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# The Progressive Potential of Journalism Education

## Recasting the Academic versus Professional Debate

*Stephen D. Reese*

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The crisis in the journalism profession has led an ever more concentrated corporate voice to assert itself in academia, diverting blame and shaping how future journalists are prepared. Historically interdisciplinary, oriented toward the liberal arts yet professional, journalism education faces mounting pressure to abandon its academic ethos to embrace its industry patrons, choosing from a false dichotomy advanced forcefully by a recent journalism foundation-supported research report. To preserve its value, however, journalism must be part of broader academic reforms, modeling an intellectually independent integration of theory and practice, supporting not just a media labor pyramid, but also a press-literate public.

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As with other modern institutions, higher education in the United States has been under attack for many years, its practices in question and public confidence eroding. The occupational prestige of the professor, once among the highest in American society, has slipped sharply. The news media have suffered the same downward trends, with declining credibility, a blurring of the lines between news and entertainment, and a proliferation of media watchdog organizations ferreting out perceived bias. Both institutions, academy and press, play crucial roles as cultural authorities, making them the sites of significant struggle during periods of institutional crisis. They come together in journalism's academic home. Understanding this particular part of the university provides important lessons for broader educational issues by requiring that we consider the debate over theory and practice, between academic and professional, the role of teaching and research, and corporate influence over academia.

The ultimate objective of journalism education should be to improve the practice of journalism not only by training skilled practitioners, but also by teaching how journalism impinges on other areas of public life and illustrates critical social issues. Understanding these issues is as relevant for the media-literate press consumer as for the would-be professional. From the standpoint of the news media themselves, however, the training role predominates. Editors, for example,

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often typically say that a journalism program's purpose is to "produce better candidates for jobs in our newsrooms." Echoing this view, recent attacks on journalism education and its companion field, the study of communication, have been mounted from the professional quarter. They have challenged the field's proper disciplinary location, the quality of instruction, and appropriate faculty credentials. Given journalism's multiple roles, the natural tension between academy and profession becomes particularly acute.

### **The Misframed Debate: Dichotomy versus Integration**

Although such criticism is nothing new in this or other professional fields, I believe the most recent challenges cannot be easily dismissed. We must understand their crucial assumptions and the pressures that sustain them in order to establish a more constructive critique. In this essay, I will attempt to lay out these issues and review one particularly prominent and exemplary attack sponsored by the wealthiest journalistically based foundation, the Freedom Forum. Its high-profile advocacy has ratcheted up the rhetorical volume beyond the more typical, low-grade skirmishes with its research report, *Winds of Change: Challenges Confronting Journalism Education* (Medsger 1996).

Given the Freedom Forum's resources and its close ties with the largest U.S. newspaper chain owner, Gannett, the position of this organization deserves special attention and makes a useful and exemplary case study. The ascendant industry critique, which arguably the Freedom Forum and its showcased report represent, misframes the debate as theory versus practice, an enduring and common dichotomy not peculiar at all to the journalism side of the academy. Programs are urged to reject the doctorate as a credential in favor of professional experience and to resist encroaching theory in the curriculum with practical skills. Meanwhile, the well-documented criticisms of higher education have undermined its legitimacy and make defending the academic status quo more difficult. The widely acknowledged need for academic reform need not, however, support the professional side of this convenient but false dichotomy. Indeed, this narrow framing does not adequately address the hybrid and interdisciplinary nature of journalism, it pits the academy against the industry and the profession, and it short-circuits more profitable discussion about journalism's progressive potential within higher education and within society at large. A more integrated approach is needed that embraces the field's professional role within a wider academic and scholarly ethos.

I would argue that criticism of journalism education is tied to the crisis of legitimacy within journalism itself, leading an ever more concentrated and corporate voice to assert itself, especially in the academy, where prestige has historically been sought. Abetting this assertion are technology needs and funding cuts that make university programs more dependent than ever before on exter-

nal support. Journalism on many campuses has left its traditional home in the arts and sciences. It has joined with other communication and media fields to create independent professional schools within the university. In doing so, it has found it easier to enter into symbiotic relationships with the professional community, an alliance that has brought new resources but also corresponding pressures to satisfy those constituencies. Clearly, the academy needs credibility with the professions and relevance to society, but recent attacks often serve to diminish the very features that make the academic tradition so valuable.

The current debate that I will explore turns on a number of crucial questions: How should the academic study of journalism best be organized? What are the appropriate disciplinary allies for journalism? What is the best preparation for teaching and practicing journalism? What should be the relationship between the academic field and the profession?<sup>1</sup>

## **Models for Educating Journalists**

### **Historical Roots**

As a hybrid, interdisciplinary mix of the humanities and the social sciences, journalism lies somewhere between professional and academic in its outlook. The two competing historical models for journalism education set an early tone for all future debate over theory and practice. Willard Bleyer's approach at the University of Wisconsin, outlined early in this century, integrated journalism within the liberal arts, whereas its competitor, Walter William's program at the University of Missouri, established a freestanding professional school in 1908 that emphasized hands-on training in a "real-world" environment. Although Wisconsin emphasized research more than did Missouri, Bleyer did not make the strong distinction between theory and professional practice that so often colors current controversy. Indeed, he advocated regular contact between professionals and faculty and, consistent with the Wisconsin Idea, thought that research would help improve professional practice. Bleyer argued that

no other profession has a more vital relation to the welfare of society or to the success of democratic government than has journalism. . . . The most essential training which the university can give to a student thinking of journalism is to equip him broadly with the knowledge of the ages and give him such intellectual power that he will be continually fertile in applying that knowledge to present conditions. (Quoted in Bronstein and Vaughn 1998:16, 17)

Thus the heart of this plan was the "cultivation of an informed and critical intellect, one infused with a sense of social responsibility" (Bronstein and Vaughn 1998:17). Here professional training clearly is coupled with, but in the service of, this larger goal.

