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THE EDUCATION NEEDS OF FUTURE ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS

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The future of environmental reporting has more to do with the future of news than it does with the future of newspapers. Environmental journalism will survive as long as people want public affairs information on the environment and the world around them, but the form of delivery may be very different.

(Sachsman, Simon, & Valentí, 2010, p. 179)

Elsewhere in this Handbook other contributors have laid out how environmental journalists are currently doing their jobs and how new environmental journalists should prepare for the future. In this chapter, I offer a different type of discussion, a look into how current structures in journalism and journalism education will, or not, provide a better future for environmental journalists. Environmental journalists have been, for a while, in the business of chronicling the end of the world as we know it at a great cost for themselves. I want to offer a view that defies my own cynicism and hopelessness. This chapter works on a few counter-logic assumptions: 1) that there will be a world similar enough to the one we live in now left to be covered by journalists, 2) that, in that world, freedom, democratic principles, and institutions will still be strong enough that people will still rely on the work of journalists to make informed decisions in public affairs, and 3) that journalism will still be a profession based on democratic ideals and performed by people with common ethical standards in performing their work.
I grew up in the final decade of the military dictatorship in Brazil. I didn’t get to witness the very worst of it in my first 14 years. I didn’t know anyone who suddenly disappeared in the middle of the night to never be seen again. I did hear stories from my parents and family, though. And, later, learned much more thanks to the work of journalists and columnists who survived the regime. Government spies in the schools and universities watched for faculty and students that might be too outspoken. There was rampant censorship on all media and a slow collapse of the educational system. Journalists had to find ways to report the news without becoming victims of their own work. However, my youth was not free of atrocities.

By the time I reached university in the mid-1990s, right after the protests against corruption that culminated with the resignation of our first democratically elected president, Fernando Collor de Mello, Brazil consistently ranked among the countries where journalists, environmental activists, and social justice mobilizers were killed and silenced in the greatest numbers. Being a journalist in some parts of the country, or working in many areas related to the environment, whether you were an activist or not, was usually accepting to live under constant threat, akin to living in countries at war. Even as recently as 2017, Brazil stays among the top countries where journalists are killed without consequences (Witchel, 2017) and, at least since 2015, Brazil is at the very top of the list where environmental activists are killed every year (Cox, 2018). Simply put, being an environmental journalist in Brazil has never been a safe and stable job and it’s not getting any better. Brazil is no longer an aberration, though. Journalists, especially those covering the environment, have been under attack almost everywhere else.

In the US, journalists are not killed as they are in Mexico, Philippines, or Brazil, but environmental journalists covering protests and the work of environmental activists are sometimes threatened, arrested, and even brutalized along with the protesters they cover. Although most protests may go unnoticed and journalists covering smaller protests may be missing from statistics, the number of journalists verbally attacked, physically injured, or arrested by governmental officials or corporate security forces while covering environmental issues in the United States has been rising. A protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline in North Dakota directly affecting the local Standing Rock Sioux communities generated hundreds of arrests, and journalists were treated exactly the same as protesters (Levin, 2016). There are many examples that can be found with a simple online search or looking at case by case either at the Reporters Without Borders’ World Press Freedom Index or Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press rankings. Recently, the President of the United States of America declared the media, and more specifically the news media, the enemy of the people (Grynbaum, 2017), a move very common in despotic nations where the dictator in charge needs to control the flow of information. The US is not isolated in that practice as many countries move towards less democratic governments, especially in Europe (Abramowitz, 2018). The Freedom House report on the state of democracy in the world found that “Seventy–one countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties, with only 35 registering gains. This marked the 12th consecutive year of decline in global freedom.” Freedom House called it democracy’s “most serious crisis in decades” (Abramowitz, 2018).

