The Journalist and Professionalism

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This essay by the director of Washington & Lee University’s applied ethics program for Society and the Professions argues that journalists must begin taking themselves seriously as members of a profession if journalism is to gain the respect it needs to function effectively in society. Journalism, argues the author, may not possess all the classical attributes of professionalism, but it does possess the most important ones. The essay maintains that professionalism in journalism is important for the welfare of both the media audience and the journalist. Journalists are asked to look at journalism through the audience’s eyes, to experience the reward of being true and humble servants of other human beings, and to help make people whole—in short, to be professionals, not mere technicians.

Jacques Barzun (1978) claims that the professions are under siege. Writing in Harper’s, Barzun notes that respect for the professions has been on the way down and that the only hope for their survival with anything like their present freedoms is the “recovery of mental and moral force.”

Even though journalists do not typically consider themselves to be professionals, they are arguably part of the trend Barzun notes. I believe that if journalists are to gain the respect we need them to have, the profession must attain a larger measure of mental and moral force. That can come, I think, only when journalists begin to take themselves seriously as members of a profession.

But just what do we mean by “professional?” We use the word in both a strict and a loose sense. In the loose sense it is practically synonymous with “occupation.” It is merely the opposite of “amateur.” We talk, for example, about “professional” football players.

In its strict sense, “profession” refers to a certain small class of occupations with special characteristics that set them apart from mere trades or business. These professional occupations are afforded special privileges and high status. Thus, professional status is much sought by occupational groups desiring wider freedom and recognition, e.g., financial planners.

But what are the distinctive characteristics of occupations that may properly be called professions? One way of tackling that question is to examine the occupations universally and originally designated professional. They are three in number: priesthood, medicine, and law. These are the so-called “learned” or “classical” professions.

It was these learned professions that Dean Roscoe Pound (1953) had in mind when he claimed that a profes-
sion is a “group of men pursuing a learned art...in the spirit of public service.” In that brief statement, Pound sounds three important notes.

First, to be classified as a profession an occupation requires specialized learning. Professions are based in the university.

Second, Pound includes the word “art.” That is to say that a profession is an occupation in which things are practiced, where things are done. Professional practice, as art, relates specifically and immediately to the practical needs of people. (So, too, of course, do the trades. But the professions are concerned with the fundamental, not the accidental, needs.)

Third, Pound includes “service.” Unlike the trades and business, the professional operates in the spirit of public service that is unlike the pursuit of monetary gain. Indeed, service subordinates personal gain.

These three characteristics are included by Abraham Flexner (1915) in his list of six attributes of a profession.

First, in order to qualify as a profession, an occupation must “involve essentially intellectual operations with large individual responsibility.” Being highly skilled, and even highly intelligent, would not be enough to qualify. What is requisite is an extensive and complex body of knowledge. Manual work is not excluded, of course, but it must be grounded in extensive knowledge. The professional is individually responsible for moving intellectually from that body of knowledge to its manual application.

Second, professionals “derive their raw material from science and learning.” The professional has the intellectual expertise necessary to translate ideas into practice. Emphasis here is on theoretical grasp. It is not enough, for example, to have knowledge of what to look for in the case of a particular patient or client. Nor is it even enough to have knowledge of how to treat it. The true professional must know not merely the *why* but also have a theoretical grasp of the *why*.

Third, professionals use their special knowledge to “work up to a practical and definite end.” The key here is that knowledge must be *applied*. All this knowledge possessed not merely for knowing’s sake but for people’s sake. The professional must have a definite and *practical* end.

Fourth, professions “possess an educationally communicable technique.” There is agreement within a profession about the ends to be served. Individual practitioners may differ about specific strategies and other details, but there is agreement about the education, training, and skills necessary to practice.

