President Bush on the campaign trail, had a revealing thing to say about the relevance of her broadcast journalism education and reporting experience to her presidential counselor’s duty:

The skills I learned as a reporter I still use today when I walk into a room where people are doing or discussing something I know very little about. I learn as much as I can as fast as I can, figure out what is important and what is not, and then decide how to communicate it. I did it when explaining a story to viewers in Dallas/Fort Worth, and I did it when giving recommendations to the president of the United States. (p. 39)

Hughes, currently serving as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, is in charge of America’s image problems abroad, a thankless task, to say the least. What she lacks in advanced specialized education, she fills it with her personal experience – birth in Paris, speaking French before learning English, attending schools in Europe and living in Panama, all these during her formative years. Hughes’ testimony is but one example of the broad range of utility and relevance being served by journalism education and experience in the media work.

The employment market for our students in journalism is indeed reaching far beyond the industry of media companies. As if it were a mutually beneficial deal made, the U.S. news-media industry, in turn, draws about 60 percent of its employees from the non-journalism and non-mass communication backgrounds in education (Weaver, 2008). Further, our students often find better-paying jobs in the non-media sector where most institutions, private or public, have such units as public relations, media relations, in-house communication, information office or community relations.

And the size of enrollment in our field in the U.S. colleges and universities is simply staggering: about 200,000 in all at over 460 units of various curricular orientations – from the familiar school of journalism and mass communication to news editorial, broadcast journalism, radio-TV or telecommunication, public relations, advertising, magazine, community journalism, agricultural journalism, science journalism, photojournalism, visual communication, mass communication, public communication, mass media studies, film/cinema, online press, interactive journalism and any number of combinations of any two or three above. These programs annually grant some 44,000 bachelor's degrees and about 4,000 master's degrees (Becker, 2005).

For all this complexity in educational programs, a certain one-size-fit-all model for journalism and mass communication curriculum would be neither possible nor desirable. It is especially so for the diversity of relevant markets, where educational institutions are expected to serve their primary clientele in relation to their respective mission. Complicating the picture further is the change, conversion and transformation of various media that currently occur owing to the ever-advancing communication technologies (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006).

Yet, if journalism is to be a profession, it has to retain its core belief, qualities, purpose or requirement. Whatever the change

occurring in the media sector might be, writing continues to be a core requirement. Reasoning and critical and analytical thinking continue to be a requisite quality in professional communication. Retrieving information is made easy now, but what information to retrieve and how to analyze it continue to be each journalist's thoughtful decisions. About the future of news media, one could be easily misled by the onslaught of citizen media and citizen reporters using the Internet-based devices. But, as James Carey (2005) aptly puts it, "it will still be left to professional and committed journalists to determine the quality of what is created and how it serves the needs of citizens in a democracy" (p.431).

Disciplinary Structure of Journalism Education

It is encouraging today to see an increasing level of awareness of, and concern over, the import of journalism education being raised across the world (Deuze, 2004). There is the "World Journalism Education Congress" project going on by a multinational consortium including the U.S. Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (Goodman & Hasegawa, 2004). Especially active along the line are two foundations: the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Knight Foundation (Connell, 2006; Lehrman, 2005). In 2002, even the then new president of Columbia University, Lee C. Bollinger, engineered a new curricular direction at Columbia's prestigious Graduate School of Journalism. His message was the school should stop functioning like a trade school and that it should integrate its curriculum with the university's intellectual mainstream.

Following the discussions presented thus far in this paper, we would like to envision a few major shifts in the ways by which we educate the future journalists and communication professionals. There are turf wars on university territories everywhere, much of it related to disciplinary chauvinism and survival of competing units in these times of shrinking budget. When budget allocation is based on student credit hours

generated by units, it is sin to drive students to courses of other units even for the cause of helping students expand their knowledge base. But, by integrating our journalism program with the university's rich resources, we in fact could be upgrading the stature and import of our discipline and unit in the university's intellectual tradition.

1) In a four-year undergraduate program, consider teaching skills and craft after the students have acquired a certain level of content-based knowledge first. At medical schools, don't they teach brain-surgery skills after the students have learned the brain first? We are indebted to a Canadian journalism educator, Michael Cobden (2005), for the sensible idea that much of the craft and skills better be offered in the student's senior year. By that time, students will know what the tool is for.

2) All undergraduate majors in journalism and mass communication ought to be required to complete a minor in a non-journalism content area of their respective choice. Better yet, they could be provided with a few strategically selected areas for subject-matter concentrations. Each concentration could be a series of four to six courses, not much an additional burden even in urban universities where students keep transferring.

3) Some programs, like those on residential campuses, could consider mandating a second major or double major. If students plan their studies early and are advised properly, they can complete two majors without incurring extra credit hours beyond the usual minimum credits for a bachelor's degree. In a typical undergraduate program, students take about one-third of their courses for general-education and university requirements and about another one-third for their major. They still have about one-third left that most students fill it up with free electives in the absence of a plan for a second major.

4) The profession of journalism would be much more enriched, well served and made competent if its pre-service journalism education is primarily at the master's level in graduate studies. Admissions should be for all majors from a variety of disciplines – arts and humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, business, education and so on. The news media industry already draws more than half their new employees from the non-journalism sector.

5) If our undergraduate journalism majors desire graduate studies, we should discourage them from moving onto the same journalism or mass communication master's programs. Instead, we should encourage them to try a discipline that's relevant to the direction of their specialty-reporting interest. If such students advance to their graduate studies after several years of practice, they would be solidly on the right track to specialty reporting routes.

6) The master's level of education in journalism, for its efficacy in students' goal-directed career pursuit, could offer optional emphases designed under strategic considerations, such as media tracks or subject-matter concentrations. Also equally plausible and advantageous would be the structure of dual degrees with such critically salient fields as law, business, education, health care, urban studies, international relations and so on.

7) The doctoral programs in journalism and mass communication could consider requiring their students to have at least three years of practical experience in media work. Journalism educators coming from such a pool would be better positioned in pursuing useful research in research institutions (Christian, 2005). Such institutions, in turn, should consider providing the journalism faculty with periodic refresher interaction with the media industry.

8) The news-media management also has its share of work to do. The media are desired to be somewhat more generous in

facilitating in-service educational opportunities to their newsroom personnel. At universities and other educational institutions, there are a host of fellowship programs, often for mid-career journalists, targeting a variety of specialty areas. The media need to look beyond the short-term workshops in skills and trendy topics.

In Closing

The role of the media, especially of the press, has its special standing with the Constitution. Given this privilege, the education in journalism, which has a direct bearing on the quality and vitality of the press, has to take up its mission with pride, humility and more importantly with a requisite pedagogy. A sustained construing and reconstruing of what we do with our students would be the minimum necessary first step to that end, as this is, after all, a business for an informed public and a vital democracy.

In that spirit, we would dare say the prevailing mode of our journalism education today has outgrown its relevance ever since the 1947 Hutchins Commission Report. Under the “false God” of objectivity constraining us as the ruling ideology (Auletta, 2006), we haven’t been attentive to the report’s foresights: “...provide intelligence needed by a free society...news accounts should be truthful, comprehensive and intelligent...provide a context which gives meaning....”

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