

## Five Minutes with Nicholas Lemann: “Incorporating academic research adds value to the social mission of journalism.”

by Blog Admin

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*Nicholas Lemann, Dean of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, is a veteran national affairs journalist whose books and articles often incorporated the findings of social science research. In this interview he talks about the role that academic research has in enriching journalism and public knowledge and the need for knowledge-based journalism.*



**You’ve had this vision of moving the journalism world closer to the world of academic research. So what would that look like in terms of new habits that would be established among working journalists?**

I can tell you fairly precisely, and I can use myself as an example. Every summer, they let me out of the cage and I can do one reporting story for *The New Yorker*. The one I did last summer just appeared, on [Brazil](#). I try to put into effect in my own journalism the things I’ve been trying to put into effect at the school. So the very first thing I do when I get an assignment like that is to do what academics call a “literature review,” which is partly done through reading and partly done through meeting leading academic experts on the subject, and just kind of familiarizing myself.

A lot of journalists feel pretty comfortable reviewing the literature — we don’t use the term “literature review” — of works of journalism, but not of works of scholarship and research. You can, with some training, do a literature review, by the way, inside a daily news cycle even. But to break down that barrier and show journalists how to get to and understand and use quickly the body of academic research is really, really useful in terms of getting context. Its value is meaningfully beyond the now-ancient idea of going to the newspaper morgue and pulling the clips. That’s how we were trained when I was a kid. You’d go to the morgue and pull the newspaper clips, and you’d — quote — call an expert. But that’s different from actually reading the literature and figuring out who the leading voices are and reading their work in its original academic form, without fear; and then really sitting down and trying to spend time with them, as opposed to just calling them blind and saying, “I need a quote.” So I do this myself, I teach my students how to do it, and they do it. It changes and enriches the way you work.

**For working journalists, how do you answer the question of what’s in it for them? What’s the real value in terms of their product?**

Tom Patterson’s phrase is “[knowledge-based journalism](#),” which I like a lot. Many a journalism school course doesn’t have any reading. It’s what they call experiential learning. And many that have reading only have works of journalism. What I’ve tried to do at least in my own courses — and some of my colleagues do this, too — is really introduce non-journalistic works in courses for journalists, by finding things in various places in academic literature that would pertain. For example, I teach a course in the spring now on interviewing. So when I decided to teach it, I did the proverbial literature review. What I discovered is actually literature on questions like: how does the order in which, and the manner in which, you ask questions affect the answers you get? It’s something that’s very useful in journalism, but journalists don’t even know about it — including me before I taught the course, because we only look internally at our own field. So it’s a habit in teaching, as well.

The way all this adds value is in the social mission of journalism sense. So what journalists are is a connection point between the informed general public and the inaccessible. And the inaccessible can be

hidden records of official misdeeds, or it can be what people are doing in the mountains of Afghanistan, or it can be expertise. It's just anything that the public doesn't have ready access to that's relevant to the public's understanding of important things in the world. We're supposed to make those connections. And knowledge-based journalism is an important part of doing that. So it really does produce journalism that is richer and fuller.

The example that really got me going on this was the war in Iraq. To Bush's credit, he didn't surprise us there. He essentially launched a year-and-a-half national discussion of whether we should go to war in Iraq. And there was an immense amount of press coverage. In the aggregate, it's not really the yellowcake, WMD story that bugs me. What bugs me is how little coverage there was of things like how, after you take out Saddam, there will be three ethno-religious groups and they are going to start fighting. It's just the most obvious thing in the world, but it was so rare to see any reporter even mentioning that as an issue. That's sort of the classic example. But once you get to that first-grade level of knowledge, there's actually a huge literature — and recent — on post-conflict conditions in countries, coming especially out of the Bosnia and the former Yugoslavia countries. It had all been very intensively studied. Almost no journalist ever looked at that, including the most prominent national journalists. And it turned out to be the most important issue.

### **How does knowledge-based journalism, then, fit in with the changes in the news industry — the rise of digital platforms and the contraction of newsrooms?**

On the economic side, journalism has to move from being a commodity profession to a value-added profession. I sometimes say, half-kidding, that we've operated traditionally on the hunter-gatherer model of journalism. And if we are to have a future as a paid profession, we really have to prove in the age of the Internet that an actual paid reporter or editor does something beyond what somebody just writing comments from their house could do. And one of those things is to teach journalists to be truly knowledgeable quickly and to communicate clearly the knowledge. That's a way we can enhance our economic as well as our social value.

### **What are the basic skills you think journalists need in order to read academic literature?**

I think there are three things. One is some kind of basic [statistical literacy](#). A lot of academic literature has at least some statistics in it. The course I teach in the fall, called "[Evidence and Inference](#)," is basically a methodology course to get journalists to do what I'm advocating. It has six classes with a bio-statistician who walks you through the real basics of statistics — not how to do statistics, but how to read statistics. So you know what correlation is, what regression is, what standard deviations are, and things like that. That's very useful, and if you don't have that you're lost.

The second is a kind of sociology of knowledge piece about how this kind of research gets produced and what it is meant to do in the world — what the writer is trying to do and how it gets funded, and how people who produce research relate to other people. A lot of that stuff is a little bit foreign to journalists, and this knowledge can help you decode and understand it.

The third thing I'd add is just some real basics on the scientific method and the thought process that underlies most academic research — things like hypothesis testing. I do think that this kind of literacy is teachable. But though it's fairly easy to teach, it's hard to pick up on the fly. A lot of journalists I know just don't know how to locate material, and if they find it, they don't know how to read it. But it's surprising once you learn to read it — it's like riding a bike.

**It seems, too, that once you get a certain level of understanding, you can also produce real critiques of academic work that does enter into the public square. Your [piece](#) on Robert Putnam's influential book *Bowling Alone* and its thesis stands in this category. You don't just have to report uncritically on research.**

Yes, you can enter the conversation yourself. A lot of journalists think that either there's an expert who knows about a subject, or there are two experts, one liberal and one conservative, and you have to quote them both disagreeing with each other. But there's a richer way to interact with research than that.

*This interview was originally posted on [Journalist's Resource](#), a open access website that curates scholarly studies and reports based at Harvard's Kennedy School. Read the full interview with Nicholas Lemann [here](#).*

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