

Rethinking Journalism as a Profession

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ABSTRACT

There is no significant body of theoretical knowledge considered vital to the practice of journalism. So, can other standards of competency substitute for this esoteric knowledge? Could the standard of theoretical knowledge be expanded to recognize professional competency instead? Doctors and Lawyers provide an obvious contrast. They cannot practice without a firm grasp of the theory underlining their profession. A key to defining a profession then is no doubt establishing an understanding of what professional practice means in terms of knowledge and competency.

In the 1920s American philosophers Walter Lippmann and John Dewey engaged in an ongoing debate about the role of journalists. The debate never really ended. What they both agreed on was that journalists played a vital role in a democratic society. Where they disagreed was *how* that role should be played. They argued about whether the press should be leaders or teachers of the citizenry (Champlin and Knoedler 2006). Lippmann had become disenchanted with democracy in the twentieth century. He viewed modern society as too complex for the average citizen to make informed democratic choices. In his view, trained experts were needed to make decisions and explain those decisions to the citizenry. Dewey argued that democracy required the active participation of citizens. According to him it was the job of journalists and the government to “figure out how to engage the entire public in the decisions that would affect them all in the end” (cited in Champlin and Knoedler 2006). At the heart of this debate is whether or not journalists should really

be viewed by themselves or by society as professionals. Lippmann would argue they should. Dewey provides a caution.

Unlike established professions such as law, medicine or accounting any standard of journalistic competency must be centred on practice rather than theory. For this reason calling a journalist a professional would require a peculiar taxonomy to define a profession. Furthermore, relegating journalists to the realm of professionals is undesirable because it implies limitations that diminish the important role they play in society.

Goldstein (1984 p.175) attempts to draw consensus from the sociologists with a list of professional attributes. He identifies four qualities:

- (1) a body of esoteric knowledge mastery of which is the indispensable qualification for practice of the profession;
- (2) monopoly – that is , recognition of the exclusive competence of the profession in the domain to which its body of knowledge refers;
- (3) autonomy, or control by the profession over its work, including who can legitimately do that work and how the work should be done; and
- (4) a service ideal – that is a commitment or ethical imperative to place the welfare of the public or of the individual client above the self-interest of the practitioner.

The professional quality Goldstein considers absolutely necessary is the body of knowledge. While journalism education is increasingly university based this connection to the academy is mostly valued by students for its ability to teach the mechanics of the profession and foster internship opportunities. There is no significant body of theoretical knowledge considered vital to the practice of journalism. So, can other standards of competency substitute for this esoteric knowledge? Could the standard of theoretical knowledge be expanded to recognize

professional competency instead? Doctors and Lawyers provide an obvious contrast. They cannot practice without a firm grasp of the theory underlining their profession. A key to defining a profession then is no doubt establishing an understanding of what professional practice means in terms of knowledge and competency.

Hager summarizes Schön's concept of 'Knowing in Action' as 'tacit knowledge in that, though practitioners know it, they cannot express it.' (1995 p. 235) Hager explains that Schön's major contribution has been his influence on the theory/practice dichotomy. His work and that of others has put pressure on "the front-end approach to professional education." (p. 235) Hager outlines three conceptual levels describing the journey towards becoming a competent effective professional. First there is the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Second, there is performance in simulations or practice situations. Third, there is competence in the full practice of the profession.

Problems with Hager's conceptual model emerge when it is applied to journalism education. In Hager's model the development of knowledge, skills and attitudes still seem firmly rooted in the classroom. He makes it clear that mastery of this first level is necessary before moving on to the next. In fact, there are journalism educators who believe journalists should first learn basic reporting skills before moving on to more advanced training at the university level. Since the theory of journalism is rooted in the practice of journalism, a student should engage in practice from the beginning. In essence, skills like writing declarative sentences and covering routine stories should be mastered before moving on to higher education in journalism.

This view was espoused when the President of Columbia University, Lee Bollinger called for reform in the school's journalism curriculum and suspended the

search for a new Dean of Journalism in 2002. This perceived crisis of credibility in journalism led to an Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication presidential panel discussion in 2004. (Dates et Al. p. 144). Stanford's Theodore Glasser (Dates et Al. 2006) advocated Schön's concept of 'Knowing in Action' as a crucial component in the education of journalists. More specifically he called for journalism studies to begin at the graduate level well after students had become familiar with the basic practice of journalism. Glasser is particularly critical of the association of journalism training with schools of communication.

