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Journalism and Jesuit Mission

Facing an audience that is indifferent, if not hostile,
to serious public affairs

By Alfred Lawrence Lorenz

Close your eyes for a moment. Recall the faces of those hundreds of people, most of them black, whom you saw on your television screen suffering in humid August heat outside New Orleans' Morial Convention Center in the week after Hurricane Katrina.

They had been unable to leave the city, and in the days after the storm, after the levees had burst and the deluge had flooded their homes, they had walked to the Convention Center seeking what they vainly believed would be shelter and transportation out of their devastated city.

Hear in memory the words of an uncharacteristically subdued Wolf Blitzer on CNN: "You simply get chills every time you see these poor individuals... So many of these people. Almost all of them that we see are so poor and they are so black, and this is going to raise lots of questions for people who are watching this story unfold."

Questions, indeed.

Sadly enough, the first was, "Who are these people?" We who live in New Orleans knew there was poverty in the city; we had seen the dilapidated projects, the unemployed standing on the street corners; we had read the statistics. But the sight of all of those individuals in that place and all of those those crammed into the Superdome just a mile and a half up Poydras St. shocked us.

As I watched the story unfold from my air-conditioned refuge hundreds of miles away, it struck me

that journalists had failed them and us by not bringing them to our attention long before. And as an educator of journalists in Jesuit universities for 36

years, at Marquette and Loyola New Orleans, I questioned what responsibility all of us who teach journalism in Jesuit institutions might share.

*Walter Lippmann
was wrong*

One is tempted to respond that our role is to teach the nuts and bolts of news reporting and writing, how to cover news when it occurs. But this is not 1920, when the philosopher and journalist Walter Lippmann sniffed dismissively in *Public Opinion* that schools of journalism were trade schools, "intended to prepare men and women for a career." We have a more profound responsibility.

In his 2000 address at Santa Clara University, Father General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach told us that the role of faculty members at Jesuit colleges and universities "is tirelessly to seek the truth and to form each student into a whole person of solidarity who will take responsibility for the real world."¹ He made no distinction between disciplines; he was directing his words at us journalism professors as well as at our colleagues in theology, philosophy, and literature.

What truth do we seek as we study our field and lead our students in seeking?

Professor David Host of Marquette's College of Journalism came up with an excellent answer 40 years earlier, in 1960, in an essay marking the fiftieth anniversary of the college. Host stated that he and his colleagues there pursued truth in two ways: "truth about journalism as a work to be done and truth about the news media as social instruments through which the work is done."

The same could be said of today's journalism instruction in Jesuit institutions, as evidenced by our curricula. We all teach students the basic principles

