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### Editor's Note

# What "They" (and We) Are Saying about "Us" on the World Wide Web

Applications to at least some journalism schools, from students definitely interested in journalism (and not necessarily public relations and/or advertising) boomed, if not skyrocketed, in Autumn 2009, say various news reports. If the phenomenon occurred nationally and especially in all types of journalism programs, we will surely see dramatic evidence of that next summer and fall when the University of Georgia's Lee B. Becker and his team report results of the annual enrollment survey being conducted now. In the meantime, I think all that we can say is that either these students think they know something that the rest of us don't, or we know a lot that they don't know. Or given my observation about how little even most journalism professors seem to know about the economics of news media, perhaps we all have it wrong.

One place to look for both collective intelligence (and mass stupidity) these days is, of course, the World Wide Web, the thing that 18-year-olds are "supposed" to be interested in while they continue to willingly, even eagerly, sign up for most of the same old courses, often only slightly modified for the Internet, on newspaper journalism and broadcast journalism.

With assistance from graduate assistant Tom McMeekin, I looked at what is being posted on the Web about U.S. journalism schools, by the named and unnamed, the knowledgeable and not, the sincere and the dismissive. I didn't categorically omit any Web site except that of the Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication itself because citing it here would be too much "inside baseball."

One observation is that virtually all posts, regardless of who wrote them, displayed some experience, some insight, but also almost always some major blind spot—some assumption or conclusion about journalism schools or journalists or journalism students or news consumers—that is not always true and, in some cases, rarely true. In other words, even when trying to grasp the big picture, they just weren't seeing the whole picture.

Sarah Lacy, on techcrunch.com on April 8, 2009, headlined her rant, "Who the Hell is Enrolling in Journalism School Right Now?" and started off by bragging about how she landed a job at Memphis's weekly business journal with only her "mediocre GPA" from a liberal arts college and not "even really understand[ing] what a stock was." Lacy then proceeded to claim that her "total lack of journalism training...gave me an edge," because "Journalism schools are like foot-binding. They force you into a style that a bunch of dinosaurs all agreed was acceptable a zillion years ago." Finally, Lacy told readers that she knows no journalists who want to work for the New York Times or Wall Street Journal (instead they want to have a "famous blog") and presumably there is no need to invest what she says is almost \$40,000 to obtain a journalism degree. Apparently Lacy took that figure from the 2008-9 full-time (graduate) tuition at Columbia University's j-school, which would appear to have the highest tuition of any public or private, undergraduate or graduate, j-school in the United States. It apparently never occurred to

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her that in-state tuition for journalism schools in Florida and Nevada, among other states, are mere fractions of \$40,000—even for four-year bachelor's degrees, let alone one-year (or so) graduate programs. But Lacy is not the first person, let alone the last, who thinks that all journalism schools are like the one he/she attended....or teaches at! One of Lacy's respondents, "Jeff," pointed out, in fact, that Lacy is "Quite the expert of this new form of fake journalism, all opinion[,] no facts on her own little piece of the web here." A person calling himself "Dave Johnston" added, "Most J-School students should just get right into politics, or go to law school, that's what they want to do anyway." Johnston also hasn't recently been in a typical journalism school, where the average student who is interested in journalism at all is interested in covering primarily or only sports.

Another "Dave" complained, "There is no way an undergraduate education is worth \$150K even at the best school in the country," adding that "in any meritocracy the cream will rise to the top, so grad school is largely irrelevant (Business & Journalism)." No one asked how many journalism students are paying \$37,500 per year in tuition, or why anyone would, considering what a high percentage of excellent bachelor's degree programs in journalism are at public universities.

