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Wanted: Leaders, Journalists, Scholars, and Citizens with the Right Stuff!: A Reflection on Conflict, Journalism, and Democracy

*Edmund B. Lambeth**

I. INTRODUCTION

Neither the staunchest critic nor the strongest acolyte of journalism would deny that the coverage of conflict within society is an inevitable (some would say indispensable) activity of the news media. Yet, how well journalists cover conflict is frequently debated, especially in the troubled early years of the twenty-first century. Less noticed, however, is a related and relevant response to that debate by scholars from law, journalism, and the social sciences. They are exploring whether the insights and skills from the field of dispute resolution can be usefully imported and applied to the news media's coverage of conflict.

The purpose of this article is to describe, frame, and place the new initiative in the larger context of what can be done when professions and the institutions they inhabit and serve encounter internal stress and/or external conflict.

When Howard Gardner and his colleagues interviewed geneticists and journalists for their book, *Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet*, no one doubted they would encounter distinctly disparate realms. Geneticists sang a virtual ode to the beauty of their mission, standards, and identity. With its tight scientific discipline, its successful mapping of the human genome, and associated expectations of major societal benefits, genetics was clearly a well "aligned domain." Journalists, by contrast, bemoaned the heavy profit margins that media corporations extracted from their historic "cash cow" and complained of the industry's unwillingness to invest adequately in human capital as well as in new technology. These, they argued, have amounted to a strategic failure to keep journalism abreast of its democratic role as watchdog of the powerful and complex institutions of government, the marketplace, and education.

As befits scholars of intelligence, Gardner and colleagues Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon did not ignore the genuine triumphs of journalism, nor did they fail to acknowledge the clouds that could soon envelop genetics if it failed to defend its integrity or compromised rigorous scientific practices or procedures. Nor did the authors of *Good Work* fail to warn that unpredictable shifts in culture, economics, and technology can inflict havoc on the nations and civili-

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zations of the planet. Rather than merely chronicle dilemmas and crises, the authors also describe “levers, or moves, that can encourage good work.”¹

This article illustrates how such “levers” have the potential to preserve the economic, social, and professional health of the media. It also will describe the new interest media educators and dispute resolution specialists are taking in journalism’s treatment of conflict.

A bit more attention will be paid to local media, the sector that employs not only the most journalists, but, arguably, those closest to the sinews of American community life. Special attention also will be paid to the University of Missouri School of Journalism (Missouri School of Journalism) because it is both a professional and academic research home to a full range of multimedia enterprises, as well as specialties within journalism. As a result, it has the wherewithal to attain a level of academic and professional creativity shared by only a few other journalism schools. *Good Work* is especially relevant because, among other reasons, it recognizes that “market forces have assumed overwhelming importance in contemporary professional life, and that increased emphasis on profitability has caused tension for employees.”² That tension may be the greatest challenge to excellence in journalism, including the coverage of conflict and dispute resolution in the world’s oldest constitutional democracy.

Below are the “levers” available and necessarily brief depictions of how they relate to current curricular, research, and outreach efforts in journalism that are relevant to concerns of the field of dispute resolution.

II. CREATING NEW INSTITUTIONS

Walter Williams, a small-town editor and the globe-traveling overseer of international press relations of the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, founded the world’s first school of journalism four years later in 1908. He also established its now widely known teaching mechanism—the *Missourian*, a non-profit daily and Sunday community-wide newspaper—in the same year. The University’s companion commercial and network-affiliated station, KOMU-TV, joined the journalism school’s teaching ranks in 1953, and public radio station, KBIA, followed in 1972.

Although widely known for their teaching of traditional skills, the three media currently deploy cyberspace websites and internet distribution platforms used for teaching, research, and service. Their websites pooled resources in providing voters with background on the candidates and key issues in the 2006 mid-term elections. More recently, web-based expertise of the faculty and students has expanded to portrayals of the daily lives of citizens and student life in the public schools.³

Fourteen years earlier, in 1992 – 1993, the three media cooperated with faculty in a nine-month Community Knowledge Project. The goal was to test whether and how well their coordinated, but independent, coverage of important

1. HOWARD GARDNER, MIHALY CSIKSZENTMIHALYI & WILLIAM DAMON, *GOOD WORK: WHEN ETHICS AND EXCELLENCE MEET* 3-14, 223-49, 251-56 (2001).

2. *Id.* at 254.