Not all environmental reporting work is dangerous, but understanding actual risks, trauma, and the trends in legal and digital security has become increasingly necessary to work on a beat at the center of a new, more dangerous, and more complex world. Understanding these trends should be part of the long list of what environmental journalists need to learn to become good at what they do. The future of environmental journalism lies on understanding and navigating complexity in ways that are even more demanding than in the past. If, before, journalists covering the environment needed to understand environmental history, big data, systems, and trends, now they also need to understand how environmental issues threaten global stability, security, and massive social, political, economic, and military movements.
Education needs of future journalists

A simple story on the provenance of seafood by the Center for Investigative Reporting’s *Reveal News*, “Hunting the ghost fleet” (2018), resulted in an exposé on contemporary slavery on fishing ships. To be ready to cover that type of story, a journalist needs to deal with a plethora of complex issues such as: understanding international and maritime laws, predicting life-threatening events when trying to talk to witnesses (both against the witness and the journalist), preventing corrupt public officials in different countries from learning about the reporting before it raises enough evidence, and, of course, understanding all of the scientific and journalistic knowledge and skills needed to follow up with the multiple leads.

To prepare a new batch of top-notch environmental reporters for such a complex and dangerous future, we need to rethink the way we teach journalism, especially in the bureaucratic halls of academia, more and more dominated by corporate money and the technocratic view of many educators. Rethinking the way we teach journalism is a complex and dangerous task, but many educators and journalists have been tackling it in different ways. Their work provides a view of what the future of environmental journalism education could become, if we can get through a few of the historic obstacles we created for ourselves decades ago. I want to consider a view of what that education could be and the ways to get there.

A brief view from the future

Imagine a place where journalism students work in a community-embedded newsroom. They work side by side with members of the community who have an interest in public affairs reporting. The students learn from scientists and experts the different and most complex aspects of the story. Technology specialists help the students learn how to build databases, to create data visualizations, to produce and edit 3D stories, and to transform the narrative to fit in different platforms (mobile, print, online, broadcast, etc.). Professional, investigative journalists guide the students and community members in finding the best ways to obtain the most vital data and how to make sense of them.

Not all of it happens in the same physical space or at the same time. The students are where they need to be to best report the story. In a chemistry lab, learning about the analysis process to identify the presence of lead in tap water. At the margins of a creek, reporting on scientists doing fieldwork. In a computer lab, programming a new database with computer scientists and data journalists. In local schools, teaching local students how to report on their community. Out there, knocking on doors, talking to corporate and governmental officials. In an office, working with media lawyers to get freedom of information requests completed. At a community center, learning from community members about how they have been affected by the topic at hand. At some point, stories are then published through a myriad of news outlets and platforms, shared online, through podcasts, in face-to-face discussions and presentations to the local communities. Finally, students learn to track the impact of their reporting and decide the next steps.

The scenario above is not the future, though. It is a summary of a number of past and current projects happening at the University of South Florida Saint Petersburg’s Neighborhood News Bureau (USFSP NNB). Every semester, the students taking the NNB class take on a few projects in partnership with local news media outlets and local organizations. NNB is a capstone course for undergraduate students in the journalism program, but it is also an elective for graduate students in the Digital Journalism and Design Master’s program. With the help of local journalists, community members, and organizations, the students learn how to access vital sources, understand deep contextual information about history, culture, politics, science, health, etc., and produce complex multimedia stories. From basic podcasts about local history to full-blown investigative projects with multiple layers and parts, students are constantly challenged to
come up with new and better ways to report on and tell relevant stories to the local community, to find new ways to organize and distribute their work, and to find out more about the issues that affect the local communities the most.