The communication field's institution builder, Wilbur Schramm, had a similar high-minded vision for the academic discipline:

I should like to see the kind of School of Journalism that would be not as weak as itself, but as strong as the university . . . a School that would be in the very heart of the university, which would begin with the assumption that the students it wants to produce will be the students in the whole university best equipped to understand and talk about the world. (Quoted in Medsger 1996:56)

### **Journalism's Academic Home**

These models raise an important issue concerning the best academic location for journalism. A strong and increasingly followed case has been made that a freestanding professional school, reporting directly to a provost or president, serves journalism's interests better than housing it within an arts and sciences college (Oregon Report 1984). An independent professional school can enforce its own value system and maneuver more freely with its external constituents. Traditional national leaders, such as Wisconsin and Minnesota, were housed within the arts and sciences but have lost influence in recent years to the freestanding schools of journalism and mass communication, such as North Carolina, which have been adept at pursuing the professional mission, with an accompanying healthy level of industry support. (The Freedom Forum, for example, chose North Carolina for a doctoral program initiative intended to credential experienced professionals.) Having always stressed professional training, Missouri in turn has enjoyed strong industry and alumni support.

Regardless of model, journalism on most campuses has been organized with other media and communication fields. Some programs label themselves Journalism and Mass Communication (often including public relations and advertising), whereas others have been organized around communication generally, with journalism one of the component departments (e.g., Texas, Michigan State). An overlapping issue within these programs concerns the distinctiveness of journalism itself, with many programs converting to a more general communication approach (e.g., North Dakota, Trinity—San Antonio). Advocates of this trend support an emphasis on communication issues rather than on occupational skills, while critics argue that the values of journalism are distinct from persuasion-based communication goals and are damaged by this approach (see Blanchard and Christ 1993 for the former view).

These organizational issues are important because they affect how a school relates to the professional community. To the extent that journalism has become organized within communication, professional constituents have perceived it to be less easily identified, less easily accessed, and less responsive to their needs.

We may predict that the more integrated programs are within the larger university and within a larger discipline, the less strongly and exclusively they orient toward the professional community. This is true even in legal education, which is often held up to journalism education as a model of healthy professional service. To the extent that law schools have recruited Ph.D.'s, encouraged interdisciplinary scholarship, and integrated themselves more within the campus, tensions with the profession have increased.<sup>2</sup> Federal Judge Harry T. Edwards, for example, has blasted current law school tendencies to drift away from the practical side of legal education, claiming that the "law and . . ." movement has meant greater integration of law schools into the academy, but also greater distance from the profession (1992). Finding legal academics often disdainful of the practice of law, Edwards argues that law schools have moved toward pure theory while firms have drifted toward pure commerce, with both deserting the ethical ground.

### Academic versus Professional

These educational models reflect the debate between theory and practice, an academic-professional tension found in schools of law, medicine, business, theology, architecture, and certainly journalism. *Theory* and *practice* may be used to label approaches to learning, with an emphasis on reason and experience, respectively, while the terms *academic* and *professional* are often used to describe institutional outlook, inward toward a discipline or outward toward practitioners.

### Journalism as a Profession

The professional role of journalism education is often equated with that of other professional schools.<sup>3</sup> For example, the former dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern, Bill Cole, was quoted as longing for the day when the best journalism schools in the country enjoyed the same relationship with news and journalism professionals that law schools and medical schools enjoyed with their respective professions.<sup>4</sup> Journalism students are trained in large part with a media occupation in mind, and close ties are maintained with professional constituents who hire graduates and concern themselves with their suitability. Beyond that, however, the analogy quickly breaks down.

According to Randall Beam, professions are organized around a systematic body of knowledge or technique, feature broad occupational autonomy and authority, emphasize public service over economic gain, socialize members to a common culture, and produce unstandardized occupational products (1990). Membership is typically lifelong.<sup>5</sup> To that I would add that a profession must involve a tradition of critical philosophical reflection (Pelikan 1992). Although never adhering closely to these qualities, journalism still has slipped against this

professionalism standard, with a rise in corporate oversight and editorial formulas, coupled with a relative decline in salaries. As a result, fewer journalists remain in lifelong careers. Professional autonomy has declined with the eroding wall between the business and editorial sides and the growing influence of newspaper chain conglomerates with their ever increasing drive for profits (Gissler 1997).

Although professional norms may provide limited protection, the role of most journalists in media organizations is more subordinate than that of their counterparts in law firms or medical practices. Those professionals are preeminent over their employers in their adherence to a transcendent code of conduct, and the organization or partnership exists to support the professional activity. Likewise, restricted access to the learned professions by way of academic credentials means that education critics from professional communities of law, medicine, engineering, and so forth, start from a common basis of shared university experience. No such expectation can be made for the diverse practitioners of journalism, which requires no license.

Journalism is clearly a hybrid degree, serving diverse needs. Employment patterns for journalism graduates show that the professional constituency for journalism is not clear-cut. According to the annual surveys conducted of journalism and mass communication graduates, only 9 percent were employed by newspaper organizations, with another 8 percent employed by cable, radio, and television. Indeed, only 28 percent of recent graduates expected to be working in print journalism five years after receiving their degree, and only 17 percent expected to retire from that field (Becker 1996).<sup>6</sup> This hybrid quality, however, makes the tension between theory and practice especially keen. Journalism education may be said to provide both *habits of mind* and a *set of skills* to students. If it is just a matter of providing the latter, then those who have mastered those skills may be considered the best equipped to teach them, a view best summarized by former *New York Times* managing editor Gene Roberts: "Extensive professional experience in journalism should be the main qualification for teaching journalism" (quoted in Medsker 1996:10).

Interestingly, though, even critics sharing this set-of-skills view disagree among themselves. The *New Republic's* Michael Lewis, for example, faults Columbia's School of Journalism for focusing too much on basic skills that do not justify the attention devoted to them: "Journalism schools . . . dignify a trade by tacking onto it the idea of professionalism and laying over it a body of dubious theory" (1993:27). He quotes newspaper professionals, including one columnist, who seem to have little faith in journalism's professional status: "All we do is ask questions and type and occasionally turn a phrase. Why do you need to go to school for that?" (1993:26). Another big-city editor said, "If you can write, then you can figure out how to write journalism" (1993:26). Al-



though this view suggests that journalism is best learned on the job, others argue that the set of skills is still best taught on campus but supervised by members of the profession. Thus John Wicklein favors pure news-professional schools like Columbia and the University of California at Berkeley, and he supports the education of journalists by journalists (1994). He argues that the tendency to require scholarly credentials for faculty detracts from this mission.

