

Forum Essay 4

Hope for Journalism History

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When my colleague, mentor, and friend James W. Carey died last year, I realized that nothing could be more appropriate than to talk about the wisdom I, and others, have gotten from him. I first met Jim Carey more than twenty years ago, in 1985, when I was a graduate student in American Civilization at NYU gnawing and mumbling over a weird idea that maybe studying the history of journalism would be interesting and maybe there was more to it than Frank Luther Mott had noticed.

Mott was, of course, just about the only journalism historian that most scholars had ever heard of, and from his aging *American Journalism* came the only facts most ever knew about the development and social uses of newspapers. If you wandered into the E or PS sections of the library stacks you could always find the same dozen or so deathless nuggets from his book twinkling at you on the shelves somewhere—but not much more.¹

My dissertation adviser was an extremely smart man whose field was 19th-century intellectual history, but he manfully confessed he didn't know a thing about the journalism history of that era and would love to learn more with me. My professors of political science and literature read my papers about the campaign media blitz of 1840 and humorous sketches in antebellum newspapers and said Gee, that's interesting, I never thought about that before.

I thought I might be a little crazy. Or that I'd be very, very alone.

Then I saw a listing for a one-day conference at Rutgers, which I'd like to say was a regional AEJ history division meeting but I don't even remember anymore. All I do remember is that the title put "journalism" and "history" in the same sentence, which seemed pretty exciting to me. So I hopped on a train to New Brunswick.

And toward the end of the program, up stood this charming and lively man with a strong New England accent and an infectious laugh. You know what he said—that journalism history was more than just a celebration of the steady expansion of freedom and knowledge. That it should be seen as a kind of cultural history, whose task is to recover past forms of imagination and historical consciousness and organizations of social experience. That journalism is a creative and imaginative work and that the techniques of journalism define what is considered to be real. That studying the history of journalism means studying the way people in the past have grasped reality.²

And he took the top of my head off. There was everything I'd been groping to imagine and understand and would never have come to in ten years by myself, and all of it made pure, sweet, perfect sense. Lookit, he kept saying, lookit, and I did.

So at the end of the meeting I rushed up to him, loomed over him, and bumbled “I’ve been looking for a man like you!!” He handled that with his customary grace.

He did more. We had a conversation, he gave me suggestions, he made me feel smart, and then, much later, when I wrote him and hesitantly asked whether he remembered me and whether I could impose on him to read my dissertation, he responded with his characteristic warmth and generosity, not only remembering our meeting but remembering the date better than I did. I still have his letter thanking me for the pleasure of reading my dissertation—words that we all know don’t often trip easily off the pen when we write to eager graduate students. The corny cliché is true: he was a gentleman and a scholar.

Of course I wasn’t the only one he inspired; there were hundreds of us who met him at conferences or studied or taught with him or read his work. He was largely responsible for pushing and prodding the study of journalism history out of the condition of “embarrassment” and “problem” that he described in that landmark article in the first issue of *Journalism History*. Certainly the state of journalism history is something I’m much happier about in 2006 than I’ve been for a very long time.

Of course it’s not perfect yet, it still has its embarrassing moments. For my taste there’s still too much focus on the perennial How-It-Covered-Them question: what the mainstream press has and has not reported about the lives and activities of various nondominant groups like women or African Americans or gays and lesbians. These too often end up sounding more like a politically raised twenty-first-century consciousness complaining about how the press ignored or warped or misunderstood or denigrated them.

Jim Carey would have us understand, of course, that the past is not just a slightly dog-eared present—that it often, as the title of David Lowenthal’s splendid 1985 book on heritage and social memory has it, is a foreign country, at least a Canada if not entirely a China to those of us in the U.S. Not only does the past deserve to be entered and interrogated on its own terms rather than those imposed by a twenty-first-century historian with political ideas of her own; on its own terms it also has so much more to teach us.

I remember a while back reading a *New York Times* piece on Ken Burns, who of course is widely celebrated for his historical documentaries, all of which are characterized by the color of honey and the pace of molasses. The article quoted Burns as saying that he loves American history because when he starts working on a film, “I actually go in ignorant of the story, and the lesson I bring out is how much these people in the past are exactly like us.”³

That does an injustice to them *and* to us. And how interesting is that, anyway? How thoughtful is that? How open-minded is that? How intellectually curious is that? It makes me think of that wonderful passage from John Marquand’s novel *The Late George Apley*, which is both a satire on and an elegy for traditional upperclass Boston society. The father is giving his son advice about life and urges him to join the Harvard Club. “The best people are always in it,” he says, “the sort that you will understand and like. I once tried to understand a number of other people, but I am not so sure now that it wasn’t a waste of time.”⁴

Well, it's a waste of time being a historian if you're not going to try to understand other people on their own terms, and studying their journalism with an open and sensitive mind, as Jim said it best, is an unparalleled way to begin grasping their reality.

