

Among the Media Journalism Education in a Commercial Culture*

Hanno Hardt

John F. Murray Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication,
University of Iowa/Professor of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences,
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

The means of effective communication are being expropriated from the intellectual worker. The material basis of his initiative and intellectual freedom is no longer in his hands. Some intellectuals feel these processes in their work. They know more than they say and they are powerless and afraid.
C. Wright Mills, 1944 (1963)

Journalism education as an academic pursuit has run its course during this century: from representing the interests of newspaper proprietors through a period of increasing academic standards and a new intellectual respectability to current alliances between media interests and educational endeavors. During this time journalism education has remained committed

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to meeting organizational demands without much consideration of the concrete historical conditions of working journalists.

By focusing on the predicament of contemporary newswork I intend to place journalism education at the service of journalists and the struggle of intellectual labor and against the commercialization of journalism in the United States. The larger context for this approach--of course--is the relationship between journalism and power. By identifying with various economic and political interests, American journalism has effectively abandoned its self-proclaimed cause of serving the people to accommodate its own fascination with social and political power. The resulting consequences for notions of news, democracy, and citizenship are considerable and must be of major interest to media studies and journalism education.

In the wake of another, newly established alliance between business and higher education the time has come to deconstruct the traditional mission of journalism education; the goal is to redefine its presence in the cultural apparatus and to confirm its role in supporting the intellectual practices of journalism against rising expectations of technical expertise which dominate the social, cultural, and political spheres of society, including the editorial function of journalism.

Journalism education is witness to major changes in media content and structure without a clear response to commercial and political interests among the media and their impact on the education of journalists. For instance, the predominance of the media effect as a topic of societal concerns generates truth claims of considerable weight that reflect on the conduct of newswork. Consequently, journalists are implicated by association and condemned by a public perception of the media as either ignoring important social issues or posing a moral threat to bourgeois values. The result has been a general deterioration of trust in information--and journalism in general--and a rising expectation of entertainment from what Howard Kurz has dubbed a "media circus."

In the meantime, Robert McChesney suggests that "corporate concentration, conglomeration, and hyper-commercialism" characterize contemporary media, while Ben Bagdikian reports on the accelerated centralization of media power in the face of favorable economic conditions and an expanding market. Economic changes are accompanied by a shifting climate of media ownership which seems to thrive on breaking with traditional notions of public trust or public interest. William Allen White once observed that when media owners have made their fortunes in some other calling than journalism and pursue media ownership in search for power and prestige, "they all get the unconscious arrogance of conscious wealth." In fact, media have become part of the corporate domain of society which converts economic power into political power; they shape consciousness and help reinforce the dominant corporate ideology.

Changes in the size and quality of media ownership have been accompanied by a considerable and long-lasting concern among intellectuals about their own predicament — which is their inability to act on what they foresee. What they foresaw, however, exists as critical observations about culture and cultural institutions in American society and provides an ideological context and a historical perspective on the role of the media; their observations reach from the cultural crisis described by Lewis Corey in the 1930s to the workings of the "cultural apparatus" outlined by C. Wright Mills in the 1940s, or the "cultural mass" addressed by Daniel Bell in the 1970s — not to mention the more recent impact of British writers like E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, or Stuart Hall on revitalizing American cultural studies. Their notions of class, power, ideology, and the nature of representation, in particular, have pushed progressive thought beyond the traditional boundaries of American pragmatism and provide opportunities for a cultural discourse that addresses the historical realities of newsroom labor and the contemporary conditions of work.

Strengthened by economic power and political influence, claims of the

new "media apparatus" on society are considerable, including not only the producers of news, information, or entertainment, but also journalism educators. The latter have become the new workforce of the media industry--increasingly dependent on its support while operating within the academy in incompliance with industry needs, including training and recruitment. Their participation is needed to legitimate the merger of business interests and academic practices and to provide credibility where uneasiness about the process persists--among colleagues, students, and the general public. On the other hand, journalism educators have the insights and experiences also to effectively resist industrial demands and to join a growing critique of media practices and their assertion of social, political, and cultural power.