Of course, this leads one to ask why media organizations do not teach these skills on the job to promising recruits, where the training can be carefully monitored by working professionals. The answer, of course, lies in the economic self-interest of these organizations, which encourage universities to subsidize this cost of training and to screen and credential talented prospects. The industry's desire for cheap labor is particularly striking in broadcasting's heavy reliance on unpaid internships.<sup>7</sup>

Other critics, without explicitly favoring an academic "habits of mind" approach, still fault an overemphasis on skills. James Ledbetter, for example, argues in *Rolling Stone* that journalism has corrupted its mission by incorporating public relations and advertising into a generalized, integrated marketing communication curriculum (1997). (In the last twenty years, students interested in the news-editorial area have declined.) In its market-driven move to train students for existing jobs, Ledbetter faults journalism for taking on a trade-school orientation. Furthermore, he argues that the professional orientation can be carried too far when it means hands-on training for jobs in short supply and with depressed salaries, such as in broadcasting, with the additional result of giving students skills that do not easily transfer when they likely switch occupations.<sup>8</sup>

Further encouraging the set-of-skills approach is the structure of the journalism labor market. Smaller and local markets form the lower levels, leading up to the larger urban and elite national media. Workers move up as they perform successfully at the lower levels, certifying their "track record." Contrast this to law and business school graduates, the best and brightest of whom, having learned their habits of mind, are hired directly by big-city firms, which are willing to shoulder the responsibility for teaching skills on the job.

The journalism training and hiring complex, then, is based on providing labor at the entry-level bottom, with job advancement dependent on a successful socialization experience. This encourages academic training to hew closely to the set-of-skills approach if students are to gain access to the profession. Direct entry to the prestige organizations at the apex of this pyramid, however, may come with Ivy League schooling in fields other than journalism or with other elite background. So whether new members arrive with a journalism degree or not, the habits of mind, I would argue, are controlled more directly by the profession than is the case with law, business, and medicine with their academic counterweights.



## The Corporatizing of Professional Pressure

The professional pressure on journalism and academia alike cannot be fully understood without grasping changes in the corporate media world. Journalism is today primarily a creature of major concentrated commercial interests. Although law, medicine, and business are typically more remunerative than journalism, the corporate organizations within which journalists are housed are far more concentrated than the distributed wealth of these other professions. Thus of them all, journalism has the most corporate face.

This is significant when considering Robert McChesney's argument that corporate media rely on the myth that the First Amendment ordains private media ownership, with professionalism protecting the public interest from private media control (1997). The current public unease over synergistic media, the blurred lines between news and entertainment, and the increasingly conglomerate face of journalism make the reassertion of educational authority by the professional quarter a natural response to preserve legitimacy. Blame can be diverted from a crisis in the profession itself. When the prestige and credibility of the news media decline, academia is one place where influence may be exerted and respect recouped. Thus the industry finds itself in the awkward role of needy critic.

Reflecting on the uncritical self-confidence of the American press, Daniel Hallin writes of his interview with journalist Peter Arnett in the late 1970s (1992). In his defense of Establishment Journalism, as Hallin called it, Arnett showed a complete faith in mainstream press practice, which—by reporting the facts—he claimed had served its most effective role in ending the war in Vietnam. As Hallin writes, "What impressed me the most in this interview was the sense of wholeness and seamlessness in Arnett's vision of journalism, or to put it the other way around, the absence of a sense of doubt or contradiction" (1992:14).<sup>9</sup> I get a similar sense of unqualified and seamless faith in current journalism from reports like *Winds of Change*. Although American journalism has produced valuable work, this troubled profession needs reexamination and questioning. Indeed, Robert Haiman, former head of the Poynter Institute and editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, finds journalism far too self-congratulatory, as suggested by the proliferation of prizes awarded to its practitioners (1998). This arrogance, he suggests, is implicated in the recent wave of journalistic scandals.

Meanwhile, the growing concentration of media ownership has reduced the number of firms that control the news organizations hiring journalism graduates. This means that the potential for a concentrated industry "professional" voice has grown as well. Certainly, major philanthropic foundations associated with these newspaper and other media conglomerates constitute an important channel of influence. The biggest of those involved in journalism

education are the Freedom Forum (associated with the Gannett newspaper chain), the Knight Foundation (Knight Ridder), and Hearst.

There is not enough space here for a full analysis of these foundations, whose efforts no doubt have been helpful in strengthening the resources available for journalism programs. Nevertheless, this increasingly sought philanthropy is a form of influence. Although enlightened leadership at these foundations may make their impact relatively benign, the fact remains that the influence center of gravity has shifted away from the academy. A concentrated industry and philanthropic constituency has emerged with an increasingly dependent academia that must attend to it.

At the same time, higher education is under siege from all sides, with a particularly strong and well-funded attack from conservatives, who view academia as the last holdout of left-wing political values, multiculturalism, and subversion. Many critics wish that academic institutions would be run more like a business, and to the extent that many professional schools are already oriented toward business values and corporate funding, they are less susceptible to these attacks. Given, however, that journalism is organized with an interdisciplinary, liberal arts focus, yet must address a professional constituency, it is vulnerable to attack from all sides. Its lesser status and wealth compared to other professional programs make it potentially more dependent on outside help, while its relative immaturity makes it suspect by the older disciplines. Thus the academic case for journalism must be clearly thought out to help guide and withstand these crosscutting pressures.

### **An Exemplar: The *Winds of Change* Study**

The Freedom Forum's research report, *Winds of Change*, represents an attempt to influence the field of journalism education and shows how framing the issue can shape the findings and their perceived implications. It exemplifies a professional-academic antagonism and illustrates many of the issues set out earlier in this essay.

#### **The Freedom Forum**

The Freedom Forum calls itself a "nonpartisan, international foundation dedicated to free press, free speech and free spirit for all people." With an endowment of just over one billion dollars (\$1.077 billion as of its last annual report), it operates the Media Studies Center in New York City (formerly the Gannett Media Studies Center), the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, and the Newseum, an interactive museum of news at its headquarters in Arlington, Virginia.

