



Rethinking the Lessons of Journalism School

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By MICHAEL JANEWAY

In the last century, professional education for law, business and medicine has undergone a transformation. Before the New Deal, for example, legal scholars at Yale and Harvard integrated analysis of economics and finance into the teaching of law (and then designed the first effective regulation of our market economy). After World War II, leading business schools began offering the M. B. A. degree to give their students a broader education in management and economics. Medical schools also moved on from trade-school models and began to engage with fields like ethics.

Such conceptual reform has never occurred in journalism education. Its time is overdue - but if the experience of Columbia University is any indication, it will be a difficult undertaking. Last month Columbia's new president, Lee Bollinger, prompted criticism when he halted a search for a new dean for the university's Graduate School of Journalism, saying that the school needed to rethink its mission. "To teach the craft of journalism is a worthy goal," he said, but it is "clearly insufficient in this new world." He will appoint a task force to study the school's purpose and report its findings by the end of the year.

Rarely has the need for a well-informed society been so great. Yet in the last several decades the ability of news organizations to provide probing and insightful information has been compromised. Driven by corporate imperatives like cost-cutting and revenue growth, whole sectors of the news business now tilt toward "infotainment" and soft features. Meanwhile, anyone with a public agenda employs teams of consultants to spin the news, making it harder to separate fact from pseudo-fact. And the need for expertise does not stop at the task of informed reaction. Event crowds out event - Sept. 11 followed by Enron - and serious news organizations do superb work reporting them. But discerning readers

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and viewers are right to ask why they aren't reading or watching reports on issues like terrorism or fraud before such stories break, not after.

At the same time, the best journalism is timeless and involves skills in reporting, judgment and critical thinking that need no New Deal. Many promising young journalists, often editors at undergraduate college newspapers, don't need graduate education the way their counterparts in law, business and medicine do, and the field carries no certification. Recognizing this, news organizations have never invested in journalism education the way corporate America invests in business schools.

Mr. Bollinger faces a dilemma. Society is changing, and the news business along with it. But the very transformations that make reform so urgent also work against it. There is a tension between the demands of society and the habits of the industry. So what should Columbia and other journalism schools do? Training students for entry-level jobs is redundant; many universities offer such classes at the undergraduate level. The leading graduate programs in journalism, which can cost more than \$30,000 a year, should add depth and value to a university education.

At Columbia, reforms in student recruitment, curriculum, financial aid and placement could combine to extend the length of the program (currently an airless, boot camp-like 10 months). Students could use the extra time to gain expertise in a variety of fields - the sciences, economics,

the environment, management, the arts. They may earn a joint degree. Or some new form of journalism education might evolve - for example, urban sociology or international affairs, taught by experts in such fields who also present their work journalistically. (Speculation that Mr. Bollinger intends an injection of theory-driven "communications studies" into Columbia's program is without basis.) Columbia and other journalism schools might then be better able to attract those intelligent, ambitious young journalists who currently skip such programs altogether.

Such reform requires the collaboration of news industry leaders. Working with the university's other departments and with other innovative journalism schools, Columbia can create a vision for journalism education that moves it, finally, beyond what Mr. Bollinger has correctly diagnosed as its preoccupation with form and technique at the expense of depth and content.

By changing with the times, America's journalism schools can do more than just help an industry strengthen itself. They can also help create a truly informed public - and thus serve the cause of democracy.

Michael Janeway, director of the National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University, is a former editor of The Boston Globe. He serves on the search committee for a new journalism dean at Columbia.

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