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Forum Essay 2

Blending Journalism and Communication Studies

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I want to offer a parable about discovering virtue in necessity. Specifically, I want to suggest why the much-bemoaned practice of blending journalism and communication studies has actually benefited journalism education on the whole, making it more intellectually supple and adventurous and opening new opportunities for both scholarship and professional practice.

Much opinion has flowed in precisely the opposite direction, of course. The forced marriage of once-independent journalism and speech departments at many universities has inspired dark and mournful tales of decline. Journalism's defenders argue that their profession inevitably loses its distinctive identity when combined with other forms of communication or media studies. Sometimes the profession's defenders declare that any combination of journalism—whether speech communication or media studies or strategic communication—amounts to a profanation, a betrayal of the sacred trust upon which their craft was founded. At least once or twice, formerly combined departments have been granted divorces, in the name of restoring the purity of journalism education. Such debates are not entirely new, of course. Thirty years ago, the increasing application of social science methods to media studies provoked stylized debates between the "communicologists" and the "green eye-shades," in which the theoretical knowledge (and cultural authority) of the Ph.D. was imagined to be displacing the street smarts of the former newsroom professionals.

But the getting of wisdom may require us to find good reasons for actions originally taken for less-than-ideal motives. The fact that administrative fiat and financial pressures have often demanded the blending of journalism and speech departments does not necessarily make such marriages a bad idea. And the insistence, in some quarters, that true journalism education can only be conducted within narrowly focused units may be less pure than it at first seems. For example, in the recent Carnegie Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education, one senses a familiar mix of motives—a real concern for the future of the profession combined with the usual grasping for academic distinction, as a few well-heeled programs seek to set norms that only they have the resources to meet. Yet journalism's historical claims to be a democratic institution rest as much upon the profession's recruitment of talent from across society as much as upon its philosophical commitment to public life. Journalism has traditionally opened itself to those who enter by many paths, from many directions. In that spirit, I want to argue that a style of education that blends journalism and communication studies, while not the only path into the profession, offers its own distinct virtues.

Treating journalism as communication practice seems plausible, in part, because we now recognize the particular, contingent circumstances that have shaped journalism education from the start. Though the history of university education in journalism remains largely untold, some key features of that history seem evident. Early journalism education privileged newspaper work as the predominant mode of professional practice, a choice that if made in the current media environment would seem idiosyncratic. The founding of journalism schools in public universities encouraged state press associations and prominent urban dailies to seek a measure of influence. Many of the best-known journalism schools bear the names of the newspaper publishers whose fortunes helped endow them—from Joseph Pulitzer, Henry Grady, Joseph Medill, S. I. Newhouse, Walter Annenberg, E. W. Scripps, and William Allen White, to Donald Reynolds, Charles Manship, and Edward Gaylord. Each new technology—photography, radio, television, Internet—has unsettled the profession's conception of itself, as have calls for news organizations to behave in ways that others take to be more ethical, socially responsible, or civically conscious.

Educators and journalists have sometimes responded to such criticism by arguing that the profession's core values remain the same, despite changes in media technology and organizational sponsorship. The mandate to gather, interpret, write, and disseminate factual information has not changed, defenders say. But in fact the journalism profession has long maintained multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory conceptions of itself. When justifying the social and political value of their profession, journalists describe themselves as information trustees, providing citizens with balanced, verifiable fact. When dramatizing the actual experience of being a journalist, however, they often describe themselves as storytellers, known for having an eye for telling detail and an ear for pithy expression. Because the profession's definition of itself has never been stable or permanent, it cannot be used to secure a single system of education in its name. The *Wall Street Journal*'s recently announced decision to shift its focus from "what happened" to "what it means" reenacts once again the ongoing argument between information and story as competing ideals of journalistic practice. The profession's core values remain so broad—gathering facts, writing clearly, being fair—that they cannot justify all the specific activities that journalists undertake in the name of those values. To an outsider, the profession's self-descriptions (like everybody else's) sound ceremonial and strategic, designed as much to celebrate as to explain, directed as much to the profession itself as to the wider society.

