Journalism and Serving the Public Trust

By William F. Woo
Lorry I. Lokey Visiting Professor of Professional Journalism
Stanford University

The relentless acquisition and independent presentation of news is the way the press serves the public trust. Journalism programs, departments, and schools need to become the places where such concepts are nurtured, protected, and ceaselessly advocated.

In 1892, the visionary Joseph Pulitzer, owner of the *New York World,* offered Columbia University the money to create the world's first school of journalism. At the time, what journalism education there was in the United States and elsewhere consisted of experienced editors and reporters passing along the rules and tools of the craft. Pulitzer's idea seemed farfetched.

Why, people wondered, would any university want to train journalists? They were mere ink-stained wretches who practiced what at best was a craft, learned on the job. The idea that journalists belonged in a community of humanists and scientists seemed laughable. Columbia's trustees rejected the offer.

Pulitzer, whose name is associated today with U.S. journalism's highest award, the Pulitzer Prizes, persevered. In 1904, he published an article titled "The College of Journalism" in *The North American Review*. In it, he laid out his case for journalism education.

"Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together," Pulitzer wrote. "An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mould the future of the Republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations."

Columbia accepted Pulitzer's money, but by the time it got around to opening a journalism school in 1912 and naming it after him, he was dead and the University of Missouri already had started the first school of journalism. Today journalism education is taken for granted. In the United States alone there are more than 450 programs, departments, and schools of journalism and mass communication. In a typical year, these produce

close to 40,000 recipients of bachelor's and master's degrees.

In this article, I shall put forward three themes. The first addresses the development and state of journalism education. The second examines some profound changes in journalism that raise troubling questions about its future. The third takes another look at Joseph Pulitzer's vision and argues that it is of paramount importance today to both journalists and journalism education.

When Missouri began its journalism school in 1908, it found that it had to invent a faculty. So from the start, the university emphasized practical experience. That remains its focus, though like most modern journalism schools today, it also teaches history, theory, research, and a broad array of other subjects. The original emphasis on practical experience, however, became the model for other universities.

In time, schools understood it was not enough to teach reporting and writing. They needed educators with advanced degrees, who could conduct research and develop theories of journalism. They needed a faculty skilled in pedagogy. Increasingly, journalism came to be thought of as a subset of communication.

Practitioners and scholars often found themselves on opposite sides of a growing and contentious rift. Some practitioners looked with disdain upon their scholarly colleagues, with their doctorate degrees and social science methods and jargon as more suited for ivory towers than the "real world" of journalism. Some scholars came to regard the practitioners as mere trades people and the "real world" of journalism as the crude industrial moorings from which academic institutions ought to divest themselves.

The ground over which this contest was waged was the old question of what a journalism education should be. Was it to be mainly practice? Theory? Some combination of these? Was its mission to produce Ph.D.'s or, as Pulitzer had envisioned, future generations of reporters and editors?

Over the years, the journalism school that Pulitzer had endowed at Columbia became one of America's finest training grounds for reporters and editors. Its graduates were found in the most prestigious news organizations. The cornerstone of its curriculum was a rigorous mandatory reporting course.

But in mid-2002, while the school was looking for a new dean, Columbia's president, Lee Bollinger, abruptly called off the search. More reflection was needed. "To teach the craft of journalism is a worthy goal, but clearly insufficient in this new world and within the setting of a great university," he said.

This was stunning. Here at Columbia, the citadel of journalism education directed at professional competence, the university president had declared that teaching the craft of journalism was insufficient.

More than 100 years after Joseph Pulitzer first advocated the establishment of journalism schools, there still was no agreement on what journalism education should be. The question of whether universities should teach journalism had been answered decisively. Far from settled, however, were the questions of why journalism should be taught and what an education in it should be.

For much of the 20th century, newspapers enjoyed a favored situation. Apart from other papers, they had no significant competitors. Newspapers were the country's main, everyday source of news and advertising. "I only know what I read in the papers," people said.

In the decades after World War II, however, three developments occurred that were to have an enormous impact on journalism. Inevitably, they affected journalism education.

The first was the rise of serious competition for people's attention and advertisers' money. Television and much later the Internet and an explosion of specialty publications bit deeply into the newspapers' traditional audience and sources of revenue. These competitors offered not only new ways of getting information; they also gave the public different points of view. Fewer people could say, "I only know what I read in the papers." Public trust in journalism declined.

The second impact on journalism was demographic. After the war, beginning with the many returning servicemen and women who entered universities, America became better educated and demanded a different kind of journalism—one that was more informed and had broader interests. Suburbs grew at the expense of central cities. Shopping malls replaced downtown department stores, upon whose advertising dollars the newspaper industry had been built. Afternoon newspapers, delivered by trucks that struggled through

rush hour traffic, began to die. More insidiously, the pace of modern life left people with less time for newspapers. They turned to the emerging medium of television for news, but even more for entertainment.

