Commentary: It's Time to Redefine Journalism Education in Canada

Mike Gasher
Concordia University

Canada's journalism schools have since their inception defined themselves as servants of two masters: the news industry, which demands graduates with the requisite technical skills for entry-level reporting positions, and the university, which demands adherence to the academy's tripartite mission of research, teaching, and community service. This structural tension has been held together by the persistent belief that journalism is a core institution of democracy, and therefore journalism, even if taught in a vocational manner, constitutes a suitable field of study at the university level. By educating and training journalists for work in the news industry, that is, journalism schools and universities serve democratic society.

Recent trends, however, are straining this tension and threatening to make a mockery of the idea that journalism schools serve democracy by producing well-trained graduates for the news industry. As the news industry becomes increasingly corporatized, commercialized, and concentrated, and as it forsakes public service as a guiding principle, the role of journalism schools, too, must be redefined, their mission recast. Rather than serve the news industry, a function that journalism schools have come to take for granted (e.g., Johansen & Dornan, 2003), they should instead position themselves as serving journalism in all its burgeoning forms; that is, journalism schools must make a distinction between the news industry and journalism. And by abiding more closely to the academy's goals of research, teaching, and community service, that mission can be much more satisfactorily accomplished. As Cole C. Campbell, the new dean of the journalism school at the University of Nevada-Reno, told the August 2005 meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication in San Antonio, journalism's ideals of producing information, criticism, and understanding are "synonymous" with those of the academy (Campbell, 2005).

While there has long been pressure on journalism schools to take a scholarly turn, this has acquired more urgency in recent years. This rethinking of journalism education has occurred at conferences devoted to the topic, in journal articles and books, and in an increasing number of university board rooms. If the threatened closure of the journalism program at the University of Western Ontario in 1993

Mike Gasher is a former newspaper reporter, copyeditor, and editor who is currently an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at Concordia University, 7141 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal, QC, H4B 1R6. E-mail: gashmj8590@yahoo.ca.

***Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol 30 (2005) 665-672**
©2005 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation

was an early sign of changing times (Johansen & Dornan, 2003), the event that most clearly flagged the seriousness of this need for change was the 2002 decision by Columbia University's flagship School of Journalism to upgrade its highly regarded MA program. University president Lee Bollinger suspended the search for a new dean until the school had a chance to clarify its mission. Specifically, Bollinger said the school needed to place less emphasis on teaching basic reporting skills and become more scholarly by addressing more substantive issues such as changes in communication and the role of a free press in a democracy. "To teach the craft of journalism is a worthy goal," Bollinger said at the time, "but clearly insufficient in this new world and within the setting of a great university" (Arenson, 2002, B7).

Predictably, Bollinger's decision was met with bitter, often infantile, criticism, and it has been cited in every subsequent discussion of journalism education reform, by opponents as well as advocates. But the Columbia controversy must be seen as part of a broader move to re-invent journalism school. The recent establishment of two new scholarly journals—*Journalism Studies* (Routledge) and *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* (Sage Publications)—provides a forum for the kind of critical and theoretical scholarship envisioned by Columbia's president and other like-minded reformers. In 2004, the International Communication Association established a new division of journalism studies "to promote journalism theory, journalism research, and professional education in journalism as well as to provide a critical perspective on its specific functions, structures and practice" (ICA, 2004, p. 1). A World Journalism Education Congress is planned for July 2007 in Singapore to consider the state of journalism education worldwide (AEJMC, 2005).

The push to transform journalism education—in Canada and elsewhere—is being driven by a number of internal and external forces. The change agents include a new generation of faculty members with graduate degrees and research training in communication and media studies, senior university administrators demanding that journalism schools do more than train students for the news industry workforce, researchers carving out the emerging field of "journalism studies," alternative media and media-reform movements that are redefining what journalism is and can be, and a hypercommercialized news industry that degrades journalism when it treats communities solely as markets, audiences strictly as consumers.

This ongoing transformation has so far met with considerable resistance from journalism educators across Canada, who have always seen their schools as distinct units within the university system, schools with a vocational rather than a research mission, devoted to teaching students the fundamental skills of journalism, staffed with faculty members who have distinguished themselves as practising journalists rather than as active scholars. The pedagogical philosophy has been "learning by doing" and the standards employed have been those of the mainstream news media. Calls for a more scholarly approach to the teaching and

study of journalism have largely been denounced, framed by the tried-and-true "real world vs. ivory tower" dichotomy that divorces theory from practice.

