

To Affirm Journalism

Remarks by Walter Dean to the IV Congresso Dos Jornalistas

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Thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to help you think about the future.

I'm pleased that you did not introduce me as a "former" journalist, because I like to consider myself as "in recovery" but not completely cured.

And I'm especially happy to have seen so many of the 500 Portuguese journalists who over the past 9 years participated in Elements seminars where they discovered Third Places, witnessed smoke at the capitol, and agonized over where in the late news line-up to put anthrax and Bobo the elephant.

The first question I ask at those seminars is the both the easiest and most difficult:

What is the purpose of a news organization?

We hear the easy answers first. "To inform, to educate, to serve and protect, to find the truth."

Then it get's more difficult as the journalists move from the abstract to reality.

"To attract audience, to get hits, to make money, to keep going."

It does not take long for two truths become evident. The first is that some of the most important purposes of journalism appear to be at odds. For example,

- Do we give the audience what it wants or what it needs?

- Should the journalist be more a patriot or more a journalist?
- How far do we go in telling the truth? Is it our job to identify the scoundrels, liars or incompetent as such?
- What's more important, immediacy or accuracy? Is verification different for the Internet or if we identify the source, can we "just pass it on?"

The second truth we discover when asking the purpose question is that it's a lot easier to *talk* about journalism than to *do* it.

Journalists, of course, were once the "gatekeepers" of information, opening and closing the gate to allow some news to flow while keeping other stuff corralled. In exchange, news organizations collected fees from subscribers and advertisers.

But while we were opening and closing the gate, the inventors of the new technologies tore down the fence. The business model was upended and algorithms replaced editorial judgment. News consumers got more control, but exercise it within a framework of the crowd.

The result, as you know, has been nothing short of breathtaking.

News is now more available but thinner. Verified information, moreover, is often overwhelmed by assertion from the partisan, commercial, authoritarian, fanatical, confused, and crazy.

Consider what recently occurred on Facebook, which almost half of U-S adults use to get news.

In the final 3 months of the presidential campaign the 20 most popular FAKE election stories – posted on hoax news sites or hyper-partisan blogs – generated 16% more engagement than the top 20 verified stories from the websites of 19 major news outlets including the New York Times and Washington Post to the big-3 TV networks.

Two of the most popular fakes claimed that Hillary Clinton sold weapons to ISIS and that the Pope had endorsed Donald Trump.

In addition to waging an assault on the facts, the language itself is being co-opted by those who apply the term “fake news” to stories they simply don’t like, appropriating the term to further erode the mainstream media’s claim to be a reliable and accurate source.

It is no coincidence that this congress is taking place amidst a dramatic increase in attacks on the facts, the language, the journalist, and the truth.

In fact, the rise of fake news coupled with the decline of mainstream media is rapidly becoming an issue of national security.

We know, for example, that 95% of the information collected and analyzed by intelligence agencies is open source, much of it culled from reporting by journalists.

In the U-S, about 40% of the editorial positions in mainstream media have disappeared over the past 20 years. While content from the crowd has filled some of the void, it amounts to only a fraction of the journalism no longer available to decision-makers, including citizens.

And something else has been lost, too. It’s what Steve Cole, now dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia University, calls the deterrent effect of local journalism.

He’s talking about the reporter from the local newspaper who regularly sits in the front row of court hearings, school board sessions, city council meetings, or the mayor’s news conference. Even when no story is written, the journalist by his mere presence is performing a valuable public service by monitoring the activities of government and the powerful.

Luciano Floridi, a professor of philosophy and ethics-of-information at the University of Oxford, recently wrote in the Guardian that, “The Internet age made big promises to us: a new period of hope and opportunity, connection and empathy, expression and democracy. Yet the digital medium has aged badly because we allowed it to grow

chaotically and carelessly, lowering our guard against the deterioration and pollution of our infosphere.”

Instead of more and better information, civic decision-making is increasingly informed by opinion, advertising, speculation, propaganda and, most recently, stuff that is completely fabricated.

Nor is the problem confined to the United States.

Consider the political responsibilities of websites that distorted discussions around the UK’s Brexit vote, the Obama presidency, or Hillary Clinton.

Or the fake news story last month that falsely claimed Israel might use nuclear weapons against another nuclear power, Pakistan, prompting the Pakistani defense minister to write a saber-rattling Twitter post threatening nuclear retaliation.

Or that some governments are attempting to shape the politics in other countries by trying to influence elections, undermine confidence in government, or sow domestic unrest through the distribution of misinformation, hacked emails, or fake news.

The New York Times noted last week that “As they did in the United States during the presidential campaign, fake and misleading reports are popping up across Europe, particularly as a string of countries including Germany are poised for major elections.”

Perhaps this will be the watershed moment that awakens the public and prompts a serious discussion about the health of the news, the viability of the business model, and the future of the professional journalist.

