

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

The Sociology of the Professions and the Problem of Journalism Education

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY JOURNALISM CLASS. COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Several times a week, I stand up in front of a few dozen journalism students to teach them the practices, ethics, laws, and history of a profession which is transforming—some would say collapsing—before our very eyes. These students, enrolled at the College of Staten Island (CSI) (a four year senior college in the City University of New York (CUNY) system) are earnest and eager. Some of them have genuine dreams of becoming journalists, though they do not always entirely understand what that means, at least at first. Most of them are first-generation college students, some of whom (along with their parents) are often deeply concerned with the economic benefits that a college degree can provide.

At CSI, our journalism program is jointly offered between the Media Culture Department, where I teach, and the English Department. Students take two introductory classes (in journalism fundamentals and online journalism) before they graduate into a series of more skills based classes (Broadcast Journalism, Newspaper Journalism, and Advanced Online Journalism). We conclude with a capstone seminar, Journalism and Society, which is usually my class.

By the time we have reached this capstone seminar, my students are excited and eager to enter the world of journalism. As a class, we make our way through the journalistic fundamentals (always, of course, with the internet implicitly or explicitly in mind), discussing how to verify evidence, land an interview, and track down documents of both the paper and digital variety. I spend a lot of time on journalism history, because I think that a genealogical approach to the occupation of newsgathering helps my students understand that the current set of digitally enabled changes in news production is only the latest development in the long history of journalism. For a break, we watch the film *Shattered Glass*, the story of the young fabulist Steven Glass, which I hope will serve as a warning of everything not to do.

And then, at some point, comes the class I dread. The baldest version of the title is "How to Get a Job."

Because the problem is, I don't actually have an answer.

The Current Crisis and the "Profession" of Journalism

The numbers are stark. As documented by the Pew Research Center's *State of the News Media 2013*, "estimates for newspaper newsroom cutbacks in 2012 put the industry down 30% since 2000 and below 40,000 full-time professional employees for the first time since 1978" (Pew 2013, 1). It must be difficult to continue to write the opening sentences of the Pew report every year, because every year since 2006, the news has been basically the same: cuts to personnel, falling advertising revenues, and newspapers closed or merged. At least two major newspapers—the *Detroit Free Press* and the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*—no longer print news 7 days a week. And it is nearly as bad in the world of television news; "on local

TV . . . sports, weather and traffic now account on average for 40% of the content produced on the newscasts studied while story lengths shrink. On CNN, the cable channel that has branded itself around deep reporting, produced story packages were cut nearly in half from 2007 to 2012" (1).

There have been signs, of late, that at least a few of the most elite newspapers are having success with a "paywall" or "metered" model, in which readers get a certain number of online news articles for free and then must subscribe to access the rest. For the first time in decades, the *New York Times* made more money from readers in 2012 than it did from advertisers. But even at these prestige papers, the ability to charge for content is largely seen as a way to stabilize reporting capacity rather than grow it. It is unlikely that local and regional newspapers will use any success they have at launching paywalls to re-invest in hiring large numbers of reporters.

Even before this current "crisis in journalism"—brought about by the collapse in newspaper business models, the impact of digital technologies, and the reluctance of journalists to change their occupational self-image to meet new work realities—the idea of educating journalists as professional workers was controversial. Needless to say, under present circumstances, it still is. In essence, many people, scholars included, doubt whether journalism is a profession at all. And because it operates under such a complex and contradictory set of macro-sociological influences (Schudson and Anderson, 2008), journalism is actually a good case study through which to understand the working out of occupational discourses in times of rapid economic and cultural change and widespread professional delegitimation.

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So why has journalism failed to become what most sociologists recognize as a true profession? Or perhaps in slightly less categorical terms, why has journalism's "professional project," its attempt to establish what Andrew Abbott calls "professional jurisdiction" over a particular set of occupational tasks, largely failed? (Abbott, 1993). For comparison's sake, let us briefly discuss a classic example of a more authoritative profession—the law. At the core of the legal profession lies an educational process, a form of certification that occurs through the granting of the Juris Doctor (J.D.) degree, and the more formal mechanism of

