

Innovate Or Die

Ernest J. Wilson III, Dean of Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California talks to **EDU** about his vision for the school and about the role of media schools and communications

By Aman Singh

EDU: What changes did you bring when you joined as the new Dean?

ERNEST: We started with the idea of the ‘three Is’—innovation, impact and internationalisation. Innovation because the field of media is dynamic. An institution which provides media training to students must be innovative. It was Gandhi who said that we must become the change we want to see in the world. If we want our students to be innovative, then we (professors) must also innovate. I thought of impact as the second ‘I’, because I wanted to ensure that the school continued its commitment to impact the society in a positive way. The third point is internationalisation. With the world becoming more global, our students should be able to adjust to all cultures.

Q What is your vision for the school?

A Someone once told me that a vision statement should be such that when someone reads it, even if they don’t know what school you are talking about, they should say, ‘Aha! That must be Annenberg’. When we came up with the ‘three Is’ I realised that all institutions must have these. So what makes us unique? After working with my faculty, students, advisory board and media leaders, we came up with the following statement—Annenberg 3.0: an inno-

vative full-service school in a networked university in the most diverse and global city in the United States. Another way to say it is the four words, “we do cool stuff”. I think students like that!

Q What do you mean by full service?

A Full service means comprehensive. I have found that there are not many schools that combine what we have, under a single roof—journalism, communication, public relations and public diplomacy. We have graduate students and we also offer PhDs and master degrees. We have 14 independent research centres. So, when I say it is a full-service school, that’s exactly what I mean.

Q What about innovation?

A You either innovate, or you die. It’s harder for universities to go out of business, but, they could



FACT FILE

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Walter Annenberg Chair in Communication and dean of Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California
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become irrelevant. If you innovate, you stay ahead of the curve. I don't want my students to be catching up with the rest of the world, I want them to lead.

Q You are also on the board of the Carnegie Knight Commission on the Future of Journalism Education. What are the institutions that the commission works with concerned about?

A The Carnegie Knight Commission comprises deans of journalism schools. They are concerned about the fact that print media is declining in United States and in other developed countries. There are almost 20,000 unemployed journalists. The concern is that this decline could well mean the end of free press and democracy in a way. Not everybody will have an access to radio or television. If newspapers are dying in Colorado, or Boston, how does the public get information about public affairs—because if they don't receive information about fraud, health issues, education, civic rights and international affairs, then civic life takes a hit.

Q How are you and the commission trying to address this issue?

A I am relatively new to the world of media. When I got here, I discovered that journalism and communication schools did not have a close relationship with institutions they were preparing people to serve. Whereas public policy schools that I was engaged with earlier, I saw, always invited people from government, World Bank and other institutions to participate. If we are going to prepare people for the world, then deans, administrators and professors have to know something of the world that we are preparing students for. I have been reaching out to World Bank, Obama Administration, foundations, publishers and authors asking them—what do you need in the people you hire, what are you looking for? They all said that we need more people who understand economics.

We charge \$40,000 a year from our students, and that's a lot of money. It's crazy not to have these students to be economically literate when they graduate. I believe that to be a good citizen you need economic literacy, to be a

good writer or journalist. If you are going to write about education, or health care or international affairs—you need to know economics. Moreover our industry is going through rapid changes, and in this scenario, students should be trained in such a way that they are able to make their own choices for the future. We don't want to educate students for a profession. We want to educate them for life.

Q What is the responsibility of a journalism school, apart from training students with the right skill set?

A The responsibility is to make sure that students are broadly educated. In most American schools you take a major after studying political science or economics, but then you have to distribute your other credits.

As a student I remember attending a course where a professor was talking about small Greek statues. I said, "My God! How boring!" But, it did give me a vocabulary to appreciate art. Having liberal education is essential.

Q What changes in the global media industry should institutions be prepared for?

A Instead of preparing for a particular technology one must look at the more fundamental issue. The challenge is to figure out what students would need to know in the next 50 years—in terms of competencies. Competencies come

under four parts—skills, attitude, knowledge and experience. You need a set of skills—analytical, writing and interpersonal skills. You also have to have a set of attitudes; an intellectual curiosity—I wonder where you are from, what kind of camera is that, what sort of bird is that, much like a kid. You need empathy, understanding, have a risk-taking attitude and be able to appreciate context. This context in media is now changing. So you have to have 360 degree vision. We have to design courses, recruit faculty and help them re-learn. We have to become guides on the side, rather than sages on stage.

Q You want rigour of research to enter the journalism school. Can you share more on that?

A I think research is central. Communication needs a background of new knowledge. This can come through social science, research, or through humanistic reflections on what is the meaning of life. In today's dynamic world, journalism and public relations (PR) need a lot more to make sense.

Take PR for instance, it is a new field. I went around asking CEOs in the US about who I should get to teach PR at my school—a respected and proven practitioner, or a PhD in psychology or sociology. Without hesitation they replied that someone with a PhD would be able to add more value and train people who they would like to hire. They said that they need people who can think about contracts, culture and history, all combined together.

Q How can ethics be integrated in a journalism school?

A In the old days ethics was a given, today the lines are getting blurred. When you get a proliferation of platform in application, nobody is certain anymore about what is ethical and what is not. So, it has to be grounded more and more into the curriculum. A way to incorporate ethics with journalism is by implementing a required course, or a course investigating the relation between ethics and some other field. Ethics is also one of the competencies that I was talking about earlier—an attitude that one has to develop. It is not just a course that one does and declares—I got an 'A' in ethics so how dare you accuse me of cheating? Also the faculty has to become a model for the kind of behaviour they expect from students.

Q What role does communication play in today's world?

A If you think about the creation of new knowledge, it does not come from one smart person sitting in a room by himself, writing things down. It's conversations like this, going to conferences and communicating on the Internet that creates new knowledge. Creating new knowledge and then sharing it is something that probably triggers new opportunities, especially in this field. We in the communication field will have to rethink our position in the creation and distribution of knowledge.

Q There has been a sudden rise in the number of schools producing journalists in India. What is it that we can do to manage the quality?

A I think market forces should take care of 80 percent of the problem. The ones who go to second-grade schools are going to be hired by second-grade publications that soon go out of business. I do think that professional associations and educators should get together to set a framework, or a yardstick. Journalism schools in India could probably form a self-monitoring organisation, just like some other countries.

Q How is the Indian media industry perceived in US journalism and communication schools?

A Unfortunately, some of my country people are ignorant about the rest of

the world. Awareness about China, India and Africa is low. However, this ignorance is gradually decreasing.

Having said that, I do think that for those people who know a little, India is a country where several things are happening at the same time. Education is expanding in urban and rural centres. Economically, India is growing with increasing salaries then you also have political freedom. When you put these three together, it means that the demand for media is high. Yet there is a sense of dissatisfaction. When I came here (India) in June, every journalist, publisher and person in a non-government agency said we are not doing a great job. Maybe together we can address that!

Q What is your opinion about the popular claim that with the advent of blogs "everyone is a journalist today"?

A Just because you blog, it doesn't mean you are a

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journalist. I strongly feel that journalism is different. It entails ethics. For instance, you don't take money to publish stuff. It also means that you check multiple sources. So, if I tell you something and it is controversial then you talk to someone else to form an idea.

Q What brings you to India?

A I wanted to explore what relationships we can have with Indian institutes, professors and researchers. I am trying to see if we could be of service in the Indian communication and journalism scenario. We have entered into other international partnerships before this. We have a relationship in Dubai with the Sheikh Muhammad Rashid School of Journalism and Communication. We also have ties with the Fudan University in China. ■■■