But where do we stand and how is our critique reflected in the application of educational policies?

The consolidation of media and politics has all but eliminated the notion of journalism as the fourth estate and introduced significant definitional changes to the idea of journalism as a cultural practice. Indeed, the predominance of a marketing orientation in newswork has resulted in a shifting conception of newsroom labor. If journalism was once the refuge of the vaguely talented, as Walter Lippmann remarked, it has now become the site of peril for the talented.

More specifically, the media have rarely been a facilitator of intellectual labor free from a business-oriented paternalism that directs journalists in their work. But the significant rise of corporate power and control over the contemporary role and function of journalists threatens the demise of traditional notions of journalistic practices; by prescribing the manner of "mass" communication and redirecting the social and political purposes of the media in general, journalistic practices are being redefined to match the new expectations of the news business.

For instance, corporate efforts are currently advanced as a crusade for responsive journalism--supported by the financial resources of several

foundations and led by some academics and press management--in attempts to change local news coverage. Such developments have serious consequences not only for the profession--including professional education --but also for society and the relationship of information, knowledge, and democracy. They not only suggest a new system of gathering and distributing information but imply--more fundamentally--a new authority for defining the nature and type of information that provides the basis of social and political decision-making. The result is a new partisanship that responds primarily to the needs of commerce and industry rather than to the social, economic, or political requirements of an informed public. For instance, there is a "compelling fear" among journalists, according to Thomas Leonard, based on the observation that editors and reporters are "often told that the readers are consumers and only infrequently reminded that readers are citizens."

Ultimately, the campaign for "public" journalism demonstrates the institutional power of media foundations to shape media policies; their arrangement of a new rationale for the American press as a commercial concern should be reason enough for uneasiness among journalism faculties about the industrialization of higher education and the potential impact of specific media interests on the location, size, and content of journalism education in the United States.

Public journalism—despite its claims—is not an emancipatory movement, but exposes—through its proponents—a range of limitations that deny the possibility of radical change in the public interest; it neither offers readers access to authorship to confirm their expert standing in the community, nor encourages the pursuit of public interest journalism under new forms of ownership. Public journalism neither supports efforts to revitalize investigative journalism nor insists on a new understanding of professionalism that frees journalists from editorial controls and acknowledges their professional independence. And under no circumstances is journalism constructed as intellectual labor.

In fact, the notion that freedom of the press belongs to those who own one is true once more. After all, the media are still fashioned and controlled by capital. As C. Wright Mills once said: "If the writer is the hired man of an 'information industry,' his general aims are, of course, set by the decisions of others and not by his own integrity." He continues, "between the intellectual and his potential public stand technical, economic, and social structures which are owned and operated by others." It is also a reminder that freedom is without public value if it is not exercised.

The current accounts of "public" journalism are reminiscent of progressive ideas about the need to improve the conditions for democracy without questioning the part capitalism has played in the demise of the social system. Unfortunately, these conditions seem to have worsened and it turns out that the problems of journalism reflect the problems of society. Thus, disillusionment among journalists and their reported cynicism are symptoms of widespread alienation and disbelief, while dissatisfaction with work (and pay) in the face of shifting requirements concerning the type and quality of intellectual labor in the media industries are indications of fundamental social and economic changes in society and their effects on the workplace. These are also signs of understanding the professional limitations of journalism.

In the meantime, however, journalism education has come of age; the question is: how does it respond to these challenges which affect the very practice of journalism, its ideological foundations, and the professional self-understanding of journalists? What is being done by this organization, faculties, and individual colleagues to preserve the idea of a strong and independent profession that caters to the interests of society — even in the context of a commercial media system?

Certainly not enough.

Instead, the myth of a forceful and impartial press operating in the interest of society has prevailed throughout this period, strengthened — no

doubt—by self-promotion, including the writing of a celebratory journalism history, and brilliant journalistic accomplishments that had more to do with indulging individual activities of enterprising journalists than with the social consciousness of media ownership.