More recently, University of Texas at Austin journalism professor Robert Jensen posted his piece, "Can Journalism Schools Be Relevant in a World on the Brink?" on CommonDreams.org. Jensen noted, "I hear more and more students doubting the relevance of journalism schools—for good reasons." He then recounted how he proposed a new mission statement to his Austin colleagues, one that would "jettison the illusions of neutrality" and "contribute to shaping a decent future," and provided his summary of their reactions. "Sundrool" responded in part, "I spent nine semesters beating my head against the corporate shills populating the journalism school I attended. I was talking about environmental destruction and the demonstrable lies surrounding Iraq and the growing inequality and injustice in America and the military machine....I was ignored mostly. Sometimes harassed, threatened, slenderized [sic], but mostly ignored. I was so thoroughly disgusted with the apathetic, uninspired, hired ideologues they dared place in charge of my education that I never applied to receive my degree....I have renounced the profession entirely."

New York magazine's March 2009 piece, "Columbia J-School's Existential Crisis," also received comments. "B3K" complained that the "best J-schools in the country are staffed by a combo of tenured, retired-from-work profs who revel in being all 'cough cough you're all f\*cked ha ha! But lemme tell you about how I once got drunk with Joan Didion!' and younger guys who think that interactive Flash maps of voting precincts or whatever are going to save everything, except they have no idea how to monetize those things....Real World [journalists] furiously debat[e] pay-for-content vs. ad-supported models and none of them ever, you know, bring actual statistics to the table[.]" "ANNIEJ" added that, "It's because we don't learn about them [new media] that too many j-schoolers DO still only want to work in print....the J-school is not preparing me to work anywhere BESIDES in print," while not saying where she is in J-school.

"DELTADAWN" said, "Journalism school is a rip-off, and a non-academic discipline. Blogging 101 is even more so....Tuition at CUNY [City University of New York] is just about right....J-schools and schools of education are the biggest culprits in the 'dumbing down' of America." "HNG" complained, "I graduated from a well-

known j-school (not Columbia) with a BA and now—without a job—I feel that it was all a waste of time and money. Graduate journalism schools make even less sense to me," while "JSH26" wrote, "do not go to this [Columbia] or any other graduate-level journalism school. Go get a job. Write. Or don't get a job, and write anyway. Then write some more....good chops will beat out the degree any day." "JOURNALISTNY" attacked with, "As someone who attended CUNY's HORRIBLE Journalism program, I know first-hand how awful a school is that tries to teach 'the way of the future.'....Journalism is about storytelling, and as a storyteller, you need to know the basics before anything else."

On the other hand, several posters on various sites say j-schools need to be pushing, if not requiring, their students to take business courses to launch their own media businesses, and to become experts/specialists in something to write about: finance/economics, science, etc. (sports was not mentioned).

In September 2009, Robert Niles posted at www.olj.org his "Eight things that journalism students should demand from their journalism schools," which are role models, mentors, employment contacts, "a place to hack," work experience, "deep knowledge of a field other than journalism," "getting your name out there," and "passion, not excuses." "130.191.76.22" commented, "When we [current journalism student] have guest speakers come in and say things like 'run while you can' and 'you're crazy to get a j-degree,' I get incredibly frustrated. Aren't these professionals supposed to believe in journalism as a pillar of democracy and a way for people to make informed decisions?"

"67.142.162.32" bought into the false dichotomy, and thus complained about, how U.S. journalism professors supposedly have a Ph.D. and no practical experience, or vice versa.

And two Niles respondents each said that young people with initiative can learn what they need to know on their own and not go to j-school. The latter poster claimed j-school "create[s] a massive debt load right out of the gate" while Hunter Walker recently posted a gawker.com piece headlined, "The First Rule of J-School is You Don't Talk about J-School Debt" (apparently also thinking that one's only options are institutions with Columbia and Northwestern tuition levels).

J-schools generally and several of them by name, however, have their passionate defenders on the Web. One of Niles' respondents said, "Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University does all eight of these things and more," while "Sharon Henry" said, "I never realized how fortunate I'd been" to attend a j-school that she didn't name. "Sandi," another respondent to Sarah Lacy, called herself a "recent graduate of Medill @ Northwestern," said, "My professors were Web designers, Flash professionals, Internet marketers, NYT bestselling authors, and, of course, newspaper investigative reporting and breaking news vets. We didn't just learn how to 'write an inverted pyramid.' We learned how to start our own websites, create relevant hyperlocal content, build interactive media pieces, AND write damn good pieces" and added that she does not "regret it for a second, even \$40,000 later."