Fifth, professions “tend to self-organization.” The organization establishes the criteria by which others may be admitted. The profession in Flexner’s view has the duty to find ways of recruiting and preparing new entrants into the profession. It must be a formal and systematic method of education. It is, of course, carried out in a university setting. But it is not of a purely classroom sort. There is typically migration between the classroom and the clinic. It is of special significance that the organization be devoted to achievement of social ends, not merely to its own aggrandizement. This distinguishes professional organizations from trade unions. In short, professions are self-regulating occupational groups. They establish their own standards of ethics, of right and wrong, and they find ways of enforcing on their own members all those proper standards.

Sixth, professions become “increasingly altruistic in motivation.” Note that Flexner’s stress is on organization, but the purpose of the organization is truly central. After all, the teamsters are an organization. I think few of us would regard driving trucks as a profession in the sense we are using it here. So what is the difference between an organization like the teamsters and one like the Society of Professional Journalists? The difference
is that one organization exists to advance the interests of its own members. The other exists, properly, to help its members advance the interests of readers/viewers/listeners, i.e., the public.

Professor Walter P. Metzger of Columbia (1975) writing about Flexner, sums all this up rather well:

This brought Flexner to a concluding item: an occupation to qualify as a profession, had to be imbued with an altruistic spirit. Its members had to perform fiduciary duties for the client, do charitable works for the needy public. Without elaborating on this last requirement, Flexner implied that all employments ruled by the quest for profit, rather than the itch for service, were congenitally beyond the pale. At the last, the word 'profession' was defined as the antonym of the word 'commercial.'

What, then, about journalism? Does it qualify as a profession? Not on all counts. Journalism does not have to be, and commonly is not, based in a complex body of university-based knowledge. The really good journalists, of course, possess such a body of knowledge about the world on which they report. But it is knowledge of the world, not knowledge of journalism. The physician's knowledge is not merely of the world but of medicine. I doubt that it is possible for journalism to develop the extensive intellectual base Flexner had in mind. So this first characteristic of the "learned professions" journalism does not have.

Nor does journalism have the second quality of deriving raw material from science and learning. It is desirable, of course, for a journalist to have some fairly specialized learning. It is helpful, for example, to know something of mass communication law, of theories and the history of mass communication, of journalism ethics, etc. But these are not absolute preconditions for being a journalist in the way that biological science is a precondition for the practice of medicine.

Journalism can arguably be said to have Flexner's third quality, viz., it works toward a definite and practical end. It is devoted to meeting some basic and practical needs of people. Journalists tell what is going on in the world so we can adjust our lives accordingly. There can be no doubt about the practicality and the necessity of the journalist's function.

The fourth quality, an educationally communicable technique, is possessed by journalism. There are important techniques and skills that all journalists need and that all good ones have. These include ways of efficiently gathering information, knowing what to look for and where, as well as writing skills that make possible communication to a diverse audience. Schools of journalism, both graduate and undergraduate, are engaged precisely in communicating these techniques.

Journalists have of late taken on Flexner's fifth quality: they have tended to self-organization. The American Society of Newspaper Editors, for example, claims (I think justifiably) to have larger purposes of public service than mere self-aggrandizement. That organization is arguably more than a trade union. The same might be claimed for the Associated Press Managing Editors Association (APME) and the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA). But the best example of self-organization is the Society of Professional Journalists/Sigma Delta Chi. That organization does not control, of course, access to the profession. But it does promote professional ethical conduct and it is devoted to the improvement of journalism not merely for journalists' sake but for the sake of the republic.

Flexner claimed that professionals are increasingly altruistic in motivation. Do journalists fit? Perhaps. At least they both could and should. Some of my friends note that with the very low pay in the profession no one possessed of minimal intelligence would become a journalist out of commercial or pecuniary interests! You have to be
altruistic to want to be a journalist! Some journalists are more possessed of an altruistic spirit of service than are others, but the same is true for doctors, clergy, and lawyers. Our best journalists are often imbued with the "itch for service," to use Metzger's nice phrase.