Today we more easily recognize that criticisms of journalism often involve questions not of philosophy or law but of relationships, and this is precisely the domain addressed by the study of communication. What does an interviewer owe his or her subject? How do we decide what to write about (or in what tone) even when the constitution protects a wide range of expression? What sorts of civic energy and commitment does a society lose when journalists decide that their professional norms require them to sit on the sidelines? Deciding to study journalism as communication does not automatically answer these questions, but it compels us to address them. Left to its own devices, journalism education lacks a meticulous description of its own communication practices. Professionals and educators alike have tended to theorize a very narrow range of behaviors—mostly writing and editing with some cursory attention to interviewing. And yet, we know from experience that the work of journalists entails a whole series of communicative behaviors, including listening, persuading, working in small groups, imagining the shape and substance of cultural differences, and navigating organizational bureaucracies. All these are topics to which communication scholars have devoted considerable attention.

I am not arguing that we should consider journalism merely a practical application of what communication studies already knows more deeply. In ways rather similar to journalism education, traditional modes of speech education have continuously renegotiated their own position in the university, adding and subtracting elements of broadcast performance, theater, linguistics, or sometimes even audiology. A version of the communicologist/green eyeshade debate has inflected debates within communication studies, too, as quantitative social science methods began to claim superiority over older methods of speech education, sometimes with improbable consequences, as when quantitative methods came to exert surprising control over the study of interpersonal communication. Rhetoric, once the study of public address and strategic speaking, has evolved into a more general theory of interpretive practice. Such changes do not make sense in any absolute way but only as contingent responses to historically specific circumstances.

Some differences between the two traditions will likely remain. By its nature, journalism education attends more closely to institutional questions of technology, law, economics, history, and social structure than most communication education does. And communication studies will continue to be more intensely interested in the study of process and interaction for its own sake. But the blending does suggest intellectual possibilities normally unexplored in the traditional journalism school. The decision to study journalism and communication within the same program calls attention to important family resemblances that link journalism to advertising and public relations, two professions that journalism disdains but upon which the large-scale institutional practice of journalism depends. Practitioners in all three fields communicate for a living, in effect organizing, capitalizing, and professionalizing the ordinary communication behaviors in which all humans participate. The cultural turn in both media and communication studies has underscored the meaningfulness and power of this simple observation. Debates about the ideological power of narrative, the emotional weight of our social performances, the distribution of social capital, and the symbolic constitution of group identity can all be more fully illuminated if we acknowledge the theoretical interests that communication studies and journalism now share.

One possible objection to blending remains—that it obscures what is distinctive about journalism. Everything cannot be communication, the argument goes; otherwise it is nothing. Such either-or reasoning always betrays the complexity of our actual human experience, however. Journalism and communication are not nouns that mark off discrete, permanently constituted domains, but names that strategically position different communication practices in relation to one another, within a fluid, evolving system of cultural distinctions. Consider an artless example. The newspaper reporter who aspires to write novels easily recognizes the differences between those two styles of writing, and she might be drawn to each form for different reasons, but she also likely considers her work in both forms as moments within a lifelong, continuing commitment to writing. We do not question a writer who creates reportage, poems, novels, screenplays, and essays; why should we think any less, in turn, of a journalist who discovers the family resemblances that tie their work to other forms of communication? Truth be told, the hostility between journalism and communication has often persisted because each side has constantly picked at the other, discovering invidious distinctions where we might more easily notice shades of difference. University professors of journalism and speech for years defined themselves in part by reminding students that they were not like the folks in that other department.

One last observation. Understanding journalism as a form of communication opens the profession’s work to public scrutiny and criticism. The claim that journalism stands apart as a separate, special, constitutionally privileged activity badly serves both the profession and the polity. The constitutional protections of the First Amendment protect activities not entities. When journalists deny the family resemblance between their constitutionally protected communication practices and those of citizens, they offer others little reason to honor those practices. Rather than insisting that citizens respect journalism on the terms in which the profession prefers to understand itself (and being disappointed when they do not), we might do better to emphasize the similarities between journalism and the communicative practices in which everyone participates. Treating journalism as communication opens an ethical, dialogic space that democratic life desperately requires. And if the blending of journalism and communication studies serves that purpose, so be it.