Besides seeing journalism historians do a better job of grounding journalism deeply in its historical context, I would also like to see historians in general do a better job of taking journalism seriously as a historical force. Again, some are doing good work, and I'm pleased to see journalism finding a place in the field variously called History of the Book or History of Print Culture and that has recently been officially designated "hot."

But I want more. I want to see more scholars from all sorts of other disciplines stay for a while in our yard rather than just raiding our orchards as many do and cherry-picking the evidence or the facts they need to advance their own arguments—the sociologist interested in theories of communication, the political scientist intent on this election or that crisis, the legal scholar in hot pursuit of First Amendment principles, the literary scholar hoping to unearth a forgotten Hemingway, the historian hungry for a primary source. It never fails to amaze me how any historian can tell you a dozen different ways that today's *New York Times* got this story or that wrong, showed its clear bias in this story or that. But the minute that newspaper turns yellow, it's a Primary Source, and everything it says can be taken as a straightforward and accurate eyewitness account. Too many scholars still tend to treat the journalistic work of the past as if it were nothing more than the colorless aspic whose sole purpose is to conveniently hold the real meat—the facts—for the gentle probing of the scholarly fork. It's a short-sighted attitude that underestimates the pungency of the aspic as it overestimates the purity of the meat.

But besides the interesting and exciting good work that scholars have been doing that does accept Jim Carey's challenge to see journalism history as cultural history, I've seen even more reason for satisfaction.

I've been thrilled to see, again with Jim's help, that it's possible for even students who come to a journalism school that has a long tradition of focusing like a laser on professional education only—students who don't think they care a bit about journalism history—to care a lot about journalism history.

For seven or eight years now I've been teaching a one-semester elective in American journalism history that I had thought would appeal mainly to the students in the small and new interdisciplinary communications Ph.D. program that Jim had launched in 1998 at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. But I was both pleased and surprised to find that it also attracted interest among the students in the professional M.S. program, about six or eight of whom chose it every year instead of other electives like Investigative Techniques or Sports Journalism or Magazine Editing. I even got people from other schools and divisions, not just from History and Anthropology but even from Architecture and the medical school, people who came for the simplest and most gratifying reason in the world: they said they were curious about journalism and wanted to learn more about how it worked.

But it wasn't a required class; it was a self-selected group, many of whom had been History majors or who wanted a chance to take the kind of college course that felt more familiar

to them. The only history requirement the school currently includes in its jampacked one-year curriculum is an overview lecture I give at the beginning of each year, but at only three hours long it's essentially a highlight reel, skipping from *Publick Occurrences* to Blackbeard's head, the First Amendment, the new popular press, muckraking, World War II, Edward R. Murrow, Vietnam, and Watergate.

Last year, however, the school added a new program leading to an M.A. in journalism. The program, which is still quite small, with fewer than forty people this year as compared to nearly 300 full-time and part-time students in our traditional M.S. sequence, is an optional year of continuing education for people who have already learned and practiced the basics of reporting and writing; everyone who enters must have either an M.S. degree or equivalent on-the-job experience.

The idea is to prepare journalists not just professionally but also intellectually to interpret and communicate about an increasingly complicated world. The program combines further training in and reflection on journalism with more focused academic studies in subjects the students may someday write about: arts and culture, science and the environment, business and economics, or political science. Students must take an intensive j-school seminar in their major, several traditional academic courses outside the school that deal with their major, a course in evidence and inference taught by Dean Lemann and others, and finally a course in journalism history that last year covered two full semesters.

Since 2005/6 year was our first year, our guinea-pig year, we were constantly asking the students what was working and what wasn't, what they liked and what they didn't. And many of them started out very leery of the history requirement, and said so. It was the only course that didn't seem directly relevant to the job world; no interviewer would ever ask them the significance of September 25, 1690, and no one would ever hire them solely because they could answer that it was the publication date of the first newspaper in America.