This resistance was very much in evidence at two recent meetings sponsored by the industry-funded Canadian Media Research Consortium. In November 2003, journalism educators were invited to Ryerson University for a day-long conference. The keynote speaker was Betty Medsger, a former investigative journalist and former chair of the Department of Journalism at San Francisco State University best known for her 1996 study of journalism education, *Winds of Change* (Medsger, 1996). Medgser's presentation was a call to maintain a narrow vocational approach to journalism education. While she argued that the university's duty is to create new knowledge, she characterized new journalism knowledge as a vocational skill set that applied critical thinking only to students' news assignments and not to the institution of journalism itself. The value of a journalism education, she said, was the ability to *do* journalism. She favoured research, but spoke of research the way most journalists do, divorced from theory, methodology, and the existing scholarly literature. She decried the move by universities to hire faculty members with PhDs, because this would displace faculty members who have actually done journalism, without ever acknowledging that the PhDs being hired also have news industry experience (Medsger, 2003). Even though a counter view was later expressed by Mitchell Stephens, a professor of journalism at New York University who said the biggest failing of journalism education was its unwillingness to be "the brains of the profession," Medsger's message was echoed throughout the day and a consensus emerged.

Similarly, a meeting of Canadian journalism researchers in Montreal in June 2005 reinforced a narrow definition of journalism research as empirical and applied, disparaging the academic turn in Canadian journalism schools as irrelevant to journalism as it is practised and potentially harmful to students seeking a future in the news industry. What had been envisioned by organizers as an exercise in community-building among researchers instead reinforced an unfortunate and unnecessary gulf between scholars and practitioners.

The pressure to redefine journalism education warrants a much more sophisticated response from Canadian journalism educators than we have seen to date. Rather than greeting this transformation with a reinforcement of the territory called "journalism" and with reactionary caricatures of theory and research, Canadian journalism educators need to engage in the redefinition of what constitutes a well-educated journalist and what contribution journalism schools could make to journalism as an evolving practice. The real driving force behind the redefinition of journalism education is the recognition that there is a social need not being filled, and that journalism schools could help fill that need.

Journalism as it is practised by the commercial news industry is in crisis (see Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Posner, 2005), a crisis characterized by, among other things, growing mistrust from the public, declining audiences, an inability to appeal to youth audiences, frequent ethical breaches, the narrowing of public debate, and the failure to meet the challenge of new media, alternative media, and

media-reform movements. While often presented as a crisis of individual journalists, it can be better understood as a structural crisis that calls into question the news industry's appropriation of journalism as a corporate domain, and by extension, corporate journalism's ability to serve its community. Journalism schools are part of this structure and are thus implicated in this crisis.

The call to redefine journalism education is a call, in the words of scholar Barbie Zelizer (2004), to take journalism seriously, to perceive it as a key social institution, to live up to the responsibilities implied by constitutional guarantees of a free press. To question journalism's contribution to democracy is not to make light of the ideal, but to scrutinize the ability of journalism *as it is practised* to serve that ideal. Journalism is a practice founded on ideals, with truth, objectivity, accuracy, balance, and fairness foremost among them. A starting point for journalism education surely must be, then, to delve into these ideals, to question their viability: How accessible is the truth? How do we recognize it if we find it? What does objectivity mean? Is objectivity a useful ideal? What do balance and fairness mean, and how do we operationalize them? A journalism education confined to teaching practical skills repeats and reinforces journalism's mythological claims rather than turning those claims into hypotheses to be tested.

This is where theory comes in. Those who criticize theory—social theory, political theory, communication theory—as academic mumbo-jumbo with no practical application to journalism overlook the fact that theories, or ways of understanding, always inform practice. Journalists need to understand the theoretical premises that guide their work. Journalism schools already subscribe—uncritically—to a theoretical framework that informs even the most practical courses; the problem is that these theories are rarely made explicit, they are rarely called into question, and when they are identified at all, they are rarely presented in the context of competing, alternative theories. The conventional theoretical framework is comprised of, among other beliefs, the democratic theory of the press (whereby journalism serves democracy, as opposed to serving economic and political power); a reflection theory of the media (whereby the media reflect, rather than construct, society); a theory of objectivity (which fails to account adequately for human subjectivity); and a theory of liberal pluralism (whereby truth emerges by giving voice to a range of diverse viewpoints).

Theory, in other words, cannot be divorced from practice. Theory infuses practice, it in large part explains the particularities of a practice like journalism, and it addresses journalism's most fundamental questions: What is journalism for? Why are we doing this? Who are we serving with our practice? The answers to these questions serve as guideposts at every stage of the reporting and editing process, from determining whether an event is newsworthy, to deciding on a specific story angle, to selecting research and interview sources, to writing the story lead, to determining where that story is placed in the newspaper or newscast. Every news story, from the most serious to the most trivial, requires an explanation, a justification, a theory, behind its production.