Although now officially autonomous, the foundation was established by Frank Gannett, founder of the nation's largest corporate newspaper chain. The

foundation's board of trustees is strongly affiliated with the Gannett Corporation, whose executives occupy key roles. Forum founder and chairman, former Gannett head Al Neuharth, was succeeded by former Gannett vice-president Charles Overby, with former *USA Today* editor Peter Prichard as Forum president. Two other former Gannett paper editors, John Seigenthaler and John Quinn, are also trustees. This affiliation was strengthened when the founding head of the Media Studies Center, journalism academic Everett Dennis, was replaced ultimately by the former editor of Gannett's *Detroit News*, Robert Giles—also former chair of the journalism accreditation body, the Accrediting Council for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications.

Since the mid-1980s, when the Media Studies Center was established, the Gannett Foundation/Freedom Forum has become the most aggressively high-profile organization involved with journalism education, including with the national meetings of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). Although it maintains a Pacific Coast Leadership Institute that works with educators, only the occasional journalism professor is now involved in the residential research "fellows" program at the New York Center, and the Forum mission has shifted to a broader public outreach through the Newseum and other activities, as indicated by the Media Center's move from the Columbia University campus to midtown Manhattan and the resources devoted to the Newseum.

### Key Findings

A large-scale survey in 1995 formed the basis for the Forum's larger report. The Roper Center was commissioned to survey three groups: new journalists, with up to eleven years' experience; newsroom recruiters and supervisors; and journalism educators. In addition, accreditation team reports were examined for programs reviewed between 1989 and 1996. Interviews were conducted with hundreds of other journalists, educators, and journalism leaders, making *Winds of Change* perhaps the most extensive empirically based report on journalism education yet undertaken. Its promotion was similarly ambitious, with copies of the 181-page report mailed to educators nationwide and findings presented at professional meetings, including the AEJMC and the accreditation council, in an effort to help "professors and professionals shape the future of journalism education" (Medsger 1996). Although the report's findings, conclusions, and interpretations are said to be those of the author, former journalism professor Betty Medsger, the strong endorsement of the report by Forum leaders and its wide dissemination at their expense suggests that the thrust of the report is consistent with the currently prevailing Forum view.<sup>10</sup>

Although ostensibly based on these extensive surveys, and including a section with a number of diverse opinions, the report takes a strong, often polemical stance. Within the wide-ranging set of findings and views, the report

advocates bringing news professionals into teaching and stopping the conversion of journalism into a "generic communication degree." In the process, however, Medsger makes a number of unjustified claims and conclusions within an oversimplified professional-versus-academic framework. Of the extensive results, the report emphasized a number of key findings (1996:7, 8). The desire to elevate the professional side of the chosen dichotomy while diminishing the academic shows clearly in the report's summary and conclusions.

**Professional Experience** The report claims that the "future of journalism education is jeopardized by . . . a decline in hiring faculty with significant experience and expertise in journalism." The survey of faculty, however, showed that only 17 percent of educators had no professional experience, a figure that does not support the claim. Medsger claims that her faculty surveys show that "the notion that expertise is not needed to teach journalism skills is now commonplace in journalism education" (1996:57). It is unclear where this conclusion comes from, given that four out of five professors strongly agreed that faculties should include members with extensive professional experience as journalists (1996:87).

Other results are presented out of context to suggest that faculty are even antiprofessional. Among journalists, Medsger claims that "more than half of respondents said they had journalism professors who expressed the opinion that journalism was a dying profession" (1996:20). A closer look at the question shows that although 48 percent responded "none," her "majority" figure was obtained by summing the percentages that said "few" (25 percent), "some" (23 percent), and "most" (4 percent). Using the same method of calculation, however, shows a much different picture, revealing that the vast majority of journalists surveyed had professors who thought journalism was an "important/respected profession" (96 percent), "requires sophisticated research/writing skills" (98 percent), "requires strong ethical values" (98 percent), and is a "valuable public service" (99 percent). It is unclear what professors were thought to mean by the "dying profession" view, but it is hard to construe it as antiprofessional. It is surely arguable that journalism as we have known it has declined, with the eroding public service commitment by media corporations and the declining salaries of journalists relative to those of other professionals.

**Ph.D. Credential** The report is concerned with what it regards as overemphasis on the Ph.D. and claims to find support among educators in their rejection of the doctorate as a credential. Although the majority hold a Ph.D., they do not "strongly support the doctorate as a criterion for hiring." To the blanket statement, "Journalism educators should have earned doctoral degrees," 37 percent agreed either strongly or mildly. Here, rather than rejecting the Ph.D. and supporting a dominant professional hiring criterion, educators appear to express an ecumenical view, that *all* faculty should not be required to have the doctorate. Indeed, 95 percent of educators agree that programs should include faculty with

professional experience, which does not preclude other academic credentials. (In addition, I suspect faculty would endorse other advanced degrees, such as the M.F.A. and the J.D., but it is not possible to tell given the questions posed.)

A more recent study further supports this ecumenical view. Testing the claim that Ph.D.'s and research are required of faculty across the board in journalism programs, a recent survey of educators found significant variation across specialties. Reporting and editing specialists were, appropriately, less likely to have the doctorate and produce traditional research and had more professional background than those in "concept" areas like theory and methodology. Yet they were among the most experienced and successful faculty surveyed (Fedler et al. 1998a). Empirical findings aside, the Forum report's logic implies that anything less than a full-time faculty of seasoned non-Ph.D. professionals is an abandonment of the professional mission.

**Accreditation Process** Evidence for other conclusions is more difficult to untangle. Reports from accrediting teams were examined to see what programs were encouraged to do. These reports, rarely seen outside the inner accreditation circle, do provide some insight into prevailing values, but comparisons are difficult, given that each program is evaluated against its own mission and held either in compliance or not against twelve standards.

The accreditation process, for example, is "found" to pressure programs "to place more emphasis on doctoral degrees than on professional expertise in hiring" (Medsger 1996:7). Here the *Winds* dichotomy is plainly seen. Seeking the Ph.D. credential does not preclude a professional background. Indeed, journalism programs have clearly broadened and matured in their ability to attract faculty with the doctorate, and it is safe to say that, especially for relatively immature fields like journalism, encouraging the Ph.D. credential has been the traditional way to seek greater program status within the academy. No doubt, accrediting teams concerned with a program's viability within an institution may make such recommendations. Programs were also urged to "produce traditional scholarly research rather than in-depth journalistic research" (1996:7). Medsger claims that of the programs reviewed for accreditation over six years, 68 percent were encouraged to do more scholarly research, while 26 percent of programs were urged to accept only scholarly and not journalistic research (1996:59). However, this latter figure is not overwhelming, nor is the context of this advice available. Indeed, this would be appropriate advice were the programs in question attempting to field graduate degrees and aspiring to a research-based university reputation.

