In our era of diplomas, journalism remains one of the few professions - like that of member of Parliament for that matter - for which no formal academic degree is required. That however should not serve as a reason for admitting to the trade all those who hate studying, who show special interest in public, social or political affairs or who are gifted with bits of literary talent. It implies, besides a little of all that, a firm grip on reality, a solid knowledge of the language used and the mastery of a certain number of techniques.

Journalists Are Know-it-alls

Any individual showing a minimum of general knowledge, an eclectic culture, or who is specialised in a field of activities useful to the circulation of information, can progressively master the style, the form and the presentation that are required in the media. It remains obvious that the latter can only profit from the fact that their new journalists have already been actively practicing the trade for a few months or years, even in simulated conditions such as are reproduced in institutions teaching journalism.

What is certain is that, besides those techniques, the journalist must be able to resort daily to a battery of essential acquired knowledge. His understanding of history, geography, law, sociology, philosophy and even certain notions of science will allow him to perceive and to situate the events he has to process in a more precise perspective. Any program of journalism instruction must take those imperatives into account and cannot limit itself to the apprenticeship of techniques. In academic institutions where the program does not correspond to the legitimate
requirements of his eventual employers, the journalist apprentice should make great efforts to acquire them from other departments or faculties if necessary.

Who Will Teach Them?

"Journalism cannot be taught: it is strictly an on-the-job training affair", claim (without a second of hesitation) almost all veterans of Québec newsrooms who have been in the profession for 15 years or more. And for a very good reason: they were not able to learn journalism in classrooms, since it has been taught in our French language colleges and universities for less than 20 years.

When this magnificent profession treacherously opened its arms to me, over 35 years ago, one needed only, in order to have access to it, to be a resourceful young chap and to write correctly. This last requirement was then accessible to all those among us whose parents could afford for them the luxury of so-called "classical studies" and who had spent four, six or eight years licking the banisters of those grandiose leftovers of our church connected architecture, the seminaries. While stuffing us with masses and inducing guilt in the face of our rising sexuality, the good priests, heavy with good will, succeeded in teaching us a minimum of language correction both written and spoken. It remained only to awaken within us the sense of news and to develop journalism style: a type of writing and a way of life.

The Good Old Days

In those matters, I owe everything to Guy Bourdon, a warm and sympathetic bon vivant, who initiated me, during the summer of my 17th year, to the newsprint format, to the notion of lead, to the five W’s as well as to the few beers with which one was compelled to sprinkle his journalistic day of work. It is to be assumed that I had the proper aptitudes since I took an immediate taste to it all. That was in 1952, in a small provincial town, in the miniscule regional office of Sherbrooke’s La Tribune, where, between the two of us, we had to "fill up" our own daily page - foolscap - of local and regional news of all types.

In those days, when a newspaper wanted to hire a new journalist, it had to engage him on trial and assume his professional training. The candidate spent a certain number of weeks, or even months, covering small fires, minor car accidents or other fillers, when it was not (oh! somber despair of my human brothers!) the luncheons of Rotary clubs, Kiwanis or other sad Optimists.

The Teachings Echo the Media Needs

The advent of television and the expansion of radio stations combined to create, in the years that followed, considerable needs for journalistic personnel, which could not be satisfied with the dropouts from an already disappearing "classical
course". It seems obvious, nowadays, that, a few mythical exceptions apart, it is not the quality of language teaching in high school or college that will contribute to the formation of writers. It became important to codify journalistic tasks, to analyse their practice and to set up a system that would really teach the trade.

In that respect, you, our Anglo-Saxon neighbors, benefit from a lengthy experience that has been quite useful to us. Journalism has been taught in American universities since the beginning of the century and, in English Canadian institutions of higher learning, since the end of the twenties. Eighty-one American universities and six Canadian ones presently award a BA in journalism; thirty-eight of those teaching institutions offer a Masters and, in about a dozen of them, one can obtain a Ph. D. In the USA, 85% of all journalists hired by medias come directly out of a journalism school.

