The Media's Ancien Regime

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Columbia Journalism School tries to save the old order.
by Hugh Hewitt
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To enter Columbia University's graduate school of journalism is to enter the highest temple of a
religion in decline. A statue of Thomas Jefferson guards the plaza outside the doors, and the entry
room is suitably grand. Two raised platforms proclaim the missions in bold gold letters: "To Uphold
Standards of Excellence in Journalism" and "To Educate the Next Generation of Journalists." The
marble floor tells you that the school was endowed by Joseph Pulitzer and erected in 1912 in memory
of his daughter Lucille. A bronze quotation from Pulitzer's 1904 cri de coeur in the North American
Review is on the wall:

Our republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited
press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve the
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.

There is a new high priest in the dean's office on the seventh floor--Nicholas Lemann, veteran writer
for the New Yorker, and before that the national correspondent for the Atlantic Monthly, where he
spent 15 years after stints at the Texas Monthly, the Washington Post, and the Washington Monthly.
Lemann began his scribbling for a New Orleans alternative weekly, the Vieux Carré Courier, while
still a high school student, covering everything from boxing to city hall to the private school network
of the region. Upon entering Harvard in 1972, he immediately "comped" for the Crimson, only to be
rejected in his application to join the editorial board of the greatest brand in undergraduate newspapers.
"Harvard is filled with this sort of humiliation," Lemann told me in a conversation last fall that capped
a two-day visit to the school. He reapplied for a position as a reporter, and the second time was
successful, rising through the ranks to become the paper's president in the 1975-76 academic year.
Now 51 and two years into a new career, Lemann will need the same persistence if his legacy as dean
is to be something other than a footnote in the history of the decline of American media power.

On my first day at Columbia's graduate school of journalism (CSJ), the poster boy for all that has come
to plague elite American media--former CBS anchor Dan Rather--took to the podium at Fordham Law
School to denounce the "new journalism order." On day two, the New York Times Company
announced a cut of 500 employees from its already pared down workforce of 12,300. (The company
employed 13,750 as recently as 2001.) On that same day Knight-Ridder slashed its Philadelphia
papers' editorial staff by 75 positions at the Inquirer and 25 at the Daily News. "I get 50 calls a day
about the crisis in journalism," Lemann deadpanned when I posed the "crisis" question. "Only 50?" I
thought.

The story of what is going on at CSJ cannot be separated from the collapse of credibility of the
mainstream media, also known as "elite media" and "old media" among its detractors. The fortunes of the big five papers--the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, the Boston Globe, and the Wall Street Journal, as well as the old TV networks and big weekly newsmagazines--are visibly in decline. The upstart blogosphere is ever at the ready to "deconstruct" the work product of the old media's old guard. The very best investigative reporting is being done not by big names at the big papers, but by people like the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies' journalist in residence Claudia Rosett, who almost singlehandedly unraveled the U.N.-Saddam Oil-for-Food scandal, with much of her work published online. Dan Rather's CBS, eager to impugn George W. Bush's service in the Texas National Guard, got duped by fraudulent documents it took months to obtain and only hours for bloggers and readers to shred.

This story in its small way partakes of the seismic shift underway. Its origin is an email request from Lemann last spring: Would I be willing to be the subject of a New Yorker profile? I agreed, on the condition that I could have reciprocal access to Lemann and the Columbia Journalism School for this piece. Hedged with some qualifiers--he could not commit any of his faculty to talk to me or guarantee access to classrooms, though everyone proved to be very welcoming--Lemann agreed. Reactions to his profile of me varied among family and friends, but I thought it complete and fair. Before I sat down with Lemann I had read everything he'd written for the New Yorker and was impressed with his profiles of Dick Cheney and Karl Rove. (The Cheney profile earned Lemann some animosity among colleagues, who thought him too gentle with the only man the left fears as much as Rove.) The scorn on the center-right for the "objectivity" and "professionalism" of the mainstream media is deep and sincere. I went to Columbia to see if Lemann was the exception that proves the rule, and to test the rule itself.

What's the rule? That the elite media are hopelessly biased to the left and so blind to their own deficiencies, or so in denial, that they cannot save themselves from irrelevance. They're like the cheater in the clubhouse, whose every mention of a great round of golf is met with rolling eyes and knowing nods.

