

Oklahoma City Society of Professional Journalists
Dr. Charles C. Self
Dean of the Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication
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Thank you, Mark. And thank you, Dr. Sechrist, for joining us this evening. It is wonderful to see this level of commitment to public media education from central administration. I feel privileged to be with you tonight. Thank you all for the honor you have shown me by being here during what is, for most of us, the busiest time of the year. I am especially impressed at the effort the students have made to be here. With final examinations pending, I know it's difficult to take the time right now.

I would like to thank Carter Bradley, Mark Hanebutt, Kim Morava, Mick Hinton and the entire Board of the Oklahoma City Chapter of SPJ for planning this event. While I was at Texas A&M University, I served on the board of the Brazos Valley Professional Chapter of SPJ. I know how much work it takes to create and sustain a successful chapter.

I have been involved with the Society of Professional Journalists for my entire career. I joined when I was a student at the University of Missouri. I've attended chapter meetings in Alabama, Missouri, Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. I have spoken at several local chapters. I have even served on a panel at the national convention. I know of no organization that contributes more to maintaining strong, vibrant journalism than SPJ. This is why I consider it such an honor that you have invited me to share my thoughts about the changes sweeping journalism and all of the public communication fields today.

Finally thanks, too, to Sue Hinton for the extra effort she has made to host this evening's event. Gaylord College faculty members have enormous respect for the dedicated work Sue Hinton does here at OCCC. We have had many students take writing courses here. Our faculty members report that those students have received rigorous instruction and are well prepared for the classes they take at OU. Under Sue's tutelage, students have developed high standards that have stood them well in our programs and in the successful careers that many have later led. That's what I'd like to talk about tonight's high standards and our individual responsibility to maintain high standards when our industry is in turmoil.

What a great time to be in journalism. The public media industries are changing more rapidly than most of could have believed a few years ago. New kinds of journalism jobs are open to our graduates every day. New ways of gathering information, new ways of preparing and presenting it, and new ways of reaching readers, listeners and viewers have been invented. New technologies, new concepts, new ownership patterns, and new marketing approaches have challenged and changed how public communication is practiced.

Mass media have evolved toward becoming personal media. They already are digitally based. For years they've been targeted toward finer and finer geographic, demographic, and functional specialties. They are visually stimulating, sophisticated, and easy to

follow. Presentation is at once detailed and comprehensive. Content has become specialized, even personalized. It often appears in new media forms. It often is national or international, but its impact is on local audiences and, at its best, it serves local needs. Content is adapted into many formats then marketed to narrower and narrower segments of the audience. Media content has never come solely from staff journalists. Today independent entrepreneurs and private contractors often create it. Many of these writers have degrees from journalism programs and have worked in public media organizations.

Production today is generated mostly from a digital base. This is clearly true for print media and Internet media. It is increasingly true for broadcast media. This has made it possible for content to appear simultaneously in many media outlets.

Last week, I talked with the chief technology officer of the Belo Corporation, which publishes the Dallas Morning News, owns the strongest television station in Dallas (WFFA), has one of the most advanced media webpages in the country, and has started the successful statewide Texas Cable News Network. He said equipment vendors now tell him that within three years, all broadcast equipment will be digital. He said reporters and editors throughout the Belo organizations (television, cable, newspaper and web) have finally come to accept the fact that they will work from a common assignments desk and that they will share stories. He pointed out that newspaper reporters now appear on camera and that broadcast reporters now write their stories for print, too. All of it may end up on the webpage.

Last fall, I visited Media General in Florida. There, too, reporters and editors, and producers and anchors, work for the Tampa Tribune newspaper, WFLA television, the Internet webpage, and the cable operation. There, too, they report for a common assignments desk. There, too, they appear on camera and write for print. It is happening in dozens of other places, too. I recently read a dramatic account of the changes in Chicago. You may even have noticed that the winner of three of the NPPA's broadcasting awards this year award, was not even a broadcaster. It was the WashingtonPost.com, an Internet site. It won the White House photo award, a feature award and a news award. The deputy managing editor of the Associated Press in New York, Thomas Kent, even confirmed to me last month that AP is running an experiment in which some of its reporters are asked to carry video cameras and report in multimedia formats. It's a far cry from what went for convergence when I worked for UPI in Little Rock and Kansas City back in the late 1960s. Back then I had to write for the news wire on the hour and the broadcast wire on the forty minutes!

Many of those changes are wonderful. They make it possible for us to do things and reach people that would have been impossible to reach a few years ago. We can involve people who would not have been part of the public conversation. We can be more interactive — more responsive to our publics. The old model — one to thousands or even millions — is breaking down. A new model — telling stories one to one, on demand, in whatever format the reader wants from more sources to more individuals is slowly forming.

But the transition is not easy. Many of the changes so far have not really been

good. Some media practices today do not follow the core values that many of us feel should characterize the field. Content drives public discourse. But today content too often is shaped by what has come to be called “infotainment.” Infotainment is a word used to characterize the practice of mixing of information, advocacy and entertainment. It blurs the line between public discourse, private interest, entertainment, commercial communication.

Competition has increased. Media markets are more diverse. That should be healthy. Unfortunately, the response to this intense competition recently seems to be “get it first, regardless of whether it is clearly right. And — grab attention at all costs.”

The mission of journalism as an arbiter of truth has become confused. The purpose of journalists’ work has become jumbled. The skills to be a journalist have become more complex.

And we have seen some disturbing trends. Media are mass marketed There’s nothing new there. But today news itself seems subject to marketing goals rather than larger social goals.

