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Promise, Peril of "Teaching Hospitals"

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Response to Francisco, Lenoff and Schudson

Law students can file legal briefs. Medical students can cure patients. Why can't journalism students report for the public? That's the question considered by "The Classroom as Newsroom," which covers well the promise and peril of the "teaching hospital" form of journalism education.

The promise: employable students, faculty with fresh professional experience, universities providing a public service, and communities gaining the news they need to run their governments and their lives. When students do actual journalism for a real community, their digital skills and understanding must be up-to-date. In a teaching newsroom, students will learn much more about community engagement and story impact than they would by turning papers over to a professor in a classroom.

The peril: students must be protected legally; the pace of intense, high-pressure, year-round news demands can be draining; university support, while essential, may not be there; and faculty debates over all the details, including a too-literal view of the "teaching hospital" metaphor, can be used as an excuse to resist improvements.

Disclosure: Most of the experiments quoted in the "Newsroom as Classroom" article, including the Youngstown project, have been funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, where I work. We believe our efforts to encourage nonprofit news organizations and the "teaching hospital" model are based on sound investigation. In 2009, our Knight Commission in the Information Needs of Communities showed us that America's local news systems were in trouble, concluding that they do not need to be saved so much as they need to be invented. In 2011, the Federal Communications Commission followed our report with its own, also named "Information Needs of Communities," calling for journalism schools and other nonprofits to deal with a crisis in local accountability journalism, in the wake of the loss of 15,000 local daily newsroom jobs in recent years. In addition, we funded the most comprehensive study on "teaching hospital" models, done by Tom Glaisyer of the New America Foundation. He called for many more schools to adopt the model. (See his report at http://newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/Shaping%2021st%20Century%20Journalism_1.pdf.)

Finally, Schudson himself co-authored a report on "The Reconstruction of American Journalism" that contained even bolder recommendations for greater public funding of journalism. The bottom line: Competition from the Internet, and now mobile and social media, has disrupted traditional news

economics. In America, news organizations drew more than 85% of their revenue from advertising, a share higher than anywhere in the developing world. When cheap or free Internet ads ruined the advertising model, it became a case of "the bigger they are, the harder they fall" for U.S. news media.

Schudson, Lenhoff, and Francisco are correct to note that the number of schools trying to do actual journalism is increasing. Still, we do not have exact numbers. Statistics kept by groups like the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication are outdated; they need to be revamped to catch up with the teaching newsroom trend. That said, the authors have captured meaningful vignettes. It seems clear from the reports of student hiring from places where teaching newsrooms flourish—from the University of Missouri, which has been doing this for a century, to Arizona State's high-visibility national News21 program, to the University of Alabama's community news version—that institutions providing the clinical form of education place more students into the competitive communications job market than the national average. In some ways, this is common sense: The students who learn to shoot with live ammunition will develop better aim than people who are only pretending (they also develop a healthy respect for the power of the weapon). If that weren't enough, research has shown that the two things employers look for most in applicants are work experience and professionally done work samples.

Faculty members who are pure scholars with no professional experience are at a tremendous disadvantage in trying to run such real-world laboratories. If faculty with high-level professional experience can't be hired, or if "hybrid" PhDs (modern day scholars with past professional experience, as in the inspirational Youngstown experiment) can't be found, trying to launch this sort of enterprise may not be wise. A teaching newsroom can dangerous legally if one does not have both libel insurance and the assistance of a top professional, and this is worse in states that do not cover student journalists in shield laws that give journalists greater power to protect sources. The pressures of providing news on tight deadlines can be too great for people who have never done it. The thicker skin needed to cope with community reaction and controversy may not be palatable. These are daunting roadblocks: Perhaps funders should revive programs that gave scholars daily newsroom experience, but this time, locate them in the best digital-first, social/mobile newsrooms.