PULITZER'S ACOLYTES at Columbia undoubtedly believe that they are members of an "able, disinterested, public-spirited press," and not a "cynical, mercenary, demagogic" one. But the widespread perception in the country is that the prestige newsrooms are filled with the latter pretending to be the former. "Public attitudes toward the press, which have been on a downward track for years, have become more negative in several key areas," the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reports. It is beyond argument that Pulitzer's dream of the press preserving public virtue has been abandoned, but Lemann is on a mission to help restore credibility to a "profession" without licensing or standards or governing bodies of any sort.

The first person I met on campus, Bruce Wallace, is a student enrolled in the school's traditional program, intended to result in a Master of Science degree after an intensive year of studies. Lemann has also instituted an ambitious new Master of Arts course of study, which has provoked deep suspicion in many of the school's alums and among the faculty. But with 205 students in the M.S. program and 27 in the M.A. division, there is no doubt that the training of front-line reporters is still the core mission. "How to cover a fire in Brooklyn on deadline" is one catchphrase I heard repeated. It is difficult to picture Pat Buchanan, Newsweek's Rick Smith, CBS's Susan Spencer, or writers Mitch Albom and James McBride--CSJ grads, all--covering fires in Brooklyn on or off deadline. But the M.S. program is in essence a 10-month education in the details and practice of that craft.

Wallace is a native of Baltimore who left his job as the manager of the classifieds at the San Francisco Guardian, an alternative weekly, to hone the skills that he hopes will take him to a daily to do local political reporting. The 1999 graduate of Kenyon College had done a little campus radio before
heading off to tend bar in Alaska. In San Francisco he got hooked on city hall gossip, and though he was no fan of Mayor Willie Brown, or of "corporate power allied with politicians" generally, he's certain he'll be able to bring fairness to his future job as a political reporter. When I trot out my list of "parameter" questions I use to test for basic ideological disposition--Wallace doesn't own a gun, he favors same-sex marriage--there are no surprises.

Soon Mike Hoyt, executive editor of the Columbia Journalism Review, arrives. With Michael Shapiro, Hoyt team-teaches the class "Advanced Reporting," into which Wallace and 15 other students are headed, and introduces me to Shapiro, who quickly welcomes me to observe the hour. Shapiro is a gifted teacher who, three weeks into the term, already knows all of his students' names and engages them with ease and good humor. The first half of this hour is given over to outlining a large assignment--a profile of some recently deceased person or the reconstruction of a crime. Shapiro is clearly hoping the students will go for the profile, and spends considerable time instructing his charges on how they might go about selecting their subject. He fences his instructions with cautions about engaging the bereaved ("You need to know, but you can't be a vampire") and tips on tracing the details of the life to be profiled. Hoyt contributes key bits of experience, and the students are curious and attentive to these practical lessons. "You need to make your first phone call today," Shapiro insists. "Tomorrow becomes the next day, which becomes next week. Good reporters make the first call on the first day."

The 16 students are not evenly split--there are 14 women and just two men. Two-thirds of the M.S. class this year are women, a reflection of what Lemann calls the "feminization" of journalism programs across the country. Robert Mac Donald, the assistant dean for admissions and financial aid, ran down the demographics for me: The average age of an M.S. student is just shy of 28, the mean is 26, the youngest is 20, and the oldest is 63. Whites make up 69 percent of the new class; 11 percent are African American, 7 percent Hispanic, 6 percent Asian, 3 percent Middle Eastern, and 4 percent South Asian. The school doesn't yet keep stats on religious background, though Mac Donald believes there has been a significant increase in Muslim students post 9/11. A fifth of the students are from the New York area, and between 37 to 40 percent are from "the corridor"--from Boston to Washington. Another fifth are from the west coast, and 10 percent are foreign. It is a pretty "blue" student body, and willing to pay handsomely for the privilege of their credentials. A year at CSJ--tuition, living expenses, incidentals--comes to $59,404 according to Mac Donald, though 85 percent of the students receive some financial aid, with packages ranging from $1,000 to $50,000. The average scholarship is $5,200, which means that these students are putting a lot of money into the program.

