

Forum Essay 1

What I've Learned, What I've Unlearned

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It is indisputable that one of the defining realities of the current moment is that we are living through a time of great change in both journalism and journalism education. For at least the last decade or more—a significant portion of the careers of most of us—this change has been occurring, and the transformations have taken a variety of forms.

Many are of the technological sort. Examples would include the rise of the World Wide Web, the new primacy of blogs in the daily journalistic discourse, and other new forms of communication technology, recently invented or on the horizon and soon to appear.

The second category of change would certainly have to include the economic transformations of the media world. New business models seem to emerge daily. Revenue streams are suddenly diverted. Even the most basic economic equations in the business of journalism are undergoing significant disruption.

Perhaps another aspect of change seems to be occurring in the political arena. In the age of "All Spin, All the Time," an increasingly confrontational approach by traditional news sources in the political realm has transformed the nature of political reporting. And journalism must take responsibility for some of the changes in the media landscape, including what might be called the "New Partisanship," as well as a de-legitimization of the longstanding ideal of objectivity.

And lastly, many of the changes have been cultural. In a professionally profound way, in the minds of many both inside and outside the industry, there has been a transformation in what it means to be a journalist. Who these days can rightfully claim to be a journalist? And, as Jay Rosen so eloquently asks, "What are journalists for?"¹ Perhaps similar observations can be made about journalism education. As an attempt to mirror the professional reality, a large number of schools have been thinking about revising, or indeed completely reordering, their curricula.

Several large questions present themselves here. In the midst of all this change, are matters being altered for the better? Has the transformation resulted in improvements? There might be value in addressing the issue as an interrogatory: in effect, to ask ourselves what changes would we applaud? At a minimum, this might go a long way toward assisting us in defining what we actually mean by better.

There may, of course, be two perspectives from which to look at this. One is from the point of view of the practitioner. How have these changes improved her professional life? Made her work more efficient? Made her work less hierarchical? Made her work more satisfying? As an aside, it is clear that this line of inquiry is of intense interest to one particular constituency: our students. They, after all, will be active participants in the brave new world to come.

A second perspective from which to address the question might focus not on the individual but on the profession as a whole. For example, what changes now occurring, as well as those on the horizon, make journalism more effective? This seems a particularly germane line of inquiry in the sense outlined by John Courtney Murray in his thesis about journalism's role in the "consent of the governed."² Other possible criteria in this area might include questions such as: Have the changes made journalism more accountable? Have they made it more responsible? Have they made it more transparent? More inclusive? And indeed, with your permission, more inspiring?

As we ponder the transformations we have already seen, as well as those likely to come, four fairly important and interrelated aspects of improvement seem to suggest themselves. First, the very *role of the journalist* is changing. While the reporting function remains paramount, a pair of factors—the increased speed of the discourse and the multiplicity of formats and platforms—have significantly enlarged the reportorial role. "Journalist as reporter" is becoming "journalist as packager, producer, and even performer." One might also add that, with the breakdown of traditional news writing formulas such as the inverted pyramid, "reporter as accomplished writer" could be added to the list.

Second, the core *mission of journalism* has been changing. There are many ways to describe this, but I suspect the best is to understand this is to acknowledge that, in the sports idiom of today, the bar has been (and will continue to be) raised. Simply put, journalism must now add value to the information it conveys. There are, in effect, new informational imperatives that will be asked of us from ever-more-demanding readers and viewers. When, for example, one considers the new two-way conversation that has emerged between the journalist and the reader, one is reminded of how really revolutionary this new demand is. The old model, not much changed since the time of Luther and his hammer and nail, is surely on its way into history's dustbin.

Third, one can argue that the *craft of journalism* is changing, and in some ways the positive elements of this are quite compelling. What might be termed the "New Accountability," driven mostly, I suspect, by the blogging watchdogs, is considered by many a major step forward. In fact, it is possible that 10 or 20 years from now media historians will look back on this phenomenon—and the increased rigor it encouraged on the part of journalists—and credit it for helping journalism to emerge stronger from the troubled period of transformation. And there are other examples of the changes to the craft, and these might include aspects of reporting: for example, less reliance on the official spokespersons and the use of new data sources. In addition, there are changes in aspects of writing and presentation, such as the rise of narrative forms and the new and improved use of info-graphics.

My fourth and last area of possible improvement is that the *benefits of journalism* are changing. Readers will get more for their money. There was already a virtuous circle of rising expectations, and this will certainly continue. My guess is that there will be at least two important results. What has been called the "journalistic distance" between the journalist and the reader, producer and consumer, will decrease. As a result, there will be a significant increase in transparency—which, one can argue, is no bad thing. And in addition, journalism will play a

substantial part in the ongoing rise in society's individual empowerment. Citizens will not only be encouraged to participate more rather than less, but will also make their own choices about their own personal interests and the common good.

In closing, with your permission, a brief word about changes in journalism education, specifically the nature of our students. Yes, they have changed also—to my eye, especially in the last ten years or so. The clay we are given to work with is indeed different. A very important point to be kept in mind is that students today are as confused about all these changes as we are. Perhaps that contributes to making them more challenging to teach, more concerned about the future, and less deferential.

Ah, this last aspect: deference. I admit can be a little troubling, even problematical, at times. But then I remind myself that I am charged with educating journalists. And whether in their future working lives they are facing petulant officialdom—or all the many changes and uncertainties that will certainly characterize their professional lives for years to come—it will be perseverance and fortitude, not deference, that will serve them and their profession exceedingly well.

Endnotes:

¹ See Jay Rosen, *What Are Journalists For?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

² John Courtney Murray, "The Social Function of the Press," in *Bridging the Sacred and the Secular: Selected Writings of John Courtney Murray*, edited by J. Leon Hooper, ed., (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 200-208.