A necessary part of teaching students how to *do* journalism, then, is not only making them familiar with the theories that inform the practice, but making those theories themselves topics for discussion. Again, we need to turn assumptions into questions: Does this practice serve the community? If so, how? If not, can the practice be changed?

This is where research comes in. One of the services research performs in any field of study is that it subjects conventional theories to evaluation by examining their logic and testing their premises in particular grounded contexts. Research thereby validates, criticizes, revises, or rejects received ideas and proposes new ways of thinking. If we teach aspiring journalists to be suspicious of conventional wisdom in their reporting—to think critically—then surely we as educators should be equally wary of conventional understandings of the practice and institution of journalism.

This means reading and keeping up to date, and it means conducting research ourselves—all kinds of research, from so-called high theory (for those who are able and inclined) to documentary work. Coinciding with the foundation of journalism schools in Canada in the post-war period has been the emergence of communication and media-studies programs, well-respected programs, which have engaged some of the foremost thinkers in the field. But even though journalism is a form of communication, these two disciplines have had little influence on one another. If Barbie Zelizer (2004) takes communication scholarship to task for not taking journalism research seriously, the counterargument can also be made; journalism educators have not taken communication scholarship seriously. We have not kept abreast of the vast range of ideas that most closely pertain to the practice we care most about, and thus we have not brought into the classroom even the most fundamental teachings of semiotics, signification, representation, and discourse analysis (even though we spend a great deal of our time instructing students about language), ethnography (even though our students work in a diverse environment, write about "others" on a regular basis, and rely heavily on people as information sources), epistemology (though journalists produce knowledge), social theory, political theory, feminist theory, or political economy (even though we are preparing students for a career in a predominantly commercial industry). Not even history (whether of journalism or of media) is required by all programs.

We operate from the assumption that these topics are either not relevant to the aspiring practitioners we are training or, if they are important, that students will acquire the basic knowledge themselves in the other liberal arts courses they take as electives. This means, of course, that they are left on their own to make the connections between those subjects and journalism, if they see a connection at all (see Skinner, Gasher, & Compton, 2001). This renders journalism a study of form and not content.[1]

The question has to be asked: Why are journalism educators so hesitant, even afraid, to venture onto the ground of theory and scholarly research? There is no single answer to such a question, but let me propose two partial answers. The first is personal, the second institutional.

Most journalism educators in Canada are former working journalists with no research-oriented graduate degree in a related field. This situation is changing, but to date the majority of senior faculty and department administrators are those whose principal formation has been working in newsrooms (Raudsepp, 2004). While they have distinguished themselves as working journalists, they have not undergone the kind of research training that a graduate degree, and especially a PhD, provides. That training includes a grasp of the scholarly literature, familiarity with a range of pertinent theoretical work, an understanding of research methodology, and actual scholarly research experience. Most journalism educators are not, in other words, equipped to teach theoretical material or to conduct certain kinds of scholarly research. The scholarly turn, then, is seen as a personal threat to their professional standing.

It is also seen as a territorial threat, a threat to the institution of journalism, what journalism is. Journalists have a strong cultural sense of themselves, what it means to be a journalist, who belongs to this club and who doesn't, who has actually *done* journalism and who hasn't. Even though journalists themselves feel free to write about and comment on practices and professions with which they have no first-hand experience and no necessary specialized training—e.g., politics, business, sports, the arts—they resent their own practice being analyzed and criticized by non-journalists, especially by academics. They recognize the credential of journalism experience, but would bar from the j-school press box the credential of PhD (even though, as stated above, an increasing number of those PhDs seeking entry to journalism departments also have practical journalism experience).

This is a problem for journalism education because inherent to scholarship is lifelong learning and the kind of critical thinking that asks us, as teachers, as researchers, as administrators, to question constantly our own assumptions and beliefs. This resistance to change is also hard to comprehend because the scholarly turn being advocated is consistent with, rather than contrary to, the traditional goals of journalism education: to teach students to be good journalists. Journalism educators, that is, could do a better job of serving their students and serving journalism by adhering more faithfully to the three aspects of the university mission—research, teaching, and community service—especially at a time when journalism itself is being redefined, not only by the news industry, but by other information providers such as alternative media and bloggers.

Besides subjecting conventional wisdom to critical analysis, as discussed above, research and related forms of knowledge production provide journalism educators not only the prerequisite material to conduct further research, but the basic tools required for classroom teaching. It is the existing literature that provides our course readings and informs our lesson preparation, that we ask students to consult for assignments, that provides current reference material. In Canada, particularly, there is a paucity of good, current, and relevant work that speaks to Canadian students, regardless of the area of journalism study. How many of us have been forced to use American or British or French texts because there is no adequate Canadian text available for a given course? The university asks us, as a

fundamental part of our job, to contribute to the production of this knowledge, and each of us is capable of making a contribution. Research that is more journalistic or documentary is just as welcome as research that is scholarly and theoretical. We need all kinds of work.