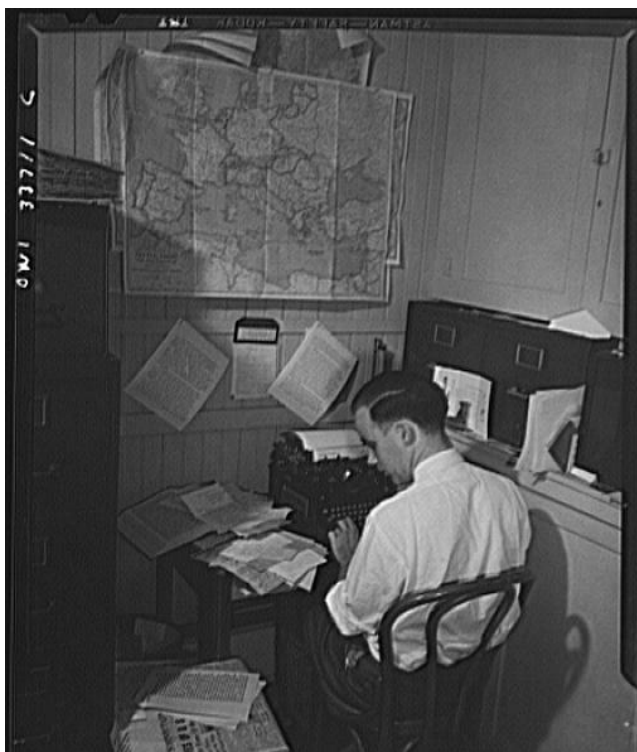
bar certification. At the core of the law, in other words, we see both the creation and negotiation of legal expertise (defined rhetorically through educational curricula and culturally through training in a certain style or mode of thought) as well as the erection of a boundary line between lawyers and non-lawyers (i.e., those without the necessary degrees and who have not been admitted to the bar). Even in the law, however, the processes by which an occupation makes itself into a profession are not quite that simple. The very acting out of legal knowledge in day-to-day work, far from both the classroom and the bar examiner's office, itself helps define legal expertise. At the same time, the relationship between lawyers and various non-core occupational groups—between lawyers and paralegals; corporate accountants and transactional attorneys; legal professionals and other experts of various kinds (for example, so-called expert witnesses); and, increasingly, between firm and contract attorneys (in effect, legal temp work) —help make the borderline between the inside and the outside of the profession less a sharp line than a fuzzy boundary zone.

And in journalism, which is far less of an authoritative and traditional profession than the law, matters are worse. Lacking, as it does, the strong core professional advantages of a field like the law—without a clearly defined educational curriculum or even distinct pedagogically enforced style of thought, and, even more importantly, barred by the First Amendment from instituting a formal licensing mechanism—journalism is largely reliant upon *only* peripheral boundary work. Journalistic expertise, in other words, is almost always defined on the job. Further, the lack of a clear occupational boundary marker within the core of journalism makes the negotiations between journalists and their competitors—sources, public relations executives, campaign communications staffers, freelance writers, bloggers, etc.—both more important for definitional purposes and incredibly problematic at the same time. If the legal occupation can be thought of as a solid core of professionalism surrounded by a thin border zone, journalism might be viewed as almost entirely border zone.

In short, despite its position as the one of the most important occupations engaged in the collection and dissemination of publicly relevant information, journalism has failed to achieve what Abbott calls “a claim of jurisdiction . . . [in which] a profession asks society to recognize its cognitive structure through exclusive rights” (59). If journalism is, as its practitioners and theorists

often aver, the attempt to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing, then the knowledge-object over which journalism attempts to lay claim is the unique and privileged ability to recognize, gather, analyze, and convey this information. But an analysis of the self-conception of many journalism educational programs demonstrates that both teachers and students often explicitly deny the existence of any sort of abstract, expert knowledge upon which reporters might base their professional claims. The leading paradigm of professional journalism education, in fact, has taken great pains to emphasize its lack of expertise and its use of a simple shoe leather methodology. The dominant notion of journalism education as imparting a craft, rather than an intellectual pedagogy through which reporters are trained to gain access to truth, renders ultimately suspect any straightforward sociological narrative of jurisdictional competition. The basic pedagogy of journalism education differs from school to school, and there is no widely accepted central body of knowledge to which most journalism students orient themselves. The core requirements and sequencing of many journalism programs vary widely. Some schools emphasize more analytical approaches, others emphasize a case study approach, and others are oriented entirely towards skill training. Still others focus on presenting the history, ethics, and laws of journalism in their broader context. In essence, the actions of professional schools and of educators both reflect and reinforce journalism's complex relationship with the entire concept of professionalism.

