

What Is Journalism Education For?

Mike Gasher

What we are witnessing in journalism education today is a tug of war over what we call journalism – a struggle over its definition and purpose as well as over who gets to decide these questions. Pulling on one end of the rope is the news industry, which continues to try to appropriate journalism as a commercial enterprise serving markets rather than publics. This is an increasingly corporate, concentrated, and commercial industry struggling to find its place in what has become a crowded and networked field (Hamilton 2004; Heinrich 2008; Van Der Haak, Parks, and Castells 2012; Anderson, 2013). Tugging on the other end is a messy mix of citizens, alternative news organizations, reform advocates, and critical journalists, all of whom are trying to restore to journalism a public service ethos in order to resuscitate the idea that journalism can be a democratic communications system (Gingras 2006; Shade and Lithgow 2009; Mulhmann 2010; Dahlgren 2013; Gasher, Brin, et al. 2016). Meanwhile, journalism educators are looking on, not entirely sure which end of the rope to grab (Skinner, Gasher, and Compton 2001; Gasher 2007; Knox & Goodrum 2007). We are eager to maintain the integrity of the practice and the institution, but we face often contradictory demands from a floundering news industry offering temporary and intermittent contract work, from students who want the employment we are preparing them for, and from our own sense of what journalism should be and will be by the time our students graduate. Once again, we are left asking: What is journalism education for? (see UNESCO 2007; Donsbach 2014).

As a response to this persistent question, I want to draw a number of important distinctions between terms that are too often conflated and thus contribute further to the muddle. This exercise in unpacking terms commonly applied to discussions about the future of journalism education is intended to reveal a number of problematic assumptions that too often lead the discussion astray.

First, I want to draw a distinction between journalism education and journalism training. Journalism education in Canada has taken a largely vocational approach, with an emphasis on students learning about form: news values, story structure, interviewing and research strategies, hardware and software instruction, and storytelling styles (Straw 1984; Skinner, Gasher, and Compton 2001; Johansen and Dornan 2003; Gasher 2007; Knox and Goodrum 2007). These are the kinds of things that many of us

who teach journalism learned on the fly in the newsroom. Much less of students' journalism education is about content, that is, the topics journalists tell stories about: politics and government, history, geography, science, the arts, the kinds of things normally associated with post-secondary education. The shift to multiplatform journalism has exacerbated the emphasis on journalism form: students are being taught the most effective presentation styles for each platform, the narrative ingredients these platforms demand, the latest software applications, even computer code (see Spinner 2014).

This emphasis on form over content grants students considerable expertise as news presenters, but it comes at the expense of their ability to produce informed content. When students' understanding of the topics that typically inform news coverage – history, geography, politics, the justice system, science, the arts – is neglected, their store of basic knowledge is compromised, and so is their ability to do proper research and ask informed and challenging questions. They become increasingly reliant on expert sources because they lack the critical skills to evaluate the information those sources provide. The risk is that they are left to practise stenography rather than journalism. Presentation styles are relatively easy to learn – many journalism educators learned them on the job, and our graduate programs cover the basics of storytelling in two or three semesters. Content expertise takes much longer to acquire, and greater emphasis should be placed on it in the education of journalists, particularly in universities (see Mangan 2005; UNESCO 2007).

This relates to a second distinction, between educating journalists and training news workers. Educating journalists should include addressing, and addressing critically, journalism's long-held values, reflecting on what we understand journalism to be – that is, on its role in democracy, its status as an independent institution, its notions of truth, and its methods of verification, as well as on what objectivity means (Hackett and Zhao 1998; Skinner, Gasher, and Compton 2001; McChesney and Nichols 2009; McChesney and Pickard 2011; Ward 2004, 2014). Training news workers in an era of shrinking newsrooms and growing technological dependence means serving industry's immediate needs, which too often include quick story turnaround, single sourcing, newsroom-based reporting, brand journalism, and native advertising; this produces Jacks and Jills of all platforms, masters of none. We need to draw a distinction between the learning environment of the classroom and the production environment of the newsroom. This ultimately is about recognizing our students – the best and the brightest of them, at least – as future leaders, builders, and visionaries of the journalism to come, as the future editors and producers who will one day be in a position to shape that production environment, to define the journalism their news organizations produce.

