Professionalization: 
Danger to Press Freedom and Pluralism

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Journalism is viewed here as being in danger of becoming a profession, thereby changing the field into a narrow, monolithic, self-centered fellowship of true believers devoid of outward-looking and service orientations.

Journalism has gone a long way toward becoming a profession. Many will say it is already a profession. Profession or not, it is highly institutionalized, causing it to perform in increasingly predictable ways. Therefore, the stage is set for rather rapid professionalization. Whereas in the pre-World War II days, journalism was known as a "craft" or a "trade"—or simply not given a label at all—it is now quite common to hear it referred to as a profession. And we hear of "professional" journalism programs (Which ones are not "professional"?) in our universities, "professional" standards in our ethical codes, and "professional" organizations, associations, and societies of journalists.

Recently, soon after I had given a lecture in class presenting my case that journalism was not a profession and should not be one, I had a visitor to my office. This young lady, a member of my class, actually wept on my floor; she was distraught; she was devastated, she said; she wondered if she should not change her major. Why? Because, she sobbed, she got into journalism school because she thought journalism was a profession. She wanted it to be a profession, and I had shattered her hopes and ruined her day. After she calmed down somewhat, I tried (but I'm not sure I succeeded) to convince her that journalism was still journalism even though I didn't consider it a profession, that it was a worthy vocation, and that, perhaps, her reason for choosing it was not the right reason. I'm not sure she got the point. But she did leave calmer than she arrived, this time smiling through her tears.

This concerned student is not alone in her desire for journalistic professionalization. Many of her fellow students, as well as practicing journalists and journalism educators, are aspiring to a "professional" status that they believe will bring them greater prestige (and perhaps, money) and at the same time improve the field's blackened image and give "professional" journalists a new sense of direction and responsibility.

A kind of longing for peer approval and direction seems to be propelling
journalists into the elite exclusivity of professionalization, where they in some way will become “special” people with special training and special credentials. Non-professionals, under such a system, could not practice journalism. This attitude toward journalism as a profession, in addition to being contrary to the spirit of the First Amendment and American tradition, evidences a supreme arrogance. But, then, journalists are well known for arrogance, so perhaps we should not be surprised at their agitation for professional status.

In spite of this tendency toward professionalization, there are, indeed, some voices (largely crying in the wilderness) that are not sympathetic to the idea of journalism as a profession. Coming at this topic mainly from historical-sociological and economic directions (as Doug Birkhead and Art Kaul do in this issue of the Journal of Mass Media Ethics), many critics point out weaknesses of journalistic professionalization. As far back as 1974 I devoted an entire chapter in The Imperative of Freedom to the dangers of professionalizing journalism. Few took my words very seriously then, and few take them seriously now. And there have been others, here and there, who have opposed the trend toward professionalizing journalism. But the trend has continued unabated, and undoubtedly within the next decade or two journalism will have achieved significant status as a true profession. All signs point to it.

Take ethical codes for example. Codes of ethics are proliferating in spite of caveats raised against them (Black & Barney, 1985; Merrill, 1982). Such warnings are all but drowned out by a swelling chorus of pro-code rhetoric calling for their institution and enforcement. Codes need to be “tightened up” and “enforced” more stringently in line with intellectual concepts of “accountability” (Wulfemeyer, 1985; Christians, 1985).

Beyond the U.S. predilection for professionalizing and codes of ethics, spokesmen are pushing for a global or international code of journalistic ethics (Nordenstreng, 1984), and certainly the idea of certification or licensing of journalists is gaining popularity in many parts of the world—and has actually been instituted here and there. Codes, of course, as I have maintained for many years, are either so broadly fuzzy or so specifically picayunish as to be virtually useless, even in a national context. Just think of the farcical nature of an international code of journalistic ethics—trying to be useful across cultures, nationalities, ideologies, and politico-economic media systems. Perhaps someone one day will propose a “One-World Journalistic Profession” where eligible journalists everywhere can accept the same standards, have the same certification, and be accountable to the same authority.

The rapid inroads of this professional approach seem to be coming from two main directions: from a kind of collectivist liberal direction which would increase group or association sanctions and would minimize individualism, and from well-meaning conservative “free market” journalists who naively think that professionalization will assure media responsibility and help close the credibility “gap.” I maintain that the only thing that will effect these goals is an ethical renaissance among individual journalists who, without the superficial and authoritarian codes of ethics designed by some committee, determine to act in their daily work in responsible ways.

At any rate, professionalism is stalking the halls of journalism schools, newspapers, magazine, and radio and television stations. And with it comes an institutionalized mentality that would restrict individual freedom and journalistic diversity. “De-press the eccentricities and heretics” will undoubtedly be the slogan of the Great Journalistic Profession of the Year 2000. “Regulate the activities of journalists” will be a companion tenet. “Press freedom” in 2000 A.D. may
well mean the freedom to fulfill the expectations of some professional monolithic elite. Media people may very well support such a view; for, after all, their image certainly needs doctoring at present. They see salvation in professionalizing—salvation from public mistrust and salvation from outside or extra-press arbiters.

No doubt professionalism seems more acceptable to most American journalists as an approbative ethical system (Merrill, 1985) than would be a governmental/legal system in which media responsibility is defined by an agent outside the media. A professionally constituted approbative ethical system would surely be more compatible with traditional journalistic values of the United States. Few would argue against this.

But professionalism is not the only option. American journalism has been getting along pretty well without being a profession. So, another option is to keep what we have: an "open" craft where anyone can be a journalist and where ethical standards are basically determined by the journalists themselves and by the editors, publishers, and other media managers on a pluralistic basis. What I am saying is this: What is wrong with our present system of pluralistic ethics which is compatible with, and is working along side of, our system of pluralistic journalism exemplified by the diversity of our media and their messages?

