

# Thinking about journalism: the Lemann memo

LSE blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/02/19/434/

2008-2-19

Talking of [leaks](#) (see below), thanks to [Poynter Online](#) for this inadvertant insight into the world's leading journalism school at [Columbia University](#). Nicholas Lemann, the Dean of the School has mistakenly emailed his annual evaluation of the J-School's work to his students instead of his boss. It shows how email helps to un-bury news.

But this electronic hiccup has actually delivered to the world a magisterial history and analysis of modern journalism in American Higher Education that is of interest to anyone concerned about editorial standards and the future of the business. He warns of trouble ahead.

Bear in mind that Lemann is an elite figure who has worked for some of the finer publications in America and he is not entirely comfortable with the new media landscape (who is?). But he makes the very valid point that unless the media industry is thriving then there simply won't be investment in the kind of high-class journalism studies that Columbia provides. This matters to me, because it is the kind of journalism research and teaching that we try to provide here at Polis, the [Media and Communications](#) department at LSE and the journalism department at [London College of Communication](#). Here's what Lemann had to say. First his recognition that there's a media revolution underway:

*Journalism...has undergone a technological revolution and a related economic crisis over these last five years, and that has substantially affected both my deanship and the field generally.*

Here's his particular concern (it applies especially to Columbia but we should all take note):

*I cannot be sure how long our school can continue to thrive if the profession it serves is not thriving. We have many advantages, including our financial resources, our location, our worldwide reputation, our strong relationships with employers, and the quality of our faculty and curriculum...In the short run, we are benefiting from journalism's replacing older reporters with younger ones, but in the long run we must be as attentive to recruiting and to placement as possible, and we must teach our students to be journalists in ways that are as broadly applicable as possible geographically and across the different media.*

But he goes further. And I think he has a point. Do we as journalists and journalism educators think enough about what we are doing?:

*The question of what journalism amounts to as a discipline — what distinctive body of knowledge, which intellectual and analytic tools, what way of thinking might be associated with it and might therefore be taught in journalism schools — simply doesn't energize journalism educators, even though every manifesto and mission statement we as a group produce mentions it as a desideratum.*

Lemann's long-time intellectual combatant, the blogger and J-School prof [Jeff Jarvis](#) is, like me, sympathetic to both his ambition and his fears. But I agree with Jeff, that the solution is partly about recognising that the attempt to 'professionalise' journalism, which Columbia represents, may be misguided. The future of journalism (cue plug: "as I

write in my new book, *SuperMedia*“) is about how paid journalists work with unpaid citizen journalists, professionals and public sharing the process. We will need fewer hacks churning out the basics and more expert editorial entrepreneurs and ‘enablers’ working with the citizen and consumer. That’s where we should focus our thinking and our investment in journalism studies.

An interesting post on this by online journalism educator Mindy McAdams [here](#).

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