We need to draw a distinction between journalism and the news industry. Journalism is a practice with a long history informed by Enlightenment ideals, tied to notions of citizenship and democratic governance. Journalism is also an institution that is structurally embedded, and not only as a commercial

enterprise; it also has a history of various forms of public, cooperative, foundational, and alternative enterprise (Stephens, 2007; Conboy, 2010, Gasher et al., 2016; Gasher, Skinner, and Lorimer 2016). The news industry is one particular, albeit currently dominant, structuring of journalism; that industry structure has evolved dramatically, becoming increasingly corporate, concentrated, and hypercommercial, dedicated to serving readers and advertising markets as well as fickle shareholders. As journalism educators, we need to distinguish between the good journalism the news industry produces and the increasing number of practices – native advertising, click bait, celebrity trivia, and so on – that debase the practice and that render audiences cynical and mistrustful (see Basen 2012, 2013; Benedetti and Compton 2014).

We need to draw a distinction between information and content. Information is the specific form of content that good journalism specializes in – that which promotes understanding, establishes context, provides analysis, and focuses attention on and gives meaning to current events. Here, news values are determined by notions of citizenship and by citizens' need to know. Content is a much broader category, one that includes material that is not news in any conventional sense but that can nonetheless generate circulation, ratings, views, hits, downloads, and likes. Blurring the lines between news and other forms of content hollows out any clear sense of what journalism is.

We need to make a distinction between publics and markets. The notion of public is related to citizenship and community, to a sense of belonging that accommodates both diverse and common interests (see Gil de Zúñiga and Hinsley 2013; Nerone 2015). Serving the public entails an inclusive approach to audience, something that omnibus newspapers and newscasts once strived to ensure. Markets, by contrast, consist of consumers, of subscribers, of advertisers seeking the attention of media audiences with disposable income. This is an exclusive approach to journalism, one that speaks only to some people and that shapes the news agenda accordingly (see Hamilton 2004). This distinction is fundamental to how journalism defines the topics of news coverage; the market approach to journalism, for example, tends to treat politics as a spectator sport, economics as the exclusive purview of investors and managers, the arts and sports as spheres of corporately generated entertainment.

Speaking of markets, we need to distinguish between supply and demand. By supply I mean the elements in the curriculum that we as journalism educators believe are important in order to serve journalism's ideals, based on our experience and the learning that comes both from that newsroom experience and from the perspective we have gained from our reading of scholarship, not only in the field of journalism studies but also in media studies, communication, sociology, political science, history. Demand is what the news industry says *it* wants (and that industry seems lost in these transitional times) and what students say *they* want – internships, paid employment. Such demand is often ill-informed and too short-sighted to serve properly as journalism education's guide.

Finally, we need to draw a distinction between production and distribution. Production of

journalism is first and foremost about original reporting, what reporters, shooters, editors, and producers are best qualified to do (Benedetti and Compton 2014). This is where news originates, in the background research and in the face-to-face interactions between journalists and the people, institutions, places, and events that constitute the news world. This is the creative and, ideally, intellectual aspect of information generation. Distribution is what news organizations do: packaging and circulating those original reports. Linking, sharing, and aggregating do not exist without original reporting to link, share, and aggregate.

All of this is my way of saying that journalism educators should serve journalism, an idealized journalism with a set of core values and a long history of producing news and commentary about current events. This journalism should be served through a much stronger emphasis on knowledge about the subjects that comprise the content of news stories, with the focus on those aspects of the practice and the institution that the industry cannot or will not teach, as well as a clear understanding of journalism's role in a modern, democratic society.

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