



BACK TO SCHOOL

BY **MARC EDGE**

Professionalism versus pragmatism

Canadians should pay attention to the way the debate over journalism schools played out in the United States

When Columbia University in New York elevated its undergraduate journalism program to graduate school status in 1935, one wag quipped that offering an advanced degree in such a practical subject was akin to awarding an MA in swimming. The Master's program at Columbia has proven a lightning rod ever since — for criticism from academics for its relentlessly vocational approach, and for praise from practitioners who consider skills training the only appropriate method of journalism education. It was thus to be expected when the opposing camps skirmished again recently after Columbia's new president, Lee Bollinger, moved to inject some more academic rigor into the Ivy League school's journalism program.

The skills vs. theory debate has gone on unresolved for decades in U.S. journalism schools, where it has been called a "dialogue of the deaf." In Canada, journalism education lags far behind where it is in the U.S., not only in history and sheer numbers, but also in the state of the debate. Here the practitioners, many of whom dismiss the notion of instruction even in skills, and instead argue for the traditional apprenticeship system, have long held the upper hand over the academics. Just listen to a few of the more prominent professional voices:

- **Robert Fulford:** *"It would be cruel to inform [journalism students] they have embarked on a highly dubious enterprise. Still, they will eventually learn the uncomfortable truth: many of those in the profession they want to enter are convinced that this is precisely the wrong way to go about it."*
- **Barbara Amiel:** *"If our Canadian journalists are as good as any in the world, as I suspect, the one drawback from which they suffer is the existence of our courses on journalism . . . I suspect the good people are good 'in spite of' not 'because of' their journalism studies."*
- **Allan Fotheringham:** *"You cannot teach journalism any more than you can teach sex. The credentials for the trade are handed out at birth and there is no manual applicable."*

This antipathy helps explain why journalism education is a marginalized enterprise in Canada. Some practitioners argue that if instruction is called for at all, it should be on the long-standing British model of craft school training in the basics. In contrast to the almost century-long history of university journalism in the U.S., higher education in the subject north of the border is strictly a post-WWII phenomenon. The

original Big Three programs — at Carleton, Ryerson, and Western Ontario — didn't start until the late 1940s. Before 1975, when Concordia in Montreal began a degree program, university jour-



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nalism education was an exclusively Ontario offering. Later that decade the subject spread both westward (Regina) and east (King's College, Halifax), but it wasn't until the late 1990s that a long-promised graduate school of journalism was established at UBC on

the West Coast. Still, the number of university J-schools in Canada can be counted on the fingers of two hands, while in the U.S., there were 458 four-year programs in the subject in 2002.

That's why it's worthwhile to consider the long-running debate in the States, especially the watershed tussle at Columbia, in pondering the future direction of journalism education in Canada, the popularity of which is taking off despite the resistance of practitioners. In B.C. alone, the number of four-year journalism programs has leaped in the past few years with the movement there to convert many two-year community colleges into degree-granting University Colleges. As a result, the former Kwantlen College in suburban Vancouver now offers a four-year program in journalism, as does University College of the Cariboo in Kamloops, and soon the erstwhile Malaspina College on Vancouver Island will expand its media studies diploma into a degree program.

In the U.S., practitioner resistance to journalism even being taught at the college level was also exhibited early on in the debate. It wasn't until the 1930s that editors and publishers warmed to the idea, and then only to provide themselves with some needed credibility during the Depression. The long tradition of patronage by publishers started by Joseph Pulitzer, who bankrolled the Columbia program that began in 1912, soon led to the naming of many free-standing professional schools after individuals or media companies, which extended the influence of practitioners. A liberal arts model prevailed at other schools, such as Wisconsin, where journalism was taught in the faculty of arts. Courses in economics, history, and political science were mixed with skills training, and this scholarly approach allowed for a more critical and reformist relationship with the press. Social scientific research into mass communication began in earnest in the 1940s, and an increased research orientation at many universities required faculty to "publish or perish" if they wanted tenure and promotion. Soon the battle lines were drawn in many journalism schools, with the "green eyeshades" from the newsroom arguing for skills training on one side and the "chi squares" with their slide rules pondering the theoretical questions on the other.

The most notable recent salvos exchanged in the long-running battle, pre-Bollinger, came from the University of Oregon and the Freedom Forum. The Oregon Report, as it came to be called, was a comprehensive examination of journalism education in the U.S. that described many programs in 1984 as "little

more than industry-oriented trade schools" and led to a movement at many universities toward a more scholarly curriculum. The industry backlash came a dozen years later from the Freedom Forum, a well-funded group founded by the Gannett newspaper chain, which surveyed both journalists and journalism educators for their thoughts on the topic. Its report, titled *Winds of Change*, deplored the increased hiring of journalism professors with Ph.D.s over those with extensive industry experience and decried the movement in j-schools toward a more "generic" communication curriculum.

