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# Journalism Education in the Spirit of *Magis*

By John J. Pauly

Every effort to improve journalism, to sharpen its senses or blunt its worst impulses, must struggle with a simple historical fact. As a profession and an institution, journalism remains in thrall to the liberal tradition. In the world it imagines, journalism stands watch against despots. It guarantees the possibility of representative government, in which forms of authority can be shared, with ample provision for debate and oversight. Journalism defends news as citizens' passport to a public world in which the provision of shared knowledge becomes the basis for deliberation and, ultimately, control of the people's representatives. All of which fit with Jesuit ideals.

We should not underestimate the historical accomplishments of that liberal tradition. Its vision of the world was capacious enough to allow humane revision. Over time, its definition of "the public" encouraged a broader sense of civic membership, wearing down the rights of blood, race, and gender. Its insistent defense of its own speech created more generous possibilities for dissent and individual conscience, and perhaps even a deepened sense of what true human freedom and flourishing requires. Even when it faltered, or proved inadequate to its circumstances, the liberal tradition offered tools for its own

critique, and that fact alone has helped it to survive.

Journalism judges itself in these terms, and asks to be so judged by others. And journalism education, in its turn, has followed the profession's lead. It aims not only to teach an ever-expanding array of craft techniques and tools but also to imbue its apprentices with a sense of their institutional role within the larger pageant of civic life.

Those of us who teach journalism in Jesuit universities might well ask: Is that enough? Is the profession adequate to this vexing historical moment? Confronted with accusations of fakery, criticism of mainstream media, and widespread suspicion of the professional expertise and authority it has sought to cultivate for the last century, should journalism double down on the liberal tradition and on those truths it takes to be self-evident?

We should understand the profession's current obsession with fact-checking and the correction of fake news as an attempt to renormalize this moment, to tame the chaos by falling back on a tried and true practice in which it already believes: dispassionate and determined factual reporting as service to the public as the best means available to restore citizens' trust in journalism as an institution. As the sociolo-

gist Michael Schudson has argued, journalism serves representative government best by doing the things it does best, no matter how unlovable that might make it to others.

But it is worth asking whether that is the endgame the profession should play, or needs to play. Will the restoration of public trust in journalism's sense of itself help the rest of us as much as journalists hope it will, or is what we are hearing the sound of a profession whistling in the dark as fear begins to overcome it? In the spirit of *magis*, those of us who teach journalism in Jesuit universities might well ask whether yet another invocation of the liberal tradition is good enough right now.

One clue to where journalism might do better is in its understanding of the public it hopes to serve. As commentators such as James Carey and Jay Rosen have noted, journalists treat "the public" as their god-term, as the core value that justifies their everyday practices and demonstrates their profession's ethical commitment. The public, as a theory of what connects us, has done brave and important work, to be sure. It freed democracy from crippling forms of religiously inspired intolerance and bloodshed. It allowed all human beings (in theory) to enter public life with a new status: as citizens, not as subjects of a

monarch or members of a clan, but as equal participants in the work of self-governance. We ignore those historical accomplishments at our own peril.

And yet, the term *public* does not fully capture the deeper forms of human solidarity and mutual implication that the Jesuit tradition aims to explore. Perhaps this is how a Jesuit approach to journalism education might describe itself – not as the blunt opposite of the liberal tradition that trades in objectivity for advocacy, but as the formation of a moral conscience. What would a journalism dedicated to the cause of human solidarity look like? In such a journalism, how would we talk to and about one another, and about the social institutions we have created to serve us? Schudson has identified empathy as one of the functions of journalism, but that way of putting the question falls back upon the vocabulary of liberalism, with otherwise autonomous individuals finding ways to acknowledge one another as human. Nor is journalism's habitual response, finding the feature story that personalizes the institutional politics, enough.

So consider this just an inkling about the path we might walk. As we teach young journalists all the things they need to know to do their work, let us also keep in front of them the notion that they should recognize and honor the need for human solidarity. There are journalists who do such work. Katherine Boo's remarkable book about Mumbai's slums, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, honors that principle. And for decades, and with little fanfare, so have the reports of public radio's Daniel Zwerdling.

The question that Jesuit higher education should pose to professional journalists is this: How would you do your work differently if you imagined yourself walking in the company of others? What would it take for you to learn to stand as comfortably in the presence of the immigrant, the poor, and the sick – as you do now in the presence of the politician, the expert, the public relations officer, and the corporate executive?

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Cover photo from *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity* by Katherine Boo.