

It Takes a Team and Optimism

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Right now, spring is in the air, and after a long and extremely cold winter, there is a sense of new beginnings. Classes are coming to an end. Students and faculty alike are excited about the imminent summer break.

I, too, am witnessing a new beginning. I am in transition to a new team. Effective July 1, I will serve as dean of the College of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL). I have relinquished my tenure at Central Michigan University where I served as chair of the Department of Journalism for twelve years.

You will note that the masthead of this edition of *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* (J&MCE) reflects that change, bringing the journal to UNL. I look forward to learning from and working with UNL's administrators as well as the college's faculty, staff, students, and other stakeholders. I am particularly indebted to Dean Jim O'Hanlon for his immense help in this transition.

And crazy as it sounds from someone who does not understand the rules of American football but who relishes the college band sound, the roar of the crowds, and the sideline entertainment at football games, I look forward to being part of the sea of Husker red on an occasional Saturday in fall.

That brings me to a key lesson we in journalism and mass communications education can learn from the world of sport: Football relies on the team for success. Occasionally, the brilliance of one or more players can stand out, and often, one person is named Most Valuable Player. However, one player alone cannot pave the way for success. It takes the team.

So, too, in departments, schools, and colleges of journalism and mass communications, it takes a team. Although being a faculty member often is an individualistic and even an entrepreneurial pursuit, especially in research or external outreach, faculty members also need to be mindful of the well-being of their department, school, or college. People need to work together to achieve the common good—the healthy functioning of the unit (including the practice of shared governance, the confidentiality of personnel deliberations), the preparation of students for the professional world and for life, and the viability of the unit within the Academy.

It also takes a team to publish a journal—everyone from researchers/authors who submit manuscripts to the reviewers and the personnel at SAGE—Isabella Hecht, Leah Fargotstein, and others. Jeremy Lipschultz, the book reviews editor; the J&MCE editorial board; the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Publications Committee; and the AEJMC executive director, Jennifer McGill, also contribute greatly to this journal.

Sometimes, it also takes optimism. Two articles in the past month have given me reason to be optimistic about the future of journalism and indeed about the future of journalism and mass communications education.

Marty Baron, editor of *The Washington Post*, in his keynote speech at the fifteenth International Symposium on Online Journalism at the University of Texas–Austin, about the need for optimism in journalism, concluded his remarks by saying, “There is no acceptable alternative to optimism.”

He said:

We cannot be successful if we are not optimistic, if we do not recognize opportunities and seize on them. If we are not optimistic, why work to succeed? What use would it be? And if you are not working to succeed, no matter the obstacles, you are not working as you should.

Baron’s reasons to be optimistic about the future of journalism are as follows:

- We’ve survived. We’re still here. Real journalists are doing real journalism.
- New owners are bringing needed new capital and a range of disparate ideas, rethinking business models. Such people include Jeff Bezos, new owner of the *Washington Post*; Red Sox owner John Henry who has acquired *The Boston Globe*; Warren Buffett who is acquiring newspapers in smaller communities; and Minnesota billionaire Glen Taylor who has offered to buy the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis.
- New journalistic organizations are blossoming in an era of journalistic entrepreneurship.
- New forms of storytelling have emerged, and they have proved particularly effective at connecting with readers.
- The pressure on the industry has made it essential to pay attention to customers—readers, viewers, listeners.
- The current conditions in the industry are opening up a vast array of new opportunities. Many of these opportunities are at legacy media institutions where digital transformation is leading to the hiring of new talent with strong technical skills such as coding.
- A new generation of journalists is entering the field. They are digital natives who are completely in sync with the digital environment.
- Amid all the turmoil in the field, amid the persistent and pervasive anxiety among journalists, we’re doing strong and important work.

Howard Finberg of the Poynter Institute pointed to reasons for those of us in the journalism and mass communications educational environment to be optimistic about the future of journalism education.

Writing about *The Core Skills for the Future of Journalism* report, released by Poynter on April 9, 2014, Finberg noted that the report “shows a wide divergence between professionals and educators in their thinking on the importance of core

journalism skills, especially those skills that are essential for mastering new methods of gathering and delivering news and information.”

Professionals who responded to the Poynter Institute–initiated survey did not rate the importance of multimedia skills as highly as educators, students, and independent journalists.

The Future of Journalism Competencies survey, on which the report is based, identified thirty-seven key skills, attributes, and knowledge areas deemed important “for a beginning journalist as he/she looks toward his/her career in the digital/mobile age.” Academic papers by Nico Drok and Michael Opgenhaffen et al. provided the researchers with the list of skills, attributes, and knowledge areas. Educators rated multimedia skills, including video, audio, and photography, much higher than did professionals (apart from freelance journalists).

The report shows that professionals and educators think similarly about the foundational attitudes and skills needed for beginning journalists, but they differ in their thinking about the abilities needed for today’s journalism. For example, educators rate “knowledge of other cultures” and “knowledge of government” far more highly than professionals do. Similarly, educators as well as students and freelancers rate “knowledge of the business of media” and “understanding the media landscape” far more highly than professionals do. Other discrepancies between educators and professionals arise in the importance attributed to the ability to “analyze and synthesize large amounts of data” and the “ability to interpret statistical data” as well as “the ability to master various forms of journalistic writing.” In all these areas, educators rate the importance of these abilities more highly than professionals do.

The greatest gaps in importance between educators and professionals were in multimedia skills with 76 percent of educators versus 46 percent of professionals rating “shoot and edit video” as important; 80 percent of educators versus 52 percent of professionals rating “ability to tell stories with design and visuals” as important; 79 percent of educators versus 53 percent of professionals rating “shoot and edit photographs” as important; and 72 percent of educators versus 38 percent of professionals rating “record and edit audio” as important.

The fifth skill, “the ability to work with HTML or other computer language,” was rated high in importance by students, but only 41 percent of educators rated the skill as important to very important while only 28 percent of professionals and managers rated it important to very important.

These findings represent reason to be optimistic—optimistic that educators are keeping up with trends; that their emphasis on the skills, attributes, and knowledge areas identified in this report is both contemporary and prescient; and that educators are serving as leaders for the industry, not as followers.

The fact that educators, students, and freelance journalists share similar thoughts about the skills and abilities needed to equip students for media careers reflects their concern with the present and the future, with the need for innovation and for multiplatform journalism. It reflects the fact that educators learn from their students about what those students believe is critical to their future success; from the research generated in the discipline and shared in papers presented at the AEJMC, the International

Communication Association, and the Broadcast Education Association, among others, as well as published in various journals; and from workshops and seminars such as the Convergence conferences (see the essay by Janet Kolodzy et al. in this edition), the Online News Association, and the Poynter Institute.

In short, the congruence of opinion among educators, students, and freelances shows that educators are on the cutting edge of trends. They, and not the professionals who responded to the survey about the Future of Journalism Competencies, are responsible for training and educating the next generation of journalists.

We are at a time of new beginnings, a time when educators have a vital role in equipping our students with the skills and attributes needed for success in this new world of multiplatform innovation, of entre- and intrapreneurship. It will take teamwork in each of our departments, schools, and colleges to prepare our students. It is with optimism that we will succeed. And there is, as Marty Baron says, every reason to be optimistic.

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