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M. Thornton

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A Casual Journalism Lecturer

Mark Thornton
Freelance Writer

What relevance has journalism to today’s graduate student? What will they do with their Master in Journalism? Having never met my class and having only a vague idea of their aspirations and origins, I wanted to make my opening address something that would show them the practical work we would need to get through, yet make it inspiring enough for them actually to want to get out there and cross swords with injustice and stand.

"Greetings students. My name is Mark Thornton and I’m to be your lecturer in Advanced Print for this semester. This is my first attempt at a serious academic lecture though I have given between 15 and 20 lectures or talks to public and private groups, often much bigger than this, about specific aspects of journalism and personal recollections of it. I hope you’re going to like the way I teach, if not, we can talk about it."

So far so good. No one has walked out yet and they appear to be still listening. Except for the bloke in the second row with earphones on. Well, at least he’s looking at me.

"I have been a journalist for 20 years and have worked in England, Europe, Asia and Australia and my material has been published in many countries - from Switzerland and the US to the Philippines. I have worked for tabloid and broadsheet newspapers and every TV station and network in Australia. I say this to impress you a little, more than a little hopefully, so you know that, in terms of most of the subjects we will discuss, I have been there and done that. This is not arrogance or egocentrism, it’s fact to reassure you I’m not some blow-in with a good rap but little experience."

A couple of the students raise their eyebrows, suggesting they think I’m up myself. I walk towards the class and between the desks, decreasing the physical distance and abandoning the lecturer’s 'high position'. Their heads follow. They each take a bundle of hand-outs as I pass and I hold up one sheaf to wave at them.
"These are your course profiles and tell you what we will be doing for the next three months or so, and what I expect of you."

Their heads are buried in the papers and I walk back to the front of the class and stand behind my desk.

"You are all graduates so presumably want to be here and are eager to learn. You are also obviously mature adults and probably know as much about tertiary institutions and the way they operate as I do. This is a Specialist Journalism course in Advanced Print and our aim with it will be to depart from the basics of writing and develop a love of the language through use and appreciation. Throughout our time together I ask you to remember this is a Master's course and I expect much from you. So does Wollongong University. While I will argue that nothing you write, style-wise, can be 'wrong', some efforts will be better than others. The way I mark your work will encourage style development."

This draws their eyes from the hand-outs again but no one says anything.

"If you have any questions at any time, by the way, don't hesitate to ask. In the meantime -- love the language, love the skills you develop as a wordsmith. English is a wonderful language and a good writer can take great joy in his work. Sometimes when I am deep inside a story and so involved with the subject and how I am telling it I can laugh or weep at my own words. Hopefully you will develop this love and it will show in your work. This will reflect not only on yourselves but on the status of this university as a good place to learn. I would hate for one of you to take your Master's testamur to an editor and him take you on on the strength of it, only to find later you can't string two sentences together.

"We will first have to make sure we all know the basic grammar and use of English, and will stress the importance of research. No matter how good your writing skills, they are only window dressing if you don't first have the full story. Only with the language mastered and the background work done can we actually try and write a story. Not just any story, but one which will show off your style. Quality writing in an individual style is what sets each of us apart and, hopefully, puts us head and shoulders above the rest of the hacks. You all presumably want to write, at least in part, as a career. Ultimately then, you have to sell your work. And to do that, you must make an editor sit up and take notice - make your story too good to refuse."

This all seems to be making sense to them. They may not
all particularly want to write like Tom Wolfe, but relate it to economics -- how they can expect to make a living out of what they learn -- and they're all ears. Even the bloke with the headphones has taken them off. A young couple at the back has exchanged glances but they appear to be smiling. I explain my intention to talk in class about each allotted subject for the week, using practical examples from my own experience to illustrate them and bring them to life.

"We will talk about the theory and methods of writing but I can also tell you about the hands-on realities of it all; about the difficulties of researching and the short-cuts, about the gut-wrenching moral and ethical decisions which will confront you sooner or later, about legal constraints and about how to deal with the clever anti-media flak-catching bureaucracy and not get trampled on. We will discuss the different styles available to us to use in different publications; how to write news, news features and full length features - which have as many varieties of styles as there are writers.

"Above all, though, you will have to realise something about the world in which we work; about the invisible pressures of the power elites in society and other pressure groups which have vested interests in getting, or usually not getting, what you have written onto the page. Apart from your basic texts, I strongly recommend you read Herman and Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent. Nothing we do or learn here has any more meaning than peeling potatoes in a fast food outlet if you don't understand the bigger picture.

"I just want to read a quote from the Preface of that book: 'Leaders of the media claim that their news choices rest on unbiased professional and objective criteria, and they have support for this contention in the intellectual community. If, however, the powerful are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear, and think about, and to 'manage' public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality.' "

I pause for breath. Not a sound.

Time to wrap up my introductory remarks with something personal, something inspiring even.