The "blue" nature of the student body is further confirmed by my polling of the class I attended, done with the permission of Shapiro. Six of the 16 were English majors, two studied history, and the balance spread across the humanities. No one had a background in the physical sciences. No one owned a gun. All supported same-sex marriage. Three had been in a house of worship the previous week. Six read blogs. None of them recognized the phrase "Christmas Eve in Cambodia"--though Shapiro not only got the allusion but knew the date of the John Kerry Senate speech in which he made the false claim about his Vietnam war experience. Three quarters of them hope to make more than $100,000 as a journalist, 11 had voted for John Kerry, and one for George Bush (three are from abroad and not eligible, and one didn't vote for either candidate). I concluded by asking them if they "think George Bush is something of a dolt." There was unanimous agreement with this proposition, one of the widely shared views within elite media and elsewhere on the left. The president's Harvard MBA and four consecutive victories over Democrats judged "smarter" than him haven't made even a dent in that prejudice.

The intake valve at the elite media's equivalent of the Army's war college isn't pulling in many conservatives. In fact, it isn't pulling in many moderates. After the class, a few students linger. Their backgrounds are interesting. Rachel Templeton is from Alaska, graduated from the University of
Washington, and has spent a few years at the Henry Jackson Foundation. She's moving to Israel after this year, where she hopes to pick up freelance work. Bree Nordenson is from Freeport, Maine, a graduate of Minnesota's Carleton College, and is transitioning from her work as a psychiatric counselor in Boston. Andreea Płesea is from Rumania and her Facebook entry announces her goal is to "become a top-notch investigative reporter" and to "pursue a degree in law." Stina Lunden is from Sweden, and spent her last year as a Washington Post intern in France working for Keith B. Richburg. Lanie Shapiro was in PR for Simon & Schuster and Random House. Sophia Chang, originally from Texas, has been a reporter for the past four years.

These six want to pursue the idea of "objectivity," and most had read Lemann's profile of me, which included my very skeptical assessment of the objectivity of the mainstream media. Lunden is particularly animated. "You can't draw conclusions that our opinions will influence our reporting," she says, launching into a familiar defense of the ability of journalists to put aside their points of view. Shapiro stresses that all of her professors have been teaching "the value of objectivity," but Nordenson isn't buying it. "It is dangerous to think you are objective." Płesea is cynical: "You don't get truth in political reporting," an opinion she didn't confine to the countries of the former Soviet Union, with which she is familiar.

I am not here to debate the proposition, but find it interesting that the three-week wonders are already committed to the defense of their new profession's reputation for objectivity. With a faculty that does not appear to count among its number even one prominent name from the center-right, but does include respected voices of the left such as Todd Gitlin and Victor Navasky, it is difficult to see where they will acquire any useful skepticism about their own craft's motives and abilities.

THE WORST MOMENTS in recent history for the mainstream media-- Rathergate, Jayson Blair's fabrications at the New York Times, the slander by CNN executive Eason Jordan that the U.S. military in Iraq was targeting journalists for assassination--were all still in the future when Columbia president Lee Bollinger was presented with an opening in the deanship by the retirement of Lemann's predecessor, Tom Goldstein. Bollinger, a First Amendment expert, former president of the University of Michigan, and former dean of its law school (I took media law from him in the spring of 1983, and the quiet, brooding, and even moody Bollinger hasn't changed much in 22 years, according to reports) seized the moment. He launched a controversial top-to-bottom look at the journalism school, empaneling a committee that met a dozen or so times to debate the future of the school. Lemann was among the panel's members, and delivered a paper to the group in the spring of 2003 that urged the one-year M.S. degree be replaced by a two-year Master of Arts program. Bollinger obviously warmed to some part of the Lemann pitch, and offered him the deanship.

Lemann quickly realized that alumni and faculty would unite to kill any idea of a uniform two-year degree at CSJ. "Of 24 or 25 faculty," he told me, "I'd have had maybe two votes." But there are other ways to pursue change and reform. After another year of meetings with industry types, he launched a second degree track: a year-long Masters of Arts program open only to practicing journalists, aiming to enhance and deepen their skills. Lemann is clearly hoping that the best and brightest of the M.S. grads will be willing to stay a second year and also go for the M.A. This year a pool of 70 applicants yielded a class of 27. The goal is a class of 60 drawn from 250 applicants.