This requires the students to go beyond demonstrating technical newsgathering and production skills. It requires them to think critically about how their work serves their local historic African-American cluster of neighborhoods, each with its own culture, characteristics, and reporting challenges. It also challenges them to apply subject knowledge in multiple areas. They need to know the history of the neighborhoods. They need to know their geographies, demographics, socio-economic characteristics, and political and civic issues. They also need to be able to understand enough of their coverage topic to produce useful reporting. Whether they are reporting on the environment, on health, on science, or on public affairs, they need to know the processes behind those topics to be able to report accurately and find the data that are more relevant and impactful to the communities they cover. Finally, students also need to understand journalism in a deeper way. Everything that is reported comes back to the communities in ways that define them, frame them, inform them, and even empower them. If done improperly, the reporting may cause serious long-term harm. Any piece of news, as superficial as it may seem, must be embedded in context and worked with careful concern about how the story should be told. “Just the facts, ma’am,” but which facts? In what order? From what angle? Who gets to speak? Who gets agency and who just suffers or observes? What venues for redress are available? How did those facts come to be? Why were they presented in such a way and not in another? How do the facts help the community to move forward?

Far from perfect, the process we follow at NNB attempts to bring together active professional journalists, journalism faculty, experts in multiple fields, and community members to find the very best ways to help the future generation of journalists to learn what none of us could teach alone. We try to get our students trained in selling their work, negotiating contracts, finding different ways to format and monetize their reporting, and taking care of their finances and professional needs. Many projects result in internships and jobs for the students while others may result in entrepreneurial projects, freelancing contracts, or new collaborations.

NNB is not always a success story, nor is it a new idea. It was imagined, developed, and created as the main piece of the journalism program at USFSP in the late 1990s and early 2000s by Mike Killenberg and Bob Dardenne based on a theory they developed with Robert Anderson in their 1994 book *The Conversation of Journalism*. We are still working to make it better, more inclusive, more collaborative, and more impactful, but it is a step in breaking with the traditional classroom or online journalism class and bridging the islands of academia and professional journalism.

NNB’s approach may be unique, but it is only one in many programs that have been fighting the rigid structures of academia to provide a much more flexible, dynamic, and professionally oriented approach to journalism education.

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**The education of the environmental journalist: a disjointed past**

“The news media environment of the 21st century requires journalism students to master a wide range of skills. Students are expected to demonstrate not only news writing, video editing, podcasting, and social media abilities, but also are pushed to carve their own content niche” (Takahashi & Parks, 2018, p. 1).

In their study, Takahashi and Parks used the five competencies of knowledge-based journalism based on Thomas Patterson’s (2013) and Wolfgang Donsbach’s (2014) works (journalistic skills, general knowledge, content specific knowledge, understanding of communication theory, and development of journalistic values) to interpret the data from interviews conducted with
graduate students in journalism. What their findings suggest is consistent with a history of misguided academic culture and visionless practice.

“An important issue we identified in these interviews is the disconnect that students perceive between courses that focus on mass communication research and the applicability of that knowledge to the journalistic work they are interested in pursuing,” they wrote (Takahashi & Parks, 2018, p. 9).

Takahashi and Parks did not focus on finding the root causes of this fundamental disconnect between theory and practice in this study, but it has been researched and exposed in other studies grounded in the history of journalism as a field of study. Patterson’s Informing the News (2013) provided an important, if incomplete, answer: journalism practice and education have focused on acquiring and distributing the “new” and, therefore, missing out on the many important long-term trends and movements.

As an example, Patterson mentions the mass migration of African-Americans from the South to the North. One of the most impactful movements of people in the history of the US was seldom found in headlines of any mainstream newspapers. Most of it was missed because there was no single event of millions of people jumping on buses at the same time. People consistently moved out, or were chased out, of the South throughout many years in small groups from many different locations.

This is also true of many science and environment-based stories. Science is not made of sudden eureka moments as it may seem if our understanding of reality is based solely on headlines. Most actual discoveries are, in fact, long-term processes that may stretch through decades and through many teams of researchers. That’s very different than the impression we get from stories on the most recent study showing results that contradict established scientific knowledge. These novelty studies are rare, usually disproved later, or found to be much less significant than the news coverage on them may lead us to believe. Covering scientific trends or environmental events like a play-by-play sports broadcast is doomed to cause misinformation and, in consequence, distrust of both the scientific method and of the reporting of science and environmental issues.