I suppose I'm as guilty as anyone for throwing around the phrase "teaching hospital." As with civic journalism, we label things to help spread the word about an important issue. But giving a thing a name and claiming it is a bold new trend can ruin a perfectly good idea. Some have picked at the "teaching hospital" metaphor, pointing out the literal differences between medicine, which has a terminal professional degree, and journalism and communications, which have no professional doctorate, nor any licensing. Others argue that only a large, well-funded school can have a hospital. So let's edit the metaphor. Schools with few resources could have "teaching clinics," or even "teaching first-aid stations." One size does not fit all. The Youngstown experience proves that you don't have to be a huge campus to have a teaching newsroom.

Then, there is the question of revenue. Good journalism schools like the one at my alma mater, San Francisco State University, have, for 20 years and with no resources, been offering local reporting classes that yield good student work published in actual newspapers. Other examples: The University of Alabama's "teaching newspaper" program (the name came from a program I ran years ago at the Oakland

Tribune) is entirely tuition supported. The New England Center for Investigative Reporting has a variety of revenue streams, including a profitable high school journalism training program (http://www.knightfoundation.org/blogs/knightblog/2012/6/29/nonprofit-news-organization-stable-footing). I'm convinced teaching newsrooms will never be able to run on revenue from the news organizations they may partner with. Even News21, which in 2012 surpassed its transportation series from the year before with a stunning investigation of voter fraud, did not receive any revenues from news organizations. In the end, the issue is not whether a program is expensive or no-cost, but whether it is the right size for your campus.

Many debate whether student journalists should be paid. That framing may miss the point. My youngest son plays French horn for the college orchestra, as well as the basketball team's pep band. He gets credit for one and money for the other. My oldest son freelances as a graphic artist for pay. He works for a tech startup for equity. When he was in school, he created a lot of art for credit only. The form of compensation isn't the point; what matters is the value of the compensation. When you learn amazing new things, that's value. If you are playing the same songs again and again, then perhaps the only value is in the pay (or just the fun of it). In this article, the authors provide useful advice about balancing classroom and newsroom to try to be sure the academic value is there. I think that's the main thing: Pay should not be a surrogate for paying attention and providing educational value. Perhaps the kind of formal evaluation the authors call for can be directed toward this question from the student point of view.

The most encouraging aspect of Lenhoff and Francisco's good work, to me, has been their community engagement effort. Too many student news services are just that—one-way, assembly-line news factories that spit out stories. That is, as the students say, so 20th century. Today, in our digital, networked, multidirectional, local/global, mobile/social, real-time, 24/7 web of communication, engagement is the key. When hundreds of millions of people each carry a powerful mass media device in their pocket, it is a new world. One must be able to understand how to interact with a community to be a local news producer today. Giving students real news experience also gives them real community experience. The relationship between engagement with the news and the impact of the news is also a vast new area for formal study. Scholarship may well prove what my colleague Michael Maness, our vice president of journalism and media innovation, says: Human-centered design of news products and projects is a key to engagement.

The most important factor in the success or failure of the teaching newsroom model may is the support of a university's president. If the president is behind the idea, money flows and doors open. That said, it also can't happen without the right faculty, people willing to keep costs down by tightly integrating the journalism with the teaching. The good news is that accreditation standards in the United States have been loosened to allow for more curriculum flexibility. The bad news is that the digital age of communication has, even in its infancy, shown a steadily increasing rate of change. The reality: New forms of communication are being created faster than PhDs can be minted. Who has a doctorate in mobile media? What schools have integrated mobile media into most or all of their classes? This summer, six foundations asked America's college presidents to join them in calling for reform, saying "journalism schools must be willing to recreate themselves if they are to succeed . . . [and] universities should make these changes for the betterment of students and society."

Extraordinary professionals, those meeting rigorous standards, can help journalism and communication schools develop greater clinical expertise. Professionals co-exist with scholars in law and medicine. They co-exist in art and music and business schools. They could, increasingly, do so in journalism, especially when, through all these clinical variations, students and professors might actually be helping to invent the future of news.