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# The Real Who, What, When, and Why of Journalism

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## The Real Who, What, When, and Why of Journalism

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During the 2005-6 academic year, I taught **journalism** at a large, public university, where I also served as the adviser for its large-circulation student newspaper. I wondered then and I wonder now whether we are equipping students to become the kind of thoughtful, creative reporters we need to help us make sense of an increasingly chaotic world.

My own hectic teaching life replicated the hectic daily news cycle at the paper. I went to work every day, got caffeinated, and accomplished tasks. I talked with my students about writing, reporting, editing, and media ethics. My e-mail in box filled with listserv postings about the changing media landscape, the need to podcast and blog and "converge," as journalists these days describe the task of delivering the news in multiple formats and media. I felt bad for my students because I was sending them out into this wired world that I couldn't begin to comprehend or summarize in a study guide.

Journalism programs across the country have rolled out new curricula and courses emphasizing complex social issues, in-depth reporting, and "new media" such as online news sites with streaming audio and video. Journalism education has rightly taken its cue from media outlets that find themselves not relevant enough for a new generation of readers, not hip enough, not appealing enough to keep the advertising and subscription revenues rolling in. Citizen journalism, such as reporting that is either created by bloggers or readers or guided by reader feedback; new narrative approaches; multimedia formats; and efforts at increased editorial transparency are only a few of the positive recent responses to a new low in the public's trust of the news media. As a result, journalism faculty members find themselves confronted with a dazzling array of dilemmas to teach and toys to play with. The biggest challenge seems to be how to cram it all into a syllabus.

The media culture abhors both uncertainty and a vacuum. For journalists facing the daily yawning 24-hour news hole, uncertainty -- even in the form of a moment's hesitation -- is the enemy. The story has to get filed. We have to make sense of the world on a deadline. But is our frantic avoidance of uncertainty undermining our ability to teach students the value of reflection?

When I started as faculty adviser to The Lantern, I believed I would help my students navigate the maze of media change by building the skills that good, skeptical, analytical reporters need. Every afternoon in the newsroom, I felt a rush of pride when I saw my students' jaws harden with determination as they picked through a Board of Trustees meeting agenda or a notebook full of quotes, eager to find the story in the soup of words and sound bites. Student reporters need to learn how to connect subjects and verbs, make judgments, and analyze everything from art exhibits to zoning laws. My first task was to encourage students to piece together meaning from the maddening chaos of reality, and my second job was to help them communicate that meaning clearly to their readers.

In the process of putting out a daily newspaper, students become reporters. Resistance from sources, comments from readers, and feedback from editors all play a role in thickening their skins. Gradually many of them develop the reporter growl-and-scowl heard and seen in so many movies, the same brusqueness I myself had heard in the newsrooms when I worked as a reporter. My fledgling student reporters had only two hours to pry a 15-inch story and a few quotes from messy, contradictory reality, and it made them grouchy.

Once when I was mulling over a revision to my syllabus, I overheard a student editor telling a writer that one of his ideas for an article was stupid. It would never work, he said, for some reason or another. In his voice, I could hear time

pressure motivating his irritation: "That story is going to be huge and complicated. You're going to get lost in it, and while you're busy extracting yourself, who is going to help me fill Pages 1, 2, and 3?"

What got to me was that I heard my own reporter's voice in his tone. He made hard-nosed-reporter comments -- like "That source is lying. That's crap. It's all about the money. She just wants good PR. He's a politician." -- that shut off experimentation or multiple interpretations in the interest of getting the story out.

Such cynicism is often a necessary and painful adaptation to the pressures of an understaffed newsroom. But while I am heartened by journalism schools' new emphasis on subject-driven, in-depth reporting, I worry that the focus on advanced analysis encourages students to think they know everything. Yes, reporters must be able to wrestle with complex subjects, but too often the role of expert that reporters tend to adopt results in patronizing news coverage that distances itself from and even disparages the events and people being reported on.

Trends like citizen journalism have attempted to counteract the negative potential of the reporter as expert by enabling readers to both generate and evaluate news. But reporters are still taught to see their reporting as the guiding consciousness of the news, often without questioning either the personal or organizational biases that frame the news being presented or the effect that being "covered" by the media has on a community or source. The study of "media effects" in most journalism or communication departments is separated from media ethics, and it shouldn't be. In the crush of a student reporter's jam-packed schedule, media ethics often amounts to: "How do I avoid getting sued for libel?"

Sitting at my desk surrounded by a sickening stack of doomsday predictions on media change and readership polls, I found myself fantasizing about a classroom where my reporters and I could all just shut up for a few minutes and turn our backs to the 24-hour news tapeworm that beckoned and hissed from beyond graduation. Was it possible, I wondered, to release my students from deadlines long enough to stare at uncertainty, to reflect deeply on what they don't know and how those gaps in knowledge and perception might shape their production of news? Wouldn't such reflection give them more tools with which to craft stories that answer -- or even just pose -- the questions worth asking? I fantasized about a course that veered away from computer-assisted reporting to focus on a single article, teasing out biases, experimenting with alternate approaches, re-interviewing sources to get to the varied hearts of the matter.

We did manage to spend a few classes speculating about why these young reporters and their friends turned away from newspapers in favor of Jon Stewart's Daily Show. We studied how the 18 to 35 demographic is the holy grail for news-media marketers and how news outlets court those elusive media users with come-ons like snappy hardware and hairstyles. But maybe these young news consumers do not eschew traditional news because they are cynical or jaded; maybe they simply realize that the news media's clipped, confident, declarative statements of "truth" often turn out to be wrong and fail to capture reality.

In my fantasy journalism class, I would ask students to sit silently for 10 minutes and notice what they are worrying about, what they are obsessed with, and how those worries and obsessions might contain better seeds of articles than any news release. I would describe interviews as not just a means for harvesting good quotes, or a series of mind games designed to strip sources' defenses and trick them into divulging carefully guarded information. Rather, I would suggest that interviews could be encounters in which one human being might actually attempt to listen to another. (I cringe as I write that sentence, hearing my reporter friends jeer at my Pollyannaism.) I would have students examine the quotes they've gathered for a story from three sources and identify the ways in which those quotes barely scratch the surface of what the story is really about.

I would want students to be able to say out loud the words "I don't know." I would want them to imagine working in a newsroom where "I don't know" is the trigger for a story, not a sign that the reporter needs to be transferred to the home-and-garden section.

Looking back at my own time crunch to help students put out a newspaper and release our content in every format possible, I wish I had had the guts or the time to assign some silence -- perhaps by asking them to drive around a neighborhood where they felt lost and afraid, and then ask themselves how their fears might shape their coverage of a news story emerging from that neighborhood. When they pitched stories about pollution, health insurance, or cheap eats on the campus, I should have asked them to put their hands in the dirt, to stand outside a health clinic, to wash dishes in a fast-food restaurant.

I might actually have the chance to put my syllabus where my mouth is. I am now teaching creative nonfiction in a writing program far removed from journalism. Truth can get loosey-goosey when nonfiction is "creative"; there are as many temptations for creative writers to steer away from complex truths as there are for reporters to reduce reality to simplistic facts. I am hoping to bring my students into the murky territory between those two poles. There, the roles of

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reporter, writer, thinker, and community member might blend so that journalism students could attempt to capture both what's true and what's unknown; there, they might have the chance to absorb, record, and probe life's big questions.

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