My second classroom experience is in an M.A. class, "Evidence and Inference," which includes all 27 students. It is the meta-class for the new track, and is co-taught by Lemann and associate dean Evan Cornog, as well as a series of academic and media guest-lecturers. Today marks the third in three lectures by the former director of the U.S. Census Bureau, Columbia's Carnegie Professor of Public Affairs Kenneth Prewitt, on the use of race as a classifying device. Prewitt's lecture is a fascinating look at the introduction of racial categories into the census and the evolution of those categories, as
well as the limits of the utility of that data. An interesting and provocative 90 minutes later, though, I am left wondering how much the Prewitt lecture will do for these students unless they are fortuitously assigned some future story on the census or a related topic having to do with, say, racial classifications in university admissions.

Lemann's hope for this course is to cultivate in his students a capacity to discover and analyze data. He repeatedly uses the term "power skills," and he has in mind a deeper appreciation, and use, of more sophisticated research and analytical skills than most journalists bring to the table. "Regression analysis is the best example," he tells me. "Every social science study in the United States depends upon regression analysis, but almost no reporters understand it. You can't read and understand these studies if you don't know how regression analysis works. I taught myself how to do it, and we are going to teach the M.A. students, equipping them to go beyond their ordinary reliance on dueling experts interpreting studies."

That, in a nutshell, is Lemann's grand plan for salvaging the profession: Teaching reporters new skills that will make them more competent amateurs in the worlds of other professionals. The school's newsletter, 116th & Broadway, carried a letter from Lemann on its front cover for the summer '05 issue. Lemann noted that the spring of 2006 would see the school of journalism confer its first new professional degree in 70 years. He was eager that alums understand what the M.A. program was all about. Among other points, he wanted to emphasize:

* The M.A. program will accept not only holders of the Journalism School's M.S. degree, but also journalists who can demonstrate to us that they are already working at a level of skill commensurate with that of M.S. holders.
* For the first couple of years, the program will be tuition-free to students for whom paying tuition imposes a financial difficulty.
* The program involves greatly deepening the ties between the Journalism School and the rest of the university, mainly by bringing academic faculty people here to teach in partnership with the journalists on our faculty, so as to marry deep substantive knowledge to journalistic practice.

If ever a class is given on the elegant insertion of the thin edge of a wedge, this would make a fine piece of assigned reading. The M.S. holders are assured of the status of their credential; the applicant pool sees a hint of tuition deals; Columbia faculty are given their props; and the industry gets a promise of "deep substantive knowledge" on the way. In that last phrase is the figure in the carpet, the grand design for saving journalism. And also an admission of great significance about all that ails the craft today.

LEMMAN'S PROJECT is either a masterful flanking of the dominant critique of the mainstream media--thoroughgoing left-wing bias among its practitioners--or an irrelevant and doomed exercise in beside-the-pointism. The big battle in American journalism is over the very idea of objectivity. Lemann assumes that objectivity is possible, but that the skills of reporters need burnishing if their reputation for disinterestedness is to be recovered.

The genuine enthusiasm for a new program's launch is always difficult to gauge, but one measurement that simply does not lie in the world of academia is donor support. CSJ's associate dean of university development and alumni relations, Jeffrey H. Richard, briefed me on Lemann's work as change agent and chief fundraiser. Three $5 million gifts do not a conclusion render, but are more than a good start. David and Katherine Moore have given a $5 million gift to endow a faculty position to cover government and public affairs in both the M.S. and M.A. programs. David is the grandson of Joseph Pulitzer, so that sounds to an outsider like a crucial endorsement of the innovations underway. Another
$5 million is arriving from Leo Hindery, formerly of the YES Entertainment Network, and the father of a CSJ grad—another category of endorsement crucial to the school's constituencies. This gift is available for scholarships, an underfunded and pressing need for new and old programs alike. The third of the big three came to found a Center for Investigative Journalism, and came via a big name in that business, Toni Stabile, whose reporting on the cosmetics industry in the '60s and '70s set a high bar for future practitioners of the craft.