3. For portrayals of daily lives of citizens and students, access www.columbiamissourian.com for Weekend *Missourian*, Mar. 10, 2007, at 30A-31A; for other Missouri School of Journalism digital initiatives, see MyMissourian.com, www.kbia.org, and www.komu-tv.org.

local issues would resonate with readers, listeners and viewers. The study measured knowledge gained and attitudes expressed by audiences to the coverage of three important issues. The shared topics—the vitality of neighborhood organizations, the status of the local job market, and access to health care—were chosen for their significance to citizens. They also offered students an opportunity to hone in-depth reporting skills and cover public affairs arenas common to communities where they were soon to be seeking full-time positions.

Each medium in the Community Knowledge Project enjoyed the freedom to choose its approach to the topics. To test their combined capacity to promote synergy, each medium promoted not only its own work, but the coverage of sister media. On balance, the combination of print and television appeared to foster the most knowledge gain on the issues reported and the most positive reception by the readers, listeners, and viewers.⁴ The cross-media reporting methods used in this study were admittedly cumbersome and the exercise created a new awareness by supervising faculty of the need to handle the conflicting perspectives of those acculturated to the quite distinct approaches of print, radio, and television journalism. The experiment prefigured and foreshadowed, a decade later, the more sophisticated internet-based news platforms that most major newspapers and other media currently are depending upon to meet the increasing competition of the Internet and to generate the audiences and advertising that will help them survive. Indeed, as one shall soon see, the major media organizations also experienced the need for “mediating” the colliding perspectives of print and electronic practitioners.

III. EXPANDING THE FUNCTIONS OF EXISTING INSTITUTIONS

The addition of public radio and television venues for teaching, research, and service at the Missouri School of Journalism represented an expansion of the function of the educational institution that Walter Williams founded. Indeed, the acceptance of these functions by the competing private media required significant mediation to resolve differences.

Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism, founded in 1912 with earlier encouragement and financial support by Joseph Pulitzer, the late editor and publisher of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *New York World*, added a significant responsibility to its role with the creation in 1961 of the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR). An excerpt from its first editorial, carried under the CJR masthead describes its role: “To assess the performance of journalism . . . , to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair and decent.”⁵ Twenty-nine years later, the University of Maryland, a public institution of higher education, assumed in 1976 (from a private owner) the leadership of the *American Journalism Review* (AJR). Both AJR and CJR are bimonthlies.

4. *Columbia Missourian: Community Knowledge Project*, <http://www.cpn.org/topics/communication/columbia.html> (last visited Mar. 23, 2007) (describing the case study as archived by the Project on Public Life and the Press, New York University Department of Journalism, 1994). EDMUND B. LAMBETH, PHILIP MEYER & ESTHER THORSON, *ASSESSING PUBLIC 158-177* (1998) (research methods and results).

5. This excerpt appears regularly beneath the inside CJR masthead above each table of contents, and appeared originally in the founding editorial of *Columbia Journalism Review*, Nov.-Dec. 1961.

The theme of the transforming role of new technology and the need for mediation across newsroom cultures noted in Missouri's teaching media emerges again in the journalism reviews.

AJR Managing Editor Rachel Smolkin's article, *What Went Wrong? The Tribune Co. and Synergy*, is a critical analysis of the collapse of the vision of a merged multi-media firm that stretches from coast to coast and links the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune* with Long Island's *Newsday*, plus the metro television stations in each of the major cities and associated smaller newspapers. But neither synergy of advertising markets nor compatibility of newsrooms appeared strong enough to sustain original expectations. Former *Newsday* editor Howard Schneider told Smolkin that a "lack of execution, a failure to invest, lack of will and lack of staying power" contributed to the demise of the coast-to-coast synergy project.⁶ Smolkin's account reflects a failure of corporate leaders to align the requisites for success on multiple levels within the merged companies as well as the talent to anticipate the strength of corporate differences or the ability to avert or resolve them once encountered. If the turbulence at the Tribune Company is representative of the future of Marshall McLuhan's "Gutenberg Galaxy," then dispute resolution would appear to warrant a significant place in courses on media management within schools of journalism and mass communication.

In *The New York Times Confronts the Future*, Smolkin tells the story of how a newspaper regarded by many as the best in the world has gone about "bolstering its digital presence" at a "time of wrenching transformation" in the newspaper industry.⁷ The "wrenching" stems from a 3.5% drop in daily and Sunday circulation in the first three quarters of 2006 compared to the same period in 2005. That took the Sunday edition down to 1,623,697 and the weekday average to 1,086,798. The "bolstering" can be seen in the fact that, as Smolkin reports, "NYTimes.com is the largest newspaper Web site, with 13.2 million unique visitors in the U.S. in December 2006," based on Nielsen ratings.⁸ In addition, for that month and for all of its properties, The Times Company "represents the ninth largest Internet presence," with 44.2 million unique visitors. The company's digital revenues doubled from 4% to 8% between 2004 and 2006.

Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., publisher of the *New York Times* newspaper and chair of the New York Times Company, has made it clear that he will continue to strengthen what he calls the firm's "video muscle," and the strength of its Internet-based journalism. Although peppered by Wall Street for the company's comparatively weak profit-making performance, journalists themselves value more highly its strength and leadership in the profession. Sulzberger told Smolkin: "Please, if you walk away from this conversation with anything—we are a journalistic organization. It is the journalism that will see us through If you lose that, you've lost that, you've lost your touchstone."⁹

Writing for CJR, New York University journalism history professor Mitchell Stephens cautioned the profession to assess the downside of media technology:

6. Rachel Smolkin, *Tribune Tribulations*, AM. JOURNALISM REV., Dec. 2006-Jan. 2007, at 22-31.

7. Rachel Smolkin, *Challenging Times*, AM. JOURNALISM REV., Feb.-Mar. 2007, at 16-17.

8. *Id.* at 22.

9. *Id.* at 27.

Editors and news directors today, fret about the Internet, as their predecessors worried about radio and TV, and all now see the huge threat that the Web represents to the way they distribute their product. They have been slower to see the threat it represents to the product itself. In a day when information pours out of digital spigots, stories that package painstakingly gathered facts on current events—what happened, who said what, when—have lost much of their value.¹⁰

Readers, Mitchell argued, deserve more reasoned insights and assessments from veteran journalists, not merely the straight news the Associated Press produces quite well. He cited examples in which *New York Times* correspondent John F. Burns made judgments and provided fresh insights on Iraq as a guest on PBS' *Charlie Rose* that might better, in Mitchell's view, have appeared first in the Times. The same goes for an incident in which a *Wall Street Journal* reporter's two-year old email, intended as a private communication, eventually found its way to the Web. It was a candid, first-person view of the war about which journalist Farnaz Fassihi declared: "For those of us on the ground, it's hard to imagine what if anything could be salvaged from [Iraq's] violent downward spiral." In Mitchell's view, "It proved not only more controversial but arguably more interesting than the stories Fassihi had been filing from that country."¹¹

Invoking history, Mitchell noted that during the "days when dailies monopolized breaking news, slower journals—weeklies like *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *Time*—stepped back from breaking news and sold smart analysis." He lauded the national daily, *The Independent of London*, and the *Times Herald-Record* of Middletown, New York and gave vivid examples of their emphasis on grounded opinion and interpretation, rather than merely a steady stream of spot news that fails to engage major issues.¹²

Viewed as a critical assessment of mega-media leadership and management of a project intended to synergize both advertising and news, Smolkin's critique of the Tribune Company's synergy project is a telling reminder of the need to pay much more attention to the effective alignment of resources, newsroom cultures, and internal consensus. This is no easy task given the size and competing ambitions involved. Her reporting advances the art, and demonstrates the need, for more coverage of corporate decision making. Her portrait of the *New York Times'* steady pursuit of a Web-based platform in tandem with the company's historic commitment to excellence in journalism has likely whetted the appetite of Times-watchers for more in future issues.

Stephens' critique has enough detail to foster critical thinking about whether and how the interpretive judgment approach to local or international reporting by London's *Independent* and Middletown, New York's *Times Herald-Record* might actually connect with readers affected by the issues covered. Both media criticism and media research would improve if journalism reviews could find a way to team with researchers to rigorously field test, for example, whether Mitchell's interpretive judgment approach gains more traction with readers than the explanatory and

10. Mitchell Stephens, *Beyond News*, COLUM. JOURNALISM REV., Jan.-Feb. 2007, at 34, 35.

11. *Id.* at 36.

12. *Id.* at 36-39.

news analysis methods, which emerged during the 1930s Depression era and which have been increasingly used since the 1960s. Video in tandem with incisive reporting could make the Internet a livelier locale for public affairs journalism.