But this wasn't your ordinary journalism history course; this course had the fingerprints of Jim Carey all over it. He didn't actually serve as the lead teacher, as we'd planned; he and I had designed it together, but his health began to fail at the very beginning of the term and I ended up teaching most of it, with welcome help from Michael Schudson and other faculty members.

And because it was a Carey-inspired course, it won the students over. Because it was a course that gave them the opportunity to really think about journalism as a cultural and creative work and what that meant for their own future in it. Yes, at times we did look at how the press had covered African Americans or women, but not to yell "gotcha!"; it was just one of the lenses we used to consider journalism as a critical prerequisite for democracy and as an ongoing public conversation about reality in which the people and the press together were constantly renegotiating the rules for how reality should look.

We put them through hoops. We gave them excerpts from writers like Walter Lippmann, Benedict Anderson, Jürgen Habermas, and Jim Carey himself to help set things in context. But we also insisted that they read lots of real, on-the-ground journalism, and pressed them to explore how it worked and what readers and journalists together were doing with it.

We gave them Daniel Defoe and asked them to ponder how people might have distinguished between fact and fiction at a time when the novel was still so new many people didn't know how one actually worked.

We gave them Tom Paine and considered both the intellectual and the practical difficulties of persuading a widely-scattered people who knew nothing about each other to join in a perilous effort to build a new kind of nation that no one could say for sure would even work.

We gave them excerpts from the antebellum penny press and discussed how the new breed of people called "reporters" and the new sort of newspaper called "independent" went about earning the trust of a new kind of public that had never before considered a newspaper important to its well-being.

We gave them the front-page story written by the *New York Times* reporter describing how he'd just found his dead son on the battlefield at Gettysburg, and talked about what purposes are served and what values are reinforced by our current expectation that in the 21st-century reporters for an organization like today's *Times* will generally cover things "objectively," suppressing both emotion and the first-person singular.

We gave them Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell and thought about how the relationship between journalism and the public might have been changed by the evolution of journalists from ordinary folks with dirty fingernails to a special class of people who felt more in common with experts and professionals.

We listened to the radio announcer Herbert Morrison get hysterical live on the air in 1937 as he watched the zeppelin Hindenberg catch fire while docking after a transatlantic voyage, and pondered what it meant for the way people felt about the world that the tragedy of strangers could suddenly come bursting into your living room without warning, weeping.

We gave them an excerpt from Pare Lorentz's film *The River*, made in 1937 for the government's Farm Security Administration to argue that the exploitation of the Mississippi River Valley had caused massive soil erosion, flooding, and human misery, and asked where the line lies between propaganda and journalism.

We gave them pieces of great historic journalism to read or view, Damon Runyon and Martha Gellhorn and Edward R. Murrow and Rachel Carson and Seymour Hersh, so we could see how they did it. But we also gave them pieces that don't pass muster anymore, so we could figure out what changed and why—like the party-funded journalism of the 1820s or William Randolph Hearst's murder squad that played detective in the 1897 case of the dismembered masseur, helped the cops wrestle down and handcuff the suspected murderers, and celebrated its embrace of "journalism that ACTS."

As we continued to check in with our student guinea pigs throughout the year, we could clearly see them warming to the course. Some were practical: they liked reading and viewing the good stuff so they'd have something to emulate. Some took comfort in knowing that journalism has never been easy and journalists have been wrestling for decades with some of the same

questions that bother them today. Some said they'd have more confidence in their decisions the next time they face questions of their own.

Some talked about how much more important their profession now seemed, how deeply engaged it has always been in the public conversation. One said that understanding that journalism was a set of *evolving* conventions made it possible to think about whether it's time for some of our current rules and standards to evolve a little more. One said it's really nice to know that journalism doesn't suck worse now than ever before.

But hardly anyone was still saying that studying journalism history was a waste of time. Chalk another one up for Jim Carey.

Endnotes:

¹ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History: 1690-1960*, 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

² These ideas are developed in James W. Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," *Journalism History* 1:1 (Spring 1974): 3-5, 27 (reprinted in Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren, eds., *James Carey: A Critical Reader* [Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997], 86-94).

³ Bill Carter, "Ken Burns, Artist, Meets Mark Twain, Stand-Up Comic," *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 2002, B19.

⁴ John P. Marquand, *The Late George Apley: A Novel in the Form of a Memoir* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1937), 217.