"Fundraising," says Richard, "is about relationships, about earning people's trust. They sense the excitement about what we are doing here." Lemann "has a vision," he adds, and "there's a general consensus that having journalists who better understand what they are doing is needed." Richard expects that corporate America will welcome—and fund—the emphasis on more sophisticated skills, but is careful to underscore that no gift from industry can be accompanied by any hint of compromise or strings attached.

"Authority is a construct," Lemann tells me on my second day at the school. And the "authority" of journalism with the American public is clearly at a modern low point. Lemann intends to reconstruct journalism's shaky reputation via an infusion of specific and measurable skills—either you can or you can't do regression analysis; either you can or you can't follow a case citation sequence or decode an annual audit report—and thus ignite a demand among editors not for the bright young reporters from campus newspapers, but for really smart alums of graduate schools of all sorts who can be tempted into the field despite its pay and present status somewhere near the carnival Barker's.

This objective is both large and novel. Joseph Pulitzer wasn't a skills man, though his detour from reporting to law school suggests at least a hint of Lemann's recognition that reporters are often overmatched by the complexities of the stories they are assigned. Pulitzer was very much a crusader, though, and his 1904 North American Review article "The College of Journalism," which Lemann points me to, is almost hilariously optimistic in its aims for the profession:

There are many political reformers among the clergy, but the pulpit as an institution is concerned with the Kingdom of Heaven, not with the Republic of America. There are many public-spirited lawyers, but the bar as a profession works for its retainers, and no law-defying trust ever came to grief from a dearth of legal talent to serve it. Physicians work for their patients and architects for their patrons. The press alone makes the public interests its own.

"What is everybody's business is nobody's business"—except the journalist's; it is his by adoption. But for his care almost every reform would fall stillborn. He holds officials to their duty. He exposes secret schemes of plunder. . . . He brings all classes, all professions together, and teaches them to act in concert on the basis of their common citizenship.

The Greeks thought that no republic could be successfully governed if it were too large for all the citizens to come together in one place. The Athenian democracy could all meet in the popular assembly. There public opinion was made, and accordingly as the people listened to a Pericles or to a Cleon the state flourished or declined. The orator that reaches the American democracy is the newspaper. It alone makes it possible to keep the political blood in healthful circulation in the veins of a continental republic. . . . Virtue, said Montesquieu, is the principle of a republic, and therefore a republic . . . is the hardest of all to preserve. For there is nothing more subject to decay than virtue.

This vision, from which the quotations in the school's entrance lobby are excerpted, can hardly be read...
with a straight face these days. And it has very little in common with Lemann’s project. Pulitzer wanted reporters to push for virtue. Lemann endorses, first and emphatically, “truth-seeking.” They are very different projects, proceeding from very different ideologies. Virtue, as Pulitzer understood it, was not so difficult to figure out. Truth is elusive.

Lemann also recommends to me the 1920 Walter Lippmann essay “Liberty and the News,” but curiously not Lippmann’s better known 1922 opus, Public Opinion, which opens this way:

_There is an island in the ocean where in 1914 a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans lived. No cable reaches that island, and the British mail steamer comes but once in sixty days. In September it had not yet come, and the islanders were still talking about the latest newspaper which told about the approaching trial of Madame Caillaux for the shooting of Gaston Calmette. It was, therefore, with more than usual eagerness that the whole colony assembled at the quay on a day in mid-September to hear from the captain what the verdict had been. They learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting in behalf of the sanctity of treaties against those of them who were Germans. For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies._

You can put Lippmann’s book down after page one, his 1920 essay, and Pulitzer’s vision statement for his school as well. Lippmann’s world, Pulitzer’s world, even Nicholas Lemann’s world of the Harvard Crimson from 1972 to 1976—they are all gone. Every conversation with one of the old guard citing the old proof texts comes down to this point: There is too much expertise, all of it almost instantly available now, for the traditional idea of journalism to last much longer. In the past, almost every bit of information was difficult and expensive to acquire and was therefore mediated by journalists whom readers and viewers were usually in no position to second-guess. Authority has drained from journalism for a reason. Too many of its practitioners have been easily exposed as poseurs.

Lemann understands completely what has happened. I think he regrets it. He is certainly trying to salvage the situation. And there is simply no way he can succeed.

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