1-1-2000

Negotiating professional and academic standards in journalism education

K. Starck
University of Iowa, US

Recommended Citation
Starck, K., Negotiating professional and academic standards in journalism education, Asia Pacific Media Educator, 8, 2000, 59-69.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss8/6
Negotiating Professional And Academic Standards In Journalism Education

Inevitable conflicts occur in establishing appropriate standards for journalism education. The professional community has specific goals in mind, usually calling for pragmatic, hands-on preparation for the practice of journalism. The academic community strives to accommodate professional demands but also has—or should have—as its mission to provide students with experiences that will help them in life-long career pursuits and to produce scholarship that enhances journalistic performance as well as society as a whole. The author maintains that professional and academic communities have different missions yet share some of the same goals. Drawing largely on the experience of the United States, the author argues against the wholesale adoption of the U.S. model of journalism education and for the establishment of the academy as the primary agent in journalism education. The author offers several proposals and considerations in the negotiating process between the profession and the academy in achieving shared goals.

Kenneth Starck
University of Iowa

The question is simple; the answer is not: Who controls professional education?

The purpose of this essay is to explore the inevitable conflicts that occur in the establishment of appropriate standards for education and propose ways to take into account not only professional and academic but also other interests.

The basic issues are relatively clear: The professional community has specific goals in mind, which usually call for pragmatic, hands-on preparation. The academic community, on the other hand, strives not only to accommodate professional demands but also to provide students with experiences that will get them a job and, ideally, provide them life-long benefits. Society represents another important constituent in this tangled web of interdependency.
Let me begin by providing some context for this paper—about myself, about the spread of journalism education globally and about the historical evolution of journalism education in the United States.

For most of my life and from a variety of perspectives, I have been contemplating journalism education—as a student, as a reporter, as a teacher, as an administrator. Over the years I have witnessed some of the best and some of the worst in journalism and journalism education. Maybe I’ve become a bit like the iconoclastic journalist of the Baltimore Sun, H. L. Mencken, who told the reporter updating his prepared obituary that it was all right, but that he wanted a line added: “As he grew older, he grew worse.”

After a lifetime of journalism and journalism education, I should have some answers. But mainly I think I have identified some of the key issues. Perhaps that, along with a few insights along the way, will be instructive.

For better or worse, the model for journalism education for most of the world has been provided by the United States. The American model has become widespread for several reasons. One is simply that the United States occupies a powerful and influential role in the world. As a result, what happens in the United States often as not leaves its mark elsewhere. More specifically, foreign graduates of United States institutions have returned to their homelands to establish programs along lines similar to their United States experience, and American journalism professors teaching in other nations have left their imprint.

Also, following the end of the Cold War and the emergence of democracies in former authoritarian nations, the United States, through private foundations as well as government initiatives, has aggressively established or reformed journalism and journalism education in many countries. In 1977 Jeremy Tunstall wrote a book with a prescient title, The Media are American. Today we can say that “journalism education is American” since more than half of the journalism programs around the world provide a curriculum patterned after American universities (Richstad, 2000:283).

Those who export and import communication policies—and such policies inevitably carry economic consequences—to facilitate the nurturing of democracy too often overlook or disregard cultural considerations. Historical and social factors are important in any nation’s history. When such factors as human rights concepts, cultural identity, colonialism or media imperialism and globalization, along with local traditions, are ignored, the result is confusion and disorder.

While certain tenets of democracy and communication may be universalizable, indigenous values must not only be identified
but taken into account. Thus, while economically well-developed nations may have much to offer, it ought not to be assumed that their systems are ideal or should serve as a prototype. For example, some supposedly advanced nations have experienced a sharp decline in citizen participation in the political process, certainly an aberration in a real democracy. One journalistic attempt to remedy this situation in the United States has been the movement toward civic (or public) journalism in which journalists assume an advocacy role. The effort has been controversial and has met with limited success (Blood, 1998).

The point is that local values ought to be respected and integrated into all facets of communication theory and practice. The identification and integration of values must come from the participants themselves. Of course, every effort should be made to examine other potentially useful ideas and practices whatever the source of origin. But this must be done critically with decisions being made locally. Only in this way can the authentic voice of a nation express itself.

Consider the debate that has been taking place for several decades over the issue of “Asian values,” whether they exist and, if so, what are they and how should they be incorporated into communication systems (Wang and Dissanayake, 1984). In a critical review of the debate, Xu (1998) identifies three perhaps obvious positions concerning the relevance of Asian values in journalism: proponents, opponents and “middle path followers.” He summarizes his examination of the three positions with:

“The debate has lasted for more than two decades and it has involved such areas as modes of modernization, concepts and practices of human rights, patterns of democracy, freedom of expression, cultural identity and the role of media in society. . . it is becoming an urgent task to explore and find out what values exist in journalism” (1998:174-175).