So how does the revolution in journalistic production and economics relate to this tenuous professional project? The link between the two is empirically oblique but important because one crisis (the economic) is often seen as causing the other (the professional). The collapse of the commercial news industry—the crisis in news—is simultaneously an economic crisis, exacerbated by a technological crisis, which has been often confused with a crisis of professionalism and occupational authority. The advertising market, through which the news business, for most of the 20th century, achieved record profits, has been almost completely transformed. The expansion in the number of digital media outlets online has shattered newspaper's ability to set monopoly prices, as has the ability of product and service to go directly to the consumer without an intermediary. And the availability of increasingly granular data on user response to advertising online has fundamentally



WRITING NEWS BROADCAST FOR THE SCHOOLS. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

transformed John Wanamaker's old adage that "half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half." Many companies now know which half is wasted; even worse, they know the amount of money wasted on pre-digital advertising was far more than fifty percent.

So the crisis in news is mostly an advertising crisis. Why should this cause a journalistic crisis of confidence, even within a weakly institutionalized field? What do declining ad rates have to do with occupational self-doubt? Setting aside the loss of jobs and the decline in what Len Downie and Michael Schudson have called local "accountability journalism" (Downie and Schudson, 2009), the problem is that the digital advertising collapse has also coincided with the sudden ability of ordinary citizens to take up (even if they are far from taking over) many of the functions formerly monopolized by journalists. In addition to the voices on the op-ed page, there are literally thousands of people opining about current events for fun and (occasionally) profit. Deep subject matter experts, who used to rely on journalists to transmit their thoughts and knowledge to the broader public, now have their own venues through which to communicate; for those experts who can write well, this is a real boon. And finally ordinary citizens, armed with smart phone technology, now usually serve as the first source of information about rapidly unfolding, unplanned news events like natural disasters or terrorist attacks. In many ways, the partial democratization of journalistic functions has only an oblique relationship with the larger macro-level advertising collapse. But, the two trends are often confused, which, to return to our opening observation, has only increased the difficulty for journalism schools in figuring out what to teach their students.

In the 21st century world, the unwieldy concept of journalistic professionalism that educational programs and occupational cultures once served is thus under sustained attack from a variety of forces. And in many ways, journalism and journalism education are far more vulnerable than ever before. But in other ways, could it be possible that journalism's odd professional status gives its practitioners, and those who teach those practitioners in American institutions of higher education, room to experiment and adapt? How are journalism schools responding to the current crisis? How has journalism's largely unsuccessful professionalization project limited journalism schools? And how has the strange nature of journalistic professionalism potentially (if ironically) opened up avenues for new thinking about the role of the professions in a digital age?

The Current Crisis and the Problematic Response

For an educational system whose primary function has been to pump graduates into more or less secure, stable employment, this crisis in journalism has obviously caused a crisis in pedagogical rhetoric, and increasingly in the practices of j-schools themselves. J-school was once controversial on an intellectual and philosophical level; now, given the decline of the industry, it is even more vulnerable from an economic standpoint. Media critics, like Michael Wolff at *Vanity Fair*, called 21st century journalism

schools "notorious [for] for taking students' or their parents' money to train them for a livelihood that it reasonably can predict will not exist."

In general, the journalism education industry has reacted in two complementary ways to the triple crisis of economic disruption, technological disruption, and a decline in cultural authority (Ryfe and Messing, 2013). Some have argued that journalism schools ought to turn themselves into "teaching hospitals" in order to better marry communications research with industry practice. Other have contended that journalism schools need to become entrepreneurial incubators, teaching their students that the only certainty in the news industry right now is uncertainty and that students must be prepared to live in a period of extended employment limbo and even create their own careers and news institutions. But as we will see below, both of these solutions require us to embrace some dubious practical and normative tradeoffs, and neither really grapples with the historic and current challenges to journalistic professionalism.

The Teaching Hospital

In many ways, the arguments for journalism schools to turn themselves into the functional equivalent of teaching hospitals is simply putting a new label on a practice that has existed in j-schools for over a century. Here is how Eric Newton of the Knight Foundation, one of the strongest proponents of the teaching hospital model, describes the idea: "a model of learning-by-doing that includes college students, professors and professionals working together under one 'digital roof' for the benefit of a community. Student journalists provide news and engage the community in innovative ways. Top professionals support and guide them. Good researchers help design and study their experiments" (Ellis, 2013).

In other words, the notion of journalism school as a teaching hospital argues in part that deficits in community news production will be made up through the work of students and academic faculty. Journalism schools, housed at relatively stable community anchor institutions like universities, have the capacity to regularly produce the kind of relevant news that is being abandoned as newspapers shrink and business models collapse.