If so, journalists need to be ready for it.

And to do that, **we first need to be clear in our own minds about our most important purposes.**

In my work with journalists over the past 15 years, one characteristic transcends all others: they want to make a difference. But they want to

do it their own way – with an obligation to truth, a loyalty to the audience, and an independence from those they cover. And sometimes, even those they work for.

Journalism, in other words, is an act of conscience. It demands a personal sense of ethics and responsibility. This “sense of ethics” is especially important because many journalists now work in isolation - whether in a newsroom cubicle, a cafe, or their apartment. Stories are filed directly to the public without the safety net of editing, a second set of eyes, or collaboration with others in a newsroom.

Journalists also need to better understand the notion of journalistic independence, especially as it relates to their relationship with the community.

Gil Thelen, the former publisher and president of the Tampa Tribune, believes the journalist has a very specific roll in society that he calls “the committed observer.”

This means that the journalist is not removed from a community, though at times may stand apart from others to view things from a different perspective.

The notion of the committed observer can help clarify for reporters their journalistic role and provide citizens who are confused or angered by the coverage of controversial issues an explanation of the journalist’s purpose and motive.

Other professions have been much clearer about their role in society and the everyday tasks they perform are usually conducted within a framework of law, administrative regulation, or specific procedure.

People understand and accept, for instance, that doctors serve a Hippocratic Oath that requires they try to save a person regardless of who he is, whether an enemy soldier in war or a wounded gunman who just shot a police officer.

Or that lawyers are required to provide a zealous defense for even the most despicable suspects.

Journalists need to be equally clear, to themselves and to the public, about their role.

A journalist is not aloof from society. They are citizens. Even patriots. Journalists express their commitment and duty by performing the prescribed role of observer to provide fellow citizens with the information they need to make judgments and decisions.

Having clarity of purpose, however, is no longer enough.

We need to be clear in our own minds and able to explain to the public and our stakeholders what it is that distinguishes journalism from everything else in the information marketplace.

Three of the most fundamental differences involve purpose, principles, and process.

First, journalists take information seriously. Among common journalistic biases is a prejudice for facts, data, personal observation, history, science, and expertise.

But hard evidence alone may not be sufficient.

In our work with newspeople, we have been told time and again that the essence of journalism is about finding and presenting the facts but also “the truth about the facts.”

A second distinction is that journalists are concerned about their reputation.

Because the journalist’s work and conscience are so closely aligned, reputation is as important personally as professionally while for the news organization, reputation is a foundation of the business model.

When advertisers rent space on a page or web site, or on the air, they are essentially renting a piece of a news organization’s credibility. Anything that damages reputation also undermines the business model.

The importance of these two journalistic traits was highlighted in recent research two Carnegie Mellon professors conducted for the U-S military.

Using a database of more than 200 million disaster and crisis tweets, they found that Twitter was good for “knowing what the public is talking about” but was not good at making sense of what all the talk means.

They also discovered that Twitter produced almost no new information because just 1% of Twitter users produced information of ANY kind, and most of that was “pointless babble.”

Finally, the researchers compared the characteristics of information created by the public versus what journalists produced.

The public, they said:

- Finds and creates information but does so to meet their very diverse desires
- Serves as a filter for NEWS
- Vets/Validates/Affirms other people’s information

But citizen journalism is also

- Frequently babble
- Frequently the source of bad information
- While the information can be super-rich, it also
- Can be flawed.

The news media, on the other hand:

- Finds and creates information, often from the PUBLIC
- Serves as filter for public information
- Has pointed babble
- Preserves its reputation
- Takes information seriously
- Occasionally vets and validates other’s information
- Is much more sparse but higher quality

A third characteristic that distinguishes journalism from other content involves the methods – a scientific-like approach – that journalists have told us they use to find, gather, and assess information.

We call it “**The Discipline of Verification**” and its intellectual foundation rests on three core concepts – transparency, humility, and originality.

Transparency means show your work so the audience can decide for themselves whether they should believe it.

Humility means keep an open mind.

Journalists should be skeptical — not just about what they hear, but also about their ability to understand what it means.

“Assumption,” a veteran bureau chief once said, “is the mother of all screw-ups.”

Originality means do your own work.

Information can be viewed as a hierarchy. At the top is work you have done yourself.

Journalists say the times they most often got something wrong was when they relied on someone else’s reporting and failed to check it themselves.

When we began teaching the Elements of Journalism in U-S newsrooms 15 years ago, the mainstream media was far more robust but knew things were changing.

I reject the notion that news organizations – or their owners – got caught gazing at the sea as the new media tidal wave approached. Because when it roared ashore and swept the news audience to the

Internet, among the first things people encountered were the websites of mainstream media.

The mistake publishers did make was to assume that if journalism could accompany consumers to the web, advertising could, too.