"When I became a journalist I wasn't intending to change the world or bring down governments. Writing was the only discipline I was good at and I didn't know what else to do. Since then, having experienced the peaks as well as the gutters of the globe, I have realised that to be a journalist is to have the best job
in the world. No matter that every public opinion survey on social status that you read has us one off the bottom - in between politicians and used car salesmen. We can be a powerful force for righteousness, for change. My stories have forced the resignation of government ministers, of public service chiefs and, in some instances - such as my coverage of the wars and revolutions of South East Asia - I would hope they have raised community awareness of the plight of others and given people pause for thought in this overwhelmingly self-interested country of ours.

"As journalists we can not only make a difference, it is our duty to do so.

"Some of you may be content to sit at a desk in a provincial newspaper office and take home a pay packet for filling in the white spaces in between the ads with 'infotainment'. I hope not. Look more closely at most of the 'news' in provincial papers. Look with a different attitude. It doesn't take a Chomsky to recognise some pieces. You will find they are business-generated. The most quoted talking heads are the ones most anxious to be available for quotes; it raises their profile and gives them an interest. We all need to earn a crust but I would hope all of you - you are Masters students after all - would tire of that sort of compliant reportage very quickly.

Even at a local level, vested interests are seeking to fool most of the people most of the time. Usually we are the only ones who stand between corruption and truth. We are the members of the Fourth Estate who are charged with ensuring the members of the other three keep the truth and don’t abuse their power.

Remember when Queensland’s Royal Commission into graft and corruption interviewed Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen? He was asked what he knew of the separation of powers under the Westminster system of government. He had never heard of it. Far Right or Left wing governments will attempt to suppress the truth and trammel the voices of dissent. The Federal Government of John Howard is already treading this path and moving well. We have campaigns to fight.

"A great native American who was trying to negotiate a treaty for his people with the New Americans observed after the talks had dragged on for days: "It does not take many words to tell the truth.” We don’t need to use many words, but we do need to be the best we can be.”

I pause. A couple of them are looking a little stunned but the rest are interested.

"In case you think I’m loading too much of the romantic image upon you, think again. It is a romantic image, though the
realities of good investigative journalism are more dark and dreary, because no one else has an interest in exposing anti-social behaviour in its many forms. There’s no one else; apart from whistleblowers, a rare and disappearing breed. We depend often on whistleblowers for that ‘break’ into the story. These are rare, honest idealists who, when approached by a reporter already onto the yarn, will tell the truth. Usually, even these days, for no money. But research on what happens to whistleblowers has shown time and again that, despite their heroic and public spirited intentions, they are discredited and fade into ill-paid ignominy.

“So there’s you, and then there’s them - the people you will come up against in your quest for truth and who are most likely better than you. You have your wage and the trust, for a limited time, of your editor who is perpetually strapped for cash and having to justify reporters’ time to his bean counters.

“Against you is a well-organised corporate machine with highly paid people, a QC or two on tap, seemingly limitless funds, and slightly less highly paid people whose job it is to stop you finding out anything you want to know about the corporate body - unless it is in their interest for you to know. At which point you effectively become their employee. The whole picture is the only one you want to see. Parts of it, some even quite juicy, are often revealed to reporters ‘accidentally’ so they can be treated as scoops. But they are distortions, released cleverly only if they favour the company.

“So if you really want to make the most out of your career, you’re up against it. The down side is long, long hours of tedious file-flicking, screen-scrolling, suspect-spying, phone-polling, editor-explaining and maybe even partner-parting experience.

“The up side is glory and pots of money.”
The class laughs.

“Many people much more experienced and cleverer than me have said money is a great way to buy stuff but it is the full and varied lifestyle which counts. I don’t think I will ever be a millionaire but I have had many rich experiences along the way.

“The point is, so can you.”

Is this over the top? I flick my eyes across the class and it doesn’t seem to be. I wasn’t going to make a speech like this but in talking about why they are here, what we are trying to achieve, and the reality of the world in which we are trying to achieve it, such thoughts seemed to be relevant. After all, we don’t just love the language or our craft for its own sake; it’s what we do with it.

The class is still sitting silently so I say:

“Before we get onto a hands-on grammar exercise - just to
see what I'm up against - (there are a few reassuring chuckles at this lukewarm attempt at humour) I want you all, as aspiring Walkley Award winners, to write down and remember something Francis Bacon said 400 years ago. It applies today, especially when your first freelance story has been rejected by three editors and you're not feeling too good about the future:

"If a man look sharply, and attentively, he shall see fortune; for though she be blind, yet she is not invisible."

REFERENCES


MARK THORNTON is a freelance writer. He was senior writer for The West Australian newspaper and has worked as a foreign correspondent in South East Asia. His features have appeared in various provincial and national magazines.
Contact Address: 27 Kiama Street, Bowral, NSW 2576. Phone/fax: 02-48612507