'The new and expanding science of communication brought prestige and legitimacy to the study of journalism, which had until then languished in programs more intent on educating journalists than explicating journalism. To trumpet their status as a social science and not merely an outpost for a narrow vocationalism.' (Dates et Al. 2006 p. 146)

Glasser sees an emphasis on this body of knowledge as a disconnection between the study of journalism and the practice of journalism. He insists 'journalism studies will need to free itself from the delusional quest for the kind of propositional knowledge that other professions, like law and medicine, tout as evidence of their practitioners' education and expertise.' (Dates et Al. 2006 p. 147)

A vast number of the best practitioners in journalism have no formal training in the underlying theory, or even the mechanics of news writing and broadcasting, behind journalism. Their knowledge, skills and attitudes were acquired on the job; in fact, Hager's second level of performance in simulated and practice situations is skipped altogether. Jack Shafer has expressed this view as the media critic for the Washington Post's online culture magazine *Slate*. He takes an extreme position where there is no need for the profession of journalism to be connected to the academy.

what say the professors to my observation that the very best, most ethical, most philosophically and historically minded journalists I know have no formal training in these subjects? You become a journalist the same way you become a surgeon—you probe, you extemporize, you cut, and you paste. (Shafer, 2002)

Shafer's comments would seem to echo those of Glasser, that theory in the profession of journalism is best informed by practice. His view is that the theory informing great journalists should be incredibly diverse amongst those journalists.

Hager and Gonczi (1996) suggest a competency approach to educate, assess and train professionals. Their particular view of competency is what they call a holistic one where general attributes such as critical thinking are applied to specific contexts. This model is particularly useful to assessing the competency of a journalist and the relationship between theory and practice. Studying philosophy may have no obvious application to any particular profession. It does help an individual develop a disciplined mind capable of approaching questions both academic and practical in a logical way. Hager and Gonczi's approach

“looks at the complex combinations of attributes (knowledge, attitudes, values and skills) which are used to understand and function within the particular situation in which professionals find themselves.” (1996 p. 249)

While the competency approach may be a useful way to conceive desired outcomes and assessment criteria for professional training the criteria seem somewhat subjective. This limits the usefulness of Hager and Gonczi's (1996) concept of competency in terms of applying it to the problems it is meant to solve. Providing a means to accredit foreign trained professionals is difficult with ambiguous standards. One of the standards suggested for a teacher, for instance, is “understands how students develop and how they learn.” (p. 256) While this would be a useful basis from which to design a curriculum and evaluate a student this skill could only be

assessed with significant observation and is not really a practical way to decide if someone trained out of country or out of province for that matter is competent. This standard of competency could be useful in assessing candidates for their suitability to train others. Journalism professors are unfortunately often chosen for their academic credentials over practical experience, even for basic reporting courses.

Higgs, Titchen and Neville (2001) divide professional knowledge into three forms: one, propositional theoretical or scientific knowledge; two, professional craft knowledge and three, knowledge about oneself as a person in relation to others. (p.5) The second and third components of professional knowledge would seem to be in harmony with Hager and Gonczi's (1996) 'holistic' concept of competency where general attributes are applied in specific contexts. The components of propositional knowledge and craft knowledge proposed by Higgs, Titchen and Neville are very much in line with the first level of knowledge suggested by Hager (1995) namely, knowledge, skills and attitudes. An important difference is that Hager is describing a journey towards becoming a competent professional while Higgs, Titchen and Neville are attempting to dissect exactly what professional knowledge is comprised of.

Higgs, Titchen and Neville (2001) describe craft knowledge as the ability to apply propositional knowledge in specific contexts such as a particular patient's needs in the case of health care. This seems to be a holistic way of looking at competency; however, this model seems more complete because it places considerable emphasis on interpersonal skill. This is an important difference because the component of self knowledge emphasizes the importance of bringing attributes to personal encounters instead of general situations. They use health professionals as an example where the practitioner's ability to relate to and understand others is crucial to his or her

professional practice. This component of practice would obviously be less significant in professions where interpersonal contact is infrequent.

Journalists seem to be in the same professional limbo as teachers. Hargreaves (2000) illustrates the shortcomings of professions focused on practice in comparison to a profession where practice is closely associated with research. Hargreaves (2000 p. 220) suggests teachers lack the 'esoteric knowledge-base' doctors and other university-based professions have. He sees this knowledge base as a key characteristic of a profession. In his view teaching falls short of a true profession because of its "inability to develop an educational equivalent to the physical sciences." (p. 221) This fails to consider that the most important questions facing mankind may not be quantifiable yet are still worthy of the kind of scholarly analysis suggested by Schön (1995). Hargreaves does make an important point, that a true university based profession should maintain a strong connection to research. This could be an argument for considering some journalists as professionals. Those who actively engage in reflective research about their work could be viewed as research professionals but only in the analysis of their craft, not the practice of it.