Indeed, the labor of journalists has been successfully contained within the organizational media structure through a ritual of appropriation, a historical process of incorporating journalists into the system of information gathering and news production while dominating the conditions of employment and the definition of work. Consequently, newsroom cultures have undergone dramatic changes; according to Howard Kurz, "editors cook up prefabricated story ideas. Prose is squeezed through more and more hands into ever smaller receptacles. Controversial ideas are pasteurized and homogenized until most of the flavor has been drained. For many, the craft of Hemingway, Mencken and Reston now has all the romance of a fast-food kitchen stamping out Big Macs." It is a process that may well result in a generation of "burned-out, fed-up, pissed-off reporters," according to Bill Walker, who is one of them.

Since the conditions of journalism in modernity are shaped by a shift to new technologies and new strategies of serving the information needs of specific segments of society, they make different demands on journalists and their relations to each other and to their institutions, and they affect the notion of work itself. Thus, "work comes to be less and less defined as a personal contribution and more as a role within a system of communications and social relations," according to Alain Touraine. The result is not only an increasing sense of alienation but a changing perception of what constitutes journalism and, therefore, public interest and social responsibility at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Finally, when social and political power are constituted by information and knowledge as new forms of property, class divisions occur over access and participation in social communication.

These conditions of journalism are an outgrowth of late capitalism and the logical conclusion of a long march into a free market system which denies collective interests and shuns collective responsibilities. In addition, the "media apparatus" operates in a society whose educational system is under an increasing siege—it is caught between decreasing public funding and rising expectations of private support—especially from business interests. Lawrence Soley has written about the growing relationship between big business and universities; the latter have succeeded, in many instances, to attract significant commercial support and rely on a steady flow of income through contracts and gifts. James Carey had it right in 1992 when he concluded, "The only authority left is the authority of money, and that, above all else, is the thing most susceptible to outside control."

Schools and departments of journalism are among the beneficiaries of this development; in fact, in the process of rediscovering mutual interests industry targets journalism education for investment and gains the option of defining "the product." A complacent and complicit educational establishment may consider this a desirable prospect and an acceptable form of collaboration which breeds good relations with media enterprises and serves the specialized interests of a particular class; others will see it as a scheme against the professional interests of journalists and the needs of a general public.

In fact, there is a danger that journalism faculties become handmaidens of corporate interests to change the nature of American journalism in compliance with the goals of a privately owned, profit-driven industry which defines the public—and public responsibility—in terms of specific markets and the need to serve them well.

This danger is particularly acute when the independence of university faculties is at risk and curricula are shaped in response to job descriptions. C. Wright Mills addressed this problem a generation ago when he concluded that "the deepest problem of freedom for teachers is

not the occasional ousting of a professor, but a vague general fear—sometimes politely known as 'discretion,' 'good taste,' or 'balanced judgment.' It is a fear which leads to self-intimidation and finally becomes so habitual that the scholar is unaware of it. . . . Control is furthered by the setting up of committees by trade associations of subjects . . . which attempt to standardize the content and effects of teaching. Research in social science is increasingly dependent upon funds from foundations, and foundations are notably adverse to scholars who develop unpopular theses, that is, those placed in the category of 'unconstructive.'"

Mills' observations are confirmed by James Carey in a slightly different and more direct way a generation later; he observed in 1992 that "for generations now, universities have been quietly sold off, piece by piece, to the highest bidder. No one is particularly opposed to this process; the only argument concerns which ideological clique ought to be in charge."

But these developments—which sound only too familiar—also constitute an open invitation to resistance and change. I want to suggest that a struggle over the definition of journalism, the boundaries of the workplace, and professional practice—as a form of freedom of expression—ought to be waged on the grounds of journalism education.

Because journalism education can speak authoritatively to issues of professional education and the role of higher education in a commercial setting.

Because journalism education—unlike other educational endeavors—helps shape the practice of democracy through acting on its own definition of journalism.

Because journalism education is implicated by recent fundamental changes as an accessory to a process whose outcome cannot bode well for the education of journalists or the future of democracy and must defend itself against such charges.