In France, a limited number of specialized schools of journalism have been put up which are only open to students who already successfully went through two years of university studies in some specified discipline. Picked with infinite care through tough admission tests, students, who already possess a certain knowledge in a given sector are subjected, in those schools, to an intensive practical training, spread over a two-year period with direct access to the professional milieu, through a guaranteed - and compulsory - job in media, for a six months minimum period.

And At Home

In French Québec, no type of formal qualification, written or tacit, rules the employment of journalists. And yet, in an era when society draws its moral and cultural values from the media as well as from the traditional sources that are - or were - family, religion and school, it seems imperative to apply the same care in the formation of media professionals whose role is more and more important, as in that of teachers, police officers or social workers. Should not the competence and sense of ethics of those whose function it is to spread information that is often essential be of prime importance?

Since the media do not seem prone to codify their hiring requirements, the profession itself must dig into its collective experience and set up pertinent journalism teaching programs. Such is the individual initiative that led to less than a dozen of us, journalists by profession, becoming teachers by trade. The adventure dates back to 1968, and allowed Québec City's Laval University to hand out its first certificate in journalism in 1972. Today, the teaching of journalism in French is also dispensed at college level at the CEGEP de Jonquière, at certificate level in the Faculté d'éducation permanente of Université de Montréal (UdM), and, at the BA level but through a diploma in Communications, at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM).
In those four institutions, the programs first aim at teaching future journalists the basics of the trade: knowledge of the functioning of the media, critical analysis of their production, research for journalism, initiation into the rules of journalistic writing for print and electronic and production of newspapers as well as of radio and television news and information programs. In the most practical of those courses, students participate in workshops where they are put into real situations of journalism practice, through exercises reconstituting in every detail the working conditions in the written and the audiovisual press.

A Couple of New Tools

To this day, no authentically québécois written support registers those techniques nor the basic rules of practice of journalism. Aurélien Leclerc, a colleague from Jonquière, is currently working on a first textbook dealing with the basics of print journalism writing as well as assessing the situation and the functioning of our media. I personally have been writing, over the last six months, a textbook on radio and TV journalism that is to be published soon to, fill part of the gap. To structure this book, I dug mainly into my experience as both a journalist and a professor, but also was inspired by a certain number of French, American and Canadian textbooks on journalism that I have been using in my teaching.

Nineteen eighty nine will then be the year of the first French textbooks on journalism to appear in Québec. It is a start, but no textbook can pretend to transform whoever reads it into a journalist. Indeed, in a profession where the mastery of a certain number of techniques is primordial, only the practice of those techniques under professional conditions - real or simulated - can lead to a certain competence. That such competence can result from on-the-spot training remains indubitable, but veteran journalists are wrong in pretending - as they never fail to do in private or public - that journalism cannot be taught in school. And how about medicine?

Where To?

In fact however, those among our media managers who keep on supporting such out of date theories also keep on hiring most of their beginning journalists from among our best graduates. Sooner or later, they shall have to include in the very structure of their respective medium those cheap qualified labor tanks (beginners are paid minimum fees) currently filled by our few Québec schools of journalism. The way to do it? Institutionalized cooperation with journalism teaching programs and systematic on-the-spot training periods.

For their part, all our journalism teaching institutions should strongly try to improve their methods and to set up, in cooperation with the media, programs that answer the latters’ demands. Against all odds, a handful of obstinate individuals
have succeeded in setting up theoretical and practical courses in journalism that encompass more and more of the main aspects of the profession. Reassured on the quality of their teaching by the actual hiring by the media of their best graduates, those institutions have undertaken to extend the degree of training they intend to offer future journalists. In that respect, a project for a BA in Journalism (the first formal university degree in the subject to be offered in French in Québec) is progressively working its way through the various levels of administration, at l'Université du Québec à Montréal, and aims to open in September 1991.