For in spite of professionalization's advantage over governmental or judiciary control of journalistic activities, the concept of journalism as a profession is still filled with many weaknesses and even dangers. Not least among these are (1) the loss of individual freedom, and (2) the constriction of journalistic pluralism or diversity.

Individualism in journalism will slowly disappear with professionalization. This is not because individual journalists will have lost the ability to make independent decisions but because the pressures of the profession itself will force them to abdicate much of their real autonomy to the Collective Will of the Profession. Karl Jaspers (1957, p. 54) speaks of this danger to the individual: "He must work in an aggregate which, so far as he is concerned, exists in and by itself. Harnessed in an apparatus directed by an alien will, he obediently does the work that is assigned him. If any sort of decision is demanded of him, it is taken haphazardly within the limited province of his function, without his having to probe to the bottom of things.

As individualism declines in journalism—as surely it must with professionalization—the collectivities that take over will deprecate the person by calling forth utilitarian arguments of the most good to the most people and propound arguments that the individual must sublimate self to society and social groups for the good of all. It is sad that journalists cannot take seriously these words of Friedrich Nietzsche (1966, p.45) in which he defines human nobility as "Never thinking of degrading our duties into duties for everybody."

Listen to Lewis Lapham (1973), of Harper's. He is writing of a kind of deep-rooted desire among press people to belong to a hierarchy; he also observes in the press increasing talk about "legitimate" journalists, implying a willingness to accept some type of licensing or certification so that, presumably, a bona fide journalist can be identified. Lapham writes that the more the press becomes a profession the more it will "discourage the membership amateurs" and, as is true of other professions, "will encourage the promotion of people diligently second-rate."

Lapham is right. Professionalism will restrict the ranks of journalism, eliminating the "non-professionals" from its practice. The press will thus appear more respectable and responsible—at least from the perspective of the professional "insiders".

Journalism, through increased emphasis on codes of conduct, press coun-
cils, peer pressure, entrance requirements checked by standard examinations, and by more rigorous demand for professional journalism education, can become a true profession. But it is not quite there yet. However, saying that journalism can become a profession is not the same as saying that it should become one. I am contending that it should not become a profession. My main reason for this position can be summed up, I think, by William Barrett's (1962) succinct statement on the professions:

The price one pays for having a profession is a deformation professionelle, as the French put it—a professional deformation. Doctors and engineers tend to see things from the viewpoint of their own specialty, and usually show a very marked blind spot to whatever falls outside this particular province.

Not only will professionalizing journalism lead to a "very marked blind spot" pertaining to what is outside the profession, but it will have an impact on the individual freedom enjoyed by a journalist operating within what has been a "craft" or "trade" concept of journalism. The journalist, as a professional, would seek to—or have to—conform to professional expectations. The journalist would follow the profession's code or be in trouble; journalists will be "chilled" by the threat of expulsion—what I call the process of "depressing"—by the elite of the profession. Ayn Rand (1971) reflects the ideas of Barrett above when she writes about the dangers of professionalism:

If there is any one way to confess one's own mediocrity, it is the willingness to place one's work in the absolute power of a group, particularly a group of one's professional colleagues. Of any form of tyranny, this is the worst; it is directed against a single human attribute: the mind—and against a single enemy: the innovator. The innovator, by definition, is the man who challenges the established practices of his profession. To grant a professional monopoly to any group, is to sacrifice human ability and abolish progress.

I have consistently insisted that journalism is not a profession. Most recently (Dennis and Merrill, 1984) I took this position in a debate with Ev Dennis in a book on media issues. Irving Kristol (1975), among others, has agreed with my position. He wrote several years ago that "Even to speak of the 'profession' of journalism today is to indulge in flattering exaggeration." Journalism, he said, "has not, as yet, acquired the simplest signs of a profession."

In addition to a loss of individual freedom and diversity in journalism, another reason—and a very important one—why journalism should not be a profession has been put forward on several occasions by James Carey (1969), dean of the College of Communications at the University of Illinois. It is that if journalism were a profession its practitioners would increasingly turn inward on themselves, thinking more and more about their own vested interests and mechanisms for self-protection, and less and less about their responsibilities to their audiences. Professions, believes Carey, and I totally agree, tend to become ingrown and selfish with a kind of complacent and arrogant spirit contagious among their members.

Journalism today, I maintain, is one of the most open and diversified institutions in the country—one that is largely dedicated to public service. I want it to stay that way. But there is the danger that it will become a profession, thereby changing into a narrow, monolithic, self-centered fellowship of true believers devoid of an outward-looking and service orientation. I am well aware of all the critical (and uncritical) theorists, and other anti-capitalist critics of the American press, who would take umbrage at my preceding statement about the "openness" and "diversified" nature of the U.S. press. However, considering all counterpart press systems in the rest of the world, the American press is,
Indeed, open and diversified.

Everette Dennis (Dennis and Merrill, 1984), of the Gannett Center for Media Studies in New York, has taken the position that journalism is already a profession in spite of what "sociological quibblers" might say. He goes on to say that "journalism is a profession not because its practitioners say that they are professionals, but because it more than meets most of the criteria that, taken together, constitute a profession."

And he adds, paraphrasing a well-known saying, that journalism looks like a profession, sounds like a profession, and feels like a profession. It even "smells like a profession," he says.

I must not resist, in conclusion, the urge to respond to this last Dennissian point. Journalism is, indeed, beginning to smell like a profession, but from my position downwind I must say that its increasing professional odor does not make my day.

References


