

Reinventing journalism education by reinventing the university as journalism reinvents itself

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Some journalism educators

What contribution can higher education make to journalism? And especially, what can graduate schools do to create better journalists and better understanding of journalism? In an era when journalism is changing, shouldn't journalism education change too? All this and more was the subject of [a new report from Columbia University](#). Here are my notes for the speech I made at the launch. You can watch [video of the launch here](#) (I start talking at 45'15")

I find myself very much in agreement with much of the detail and the main thrust of what this report says and, once again, not a little envious of both the past history and current capacity

of journalism teaching and research in the US.

Two big questions for me emerging from this report:

1. If journalism is changing shouldn't we be much more challenging about the idea of journalism?
2. And if we want to be deeper into the university, shouldn't we question more what that means?

I think that one of the dangers is if we give the impression of training for a priesthood – at the very moment when everyone's faith is in doubt. In a practical sense I think this puts off many talented people who would otherwise be interested in journalism education. I also think it increases the tendency towards a lack of editorial and intellectual diversity. We should be admitting heretics not just acolytes.

What is your problem?

If there is a crisis in journalism – and I would define it as a critical rather than fatal phase of disruption, adaption and progress rather than destruction – I suspect it might be about corporate strategies rather than journalism education. We are in one of those phases where the industry might not always be the best judge of what it needs next. Are we any better?

We are not supplying a manufacturing industry anymore. It is a service industry. It is one that combines a highly competitive knowledge economy with an equally brutal market in networked social relationships.

It is not just one industry anymore either. Journalism is intimately engaged with a wider media sector that has itself been redistributed. Journalism now happens everywhere. It is not possible to prepare graduates for that without more open terms of reference.

Knowing about journalism should inform any other human activity.

I think that journalism studies is relevant to everyone in a world where media is environmental. But what do you need to know?

I agree with the report, the 'understanding versus skills' debate feels redundant now. If nothing else, new technology has helped remove the dichotomy. Production is so much more integrated and accessible that like William Blake, all

journalists and journalism academics can be both philosophers or poets as well as craftsmen and publishers.



What should you teach them?

But before we leave the craft behind I want to say that I am assuming everyone buys into a radical and thorough implementation of post-industrial digital multi-skilling – of entrepreneurship – coding – network analysis – all building on the teaching of the traditional core skills such as writing and image-making, plus the trade knowledge such as media law and media history. I hope that the kind of initiatives in the Carnegie Knight projects will be seen as standard bearers not just experiments. I liked [Knight Foundation Eric Newton's clarion call last year](#) and I am not sure this report really matches its rhetorical call for change.

Strategic Purpose

But there has to be a strategic sense of purpose, too. I agree that understanding is the goal for presentation but that too many teaching strategies see it the other way around.

I call this the 'Snowfall problem'. Yes, we need radically new narrative techniques and skills but we need to ask what difference it can make to better understanding, better journalism. What changes between the audience and the source when we 'live blog' for example? What ethical difference does it make? Does it change the balance of power between producer and consumer and subject?

I argue that new forms and structures of journalism can make a difference but we pay little attention to this beyond 'what works' or 'what looks groovy' or whether 'this is journalism'. From my experience we can often be better informed by the insights of other disciplines or expertise when we make a more serious assessment of these issues.

Understanding

Understanding is partly about learning to know more and different things – such as the tedious but vital complexities of science or finance. But if that's all you needed you don't need J School, just a varied education

More important is an understanding of how knowledge narratives are framed, how agendas are set – not just by journalism but within those different other areas of life and information.

Insight into this should be led by better research, but I don't see much that is really agenda-setting. Good research combines theoretical context and empirical evidence. Much journalism research is plagued by peer review – too slow – too specialised – either too descriptive or too narrow. It's the paradox that journalism and other media studies faces:

to establish the field, in relation to other academic disciplines, you often have to fence it off.

In the same way 'professionalisation' of the journalist career (through insisting on degrees for example) seeks to gain authority for the job, when in practice it ends up reducing the potential quality and variety of those who do it.

Inter-disciplinarity

So, yes, we should orientate towards the university but not exclusively to journalism or even media studies. There must be greater interaction with thought-leadership and theory in other areas such as sociology and economics as

well as our traditional neighbours law and politics.

The idea of the University is itself being questioned and that might be good news for journalism studies. It's an opportunity to connect journalism studies into the shifting academic landscape.

Interdisciplinarity must not be narrowly comparative. Only looking at another discipline to fit it into ours is facile.

Climate change is an example. We do research about how the media covers climate change – but do we combine with scientists on research about the ontology of climate change? It's the Rumsfeld problem: what can we as journalists or scientists know about the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns of a subject like climate change? Why are we always behind the curve when as topical people we should be aware of what's next?

Diversity

The increasing lack of diversity in mainstream journalism – especially when compared to wider social networks – is partly about background – this is not helped by the constant striving after professionalization and the practical role of internships in newsrooms.

But this really matters in relation to editorial diversity in journalism – the need to find new sources, platforms, structures, storytelling techniques, ideas, the relevance to match the diversity of audiences and the increasing variety of ways of connecting content between creators and consumers.

The Business Model Problem

It is THE business model problem – how to find new ways to add real value to journalism, but it's an existential problem for journalism studies, too.

None of the great news media inventions of the last decade came out of a J School: twitter, facebook, instagram, buzzfeed, reddit, tumblr, Vice etc Why is that?

Instead the better J School graduate schools produce people who want to create more versions of the New York Times. That's a nice ambition, but it shouldn't be the only or even dominant one. That narrowness is changing but it is a challenge to our academic as well as vocational credibility.

I like the suggestion in the CJS report of hiring professors from other areas. I am the only journalism professor in the LSE, so I have to work with others for example on a place like China, or a subject, like Criminology (riots) or the idea of archive from sociologists and anthropologists of identity and memory.

I have learnt far more about digital journalism from non-journalism research colleagues. [Sonia Livingstone's work on how families use media](#), for example, showing that it is social trends not technology that shapes people's information needs and their ability to access and use that information.

So to sum up:

I have no problem with J Schools that want to teach craft and skills. Journalism is all about the mixture of craft and cunning.

I agree we need to head back to find value in the universities in which we work. We need to be more exciting and excited by change and the intellectual challenge it offers to connect journalism to a wider world. That way we might find the intellectual talents who want to raise our standards, innovate intellectually and, above all, hold university power to account.

Here's a little thought experiment to end on. Look at (arguably) the most effective journalist of the last decade.

I nominate:

Julian Assange.

Would he have got into Columbia (or LSE)?

Probably not (I wouldn't have either for what it's worth). If he had perhaps it might have made him a 'better' journalist if he had. Though I also suspect it might have stopped him doing what he did.

His significance is what counts. [there's [a book about that...](#)] What did we in journalism education have to say about that? Did we run to our usual cupboard of journalist pieties or did we have the intellectual reference points for a stimulating debate? Discuss..

I am convinced me that we need to reinvent the idea of journalism education alongside reinventing the university as journalism reinvents itself. This report is a very serious help in that process.

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