*Understand the
mass media as
social instruments*

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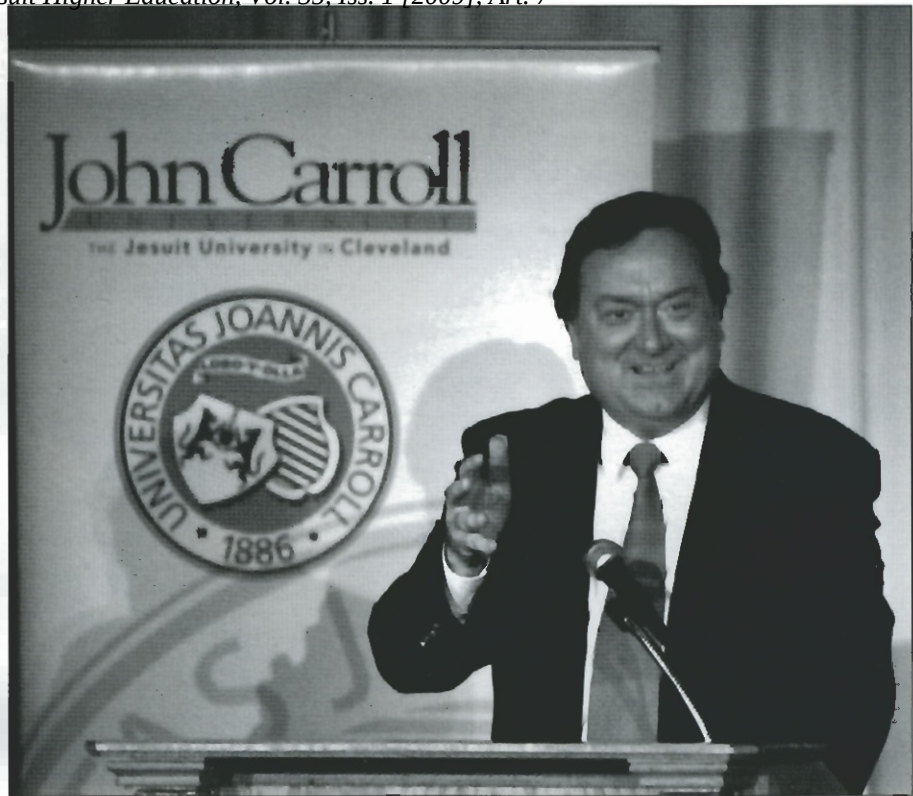
of the work and the essential techniques of gathering news and preparing it for publication; it is the grasp of those underlying principles of the work that will enable our graduates to adapt readily to changes in the field. At the same time, as did the Marquette faculty of the last century, we attempt to bring our students to a knowledge and understanding of the role of mass media as social instruments: how they have developed over time, how they are changing, how they affect the public, and journalists' ethical responsibilities to their readers and viewers.¹¹ And if we are doing our work as we should, we are bringing our students to know not only how media operate today but to view them critically and consider how they ought to operate.

We have all firmly rooted our programs in the liberal arts in order that our students have that broader knowledge and understanding of the world that is crucial to their development as human beings. For us, as for the Marquette faculty of Host's day, it is inconceivable that journalists should not be "educated precisely in those persisting questions of the nature and end of man and of the most pressing of his common worldly circumstances with which humanistic studies are traditionally concerned."

Fr. Kolvenbach also said at Santa Clara that university knowledge, while valuable for its own sake, is also "knowledge that must ask itself, 'For whom? For what?'" The answer, as we are frequently reminded on our campuses, is "the service of faith and the promotion of justice."

The year before Fr. Kolvenbach was on that campus, a Santa Clara audience had heard Joseph Daoust, S.J., president of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, take up the same theme. He pointed out that the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus had specified that promotion of justice could be accomplished by direct service to the poor, social activism, or "developing awareness of the demands of justice and the social responsibility to achieve it." Neither soup kitchens nor political mobilization campaigns, while laudable activities for our students, are central to the academic enterprise, he argued. But "developing social consciousness and conscience, or conscientization as the Latin Americans call it, is of the essence of Jesuit education. A university which does not, in its main educational activities, concern itself with this mission is not... in the Jesuit or Catholic tradition."

It is here that we face our greatest challenges. How do we help shape our students to develop social con-



Tim Russert, John Carroll class of 1972, who sadly passed away in June, credited the Jesuit education he received for preparing him to interview national and international figures as host of *Meet the Press* and as NBC News' Washington bureau chief.

sciousness and conscience for their work in the mass media—to be men and women for masses of others? How do we "form each student into a whole person of solidarity who will take responsibility for the real world" as journalists—especially, in a media environment in which the trivial is too often promoted to an audience that is increasingly indifferent, if not hostile, to serious public affairs? How can we better educate our students for the positions they ultimately will have as editors, general managers, and publishers (recalling Joseph Leibling's book dedication, "to the foundation of a school for publishers, failing which, no school of journalism can have meaning")? How do we adequately prepare each one to revolutionize the mass media on behalf of social justice?

We need to ask such questions in our periodic curriculum reviews, when we write our syllabi each semester and as we craft each lecture. And I would suggest that we journalism faculty members in the Jesuit colleges and universities, perhaps under the auspices of the AJCU Communication group, collectively begin a serious and pointed conversation focused on them. ■

*We root out
programs in the
liberal arts*