Because teachers of journalism have the knowledge and interest to resist interference in the educational effort from self-seeking external sources; but also

because journalism educators can draw on the experience and interests of professionals whose own autonomy is at stake; they can also make an effective case among journalists for an educational mission that reaches beyond the self-interest of media—or foundations, for that matter—and they can form alliances with professionals.

Based on the mythos of science and technology—which has resulted in shifting educational priorities in higher education—there is a danger, however, that journalism faculties direct their emancipatory struggle more towards integrating media technologies into their curricula than to strengthening journalistic practices. In fact, the domination of science and technology as ideology occurs when technical rationality invades the domain of communicative action and replaces the potential of consensus formation with the potential of absolute control. As a result, contemporary journalism education is apt to ignore the critical and potentially subversive knowledge of the humanities or social sciences and to celebrate technology and its false promise of liberation through access to the world.

In fact, the scientization of education—such as privileging computer literacy at the expense of pursuing the goals of a liberal arts curriculum, for instance—provides the context for an obsession with digital solutions to the teaching of journalism. Likewise, dispatching faculty members into newsrooms for training purposes typically reinforces technological solutions uncritically and further legitimates a technical rationale. The result is a total preoccupation with technological solutions.

In light of these conditions, journalism education must ask: how are we meeting the intellectual demands of aspiring journalists who are entering journalism with a commitment to public service and a collective understanding of the role and function of the profession? How do we

teach the need for a separation between the commercial goals of the organization and the professional aspirations of working journalists? And what must students of journalism know about the collective biography of journalists to appreciate the history of editorial work and the development of their own professional identity?

We have come a long way to realize that the nature of journalism education more often than not forecloses a detached if not critical approach to issues of education and the specific professional concerns of the rank and file. Indeed, autonomy in the pursuit of knowledge—a supreme value in educational philosophies since the Enlightenment—has lost its original presence and became subordinated to organizational goals. If social emancipation was an enlightenment objective of education, it has been replaced by new objectives which define the acquisition of knowledge as a technical problem rather than as a participatory experience or a way of selfdiscovery.

Confined by these historical conditions we must begin to articulate alternatives to the unconditional accommodation and support of industry interests; if not, journalism education as a form of industrial production remains a source of cheap labor and a training ground for technical expertise while it relies increasingly on financial and political support from media organizations which strengthens external control over the educational mission of the university. The latter—already faced by internal struggles over the nature of education—seems to be inclined to embrace the instrumental demands of professional training programs without confronting the consequences for its traditional mission.

There is an alternative to re-orient the curriculum towards theoretical and historical concerns identified more closely with the academic pursuits of communication studies, or American studies, for that matter, which are distanced by their traditional role in the university from the interests of media industries. The potential of a critical dialogue about media in society within a different academic setting may provide a suitable context

for the study of journalism. However, this option compromises the ideal mission of journalism education; it ignores the educational needs of a professional workforce—including the creation of a collective sense of self—and fails to address the underlying conditions—the philosophy, if you want—of instructional objectives governing journalism education.

There are other—more utopian—alternatives that speak to these issues more clearly. They draw on the existing institutional structures of journalism education and are based on a belief that education is—among others things—about the relationship between knowledge and conduct.

Knowledge refers here to "practical" as opposed to "technical" knowledge—in reference to Habermas—for whom the purposive-rational action of capitalism stresses the technical and marginalizes the capacity for communicative action which involves issues of human conduct.

The manifestation of technical knowledge in the institutional framework of journalism education refers to decisions regarding the rules of professional conduct or to instrumental actions to organize the appropriate means of controlling the idea of journalism; the desire for practical knowledge relates to the intersubjectivity of mutual understandings regarding the role and function of journalism as intellectual labor, for instance; it is secured by mutual obligations of a student-teacher relationship and directed towards individuation and emancipation.

In other words, sharing practical knowledge refers to understanding the cultural and historical conditions of labor, the economic consequences of commercial practices, the material circumstances of newswork, and their impact on the ideological framework of journalism.