Now let me turn to journalism and journalism education. My concern, as will become obvious, is less with such issues as “infotainment” vs. news or required vs. optional internships and more with the underlying rationale for the existence of journalism and journalism education. My experience suggests that too often we have not thought through the fundamental assumptions inherent in our beliefs and values, which, in turn, form the basis of our actions. We tend to focus on short term objectives or become preoccupied with the crisis of the day.

This first dawned on me years ago after I left the newsroom for the classroom. More than one student asked a question along this line: “If journalism is the fine professional calling you claim it is, why aren’t you a journalist?” That was cause for reflection. I had no trouble championing the importance of journalism in
our society. But I had never really come to grips with why I was
now in the classroom. Was it different from the newsroom? What
was the relevance of journalism education? Who made up my
clientele or who were my partners? The media? The profession?
These students? The public? All of these? If so, in what order?
Or are all equal partners? In other words, what was my rationale
for the enterprise for which I had shifted career directions?

To add to the confusion it seemed that journalism education
in the United States was under constant fire from practitioners as
well as university officials. Here is a headline sample—admittedly
limited—of articles in U.S. periodicals that tended to reflect and
frame the issue for me over several decades:


“Editors Give Journalism Education Failing Grade” (Editor & Publisher, 2 November 1974).


“Proposals made to Improve Journalism Education” (Editor & Publisher, 19 March 1977).


“What’s Wrong With Journalism Education?” (Editor & Publisher, 15 November 1980).

“News Execs Urge Major Overhaul of Journalism Training Program” with an accompanying headline, “Battleground: Educators vs. News Executives” (Editor & Publisher, 6 March 1982).

“Newsroom-Classroom Gap” (The Bulletin, American Society of Newspaper Editors, October 1982).


“Do We Need Journalism Schools?” (The Bulletin, American Society of Newspaper Editors, November/December 1984).

“Bad News: The Slow, Sad Sellout of Journalism School” (Rolling Stone, 16 October 1997).

Such questions and concerns have persisted over the years.
Task force reports have added grist to the debates. Examples:
Planning for Curricular Change in Journalism Education, issued by
the Project on the Future of Journalism and Mass Communication

Let me be more specific. Here is what one US editor has written about teaching journalism:

“The truth is, that the mystery which the professors try to throw round what they call ‘journalism’ is intended simply to supply a decent disguise for the intellectual poverty and nakedness of too many of the young who enter the calling. They keep up their self-respect, or their conceit, in the absence of all other knowledge, by their knowledge of little office tricks, most of them mechanical.”

The editor was E. L. Godkin, and he was writing 110 years ago (“Schools,” 1890:197).

Indulge me one more quote, this an excerpt from a speech: “(Teaching of journalism) must place less emphasis upon technique and practice and more and more upon theory. It must deal with the reasons which underlie the practices and less with the practices as such.”

That was the future famous pollster, George H. Gallup (1927:17), speaking to a group of journalism educators meeting in Ohio December 30, 1926.

This oft-heated debate over the years mirrors the tensions over journalism education’s Janus-faced goals as perceived by those who prepare the graduates and those who hire them. The strong views affirm the intense interest in journalism education. That’s gratifying. But the discourse also highlights the distinctly different assumptions held about journalism education. Whom does journalism education serve? Whom do journalism educators serve? If we as educators do not come to grips with these questions, we are left fluttering like so many flags in the wind.

Let me be forthright about where I stand. First and foremost, I believe we serve the students who enter our classrooms. Second, we serve society. Third, the professional domain represents the bridge by which we carry out our obligations and responsibilities. By focusing on the larger community, which in most cases provides the bulk of support for our educational programs, we serve students and society and the profession in the best manner possible.

Next, let me turn to the relationship between journalism and the academy. Even a cursory account will help provide historical perspective and at the same time help explain events as they have unfolded in the United States. Lessons can be learned from other’s experiences.

In a modern sense, the first mass communicators emerged from the invention of printing through the use of movable type.
Publishing rapidly and economically was born. Driven by commercial interests, the activity quickened, giving rise to certain specialized tasks ranging from generating messages to setting them in type and distributing the results to a mass audience. Occupational groups sprang up based on the variety of tasks to be performed. The journalist became among the first such occupational groups to strive for status with the goal of achieving the trappings of professionalism.