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Canadian contributions to the J-school debate include Stuart Adam's comprehensive model for reform of journalism education. The former long-time director of Carleton's J-school argued in 1988 that the merely quasi-professional nature of journalism itself failed to qualify vocational training in the subject as a university discipline. Education about journalism, he instead argued, is closer to the university's fundamental mission of equipping students for informed acts of citizenship. The "mutually uncomfortable" relationship between journalism scholars and practitioners, according to Adam, should thus be resolved in favor of the former. His influential paper almost landed him the vacant position of dean at Columbia back then, which would have made Bollinger's reform efforts no doubt redundant by now.

When James Carey made his oft-quoted "plea for the university tradition" in 1978, he freely admitted to borrowing the argument from Canadian economic historian Harold Innis, whose theories on how "monopolies of knowledge" have controlled media and thus society throughout human history are well known to communication scholars, if not journalists. Like Innis, Carey saw the professionalization of higher education as contrary to the fundamental mission of universities, particularly in journalism schools. Professional instruction, he argued, not only results in a curriculum devoid of intellectual thought, but one that often deliberately stifles it. "The new media centralize and monopolize civic knowledge and, as importantly, the techniques of knowing," noted Carey. "The modern school of journalism begins its teaching from the premises of the profession it serves."

The 1981 Royal Commission on Newspapers report observed that Canadians were well prepared to understand new media through the "solid foundation of theoretical studies" left by their countrymen Innis and Marshall McLuhan, who together "altered mankind's appreciation of the influence of media." Whether McLuhan's oft-quoted "the medium is the message" has influenced Canadian journalism or journalism students is doubtful, however. I know that as a journalist I never had the faintest understanding of such profound theories, but I had to take the old-fashioned apprenticeship route into the newspaper business. Since going back to school a few years ago to study the subject I practiced for so long, I wish I'd done so the first time around. Now that I teach journalism, I actually envy my students for having the



HIGHER PLACES OF LEARNING: *The key will be to strike the appropriate balance between theory and practice; there should be room for both in the university journalism curriculum.*

benefit of some instruction in the subject first, not only in the skills required, but more importantly on some of the larger issues involved.

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The Canadian equivalent of Columbia's controversial J-school is the one at Ryerson University in Toronto. As perhaps befits Ryerson's former status as a polytechnic, its curriculum is almost exclusively devoted to skills training, except for a couple of

courses on such standard subjects as Media Law and Ethics, and a laudable offering titled Covering Diversity. But don't try telling some Ryerson faculty members, who are understandably proud of their school's deserved reputation for graduating some of Canada's finest journalists, that a few "concepts" courses are in order to help students better understand the role of journalists throughout history and

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around the world. You risk getting your head bitten off, as I almost did during a job interview there as a doctoral candidate a few years ago. I returned to my dissertation research chagrined, but with a new appreciation for the level of resistance among journalism educators in our country to theoretical content in the curriculum. Needless to say, I didn't get the job.

But things are changing, even at Ryerson with its recent elevation to research university status. New faculty members holding advanced degrees have finally been hired, and the search now under way for a new director promises to help decide the journalism school's future direction. Here, for what they're worth, are my suggestions for some additions to Ryerson's journalism curriculum that would help bring it into the academic world:

• **Journalism History.** I have to admit my bias here, as this was the subject of my dissertation research, but I think an historical perspective on the subject is essential.

• **International Communication.** Sometimes called Global Media Studies. Space is the other dimension, in addition to time, across which the practice of journalism should be considered.

• **Media Management.** An understanding of the business in which students will be working would be useful, along with a few principles that should come in handy when they are promoted.

• **Mass Communication Theory.** This can also be called Media and Society. The word "theory" scares some journalists off and its connotation is overly scientific in this context. I prefer "thought" instead.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not arguing against skills training, a reasonable amount of which I think is essential. The practitioners are right when they say journalism is a craft that can only be mastered through experience. Rather, I'm arguing that a well-rounded university education in journalism should prepare students for a career as a watchdog on powerful institutions by acquainting them with the growing body of knowledge on the subject. To argue otherwise takes the anti-intellectual position in favor of less knowledge and understanding, not more. Even in the U.K., growing concern over the social importance of journalism practices has led to an explosion of undergraduate education in this area. Before 1990 there were no BA programs in journalism there, but now 46 universities offer degrees in the subject.

The key everywhere will be to strike the appropriate balance between theory and practice, but there should be room for both in the university journalism curriculum. It appears that this will be the outcome at Columbia, where the one-year master's program will

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likely be expanded to two years, with more conceptual coursework added. It can only be an improvement. ☑

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