In contrast to medicine, Hargreaves (2000) sees a sharp divide between the two worlds of research and practice in the teaching profession. He would likely agree that doctors meet a 'holistic' standard of competency because of the blurred lines between practice and research in the medical profession. He describes teacher education as a time when teachers are 'innoculated' by academics against "catching the disease of conventional practice." (p. 226) His problem with this model is that students are encouraged to become reflective practitioners, critical of their own profession, before they have acquired the basic skills and knowledge of that profession. This same criticism could be levied against journalism schools where

students are taught about media bias and conspiracies of media concentration before they have mastered the inverted pyramid.

Hargreaves (2000) feels the teaching profession would be vastly improved if practicing teachers were trained mainly under the tutelage of mentors and encouraged to actively engage in research. He even suggests giving the more mundane tasks of teaching to assistants in the same way a doctor delegates to a nurse. This kind of philosophy addresses a shift from what Gibbons et al. (1994 cited in Hargreaves 2000) call Mode 1 education which is expert led, university based, pure, disciplinary, homogenous – to Mode 2 education which is applied, problem-focused, trans-disciplinary and embedded in networks. Hargreaves (2000 p. 235) concludes by predicting the United Kingdom's shift in teacher education, where student teachers spend the majority of their time in working classrooms, will put it at the leading edge of the profession. Journalism education centred on practice may very well produce similar results.

We can see then that a standard of professional competency could possibly be substituted for a body of professional knowledge when defining the qualities of a professional. This alternative view is embodied in Shulman's (1986) examination of research into the teaching profession which he suggests may be best viewed as an art. Shulman draws attention to Schwab (1983) who writes

'every art, whether it be teaching, stone carving or judicial control of a court of law, has rules but knowledge of the rules does not make one an artist. Art arises as the knower of the rules learns to apply them appropriately to the particular case. Application, in turn, requires acute awareness of the particularities of that case and ways in which the rule can be modified to fit the case without complete abrogation of the rule. In art, the form must be adapted to the matter. Hence the form must be communicated in ways which illuminate its possibilities for modification.' (p. 31)

According to Shulman (1986) seeing teaching, or journalism for that matter, as an art requires three forms of knowledge: rules of principles, knowledge of particular cases, and knowledge of ways to apply appropriate rules to properly discerned cases. This kind of knowledge is better understood as competency. This concept of professionalism is similar to the definition proposed by Barbara Preston (1996) that ‘professional judgments are necessary for effective every-day work.’ (p. 248) While we can see this standard of professional competency may be evident among journalists, holding them to that standard is problematic.

The service ideal is probably what most easily puts journalism in the realm of the professions. Both Dewey and Lippmann saw journalism as a means to service democracy. In *Liberty and the News* Lippmann argued that ‘in an exact sense the present crisis in western democracy is a crisis in journalism.’ No liberty, he wrote exists ‘for a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies.’ (Cited in Starr p. 396)

The idea of propositional knowledge for journalists fits more with the Lippmann vision of journalism than with Dewey.

In *Public Opinion* (1922), Lippman attacked the traditional democratic theory of public opinion and the notion of the “omnicompetent citizen.” He argued that modern communication had created ubiquitous “pseudo environments” that thwarted the ability of the average citizen to make political judgments based on facts. He placed his trust in the interposition of experts between the public and the world at large; only “statisticians, accountants, auditors, industrial counselors, engineers of many species, scientific managers, personnel administrators could make intelligible “an invisible and most stupendously difficult environment.” (cited in Czitrom p. 111)

Lippmann wished to see journalists highly professionalized to the point where they become social scientists. His ideals of objectivity and rationality are now generally taken for granted by *professional* journalists. Macdonald (2006) takes an alternative view and criticizes

educators who place the onus of the solution on journalists, students and educators. Moreover they propose a model of journalism education that bypasses an analysis of the powerful media industries, downplaying the significance of journalists working conditions. Their model also harks back to traditional journalistic ideals of notions of objectivity that some critics argue contribute to public apathy and damage prospects for participatory democracy. (p. 746)

The two remaining qualities in Goldstein's professional taxonomy of monopoly and autonomy also present some difficulties.' For working journalists the whole concept of a standard of competency is troublesome. The freedom of expression rights guaranteed in the constitution makes it impractical for any government, professional association or accrediting body to actually prevent someone from practicing journalism. In an age of blogs it is apparent journalism cannot claim monopoly over its practice. Freedom of the press belongs to anyone with a computer. Dewey would be pleased to see this kind of power taken away from *professional* journalists. Likewise autonomy seems to be almost a ridiculous notion in the information age. Journalism associations do not, cannot, and should not police their members. Moving towards professionalization by its very nature means accepting less journalistic freedom.

Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* explores the full meaning of the term discipline. It can be synonymous with someone's area of expertise or refer to behaviour modification. For Foucault the term simultaneously embraces both meanings. Specializing in a *discipline* in the form of a *profession* means being confined to the obligations and parameters of that profession and the limitations that implies.