In the West, the particular socio-political-economic arrangements bestowed upon the press a special task in society and in relation to government. That task was to keep the citizenry informed and the government scrutinized. Thus, the press, though a privately-held entity, carried out an important public function. The result produced a joint public/private enterprise which in the final analysis was private yet not public despite a generally subscribed to public mission. Journalists laid a claim as social custodian of the truth in much the same way physicians staked a claim to health and lawyers to justice.

Late in the nineteenth century, journalism labor in the United States divided into essentially three functions, the work of the printer, reporter and publisher (Sobel, 1976). The development of high-speed presses and the growth of urban centers ushered in the era of the reporter. Reporter-journalists gave up print shop and managerial responsibilities and formed a new entity, fashioning a product through their intellect. Before long journalists began invoking the notion of professionalism, though there was no agreed-upon code of ethics, a recognized means of entry into the field or even a philosophy of journalism.

For social legitimization reporter-journalists eventually looked in the same direction that most occupational groups have looked: the university (Sobel, 1976). After the Civil War and early in the twentieth century, the United States university was becoming a major authority in society. As the generator and repository of knowledge, universities had the power to confer professional status.

Press associations and several prominent journalistic figures, notably Joseph Pulitzer, promoted the idea of journalism education. In the late 1800s several United States institutions offered journalism courses, and in 1908 the University of Missouri established the first journalism school. Soon other full-fledged programs began appearing. The initial thrust was career preparation. Before long efforts were being made to install journalism education as a discipline at research institutions. The first doctorate degree in journalism was awarded at the University of Wisconsin under the leadership of Willard G. Bleyer in 1929, and the first doctorate in mass communication was conceived by
Wilbur Schramm and conferred by the University of Iowa in 1948 (Rogers, 1994:21-26).

Almost from the time of its inception, journalism education has sparked a debate over curriculum. Never wholly resolved was the precise professional/academic nature of such curricula. Professionalism tended to prevail. (I do not want to detour into the labyrinthine literature of the sociology of professions; “profession” and such related terms as “professionalism” will be used here merely to refer to career orientation. [Dingwall and Lewis, 1983.] 2 Journalism took its lead from medicine and law, but operationally the pattern for educating journalists came from news organizations.

Framing the issue pointedly, Birkhead wrote: “The ideological captivity of professionalism extended in real terms to constitute a dependence of journalism schools on the industry they professed to regulate. Notwithstanding their motives, journalism educators helped to make professionalism an instrument of exploitation” (1982:280).

Birkhead goes further, insisting that universities also gave credence to the notion that the press functioned as a public utility. What is clear is that universities helped to legitimate journalism as a profession. In its early development and even continuing to the present, journalism education tended to assimilate the work procedures of the newsroom. Journalism education came to sanction the standards and values invoked by journalism practitioners, including, for example, objectivity and neutrality.

Two factors heavily influencing our thinking about journalism education were—and are—the continuing arrival of new technologies and the degree to which post-industrialized nations have come to rely on information and knowledge for their constant well-being (Wresch, 1996; Smith, 1980). With changes in media and society, the domain of the professional has been altered and expanded. In trying to accommodate the proliferation of “professional mass communicators,” we have followed a model dictated by a particular industry, much in the manner in which journalism education was conceived. Old models are hard to shake. Inventing new ones is even harder. Yet this is the challenge in a rapidly changing environment—to continually redefine our mission in order, at the least, to stay current, and maybe even to be at the cutting edge. In search for a mission, we must look beyond media, beyond curriculum and beyond accreditation, which in the United States has been carried out since 1945 by a group of professionals and educators now with the name Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. (The Council has begun accrediting journalism programs outside the United States; see the Council’s Website at...
Instead, we must look for sustenance and direction to the reasons institutions of higher education came about in the first place. We have to think about the role of the university and its overall mission in society. Incessant pressures, external as well as internal, tend to mitigate against reflecting on our fundamental role as educators. Increasingly, universities and colleges have emphasized instrumental, that is, practical, knowledge, at the expense of educating the entire person. Carried to extremes, the result is vocationalism. Let us recognize vocationalism for what it is and what it is not, namely, higher education. A journalism education, together with a liberal arts curriculum, should provide opportunities that prepare men and women for lifetimes of personal and professional growth and adaptation. If, in the name of professionalism, we particularize a core of knowledge that is artificial in scope or only temporarily useful, we limit the possibilities of our students. The greatest gift educators can give to students is that of learning how to learn.