One has to conclude, then, that journalism clearly does not possess all the attributes ordinarily associated with the classical professions. But it does possess enough attributes of the professions to be in the running. Indeed, it possess the most important of those attributes.

Having first addressed the question of the definition, or description, of a profession, trying to distinguish it from other types of occupation, we now must ask ourselves why all that is important. What difference does it make whether journalism is perceived and defined as a profession?

It makes a difference in two significant ways, one having to do with the well-being of the audience and the other having to do with the well-being of the journalist. Look at the audience first.

If the individual journalist and the profession as a whole can find ways to nurture these character traits, one sure result will be that the audience will be better served. Quality of service will supplant other considerations as the number one concern. Thus, in every case the quality of service will improve. All decisions about news stories will be made from the moral point of the audience's interests, not the interests of the journalist or the news organization.

But there is a second benefit and it derives to the journalist. When one perceives oneself as a servant of others, fully devoted to their interests, and when one knows that it is one's occupation to be so, the whole world of work takes on new meaning. The idea of being a journalist, a servant, becomes again a source of pride, and that pride in turn feeds on itself contributing all the more to a reader-centered perspective. And journalism becomes not merely something that one does; it becomes something that one is. It is not merely a job; it is a commitment to service that one professes.

One of the central issues is how to find ways to inculcate in journalism students and practicing professionals the character traits of the true professional. It appears to me that we are in our time beset on every side by a narrow cynicism that grows always from smallness of mind. Journalists have not escaped its infection. It has not always been that way. There have been great names in journalism, real professionals, real servants of the body politic.

Where does the study of ethics fit into this picture? A careful and systematic classroom experience with ethics can, I am convinced, be helpful. It does so by calling the mind's attention to important ethical issues, to the virtues, and, through cases, specifically to the needs of the audience. And that can help redeem the moral force of the profession.

The problem, however, is that the moral life of our species is not cognitive only. The moral life involves the passions; it involves the heart as well as the head. It is easier to educate the head than to engage the heart. So our problem is in part how to engage both the consciousness and the conscience. A course in ethical analysis will not provide the latter.

A colleague of mine who teaches legal ethics believes that the finest way we have of engaging the conscience and stirring the passions to inspire fellow professionals to want to be morally responsible is to have them read stories about great practitioners. He, for example, in legal ethics has his students read To Kill a Mockingbird where the stalwart moral figure of Atticus Finch is inescapable. There are comparable journalist stories: The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens is one example. The point is that human beings have to be not merely informed about good and right conduct. They
have also to be inspired to undertake it. Our professional associations need to find ways of inspiring devotion to service and to audiences that can modify, if not totally supplant, the crass commercialism that seems to me to have replaced professionalism in our midst.

While I clearly cannot claim to know the full solution, I do have three suggestions for a start.

First, we need to help students and some of our professional journalist colleagues to look at journalism through the audience’s eyes.

Look, for a minute, at the journalist/audience relationship. It is inherently unequal. The journalist is largely in control. The audience is almost totally dependent. In the language of transactional analysis, it is a “parent-child” relationship. The audience cannot even judge meaningfully the quality of the journalist’s work. The audience members were not on the scene to judge for themselves “what really happened.”

Unless the journalist is truly the audience’s servant, driven by the noblest professional ideals, the audience is helplessly at risk.

Second, we need to help students and colleagues experience the reward of being a true and humble servant of another human being. What on the face of the earth could be more exhilarating than the feeling of nobility and achievement that comes from sacrificial service to another human being? There is just nothing in a mere business transaction that comes close.

Third, we need to find ways of helping journalists understand that in journalism you do more than write news stories. In journalism, as in all the caring professions, you help make people whole. You give them information by which they can run their lives.

We must help the next generation of journalists to look well beyond the event and the story to the human beings for whom the event and its story are important. That perspective marks the essential difference between a technician and a professional.

Thus, while journalism does not share all the attributes usually associated with the learned professions, it does have the potential for cultivating the most important ones. That seems to me morally important.

References