What they did not anticipate was that the traditional models of advertising – the display ad and 30-second commercial – do not work on the Internet. And the advertising community is still trying to figure out what does work.

Moreover, the media no longer has a say in the design of the devices on which news is consumed or the networks on which it's delivered.

The earliest software, for example, evolved from the spreadsheet and was intended to process numbers rather than words. There was vigorous debate in the software community whether fonts or color were even worth the cost of development.

The companies that manufacture devices, sell software, aggregate content, or run search engines are the new gatekeepers. They are engineers and business people, not journalists or publishers. They have different purposes, principles, and processes.

Consider last week's decision by Apple to remove the New York Times app from its on-line store in China. That was not about information. It was about money.

Jaron Lanier, a technology visionary who invented the basic concepts of virtual reality computing, has long been an outspoken critic of some of the programming decisions made decades ago by software engineers who developed the world-wide web.

Among them were granting users anonymity, an anti-government paranoia that enabled trolling and trivialization in online discourse, the enabling of unlimited file sharing that is killing copyright and the artistic

middle class, and the institutionalization of algorithms that elevate the wisdom of mobs over the intelligence and judgment of individuals.

In the early days of the Internet's open culture, Lanier says he, like many, spouted the Silicone Valley's "blame the victim" talking points: Newspapers have been warned and if they do not or cannot adapt, that's their tough luck.

"But," he now asks, "(why were) none of us ever able to give the dinosaurs any constructive advice about how to survive? Would American history be any different if the economic model of the newspaper had not been under assault? We have more bloggers, sure, but also fewer Woodwards and Bernsteins."

For journalists to regain some control of their future they must make a conscious effort to better understand, educate, and partner with the people who create and run the infrastructure of new media.

I suspect, moreover, that they might even take your call because the public and the regulators appear to growing restless with what they've unleashed.

A new poll conducted in early December by the Pew Research Center found that two in three U-S adults think fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.

When asked how to prevent the spread of fake news, those polled divided the responsibility about equally between government; social networking and search engines; and the public.

Another group I think journalists should be talking with are the advertisers who have traditionally supported journalism - even when they didn't always like what they read.

You would think that business would want a reliable stream of diverse, quality information to inform civic decision-making. Or, conversely, that

business would want to avoid a situation in which misinformation produces poor public policy or leadership.

Yet whether by design or inattentiveness, major corporations are bankrolling websites that are not just factually challenged, but rise to the level of socially toxic.

Consider the ad for the 2nd largest U-S insurer for homeowner property/casualty insurance. It appears on a “faux news” website next to an article claiming that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting – in which 20 children and 6 staff members were gunned down by a young man who then committed suicide - did not happen.

I’m sure the company values its reputation and could do something about it’s logo appearing on a venomous website. One does not, for example, see major corporate advertising on porn sites....or so I’m told.

In fact, according to a recent article in the New York Times, the marketing industry is facing a moral quandary because of the realization that many websites that promote false and misleading stories are motivated by the money their creators – including teenagers in the Balkans and entrepreneurs in the United States - make from online advertising, most of which is corporate.

The chief executive of an advertising exchange recently put it this way: “The problem for marketers is they’ve been trained to value media universally.”

In other words, they don’t make the distinction between journalism and everything else. – they don’t consider what journalists do as anything particularly valuable or unique.

So when we make the case that we are special we need to be able to prove it.

The need to understand and verify the journalistic product is why content analysis is one of the first concepts I now teach in the Elements seminars.

It's an ideal task for the journalism educator – to assess and more deeply understand the news and information landscape – and would be a real service for both the public and the media.

Moreover, in Portugal, the most daunting part of content analysis – gathering the stories, transcripts, and other components of the journalistic product - is already being done to a certain extent by the media regulator.

Could this raw data be shared with researchers? And would academics (and the government) be willing to move beyond the theoretical – say the issue of pluralism now framed in terms of media ownership – to the more concrete – how many perspectives actually appear in the typical story?

A more sophisticated understanding of the news “product” can also help news organizations avoid mistakes about the criteria they use to measure journalistic quality and commercial success.

What a news organization counts – hits or rating or shares - is critical because the results influence content – reporters will embrace what works and what works will become the “rules” and editorial standards.

We've certainly seen this in television where audience numbers were compared to stories by topic. The result in the U-S at least, was that everybody soon covered the same stories in the same way.

Live, local, and late-breaking news became the rule while many important topics like government, the economy, and social issues were de-emphasized or ignored on newscasts that all looked essentially the same but for different presenters, sets, and the opening music.

A few years ago I was given the data from the most comprehensive, and expensive, study of local news ever undertaken – 34,000 stories from 2500 newscasts on 150 local TV stations in 50 U-S markets over five years. With our academic partners and colleagues at the Project for Excellence in Journalism, we spent three years “torturing the data” and

testing our questions and assumptions at more than two-dozen TV stations where we trained.