Emphasizing the claim that research is encouraged *at the expense of journalistic research* furthers the academic-professional split and overlooks the likelihood that many programs were doing little of either kind of scholarship. Indeed, as Medsger herself points out, high praise was given to two schools that accept both kinds of scholarly activity (California at Berkeley and West Florida).

**Best Teacher** In surveying a sample of “new journalists” (eleven years’ experience or less), the study asks them to evaluate their education in light of their current occupation (e.g., which journalism course “was most helpful in preparing you for what you do today?”). When asked about their best journalism teacher against this background, 56 percent reported that the teacher had professional experience but no doctorate. If we were to accept the pitting of academic against professional, this finding is perhaps the most directly supportive of the latter, especially when coupled with only 36 percent who claimed it important that journalism teachers study mass communication theory at the doctoral level (leaving aside whether these former students know what that would have entailed). When asked to respond based on their experience as “professional journalists,” these new journalists not surprisingly found the “professional” dimension most salient when evaluating their training. Certainly, I would concede that when it comes to entry-level training, journalists do find valuable the faculty who are primarily devoted to that training and who have likely stayed in closest touch with the profession. However, these new journalists may not be as antiacademic as they seem. Indeed, based on Fred Fedler’s data cited earlier, the reporting and editing faculty, who are least likely to have the Ph.D., are also likely to be most senior and are likely to have taught the most students—who, in turn, are likely to fill out such questionnaires.

Even accepting these findings on their face, Medsger’s survey of “new” journalists is clearly looking at one of the many branches that graduates will take. Considering that only a minority of graduates chose jobs in news organizations, fewer still will have remained in those jobs for up to eleven years, given the frequency of career changes. Thus only the minority of the educational “product” is surveyed in the *Winds* report.

**Salaries** Among the working journalists surveyed, who generally reported enjoying their work, 43 percent said that they might leave their jobs, listing low pay as the chief reason. Thus the report concludes that low salaries for journalists are jeopardizing the future of the profession (Medsger 1996:7). Although low salaries fail to attract the best students, the *Winds* report gives little emphasis to industry culpability, reserving most of the blame for educational trends. At the same time, the majority of recent Pulitzer Prize winners, and the majority of other award and fellowship winners as well, were found to never have studied journalism.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere, few newsroom supervisors agreed that educators were on the “cutting edge of journalism issues and have a strong influence on change in the profession” (Medsger 1996:7). Although Medsger interprets these last two findings as evidence of educational failure, the reverse is equally plausible. Indeed, to the extent that journalism education has embraced the professional entry-level model, it has the dubious honor of training entrants to the lowest-paid occupation that requires a college degree (Medsger 1996:8). Declining salaries have come about precisely as more J-school graduates have



entered the profession. Thus schools may have succeeded all too well in support of the industry's labor pyramid, as discussed earlier.

Although specific findings may be refuted and methods challenged, studies like *Winds of Change* can have a great impact. The high-profile endorsements, the framing of the debate, and the surrounding commentary that passes into received wisdom can be powerful forces in shaping the future debate. A Forum newsletter, for example, claims that some programs have increased requirements for mass communication theory courses "in the belief that journalism is a dying profession" (Kees 1996:4). Nowhere in the *Winds* report is evidence available for this causal claim. Meanwhile, valuable energy is being wasted in pursuing and rebutting these zero-sum-game dichotomies of theory and practice, academic and professional.

### **The Winds/Forum View**

To advance its professional model logic, the *Winds* approach must undermine academic research while resting heavily on a special unproblematic view of the "profession," seen as a well-defined set of skills. Throughout the *Winds* report, journalism is presented as a virtuous craft whose practitioners have much to contribute to higher education, which, especially in journalism education, is seen to be doing little right. Medsger argues that the archives of the Pulitzers and other prizes contain evidence of how the profession has matured. She claims that the profession "has solved the thorny problems arising from . . . new technology, developed new research methods, become more diverse in hiring and news coverage, cultivated new writing forms, found innovative uses of the visual arts, and recognized its obligation to serve communities better" (1996:62).

In searching for the culprits for the claimed decline in the quality of graduates, *Winds* supporters locate the reported increase in "mass communication theory" courses and the increasing percentage of Ph.D.'s on journalism faculties. The demonization of "theory" is reinforced by a rigid delineation of its content from the rest of the university, claiming that it takes time away from a "broader education in the arts and sciences" (Kees 1996:5). This distortion ignores the fact that media theory is an interdisciplinary combination of these arts and sciences. The "theorists"—a category I would broaden to include anyone with scholarly and systematic insight into journalism—receive their ultimate dismissal from the Media Studies Center's Robert Giles, who argues that students need to learn about the world from the "real scholars" in the "mainstream" departments on campus (Medsger 1996:5). The academic work for future journalists is seen as multidisciplinary rather than interdisciplinary.

The approved component of education, in this view, consists of the content areas journalists may be called upon to cover: economics, government, science, and so forth. Within the journalism curriculum itself, history and law are permitted in the canon. Although history socializes new members of the profession



to the “great men” of the craft, and law acquaints them with its rules and rights, I would argue that theory is suspect in creating undue skepticism about the enterprise itself. Although editors often list critical thinking as an important skill for journalists, there is little acceptance from the *Winds* camp that those skills might properly be turned on journalism itself.<sup>12</sup> To theorize about journalism and its role in society is viewed as a waste of time and a distraction from the real task at hand. This antireflective view was summed up by former *New York Times* executive editor Max Frankel at a Media Studies Center seminar: “There (are) too . . . many media critics in business these days. It’s ridiculous. If all those people, including me, would go back to work, we’d have a very good press. But instead all we’re doing is studying the . . . press” (Frankel 1998:12).

Compromised and besieged though it may be, the academic tradition has much of value for society and for journalism. A case for its involvement in professional education must be made on its own terms. Rejecting false dichotomies, the academic ethos must guide a broader and more integrated approach to academic and professional reform.