The problem with this solution is not only that it places the burden of informing the local public on students who are often untrained and on professors who may specialize in other, more esoteric subjects, but it also puts some of the most important production of information in our democracy on the backs of students to do for free or close to free. Criticisms of the exploitation of student labor can be increasingly heard with regard to these unpaid internships. Recently, the investigative news outlet Pro Publica caused a furor when it reported "at Medill, students pay \$15,040 in quarterly tuition for the privilege of working full-time jobs as unpaid interns." (Pro Publica, 2013). Students briefly working unpaid internships on their way to more or less stable secure careers might not cause a furor; but part of the backlash against unpaid university-based newswork lies in the fact that such jobs no longer exist. Under the cover of the public good, and in response to the very real declines in reporting capacities at a variety of

local and regional news organizations, journalism schools and the journalism profession itself risk buying into a system in which cultural labor is irregular, uncertain, and does not come with any guarantee of eventual employment. It is one thing when this change is endorsed by profit seeking news organizations; it is even worse, perhaps, when public and public-oriented universities make it the center of their curricular reform efforts.

To summarize, while there are many surface benefits to the teaching hospital concept, the changes it recommends accept the current decline in powerful journalistic anchor-institutions as a given and loads much of the work once performed by paid professionals and centralized institutions onto journalism students and faculty. This then takes us to a second possible path forward for journalism education: the entrepreneurial journalism program.

Entrepreneurialism and its Critics

What is entrepreneurial journalism? As we will see below, the term is notoriously undefined, functioning more as a catchall label than a fully fleshed out ideal. The most succinct definition comes from a program within my own university system, the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. "Our goal," reads the website for the entrepreneurial journalism program, which is a special division within the larger overall school, "is to help create a sustainable future for quality journalism. We believe that the future will be shaped by entrepreneurs who develop new business models and innovative projects – either working on their own, with startups, or within traditional media companies."



JOURNALISM TEACHER ENTERTAINING MEMBERS OF THE HIGH SCHOOL NEWSPAPER. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

The problem is that such a definition does not say very much, and can often obscure more than it reveals. Indeed, as NYU sociologists Caitlin Petre and Max Besbris have pointed out in their semi-structured in-depth interviews with over 120 journalism school professionals (JSPs), the phrase "entrepreneurial journalism" carries within it at least three distinct meanings. "The first sense is a literal one," they write. "Some JSP believe that journalism graduates must invent their own jobs, often by starting their own companies, since 'traditional' media jobs are no longer available." The second idea of entrepreneurial is one that is less concerned with starting a new business, and more concerned with branding and promoting one's own identity and journalism in the marketplace. "The final sense in which entrepreneurial is used is more nebulous," Petre and Besbris conclude. "Essentially it is a catchall term referring to a particular type of disposition: a student who is boundlessly energetic, game, and highly adaptable. It also means being willing and able to accept working

conditions that are unstable, poorly paid, and without benefits" (Petre and Besbris 2013).

Gina Neff, in her recent work on venture labor in the book of the same name, demonstrates that these three different uses of "entrepreneurial" are far from contradictory; indeed, they all stem from a basic shift in the social structures of work. Neff defines venture labor as "the explicit expression of entrepreneurial values by nonentrepreneurs," and argues that the adoption of this entrepreneurial mindset is a rational response to larger changes in workplace security. It is thus not surprising that this shift would be manifesting itself within the journalism education industry at a time when the larger industry journalism schools serve is teetering on the brink of collapse (Neff, 2013: 16).

Venture labor, Neff argues, is the product of larger macro-level economic changes, not the cause of them, and while Neff does not go so far as to call the venture labor mindset "false consciousness," she does make the argument that the dynamics of venture labor's relationship to capital are roughly comparable to the dynamics observed in the traditional forms of Marxist labor theory – the appropriation of surplus value (or in this case, of surplus venture labor) by capital.

Both responses of journalism school educators and administrators—the idea of the teaching hospital and the adoption of the entrepreneurial mindset—run the risk of simply adjusting journalism school to the new and exploitative realities that now dominate the journalism industry. Given that journalism

schools have *always* catered to the needs of the news industry, this shift is not really a surprise. But it does put educators in the awkward position of simply continuing on the path we have always trodden, to train our graduates for careers that have grown even more precarious and exploitative in the past twenty years. What is worse, neither entrepreneurial journalism nor the teaching hospital model really addresses the professionalization challenge—the fact that the value of journalistic professionalism is ever more in doubt as technologies democratize access to media production.