Education as an institution in society is probably the most important means of assuring some semblance of continuity and stability to our culture. It is the means by which one generation transmits its heritage to the next. It is the means by which society constantly revitalizes itself. It is the means by which we help citizens realize their intellectual and creative potential. After a day of meetings and memos and reaching a point where, as someone has said of the harried editor, he can’t tell the difference between a bicycle accident and the collapse of civilization, it is hard to reflect on the philosophical underpinnings of what we’re all about. To bring me back to fundamental realities, I call on a favorite quote by John Henry Newman speaking more than a century ago at the founding of the University of Dublin: “If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society.” (1976: 154).

In considering the future of journalism education, we must begin with a conception of the role of the university in society. It is this conception, philosophy, if you will, that should provide the framework for considering all other issues as they pertain to journalism education. Journalism education must go beyond catering to commercial interests and accommodating particular interests or professional groups and, in the words of Ortega y Gasset, engage “the teaching of the culture, the system of vital ideas, which the age has attained” (1944:40). If this is kept uppermost in our minds, we will not make any egregious errors and maybe even score some successes in teaching our students and nourishing our research.

Now, finally, let me turn to the main point of this disquisition
on journalism education. As noted, the history of a profession is a constant struggle over the determination and control of the standards of the profession. In the traditional professions of law and medicine, the issues are fairly clear-cut, though not always agreed upon. Journalism and, for that matter, communication, are different. Who shall devise and administer the test to certify the professional journalist? Who shall issue the license? In a democracy, free speech principles protect the skilled as well as the unskilled, the principled as well as the unscrupulous, the socially committed as well as the self-serving opportunist. It is messy, but that is as it should be. It also means that professionalism in journalism will always be problematic.

My views should not be construed to infer that control of journalism education should rest entirely in the academy. Journalism education is too important for that. But it is much too important to be left up to professionals. Journalism education is a negotiated enterprise. Educators should bear the brunt of the responsibility but always in consultation with appropriate groups. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways, such as:

• Establishing professional advisory groups, provided they are more than a mask for fund-raising or self-promotion.
• Institutionalizing professional-in-residence or visiting professional programs.
• Partnering with professional groups to provide faculty members with current professional experience, for example, through summer newsroom internships.
• Acknowledging that influence follows money and being fully aware of the consequences, especially at a time when media firms are growing larger and more powerful with the potential of significantly impacting journalism education.
• Offering media instruction to those not planning on professional careers in journalism, thus bringing about an informed public demanding higher standards of performance.
• Listening at every opportunity to professional communities yet making clear where education’s allegiance must lie.
• Organizing continuing education opportunities for professionals.
• Providing an education that helps each student realize her/his full potential as well as an experience that proves relevant for a lifetime career.
• Permitting, as much as possible, professors to teach in the same area in which they carry out research.
• Recognizing that the distinction between the theoretical and practical is artificial and that one infuses the other.
• Encouraging theoretical inquiry in the recognition that
there’s nothing so practical as a good theory.

This list is by no means comprehensive. The colloquy can take on varied configurations. The essential points are that it take place and that those taking part ponder the different roles the different parties bring to the conversation.

Sentiments similar to those expressed in this paper are echoed by Reese and Cohen in their argument for a different definition of professionalism. They use the phrase “professionalism of scholarship” to denote that the academy’s responsibility to society should rise above that of responsibility to the professions (2000:213). They advocate that media organizations ought to be “partners with academia rather than clients” (2000: 225).

The industry will continue to look to journalism education for a trained, comparatively inexpensive labor supply and other services. The educator must be sensitive to professional interests but also must keep uppermost in mind the larger mission of serving society and providing opportunities for the maximum development of individual intellect and talent and inculcating a sense of the ideal. In short, we are talking about shared objectives, but we also are talking about different missions and different roles. Professionals and educators should recognize their common goals—and respect the different roles they play. Together we should be striving toward improved standards of professional and academic performance for the benefit of society as a whole.

Notes

1. The word “journalism” is used in this paper to refer to a distinctive social activity providing information essential for self-governance. The term is not intended to be synonymous with “media” or other professional communication practices such as public relations, advertising, etc.

2. Characteristics commonly associated with professionalism include a body of specialized knowledge, the need for special educational preparation, service to society and autonomy or self-regulation.

References


Gallup, G. H. (1927), “Journalism Schools Should Teach Theory
Underlying Practice” (text of speech), The United States Publisher, February: 17-18.


**Schools of Journalism** (1890), *The Nation*, 6 March: 197-198.


**Wresch, W.** (1996), *Disconnected: Haves and Have-nots in the Information Age*,

**KENNETH STARCK, Ph.D., is a professor at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA. This paper was presented at the annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication Aug. 9-12, 2000, Phoenix, Arizona.**

**Email:** kenneth-starck@uiowa.edu