## **Toward an Integrated View**

### **A Broader Redefinition of Teaching and Research**

The academic-professional dichotomy is often reduced to a trade-off between research and teaching. Research makes an inviting target for attack, with professional critics arguing that little academic research in journalism has any value in the “real world” (e.g., Balk 1994). The debate, unfortunately, often turns mean-spirited and anti-intellectual, with opponents of a research and Ph.D. emphasis selectively and derisively citing academic research examples to make their point. Not wishing to defend the status quo, I would acknowledge that much of such research is not relevant and is of poor quality. The growing number of doctoral programs in journalism and communication has created a corresponding imperative to conduct publishable research, producing too much low-quality research chasing too many journals. Indeed, many professors who are induced to conduct their share of research to advance within the academy would better spend their energies elsewhere.

The Carnegie report authored by Ernest Boyer has advanced this standoff by redefining scholarship to better reflect the intellectual efforts of faculty scholars, reframing the old “teaching versus research” dichotomy. The privileging of traditional discovery of “new” knowledge research as the guide to practical competence has been challenged, even in fields like medicine. Indeed, the notion of the “reflective practitioner” calls for a reexamination of the relationship between theory and practice. In addition, service learning has become an important initiative on many campuses, integrating experiential learning into the college curriculum to encourage serious intellectual reflection on experience (Rice 1998:17).<sup>13</sup>

Such a more integrated view must consider a number of links: between academy and society, field and larger university, theory and practice, teaching and research. All are relevant to the debates concerning journalism and journalism education. In examining the role of what he calls the "new American scholar," Eugene Rice of the American Association of Higher Education emphasizes the integration that should characterize the academic life and an academic career (1998). This interconnectedness of life and work is made difficult by the reward structure and typical career path within the university. The foundational assumptions of academia encourage separation between university and society and between professors. Rice says that the "complete scholar would have a sense of the way in which different forms of scholarly work interrelate and enrich one another" and would appreciate not only the interdependency of teaching and research, but also the interaction between theory building and active practice.

Professional fields should find this goal of integration a particularly worthy one. While acknowledging, for example, that a "great professional law school can never be anti-theoretical," Judge Edwards criticizes the "impractical scholars" among legal academics who fail to integrate theory with doctrine, something his former clerks agreed the best teachers could comfortably do (1992:39).

The *Winds* report notes that journalism accrediting committees found faculty confused over the criteria for tenure and promotion. Far from being peculiar to journalism, however, this confusion is endemic to academia. The American Association for Higher Education Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards found in interviews with new faculty that they found the uncertainty and ambiguity of tenure requirements to be of central concern, a frustration that may be attributed to a flawed process rather than the failure of one discipline (Rice 1998). Journalism provides a valuable educational setting to explore the redefinition of scholarship as well as other major pedagogical reforms identified by Rice, such as collaborative learning and instructional application of information technology. The *Winds* report, however, ignores such larger issues within higher education.

### **The Academic Ethos**

If this integration is to be carried out within, as I would hope, a dominantly academic, scholarly, and "intellectual" ethos, we must consider what that means. Edward Said, for one, argues that intellectuals are those who are not easily co-opted by governments or corporations, and they are critical in the sense of not accepting simple formulas or clichés (1994). Indeed, he argues that intellectualism is threatened by professionalism, the notion that one's mental work is something one does to make a living. Julian Benda defined intellectuals as "those whose activity is essentially not the pursuit of practical aims" (quoted in Said 1994:5). According to Said, the hardest part of being an intellectual is to avoid

"hardening into an institution or a kind of automaton acting at the behest of a system or method" (1994:121), to "keep a space in the mind open for doubt and for the part of an alert, skeptical irony" (1994:120).

Although journalism espouses comparable values of free critique, actual practice falls short. Nevertheless, the *Winds of Change* position simply equates journalism with intellectual activity, making an a priori case for its place in the university. Medsger argues that the ability to systematically gather, analyze, and communicate information is an intellectual skill that should be properly recognized as central to higher education. This, however, takes by definition the very activity that is in question. As with the majority of jobs in the U.S. economy based in major part on information work, journalism practice need not cultivate intellectual autonomy, as indicated by the lack of self-critical insight exhibited by many of its practitioners, the formulaic recitation of quotes from experts and sources, media feeding frenzies, and pack journalism.

Although one need not be an academic to be an intellectual, higher education is, for all its flaws, one of the last institutional bastions of free societal critique where, in the ideal, the taken-for-granted assumptions can be challenged without concern for giving offense or incurring unpleasant sanctions. That is why trends corrupting this role are so worrisome. While the sciences have found themselves adapting to government, military, and corporate pressures to seek their research funding, critics of the social sciences and humanities long have been troubled that those fields have become captives of their respective domains (Lynd 1939; Mills 1959; Roszak 1967). More recently, the steady increase in corporate-backed university research has weakened the separation between academic and business values (e.g., Soley 1995). Of course, academic research can be too specialized, narrow, and divorced from pressing social issues. Turf wars and fear can prevent professors from using their academic freedom for its intended purpose. As suggested earlier in this essay, these criticisms have been made as forcefully by academics themselves as by any outside critics. There is no reason a healthy engagement with professional and social issues cannot help to discipline academic pursuits.

As with other professions, academia has a credentialing process that applies to prospective members, with the Ph.D. most typically serving as the standard requirement to enter the ranks. By having undergone a multiyear graduate training process, the doctorate holder demonstrates a commitment to the academic profession and cultivation of certain habits of mind and inquiry. The *Winds* report argues that substantial professional experience should be counted as the equivalent of doctoral training. Although the years of experience and status of position can suggest what one has learned and is prepared to bring to the academy, evaluating this background is often difficult. Indeed, even in professional schools like law it is often argued that professional background may impede one's academic effectiveness. Although most law faculty have practiced law, a substantial minor-

ity have gone straight from a judicial clerkship to law teaching (a situation analogous to journalism).<sup>14</sup> While the Ph.D. need not be the only path of entry into academia, asserting professional experience as the sole criterion for academic acceptability in professional areas diminishes the scholarly profession. Academic work is a profession unto itself where a lifelong career and some intellectual autonomy can be cultivated. Professional experience in journalism, for example, need not qualify one as an academic any more than being a successful teacher means that one is ready to assume a top editorial position.