When journalism education is means oriented—or preoccupied with questions of effectiveness—it fails to realize the importance of action directed towards maximizing the human potential. Providing a critical and socially conscious learning environment—in which knowledge of communication, media, and journalism is shared for the benefit of maintaining and strengthening a professional class—requires the capacity

to resolve practical questions. These questions relate to control over the means of production, freedom of expression as a condition of professional employment, and the material well-being of newswriters.

Learning and teaching are meant to produce self-knowledge imbedded in knowledge of one's professional culture. For instance, to understand and appreciate the role of journalists and to identify with the professional community of journalists, a curriculum should accommodate the sharing of professional experiences, encourage critique, and cultivate an atmosphere of informed anticipation.

In fact, critical reflection prepares students for an intervention in reality—or for the acquisition of historical consciousness—and constitutes the basis for maintaining a critical sense of being and laboring as a journalist in society. It is a process which challenges the teacher-student relationship to become open and dialogical, focused on questions of why something is being taught rather than on the execution of an instructional programme which is typically based on an administrative protocol that privileges a technology of instruction rather than the need for reflection.

I am suggesting that journalism education—if it is to change at all—must not only address its relationship to the media industry but examine its educational philosophy. At issue is the question whom do we serve with what knowledge and in which context? In fact, contemplating the role of teaching among the media is a sobering experience since it dramatizes the predicament of the learner and compounds the responsibility of the teacher, if emancipatory action remains our goal.

Such action is based on participation in a discourse that draws on understanding and interpreting the cultural context as well as the political and economic conditions of power and control by media organizations. At the same time, it returns to the potential of the individual as journalist at the center of a pedagogy of journalism.

For all of these reasons it may be useful to think about the implementation of a worker-centered approach to journalism education.

George Seldes referred to working journalists in 1938 "to distinguish them from all sorts of near and pseudo-newspapermen, 'trained seals,' certain columnists and others who compose the fringe of journalism." I apply the phrase "newswriters" to suggest and clarify the status of journalists in the production process apart from public relations or advertising practitioners. A worker-centered approach shifts from the institutional goals of the industry to the professional concerns of working journalists, including notions of professional identity, requirements of media literacy, and the process of deskilling which threatens professionalization in journalism. The goal is to confirm the importance of professional autonomy.

In this context it may be desirable to think about the strict separation of the education of journalists from the typical curriculum involving preparation for public relations or advertising careers. Since the demands on journalists are fundamentally different and require special attention, preparation for other communication-related careers—which have often become the main focus of journalism programs—must be relocated elsewhere in the curriculum, if not in the structure of communication and media programs.

Such a separation of specific educational tasks would signal a conscious return to the notion of journalism which has been eclipsed in recent years by the idea of communication. A. J. Liebling commented on this trend in response to the establishment of the Newhouse School of Communications, by saying that "journalism has a reference to what happens day by day, but 'communication' can deal just as well with what has not happened, what the communicator wants to happen, or what he wants the dupe on the other end to think."

The point is that journalism ought to remain journalism with writing and editing as conscious ideological choices and expression as a form of intellectual practice. These are also the constitutive elements of a discourse between learners and teachers of journalism. Its focus is the

professional culture of journalism, what it has been, what it is, and what it could be.

In this sense, journalism education can also be an expression of solidarity with those who represent the workforce and who continue to practice the craft. This means an opportunity to join with rank-and-file journalists, with union representatives, or other organized groups of professional journalists to implement a curriculum that preserves and reinforces the intellectual and professional autonomy of journalism. It would be a course of study that provides a historical and theoretical context for the practice of journalism as intellectual labor by combining an academic curriculum with a set of basic skills courses. Consequently, current notions of accreditation become obsolete and are replaced by autonomous faculty decisions regarding educational standards and a new solidarity among degree granting journalism programs that is based on common concerns about the future of education in a commercially dominated culture.