IV. RECONFIGURING THE MEMBERSHIP OF EXISTING INSTITUTIONS

Gardner and his colleagues believe that by using this third lever, leaders can and should foster more ethnic and gender diversity in the American workplace. Their brief, but sophisticated, discussion focuses chiefly on genetics and journalism, taking pains to note that because training of media practitioners is “much briefer and the commercial benefits more tangible, the ranks of journalists have been more successfully diversified in recent years” than geneticists.¹³

Whatever one may think of the challenges and opportunities that new technology poses to the news media, the faculty of schools and departments of journalism ought, at a minimum, to consider ways their instruction can also foster high quality treatment of conflict in public affairs reporting. If the research talent and funds can be made available, they also ought to study more deeply the impact on citizens of alternative modes of conflict reporting on crucial and controversial public policy issues.

The School of Law and the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri – Columbia appear to be moving in that direction. Together, they created the Center for the Study of Conflict, Law, and the Media (the Center) in 2005. As its initial event, the Center hosted an international conference on “News Reporting and Its Impact on Conflict” on September 15 and 16, 2006. Some twenty speakers gave initial reports and discussed an agenda of research questions.

In the 2006 fall semester, Michael Grinfeld, an experienced attorney and writer as well as an associate professor of magazine journalism, taught a course on journalism and conflict, which Grinfeld had created four years earlier. With the cooperation of Judy Bolch, the Harte Chair in Journalism and editorial director of the magazine, *Vox*, students covered various community conflicts. In the process, they learned the process of negotiating with sources, classmates, designers, and editors in producing a two-part series that included features, photographs, and book reviews. Grinfeld co-directs the Center with Richard Reuben, an associate professor of law and an accomplished editor. Not only does the course expose journalism students to the law, lawyers, and legal controversy, but also to a range of other sources and public issues.

V. OTHER LEVERS FOR CHANGE

The two remaining levers suggested by the authors of *Good Work* are: (1) reaffirming the values of existing institutions, and (2) taking personal stands. These approaches usually require more time and often require special circumstances to have significant impact.

Not to put down a timely re-articulation of values, but the morality of media organizations and their professionals are most persuasive when they are evident in

13. GARDNER, CSIKSZENTMIHALYI & DAMON, *supra* note 1, at 216-17.

everyday practices that touch the lives within a community. As for taking personal stands, they can be significant alarm bells if the lyrics implicit in the sound remain intelligible to the once faithful and are credible to the even larger audience they need to inspire.

Journalism is in a stronger position now that it has *The Elements of Journalism*, the book that articulates the centrality of verification in reporting and writing. The book by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel is more powerful by having been born from conversations with one thousand journalists and citizens across America.¹⁴ Its chances of educational longevity are greater now that the Committee of Concerned Journalists, which convened the creative dialogue, has a continuing role as an affiliate of the Missouri School of Journalism and its new Reynolds Journalism Institute.

Taking personal stands, strictly understood, can build customer loyalty more strongly and certainly when the story composed, the headline written, and video shot are matters of daily behavior. This is not to discount the powerful message Jay T. Harris sent to colleagues and the profession when he resigned in 2001 as publisher of the San Jose, California *Mercury-News* to protest layoffs by the Knight-Ridder Company, a firm that has since succumbed to the pressures of Wall Street for higher profitability. The widely admired journalist, John Carroll, resigned as editor of the *Los Angeles Times* in 2005 for similar reasons. Tellingly, Carroll's successor, Dean Baquet, replicated Carroll's decision only a year later.¹⁵

At least three projects seem to be needed for journalism to serve democracy well in the early twenty-first century. First, the concern for ethics and professional standards of performance that led to *The Elements of Journalism* requires a sequel to address how citizens, key stakeholders, scholars, and other professionals can explore public problems now shaped and influenced too heavily by campaign donations and special interest lobbies. Second, the relationship between the academy and the practice of journalism should be encouraged to mature in ways that permit the two institutions to better serve citizens, particularly through public service research, as other professions have done. Finally, these two developments are not likely to happen unless those who share such concerns collaborate for maximum impact.¹⁶

14. BILL KOVACH & TOM ROSENSTIEL, *THE ELEMENTS OF JOURNALISM: WHAT NEWSPEOPLE SHOULD KNOW AND THE PUBLIC SHOULD EXPECT* 70-93 (2001).

15. Dan Fost, *Mercury News Publisher Quits to Protest Cuts*, THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, Mar. 20, 2001, at C-1; Howard Kurtz, *Los Angeles Times Names Dean Baquet as Top Editor*, THE WASHINGTON POST, July 21, 2005, at C-1; James Rainey, *Times Editor Is Out after Fighting Cuts*, L.A. TIMES, Nov. 8, 2006, at A-1.

16. The author of this article would welcome hearing from readers at lambethe@missouri.edu.