And "Moll," yet another respondent to Lacy, wrote, "I can't speak for others, but the J School I attended was actually very forward-thinking, focusing on both the fundamentals of journalistic writing and the creative aspect that some journalists are taught have no place in reporting. A good J School (and I think mine was as many graduates are working for big papers, PR firms, Ad agencies, Major non-prof-

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its, producing amazing freelance work, winning prestigious awards, etc[.]) has a faculty with varied experiences (the 'old-schoolers' and fresh faces). The old school professors have experienced an era that was about a hard core/traditional approach, offering valuable lessons about diligence, ethics and what it's like to get your hands dirty. Couple that with young faculty, students can get the best of both worlds....Skills such as writing, critical thinking, analysis...you can go so many places. My school has proved that." Curiously, Moll, so eager to give a free advertisement to her alma mater, didn't tell us where she went!

"Chrisy58" responded to Jensen with, "One of my dreams is going back to school and getting a BA degree. I would love to go Journalism school....Someone has to have the courage and strength to fight for the truth. To fight for the little guy against the evil corruption that has been free to run rampant in this country."

"FISHMAN30," responding to *New York* magazine's Columbia piece, wrote, "Call me old-fashioned, but learning how to write and report aren't 'the basics' of journalism. That is journalism....[T]he vast majority of 'new media' folks couldn't write their way out of a paper bag....I didn't go to j-school to learn how to use some software."

"67.187.130.141," responded to Niles' piece with the claim that JMC faculty are out of touch with quickly changing industries, but still was thankful that his/her j-school education "led to my first internship." However, should I be impressed that he/she finished a journalism degree and three internships, and a "publisher had a connection to my university," yet he/she ended up with only a "part-time job covering sports for the college town's daily"?

Several persons claiming to be current students or recent graduates of j-schools praised their schools for teaching about Twitter and other social media, although not one noted that even a Manhattanite is lucky to have as many people follow him/her on Twitter as subscribe to a typical weekly newspaper in North Dakota.

To finish up with another indictment, however, may I suggest "Where are J-Schools in Great Debate over Journalism's Future?" (on the Poynter Institute site) by University of Southern California Annenberg School Dean Ernest Wilson? He argues, "the performance of journalism schools has something to do with the current sub-par performance of the profession," because "those of us who lead journalism schools are responsible for training a goodly percentage of the people who made questionable decisions over the past decade....Medical school faculty regularly point to failures—and opportunities—to improve their training of physicians for the 21st century. Where is the visible counterpoint in journalism education?....To survive, journalism schools have to become much more intellectually and professionally ambitious." Specifically, Wilson points out, "shocking economic illiteracy...marks too much of journalism education today, which makes it harder to get high quality economic reporting, while reinforcing the fire wall between the business and content sides of the profession....The popular claim that 'we are all journalists now' must be refuted....We ought to lead the charge for greater media literacy for all citizens."

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- 1. Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (NY: Pantheon, 1985), 82. [Note that page numbers do not carry the pp. or p. prefix.]
- 2. Joseph R. Dominick, "Children's Viewing of Crime Shows and Attitudes on Law Enforcement," *Journalism Quarterly* 51 (spring 1974): 5-12.
- Robert K. Manoff and Michael Schudson, eds., Reading the News (NY: Pantheon Books, 1986).
- 4. Leon V. Sigal, "Sources Make the News," in *Reading the News*, ed. Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson (NY: Pantheon Books, 1986), 9-37.
- 5. "Nicaragua's Bitter Harvest: War in Coffee Fields," *New York Times*, December 23, 1983, sec. A, p. 2, col. 4.

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Rachael Smolkin, "Binded by History," *American Journalism Review,* January/February 2003, http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=2747 (accessed January 19, 2003).

### Professional site:

Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, *AEJMC Online*, January 2003, http://www.aejmc.org/index.html (accessed January 22, 2003).

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