If classroom teaching of basic reporting skills has been the strength of Canadian journalism schools, it can be further enhanced by the introduction of courses devoted to scholarly concerns (history, theory, gender and diversity issues, discourse analysis) as well as the blending of theory—*current* theory—into skills courses. Practice as praxis. Every skills course provides an opportunity to address theoretical concerns: how language works (including visual languages); how a given story informs or provides an alternative understanding of its subject; where information comes from and who gets to speak as a source; what dominant frames are being employed to define a news event. To confine our teaching to basic writing and reporting skills is, in the words of Cole Campbell (2005), akin to teaching chemistry students only how to use beakers and Bunsen burners.

Finally, the community service component allows journalism educators to play a role beyond their own departments and influence the world of journalism as it is practised. Journalism does not belong to the news industry. If journalism is not to be merely a commercial enterprise, if it is to satisfy its own ideals of serving people as members of a democratic community, then it needs help that we can provide—as researchers and teachers, yes, but also as activists, public speakers, public intellectuals, critics, even assuming our old role as journalists. Journalism educators, for example, were never as relevant as in the period following CanWest's introduction of its national editorial policy in December 2001. Joining with working journalists and organized labour, journalism educators were leading critics and helped to shelve the policy. This was a period of re-awakening for our critical role and it needs to continue.

Journalism educators have long argued that journalism schools occupy a distinct place within the academy, that journalism schools are not like the other humanities and social science departments they are often grouped with in the governing structure of the university. The argument has never been entirely convincing to senior administrators and it is a mistake to continue playing the exception card. Lots of departments on campus—in the fine arts, in commerce, in the sciences—train students for the workforce. This does not excuse those disciplines from infusing their curricula with critical, theoretical material; in fact, one could argue that the vocational dimension of these programs demands it. Nor does it excuse their faculty members from producing new knowledge, whether as conventional research or as creative work. Journalism schools will only improve their standing within the university when they adopt the university mission as their own, and in doing so they will better serve journalism.

Precisely how journalism schools should adapt and help shape this new environment, and how they are to incorporate theory and research, will require careful thought, new approaches to hiring, a commitment from university administrators to recognize different kinds of research contributions, and an upgrading of skills

by faculty members. Most of all it will require the conviction that the goal of journalism education is to serve journalism and to serve journalism by helping to shape its future in all the forms it is likely to assume.

Notes

1. A recent initiative in the United States is addressing part of this problem. The idea calls for select journalism schools to work in concert with schools of law, public health, sciences, and business to give journalism students specialized knowledge in fields they cover as reporters (see Mangan, 2005). What is left out here is reflection on the institution of journalism itself.

References

Arenson, Karen W. (2002, July 24). Columbia president suspends search for new dean of journalism school. *The New York Times*. URL: http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F70710F8395C0C778EDDAE0894DA 404482.

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). (2005, June). World journalism education congress. *AEJMC New,. 38*(5), 1.

Campbell, Cole C. (2005, August 12). *Strengthening our place: The role of journalism programs on university campuses* (round-table discussion). Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Conference, annual conference, San Antonio, Tex.

International Communication Association (ICA). (2004). *Petition*. URL: http://www.icahdq.org/divisions JournalismStudies/jsigweb4/ICA_JSIG_petition.pdf.

Kovach, Bill, & Rosenstiel, Tom. (2001). *The elements of journalism: What newspeople should know and the public should expect*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

Johansen, Peter, & Dornan, Christopher. (2003). Journalism education in Canada. In R. Frölich & C. Holtz-Bacha (Eds.), *Journalism education in Europe and North America* (pp. 65-90). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Mangan, Katherine S. (2005, June 3). Plan would change journalism education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. URL: http://chronicle.com/weekly/v51/i39/39a00802.htm.

Medsger, Betty. (1996). *Winds of change: Challenges confronting journalism education.* Arlington, VA: The Freedom Forum.

Medsger, Betty. (2003). *Reconsidering those little questions: Who? What? When? Why? How?* Conference on Journalism Education. November 8, 2003. Ryerson University, Toronto, ON.

Posner, Richard A. (2005, July 31). Bad news. *New York Times Review of Books*, 1, 8-11.

Raudsepp, Enn. (2004, February 23). *A survey of hiring and tenure practices at university journalism programs in Canada.* Unpublished report, Concordia University, Montreal, QC.

Skinner, David, Gasher, Mike, & Compton, James. (2001, December). Putting theory to practice: A critical approach to journalism studies. *Journalism: Theory, practice and criticism, 2*(3), 341-360.

Zelizer, Barbie. (2004). *Taking journalism seriously: News and the academy.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.