What we found – and shared in a 2007 book, “We Interrupt this Newscast,” published by Cambridge University Press, was that the numbers were accurate. But their meaning had been misinterpreted, creating a series of myths about the audience that were simply untrue.

When we looked deeper into why people watched we found that topic was not very important at all - of several measures such as localism, relevance, sourcing, expertise, etc, topic was the least important to viewership.

“Enterprise,” on the other hand, was a statistically significant identifier of successful late newscast leads. In fact, if so-called newspaper stories are covered in ways that make them interesting to the TV audience, they attract and hold viewers better than other kinds of reporting.

We found that viewers rewarded effort - To the degree that every story was made more complete as the result of more reporting, the audience gave it progressively higher ratings.

The mistakes made by local TV are, regrettably, being repeated with the on-line audience.

Tom Rosenstiel, co-author of the Elements of Journalism and now head of the American Press Institute, recently observed that, “most web analytics are a mess, offering too little information that is useful to journalists or publishers (because) they mostly measure the wrong things or things that are false.”

As an example, he cites “unique visitors” who are, in fact, not people but the IP addresses of individual devices. So if during the day a person visits a site from his mobile device, laptop, desktop, and tablet, he’s counted as four “unique users.”

Page views can tell a publisher how many times an individual piece of content was accessed. But views cannot tell the editor why. Nor does a page view by itself tell whether consumers found that content valuable

or an annoying waste of time they were teased into viewing.

Working with more than 50 of its member publishers, the API has developed a more sophisticated measurement system that has been used to analyze about 400-thousand on-line news items.

Researchers have discovered – as we did when we looked more deeply at TV viewership – that the audience isn’t stupid, that good story-telling is vital, and that effort pays off.

Among the broad patterns found were that the single biggest change publishers can make is to produce more high-value major enterprise journalism. These “showcase” stories generate 48% more engagement, 83% more page views, 40% more time spent per article, and 103% more sharing activity.

Stories triggered by initiative – items the newsroom thinks up - score 30% better in engagement, had 62% more page views, and 101% percent more shares.

“Long form” stories averaging 1,200 words drive 23% more engagement and lift page views 11%, sharing 45%, and reading time 36%. And this is true even on mobile devices.

Stories presented with a photo score 19% higher in engagement, 43% higher if more than one photo is used. Stories about government that have a photo with them score 75% percent higher. Much the same for audio and video.

And this is just a snapshot of what is being learned. But to find it journalists must examine their own product just as we expect government or business or other institutions to scientifically study what they do.

Finally, I don’t know about how many of you have had the opportunity to visit the student newsroom next door. I’m certain that you have seen the journalism they have been producing. And would agree that it has been impressive.

Last night I was talking with one of the student journalists and asked about working in the newsroom. She said the experience has been fantastic, a once in a life opportunity. “What made it so?” I asked.

“Because it is a ‘safe space,’” she replied. “We are working in a professional environment but have the freedom to make a mistake and learn from it.” “And when the demonstrators appeared yesterday,” she continued, “the editor called a meeting for everyone to discuss who we might handle the coverage.”

Safe, collaborative, professional. I was stunned because there were the exact words used by Palestinian journalists I worked with for three and a half years in 2014 as senior advisor to the international aid community’s information service for the Humanitarian Emergency in Gaza. It was perhaps the most tragic but also the most rewarding work I have done. We created a daily one-hour 5-day-a-week radio news program carried on a 7-station radio network and then also simulcast from cameras brought into the studio by Palestinian TV.

We provided people emergency information on food, water, shelter, and medical care. And we reported back to the aid community on the needs of people and how well programs were meeting those needs. In three months with no promotion or advertising, we had 10% of the audience in Gaza and the West Bank. If the program had been carried in the U-S, it would have been the most popular on radio, TV, or cable news.

And it worked because we were able to provide our reporters in Gaza and the West Bank a safe, professional, and collaborative environment to give people the information they needed to make the best possible decisions in what was a horrific environment.

It made me wonder if perhaps the most damaging effect of the new media technologies has been on the environment of our newsrooms, many of which – because of the pressures and demands of the Internet – are no longer safe or as safe as they were.

And thinking of the 19 news organization directors who sat here on this sage earlier in the Congress, I wonder how many worry about having “safe” newsroom.

This is usually not a priority when people are stressed and institutions under fire. Rather, there's a tendency to reach out for easy answers that plenty of people are willing to provide.

I think the answers will come not from the newest technology or toy but from recognition by the public – and their governments, businesses, and institutions - that bad information produces bad government, impedes business, and undermines civic life.

Journalists can help inform this process by becoming more conscious of what they do, how they do it, and, especially, why it's important.

Obrigado e boa sorte

Thank you and good luck.