Journalism and the Liberal Arts Tradition

And so I stand in front of my students and ask myself—what to tell them? What sort of future paths should they explore?

The answers to those questions require journalism teachers to face up to the cultural dilemmas wrought by technological change as much as they do the economic and

business model challenges. We must answer, in other words, the question of what journalism education is for as much as we try to answer the question of how to get a journalism job. To answer this first question we must make four pedagogical adjustments in tandem. First, we ought to embrace the notion that many of our students will be reporters at some point in their lives, even if few of them ever become working journalists in the traditional sense. This should lead to us taking a second step, which would be to focus our teaching on questions of media production literacy. Third, we ought to encourage our students to honestly assess the pluses and minuses of the classic models of journalistic professionalism. All these steps are grounded in the fourth shift, which basically amounts to a rethinking of the relationship of journalism and the liberal arts. All of these steps, in other words, involve reframing the study of journalism as a form of critical education that can help both ordinary citizens as well as prospective journalists navigate the world of the 21st century.

Even before this current “crisis in journalism”—brought about by the collapse in newspaper business models, the impact of digital technologies, and the reluctance of journalists to change their occupational self-image to meet new work realities—the idea of educating journalists as professional workers was controversial. Journalism schools should thus take a more proactive role in educating students and citizens on issues of media literacy. In a report to the FCC in the summer of 2010, the deans at twelve leading journalism schools went so far as to argue that journalism schools should educate the populace in “read-write” media literacy; they should teach citizens how to not only intelligently consume information but also how to produce it. If we are all going to be reporters at least once in our lives, we all should learn at least the basics of how to properly produce news about current events. And understanding how news gets made can, of course, help us all become more savvy news consumers as well. In doing so, we will inevitably need to take a hard, historically informed look at what exactly journalistic professionalism is, what practices it encourages, and what alternatives to the current governing understanding of mainstream journalistic professionalism now exist. We do this, not to deny that journalistic work includes room for the reporter-as-expert, but rather to problematize the notion of an elite journalistic class that exists to report the news for a unified and homogenous public. By embracing a critical approach to the journalism profession we can create a more self-reflexive mindset for those journalists ambitious, lucky, or talented enough to find professional jobs. Rather than using professional school as a mechanism for instilling occupational ideology, we ought to use professionally-inclined journalism programs to critique their very own, seemingly practical lessons.

If these changes were made, would there still be any point in calling something “journalism school”? Would students ever enter a program of media literacy education without the carrot of a career dangling in front of them? I think they would – though many of them would probably be signing up for j-school for different reasons than our current crop of students. One of the ironies of the current journalistic moment is that the enrollment in j-school has

actually held fairly steady over the past decade; until 2011, enrollment actually increased, and even after a drop in 2011, there were more minority students studying in journalism and mass communication programs than ever before (Becker, Vlad, and Kalpen, 2012). While the recent decline surely does represent a worrying trend for educators, it is also reasonable to assume that at least some of the recent enrollment growth in media and journalism programs has been driven by the sense that, to truly understand the modern world, it is important to understand the operation of the media, as well as the manner in which that media is produced.

By treating journalism education as a *general* course of study in media production, as well as a form of critical engagement with our ever more mediated world, we teachers will be doing “triple duty.” We will be grappling with the genuine desire on the part of our students to understand and partake in the symbolic construction practices of the 21st century. We will be educating the part-time or momentary journalist-- the citizen who occasionally, but not always, engages in media production or dissemination of information of great public import. And finally, we will be equipping the smaller but by no means intellectually diminished crop of full-time journalists with the set of new and traditional skills that are increasingly required of them in the rapidly shifting job market.

In short, we might be returning journalism education to a central place within the liberal arts tradition that has formed the backbone of the American education system since the late 19th century. There is little doubt that this tradition is itself under threat, as numerous scholars and academic professionals have documented with increasing alarm. But as abilities to engage in a variety of forms of cultural, communicative production have become diffused ever more widely throughout society, we need to fuse the rigor of professional communication education with some critical reflection on the ideologies at work within that communication process. We have all, in other words, bought into the media production system whether we like it or not. Only if we teach our students how to live and create within that system can we have any hope of turning the slow, steady decline of professional journalism into something that benefits society, rather than simply something that diminishes it.

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