Nonetheless, trying to force journalists working on deadlines to think of longitudinal analyses of trends by teaching them complex scientific experimentation methods in the same way you teach social and natural scientists is also misguided. Students aiming only at becoming better reporters have very little patience for the idea of learning tedious and long processes in the same way scientists do, and they shouldn’t. They want practical skills that will make them better reporters and give them an advantage in the job market.

Journalism as a field of study has been afflicted by the discussion between theoretical and practical pedagogical approaches since Robert E. Lee introduced journalism as an academic program at Washington College in the 1860s, and it has continued to be a major discussion in the field much after Joseph Pulitzer decided to establish the Columbia School of Journalism with a sizable endowment in 1903 (King & Chapman, 2012). In many ways, most of the problems and disconnection we see in journalism education today was born during the discussion between those who believed journalism could only be learned by experience and those who believed a high level of intellectualism was needed to give the field the proper gravitas and respect. The rift between professional journalists and academics studying communication disciplines resulted in programs that are either too superficial, forcing students to pay for an “education” that was no better than what they would get in the newsroom while getting paid, or too abstract, providing students with intellectual depth that could only be applied in academia, but not in the newsroom. The whole academic history of journalism as a field of study is defined by what academia expects of academics as proper academic production and not what society needs journalists to be able to accomplish in their reporting.
Since faculty members in many journalism programs have been expected to produce academic research for publication in prominent social sciences peer-reviewed journals, very little time was left for journalism faculty to get involved with the actual practice of journalism. The more this rift grew, the more academic associations for journalism faculty became simulacra of other academic associations and more dissociated from professional practice. There are those who are trying to bridge this historical gap, particularly in environmental journalism.

A trend that has helped an increase in professionally oriented and knowledge-based programs has been the ascension of data journalism and a rediscovery of investigative public affairs reporting in recent years. Investigative series, documentaries, and podcasts have been winning multiple prizes and have been widely distributed as consumer products. Both data journalism and investigative reporting require a higher understanding of trends, methods, and systemic thinking that greatly benefit from a deeper perspective provided by theoretical and methodological knowledge. As professional newsrooms become more capable in digging data and looking at trends, new reporters are required to be able to make sense of them. That is a fantastic opportunity to mend the division between purely academic researchers and professionally minded journalism students. In my experience, once students are exposed to this type of reporting, they completely drop their complaints about learning theory and research methods as long as instructors can consistently connect the dots between class content and professional reporting.

It’s easy now to point at organizations such as ProPublica, the Center for Investigative Reporting, and even traditional media behemoths The New York Times and the Washington Post to find examples that excite students. Many medium and small newsrooms have also done amazing investigative work locally and examples of great stories abound. Many top investigative and data reporters and knowledge-based journalists have been winning Pulitzer Prizes, producing engaging stories that are pleasing to read/hear/watch, and more often than not, getting paid better than your run-of-the-mill “just the facts, ma’am” reporter. As Patterson said, people want good journalism and good journalism is usually rewarded in a plethora of different ways. Journalism students see that, and they want to be part of it. It’s purposeful, exciting, and it can pay the bills if you know how to sell it.

As for models to improve the education of journalists, we have plenty from the past and plenty more popping up every day. A long history of Critical Pragmatic Pedagogy has been developed to address many of the issues that journalists, especially the ones working with environmental issues, are facing today, as Miles Horton, founder of the Highlander Folk School in 1932 (currently Highlander Center for Research and Education), asked:

> What role should schools serve in building or reconstructing a society? Perhaps this is best answered by asking what kind of society do we want [sic]. If a democratic society, then the schools must provide models or experiences in decision-making through democratic practices. If a totalitarian society is the answer, then the schools will naturally be structured to create dictatorial practices. Unfortunately, the latter model is used in most American schools, with some far-reaching effects. (Horton, 1989, p. 77)

Carter G. Woodson described the education problem in 1933 when explaining the disconnection between the education they were receiving and the actual experiences of African-Americans after the Civil War:

> Neither this inadequately supported school system nor the struggling higher institutions of a classical order established about the same time, however, connected the
Negroes very closely with life as it was. These institutions were concerned rather with life as they hoped to make it. When the Negro found himself deprived of influence in politics, therefore, and at the same time unprepared to participate in the higher functions in the industrial development which this country began to undergo, it soon became evident to him that he was losing ground in the basic things of life. He was spending his time studying about the things which had been or might be, but he was learning little to help him to do better the tasks at hand.