### **Issues of Academic Structure: Journalism's Role on Campus**

**Journalism as a Distinct Field** The disciplinary location of journalism has both its academic and professional critics, although with different motivations. Ex-editor Gene Roberts, for example, argues that English and history would have been the logical partners for journalism (quoted in Medsger 1996:56). Similarly, James Carey says the humanities would have served journalism better than the more control-centered and dominant social science strain of U.S. communication research (Carey 1996). Professional critics worry that the special concerns of journalism are "converging," or collapsing, into other communication specialties to create an amorphous mix of information skills and studies. Medsger pursues this theme in a chapter entitled "Takeover of Journalism Education," claiming that journalism's disciplinary integration has diminished rather than enriched the field, as I would contend. In her historical analysis of what she labels a "takeover" by the communication field, she argues that journalism lost progress that would otherwise have taken place had its value not been "diminished" and its identity "submerged."

The claim that journalism's decline began with its marriage to communication does not ring true for me. I see no evidence that a golden age of the field preceded this so-called "takeover," an age in which journalism faculty held great prestige on campus and were well recognized in the profession. Although the founding figures in journalism education wished to elevate the profession by making it a fit subject of academic study, the actual prestige of these schools on their campuses did not live up to their lofty goals. Making this assumption, however, allows Medsger to argue for the restoration of professional purity and to blame communication and the "theorists" for any perceived current shortcomings. I think joining with the communication discipline has helped develop a broader, less parochial view within journalism, stimulating interdisciplinary links on campus that would not otherwise have been likely.

Although singled out for praise in the *Winds* report for retaining this professional purity (Medsger 1996:12, 13), the freestanding graduate professional programs at Berkeley and Columbia may be most successful in offering their students a marquee degree and an alumni network, as charged by even critics from the profession (e.g., Lewis 1993). Several years ago, for example, an

analysis of top journalism programs in the Gannett Media Center's own journal considered that Columbia and Berkeley, because of their graduate, professional, self-contained program structure, received little benefit from the intellectual resources surrounding them on campus. Columbia was termed a school of "lost opportunity," having "little influence on the profession—and none on the university" (Footlick 1988:75).

Indeed, when systematic evidence replaces the anecdotal, journalism's current prestige on campus following the "takeover" is relatively strong. Fred Fedler and colleagues, for example, surveyed a national sample of 225 university faculty and presented them with a list of programs from which they were to pick the ones they would most likely eliminate (1998b). Hospitality management and home economics received the most votes (60 and 43 percent of the total, respectively), with advertising/public relations and broadcasting receiving nominations from 32 and 26 percent of the sample, respectively. Journalism, on the other hand, received only six votes (2.7 percent), suggesting that it enjoys favorable regard from faculty across the board. Ironically, broadcasting, advertising, and public relations may be considered among the most professionally attuned specialties, based heavily on undergraduate entry-level training and intimately connected to their related professional associations. (For example, the Broadcast Education Association meets in conjunction with the National Association of Broadcasters.)

I would agree that the communication field has not always served journalism issues adequately, but then there are plenty of critics from within communication who have made that claim. The University of Chicago approach, with its humanistic, multimethod, community-oriented science of communication, would have provided a fertile background for journalism study in ways that the more narrowly quantitative Columbia school, associated with Paul Lazarsfeld, did not. The focus on audience and effects preempted other questions about content and control in the construction of news. Such questions raised in the 1950s, for example, by David Manning White's gatekeeper study and Warren Breed's examination of social control in the newsroom were not easily encouraged, nor were they pursued within the prevailing themes of the field (Reese et al. 1993). Ultimately, though, communication is an absorptive field, with new strains of qualitative and critical research more widely represented now than ever before. Thus the image of U.S. communication research held up for criticism, although historically accurate in its emphasis on social control, is increasingly out of date.

I agree with Carey that journalism is a worthy and distinct subject for study, as much for its importance as a set of crucial social issues as for training practitioners. Equating journalism with communication does unwisely collapse this distinct practice into others. Long ago, Robert Lynd advocated organizing higher education around the interdisciplinary approach to the study of pressing societal questions (1939), and in many ways journalism fits this model. With its

combination of research traditions, of social science and critical cultural analysis, journalism and its communication neighbor are well equipped to address the importance of interdisciplinary work, to tackle the questions that do not fit easily into only one traditional field. Issues of press performance are crucial to democratic society and merit this kind of academically organized close scrutiny. It does not follow, however, that awarding to journalism a distinct status means that it must become insular—cut off from allied fields and guided solely by its practitioners.<sup>15</sup> Organizing specifically around the study of journalism also has its advantages in providing a better focal point for professional leadership, fundraising, and employment, but it should not lead to disengagement from the academy. A more integrated perspective must guide the study of journalism, regardless of academic location.

**Academic Centrality** Whatever the setting, for the ethos of the field to remain academic, the faculty must be able to connect effectively with scholars from other campus disciplines. Although many have argued for the “centrality” of the journalism field on campus, a hyperprofessionalization works against this goal by erecting boundaries on campus and by discouraging conversations across them. As Jaroslav Pelikan argues in quoting Alfred North Whitehead, the justification for a university lies in the movement of ideas in both directions between centers of professional training and the more traditional areas of the arts and sciences (1992). Thus the question shifts to not whether the interdisciplinary field of journalism should be autonomous, but with what other fields does it best relate? It is possible to argue for the preservation of journalism as distinct, while still wishing to preserve the intellectual allies that contribute to it. That conversation implies influence in both directions. Indeed, much of the best research on journalism has been done by those outside the field. The newsroom studies of sociologists Gaye Tuchman (1978), Herbert Gans (1979), and Todd Gitlin (1980), for example, have become crucial and often cited in explaining how news is shaped.<sup>16</sup>

Journalism should rightly have outward influence as well. Willard Rowland, for example, argues that journalism education, with its interdisciplinary tradition of institutional analysis and its dualism of professional and academic study, provides the vital core of communication study (1996)—and, I would argue, a useful model for the rest of the university. Thus, rather than being submerged into communication and left a marginalized weaker player, he sees journalism as providing integrative insight for communication, and the larger university as well, concerning issues of power and ownership, meaning, technology, and ethical responsibility. Indeed, there is no reason that communication and journalism cannot mutually reinforce each other. Combining forces with the communication discipline provides greater opportunities for cross-fertilization with other fields, and greater concentration of political strength and authority on university campuses.