Ownership has consolidated into the hands of mega-conglomerates. Their officers often seem to understand little about the special place of media in building communities. The credibility of news organizations has plunged. Ratings for television news have dropped. Newspaper circulations are stagnant. The number of daily newspapers have declined. Criticism of reporting and editing has escalated. And the criticism is coming from both the left and the right. Last week, the deans of nine of the top journalism programs in the country announced a summit at the home of philanthropist Walter H. Shorenstein, founder of the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, to discuss what they called “the terrible state of broadcast news.”

After I spoke to the downtown Rotary Club in Oklahoma City earlier this month, a state representative chided me for not having read Bernard Goldberg’s popular book “Bias.” In the book, Goldberg catalogs a long list of violations of good journalistic practice. He argues that they stem from a liberal bias in network news. I believe they stem mainly from a decline in journalistic standards.

An organization called “The Committee of Concerned Journalists” has published a book analyzing the decline in core news values in print and broadcasting. In the book, called “The Elements of Journalism,” the committee outlines nine core values that they believe characterize the field. They include basic things like an obligation to truth, loyalty to citizens, verification of facts, and independence for journalists. They ask how core values can be sustained through a period that challenges how we do journalism.

These are serious questions. And there are lots of other questions out there.

But despite these questions, I remain an optimist about journalism, because, in the end, journalism is not about technology — it is about telling stories — political stories,

economic stories, stories of loss, stories of triumph, stories of our lives and the lives of our neighbors. Human beings yearn to hear real life stories and always will. Technology provides the way for us to tell those stories. I believe the future of journalism has never been brighter BECAUSE we have a whole new set of technologies to use to tell our stories. I believe we will come through the tumultuous shift in technologies a stronger field, more service oriented, more dedicated to the truth, and with more options for telling our stories than we have ever had. The key to our future is that we all assume responsibility for our field. I think we all are responsible to ensure that credibility and maintain high standards. We have to take a crucial step to do that. I believe that we have to embrace and use these new technologies to tell our stories according to our own values.

Technology always has stressed our field. It always seems to create change. Some say that the invention of printing created news; that improvements in printing created popular news —the penny press, the first so-called “new journalism;” that steam and the rotary press created the mass newspaper — the second so-called “new journalism;” that color and photo technologies created yellow journalism; and that improvements in photo technologies created jazz journalism.

Then came wire services, syndicates, radio, television, cable, and on and on. Each major new technology has been considered a technological revolution. Each has been thought to create new media industry. Each created controversy. Each was considered a new medium that would replace existing media. And each was accompanied by dire predictions of a decline in journalism. But journalism survived and became stronger with each innovation.

I believe that digital technologies and innovations in media forms ultimately will strengthen core values tied to the basic role of journalism in the lives of people. Public media are central to the public life of democratic societies. Public media create and sustain communities. The public media will be what we make them — what educators, public policy makers, media consumers, and professionals make them.

Our objective should be innovation in the pursuit of excellence. The people in this room will lead in responding to the changes in the field. Our commitment should be to core values and innovation. SPJ should seize the national conversation on this issue. This chapter of SPJ should seize the conversation in this state. It should be a conversation about how public media fulfill their constitutionally protected obligation to inform the public. SPJ should initiate a dialog about how we integrate new communication technology into public media while we sustain the core values that ensure that the public has the information it needs to sustain the public work of maintaining communities. This should not be the work of journalists alone.

If the innovation in public media has taught us anything, it should be that many voices should contribute to the conversation about community building. The crucial issues facing our communities require broad participation. The new technologies have made it possible for journalists to facilitate a broad, informed conversation within our communities. Communities are formed by shared experience and communication. The conversation is about public issues, but it also is about shared issues, shared

culture, shared entertainment, and, yes, even shared experience of buying and selling. But it is not about mixing all those things up helter-skelter so that it is not clear when you have one and when you have another. The role of journalism is should be to help sort all this out. The title that was assigned for my remarks today was “Seeing around the corner: The educator’s role in preparing tomorrow’s journalist.” I am confident as I look around the corner. Communities must communicate. They must have public media to create a public. Our obligation is to parse core values from what is simply routine practice and then to protect those core values and to permit routine practice to evolve. Our obligation is to embrace technology and shape it to the needs of communities. Our obligation is to give voice to as many in our communities in as many ways through as many media forms as we can.

This will require that we embrace change and mold it. It will require graduates with critical thinking skills, including the ability to learn through research, think analytically and creatively, organize material, speak well, write well, use visual media. It will require graduates steeped in professional values — graduates with a strong sense of ethics, a commitment to truth, a dedication to accuracy, a loyalty to their reader audiences and to their profession, a sense of conscience. It will require graduates with a knowledge of and commitment to the civic responsibilities of the public media who understand the consequences of public communication, who take seriously the constitutionally protected role of public information and public dialogue about issues that matter deeply. Above all it will require that all of us in the public media community educators, students, and professionals alike embrace new technology, engage our colleagues in discussions of first principles, immerse ourselves in the cultural and social patterns of our communities in order to set appropriate professional norms.

Several years ago, I taught a course about something called “Technological Determinism.” It’s a debate as old as technology itself. It goes something like this: Does technology determine how human beings behave or do human beings use technology for their own goals? I think we use technology to achieve our own goals. But sometimes we pause in the face of a new technology. That is when others take over. They use those technologies to shape our lives, our work and our communities for their own goals. It is time for us to seize public media technologies and use them to build the strong communities we all want.

Thank you for listening.