Finally, beginning in the 1960s, some news organizations discovered Wall Street as a source of capital. Whereas before World War II, the vast majority of America's newspapers were privately and independently owned, now public, chain ownership became the standard.

Thus in some cases, the measure of a news organization's success was decreed by the stock market, which looked at quarterly earnings and not the quality of journalism. Market pressures led to lower investments in news operations. As a priority within news organizations, journalism became overshadowed by other priorities. When executives of Gannett, America's largest newspaper chain, appeared before market analysts in Boston a few years ago, they never mentioned the word journalism in their formal presentation.

Large conglomerates gobbled up smaller organizations. By the end of the 20th century, reported Ben Bagdikian in the latest edition of his book, *The Media Monopoly,* most of what Americans read in their papers and saw on television was the product of only a handful of giant corporations.

What does all this mean for news organizations and universities? A place to begin is by recalling Joseph Pulitzer's words in *The North American Review:* "Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together . . . A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself."

What Pulitzer was saying is that journalism is more than just a way to make money or provide entertainment. It serves a public trust. Effective popular government, he had written, depended upon a "disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it."

> Journalism is not an end in itself but only the professional means by which reporters and editors serve the public trust.

Before television and the Internet, not all of journalism was public-spirited, and cynics and mercenaries were easy to find. But in the many decades in which the press was privately owned, an ethic had developed: Journalism existed to serve the people. Often this was disregarded, but nonetheless journalists came to think of themselves as a Fourth Estate, independent of public or private power centers. Their mission was disclosure; their canon, objectivity; their discipline, verification; their credo, the people's right to know.

All of these are open to critical analysis, but for a long time journalists agreed on them. Journalism schools preached them. More than anything, these ideals rested upon a stable industry that understood itself.

But ask a newsroom or a classroom today, What is journalism? What business are journalists in or are being trained for? There is no consensus. Some will say the information business; others, the entertainment business, the news business, the profit business.

A better answer, as I wrote recently in *The Nieman Reports,* a journalism quarterly published at Harvard University, requires us to go back to first principles and ask, what is the purpose of journalism and of journalism education?

In that article, from which I shall be drawing in my concluding passages, I suggested that the purpose of journalism is not doing journalism any more than the purpose of surgery is simply doing surgery, that is, cutting people open and sewing them back together again. The purpose of surgery is healing.

Similarly, the purpose of journalism is more than reporting and writing stories, though as with surgery, skill and competence are essential. Its purpose has to do with something more fundamental, which I think of as serving the public trust.

The relentless acquisition and independent presentation of news is the way the press serves the public trust, a concept that transcends political systems. These systems,

after all, are only means to an end. For Americans, democracy is the political means to liberty.

Similarly journalism is not an end in itself but only the professional means by which reporters and editors serve the public trust. They do that by providing the news and information that free people need to make political, economic, social, and personal decisions.

When President Bollinger of Columbia declared that teaching "the craft of journalism is a worthy goal but clearly insufficient," he made a useful point. Young journalists who are ignorant of the social, historical, and theoretical context of their profession are doomed to live in the shallows. Journalists who understand only theory, history, ethics, and the law of the press are equally useless. Neither can serve the public trust.

The question of whether craft or academic breadth is a worthy and sufficient goal for "a great university" strikes me as irrelevant as asking whether it is better for young people to join the army or the navy at a time when the military already has been hijacked by a half dozen warlords.

I use "a half dozen" advisedly. That is the number of corporations that Ben Bagdikian says "dominate all American mass media" and provide "the country's most widespread news, commentary, and entertainment."

What are the implications of this for journalism education? Some institutions may turn out excellent practitioners of craft. Others may produce graduates rich in historical, social, and theoretical understanding. But what does it matter if the owners of America's media are indifferent to these qualities?

The great task for journalism educators, in addition to providing practical training and academic breadth, is to equip their students with a firm sense of the public trust: how it developed, what it means to America, how it manifests itself or is betrayed in the work of journalists and news organizations. Journalism programs, departments, and schools need to become the places where such concepts are nurtured, protected, and ceaselessly advocated.

As I wrote in *The Nieman Reports*, "A press that is hostage to its investors is no more a free press than one that is hostage to government. Surely, great universities, and even lesser ones, can understand this." Joseph Pulitzer would have.

William F. Woo is the Lorry I. Lokey Visiting Professor of Professional Journalism at Stanford University, where he has taught since 1996. Before that, he had been a reporter and editor for 39 years, the last 10 of which he was the editor-in-chief of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or polices of the U.S. government.