These are mere suggestions—the beginnings perhaps of what should be a collective effort to reflect on the state of journalism education in the face of increasing challenges from the industry and pressures from those within the academy who have settled in comfortably with media interests. They are also an indication that the education of newswriters remains a first obligation and to cultivate their intellectual potential and reinforce their choice of journalism as a career constitute serious professional challenges for a journalism educator.

These concerns about journalism education belong into a larger context of social and political questions related to the situation of intellectuals in society and the role of universities in the perpetuation of an intellectual tradition. The current emphasis on technology and technical solutions marginalizes the intellectual discourse in society and provides a challenge to the humanities and social sciences to maintain their traditional places in the reconfigurations of the academic world.

After all, journalism is an intellectual vocation, although frequently undermined by the technical rationale of journalism education itself and the anti-intellectual orientation of many media organizations. Under these circumstances it is no accident that journalism programs continue to supply the labor market with technical expertise while intellectually more demanding employers recruit from the ranks of traditional liberal arts disciplines.

Intellectuals operate in a world of ideas, and their stage is the realm of the media; they occupy a specific socio-political role and function openly in reaction to specific areas of concern. Ralph Dahrendorf once described them as the court jesters of modern society who "have the duty to doubt everything that is obvious, to make relative all authority, to ask all those questions that no one else dares to ask." The power of intellectuals lies in their freedom with respect to the hierarchy of the social order. They are, after all, qualified to speak on matters of culture and engage society in a critique which utters the uncomfortable truth and raises the possibility of a utopian dream as an attainable future.

These conditions of an intellectual life fit the aspirations of journalists whose education demands exposure to the potential of an intellectual discourse that addresses society from outside as well as from inside the social order.

Ideas are not independent of their social setting; thus, the dilemma of journalism education may also be explained by its position between the institutional conditions of universities and the industrial demands of media and by the choices we make as intellectuals between acquiescence or dissent. I am quite aware that the latter one, in particular, may be more therapeutically than politically effective; nevertheless it represents an option for asserting a nuanced position vis-a-vis a dominant ideology with deeply rooted claims in educational practices amidst the compression of the role and concerns of intellectuals within the university environment.

What is needed perhaps is an ideology of dissent, not unlike the one provided by C. Wright Mills a generation ago, which combined a critique of culture with an acceptance of social scientific methods while overcoming role conflicts between intellectual and social scientist. Such an ideology operates within the culture and is strengthened by the potential of projecting ideas beyond their social or political realization into the future of society. It invites critical engagement in the public sphere—beyond the pages of scholarly journals—through participation in a discourse regarding the conditions of newswork and the place of the media in society.

What is needed is a challenge to curb the growing power of media industries; perhaps through regulation, diversification, and other controls available to manage social and cultural resources. However, my specific concerns here relate to the unlimited power of employers to interfere in the labor of journalists, to jeopardize their positions as intellectual workers, and ultimately, to turn the idea of journalism into a campaign for private visions of the world. In fact, H. L. Mencken—in talking about the changing newspaper—suggested over 75 years ago that "the quest for truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is commonly mitigated by something not unlike policy;" and he went on to comment on the inability of journalism schools to bring about changes caused by the shift in press ownership and its effects on the conditions of 1920s journalism. We have not done much better since then at the end of this century.

Nevertheless, journalism education—which is caught up in a much larger and fundamental struggle of its own over the control of education—should be a supportive environment for reconfiguring journalism and the need of journalists to rethink their own work and their relations to the means of communication.

Especially as long as there are individuals who believe in the capacity of critical inquiry—based on their own institutional positions—and who

claim the role of intellectuals for themselves and their students. Under their leadership journalism education could provide a historical and theoretical link between the goals of journalism and the needs of society, reinforce the search for a professional identity rooted in the material conditions of newswork, and support collective efforts among journalists to articulate resistance to the "media apparatus" in their own struggle for professional autonomy.

After all, journalism education does not make itself indispensable by catering exclusively to the interests of media institutions, but it could become essential to the profession by serving the educational needs of those still inclined to live productive lives among the media.

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