### **Conclusion: Nourishing Journalism's Intellectual Ethos**

Partnerships can be productive relationships and necessary in tackling complex problems, and joint ventures are a common fixture of corporate life. It must be clear, however, what one is getting out of the relationship. Academia may properly be a partner, but it should not become a mere client of the corporate world or the professions. Educators must think through what they are about, especially in fields like journalism with so many constituencies. For all of its faults, the university provides a valuable source of leadership for society and for journalism that cannot be replicated elsewhere. The value of the academy lies in providing an analytical distance in addressing social issues within an intellectual ethos and in providing a countervailing influence against short-term and parochial interests. Academia is a porous institution, absorbing the issues in the larger culture and providing a rigorous, open, and productive way of discussing them within and across the various disciplines.

To the extent that professional and academic critics of higher education can find common ground, chances of healthy reform are strong, but encouraging false dichotomies is counterproductive. The foundations have much to contribute, but the Forum report is not one of those contributions, with its exaggerated finding and unfortunate framing of the issues. The never well defined profession of journalism, with all of its contradictions, is in transition. Before journalism—and, therefore, education for journalism—can fulfill its proper roles, we must carefully determine what skills and values most deserve preservation. The interests of anyone speaking on behalf of the “profession” must themselves be evaluated. Professionalism can be misused as an unexamined prop to support corporate information industries in a way that prevents questions of public interest from being raised. At the same time, it can be valuably invoked to protect and guide the laudable goals of journalism to facilitate democratic life.

Hallin observes that during the professional heyday of journalism, the “autonomy of the journalist within the news organization was relatively high. The separation of ‘church’ and ‘state’—of journalism and the media business—was relatively strong, and it was widely accepted that journalism was first and foremost a ‘public trust,’” a model that he argues has broken down (1998:43; also see Hallin 1996). Developing a new professional model must be done collaboratively, with the best intellectual leadership informed by a close knowledge of professional practices and problems. We need to challenge the simplistic professionalism that assumes its own validity and prevents turning on itself the kind of questioning that journalism excels in directing at others.

Journalism should be a model of a societally and professionally engaged field, bringing the best thinking of the social sciences and humanities to bear on its issues. Beyond the tired debate between academic and professional lie more



interesting discussions about broader reforms, for which journalism education can provide useful guidance.

## Notes

1. In the interest of full disclosure, I acknowledge that I came to academic teaching without extensive professional experience. Having completed my master's at Wisconsin, I elected to continue on an academic path to the doctorate there, rather than return to media work. My department and I have benefited from a number of media foundation initiatives. I enjoyed grant support early on from the Gannett Foundation, and I attended the Technology Seminars and the Leadership Institute while the renamed Freedom Forum was still at Columbia. I have risked oversimplifying here; clearly, the Forum does not speak with one voice, and its programs provide the opportunity to air many important issues facing journalism and the academy. For many years, I have taught a mass communication "theory" class, the only one in our list of more than fifty undergraduate courses. Journalism is blessed with many high-minded professionals who have worked in partnership with educators for the betterment of journalism. I am an avid consumer of journalism and respect the many professionals—whether in the media or in the academy—who strive for the highest ideals of the craft.
2. According to University of Texas law professor Brian Leiter, one often hears practitioners complain that "law schools train law teachers, not lawyers. An eminent federal judge, in recommending a former clerk for a law teaching job, said to me, 'He was a very good clerk, despite having gone to Yale Law School'" (personal communication, 1998).
3. Journalism education critics often invoke the analogy more colorfully by saying that they would not want to be operated on by a surgeon taught by professors who had never been in an operating room.
4. Quoted approvingly by publisher Jay Harris in an address to administrators of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication at a meeting in New Orleans, Dec. 6, 1997.
5. Kaarle Nordenstreng provides a useful review of the concept of professionalism from an international perspective, acknowledging that the concept has both a manipulative, obfuscating role on behalf of power, but potentially an uplifting and progressive function for society (1998). He provided valuable encouragement for this essay.
6. For the most recent figures from Lee Becker and Gerald Kosicki, see the Web site at the University of Georgia: [www.grady.uga.edu/annualsurveys/](http://www.grady.uga.edu/annualsurveys/).
7. Even one of the wealthiest papers, the *Los Angeles Times*, has been criticized by a Berkeley journalism professor for its penurious program of unpaid internships. He argues that such policies have contributed to the decline in the proportion of journalists under age thirty (Henry 1998).
8. For a general overview of current curricular issues, see "Responding to the Challenge of Change," an Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) task force report (1996).
9. Ironically, Arnett was embarrassed recently by a retracted CNN/*Time* investigation in which he was shown to be merely a question asker and front man, receiving a co-byline and retaining his job for a time while others associated with the report lost theirs.
10. Some may argue that the Forum has funded a number of important projects with no ideological litmus test, including ones by the author and by David Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit (1996), among others. However, my point is precisely that its mission has become more pointed and proactive in recent years.

11. I suspect that many of those involved in recent journalistic scandals also do not hold journalism degrees, a hunch that would make an interesting subject for further investigation.
12. Betty Medsger is on record as supporting critical reflection by journalists (1998), but it does not manifest itself in the *Winds* report in the kind of academic ethos that I have in mind.
13. Jeremy Cohen and Cindy Kostyak have recently produced a report on their efforts at the College of Communication, Penn State, in an effort to integrate their teaching efforts into the larger service learning movement (1998).
14. University of Texas law professor Brian Leiter says, indeed, that "too much practice experience becomes a liability; schools worry that the candidate won't really adjust to the academic setting. Thus, when I counsel students, I recommend not more than two or three years in practice before looking for law teaching jobs" (personal communication, 1998).
15. Edward Levi argues that professional schools must be concerned with the interaction of the world of learning and the world of problems to be solved, which is why such schools need the university. Setting their course by current professional practice leads to failure (quoted in Pelikan 1992).
16. Even in the Freedom Forum's own *Media Studies Journal* in spring/summer of 1998, of the handful of academics included, communication professors wrote two of the twenty-five essays, along with two law professors and a theologian, compared to only one journalism professor.

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