Take the application process for a Canadian passport, for example. Recently a student came to me asking if I would be his *guarantor*. This involved signing his passport photos and filling out some forms verifying that I have known him for two

years. I apologized and explained that journalists were not on the Department of Foreign Affairs list of approved guarantors. He quickly pointed out that a university teacher or administrator was on the list. Suddenly I was a professional. My five years of part-time teaching had afforded me a status ten years of reporting did not. I signed his passport application and later that day went to the Department of Foreign Affairs website. What I learned is that the professions are deliberately used as a tool of surveillance for the government.

Any investigation of a passport holder begins with his guarantors since being a member of a profession gives the government quick access to membership lists provided by professional associations. Journalists can hold out hope they may be added to the list of eligible guarantors. Following an email inquiry, a Department of Foreign Affairs spokesperson explained to me that:

‘In order to keep the eligible guarantor list manageable, additions are not normally made unless there are indications that the present list is not extensive enough. Therefore there are a number of occupations that would meet our needs, but because the present list is proving extensive enough, and most Canadians are able to provide an eligible guarantor, we are not making additions at this time. Should additions be felt necessary, consideration will be given to groups that are well known in the community, that would come in contact with a number of citizens by virtue of their occupation, and whose association or licensing body will provide Passport Canada with regularly updated members listings to facilitate quick and secure verifications.’

We see then that the government is able to use professional associations to police society. As Goldstein (p. 192) puts it passports embody the ideal of bureaucracy and “police,” which, as in France, handily provide the crucial link between the domains of power and knowledge so essential to Foucault’s *disciplines*.’ While the government explicitly sees professional bodies as a mechanism for policing its citizens there are also implicit ramifications for membership in a profession.

As Czitrom (1982) writes, Dewey ‘advocated a wider role for experts in the political arena; but unlike some, he never saw them as a panacea for political ills. He criticized writers like Walter Lippmann who restricted the phrase “organized intelligence” to mean the establishment of “expert organizations” for making facts intelligible to decision makers.’ (p. 110)

Conclusions

The idea of somehow increasing the professionalism of journalists tends towards the Lippmann model. A move in that direction is condescending to audiences and problematic in its rationale. Journalism does not easily fit any taxonomy of what defines a professional and journalists defy any attempts to label them as elites in the tradition of Lippman. Champlin and Knoedler (2006) argue that it is crucial for the media be able to adopt the roles assigned by both Lippmann and Dewey

‘with Lippmann seeing the press as an elite group that should evaluate the policies of government and present well-informed conclusions about these key debates to the public and Dewey seeing the press as a necessary instrument of democracy that should engage citizens in understanding for themselves the central questions of our times.’

For the Dewey standard they ask: how well does the press do in explaining and clarifying the issues and in educating the public to participate fully in the democratic process? For the Lippman standard they ask: how well does the press carry out its primary responsibility to inform the public of complex and technical issues? Different stories require journalists to adopt either or both roles depending on the situation and their own preferences. *Professionalizing* journalism and the kind of objectivity that *professional* reporting implies might limit a journalist to embodying the Lippman vision. It is one of journalism’s greatest strengths that its practitioners float freely between the roles assigned to them by both Lippman and Dewey.

Instead of viewing journalism as a profession it might be better to see journalists as part of what Etienne Wenger (2006) calls a community of practice. Wenger's concept evolved from studies into the apprenticeship model of learning. Wenger provides a framework for managing knowledge between practitioners. He explores the often over looked benefits of peer-to-peer learning among practitioners in both formal and informal situations. When nurses discuss patient care at lunch, for instance, the participants all improve their practice. Communities of practice involve a complex network of relationships and learning environments. Envisioning journalism as a community of practice would put more attention on how on the job learning can elevate the practice of journalism. This moves the development of journalistic competency and standards away from academia and into the hands of the practitioners. Journalism could be improved by following the ideals of scientists who value sharing their methods, techniques and discoveries to improve science. This cooperation is intended to occur whether the scientist is affiliated with an academic institution or not, albeit corporate research has somewhat compromised this ideal.

Alison Alexander (2005) argues that people are becoming 'increasingly disenchanted with institutions in general and the media in particular.' It is understandable that the status of professional would be desirable in a society that has embraced a kind of caste system based on credentials. Both medicine and law have entry standards to exclude people. There is no such standard for those wishing to become journalists (Committee on Freedom of the Press, 1947). This is a good thing. As Schafer (2002) writes, journalism 'depends on un-credentialed losers, outsiders, dilettantes, frustrated lawyers, unabashed alcoholics—and, yes, creative psychopaths—to keep its blood red.'

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