(Woodson, 2008, p. 13)

John Dewey (1916) identified the same disconnection process a few years earlier when he explained, and challenged, the long history of the idea that knowledge and experience were distinct and that the first held a hierarchical superiority over the latter. Dewey, then, argued that scientific experimentation and the need for empirical evidence to produce knowledge required that notion to be subverted. Moreover, although Walter Lippman is seen as the main thinker of journalism at the time, Lippman was usually against the idea of a journalism that worked to sustain Democracy, while Dewey had produced a much more comprehensive and applicable body of work relating journalism and democratic processes, eerily predicting our current situation, but also providing practical answers to it (Dewey, 1954).

All this theoretical and historical discussion is just to say that the future of environmental journalism lies not in either a highly intellectualized elite of social-scientist journalists armed with the latest army of drones carrying VR cameras nor in a mob of parrots retweeting quotes for impact. The future of environmental journalism lies where it has always been, on a group of well-educated and well-prepared professionals who can both comprehend complex, intertwined, and protracted trends in science, politics, economics, and social movements, and also understand the individual experiences of local people in their own context through their own eyes. After all, we may cover plants, rocks, factories, and systems, but in the end, we are always telling those stories to individuals who can, should, and will make decisions about what those topics mean to their own lives and livelihoods.

**A view for the future: knowledge, collaboration, community-based ethics, and global perspective**

“Developing a conversational journalism requires investing in educated reporters and editors, giving them time and opportunities to bring citizens into the conversation, and sponsoring innovative programs that help build a community which can act reasonably on issues and ideas” (Anderson, Dardenne, & Killenberg, 1994).

The future of environmental journalism depends on journalists who are properly trained to deal with all complexities of a career in environmental journalism and capable of creating a financially sustainable journalism ecosystem.

In the last decades, our profession saw full teams of journalists, each of them a specialist with a well-defined production role, be reduced to individual backpack (one person does it all) and then pocket (one person does it all with a smartphone) journalists. We also saw an increase in the time spent teaching journalism students specific technical skills and a decrease in teaching the same student a balanced diet of actual knowledge about the world.

The better view of the future for environmental journalism is directly related to a new understanding of both journalism practice and journalism education, not in conflict with each other but in collaboration with each other. One consistent beacon of hope for many journalists has been professional associations. A great number of these associations have taken the
responsibility of providing the type of complete, complex, practical, and useful education that has been missing from traditional academic programs and underfunded newsrooms. Many of them have developed full training programs in multiple areas, added a number of workshops during their meetings and throughout the year, and developed multiple resources, including databases, in-depth reports, textbooks, and well-developed tip sheets on multiple subjects. A few academic associations have been offering more practical workshops and resources for educators and trying to do a better job in bridging research and practice. The more both professionals and academics push for more collaboration, the better for both. The clear results would be more access to practical and applied research, more efficiency and efficacy in newsrooms, more useful in-depth reporting, improved financial and management tools, and, above all, better-educated journalists in all types of roles.

Great examples can be found in many organizations, such as the National Association of Science Writers (NASW), the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ), Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE), and the National Association of Health Care Journalists (NAHCJ). All of them offer a plethora of courses, workshops, field experiences, and databases. In my own case, I can attest that I can only do what I do with NNB because of what I have learned from my mentors, peers, and colleagues at SEJ. My complex past gave me a library of references, but it was after attending my first SEJ conference in Roanoke, Virginia, that I finally saw how to translate my academic knowledge to my journalistic practice. To say it was a life-changing experience may be a cliche, but it affected me so much that I immediately changed the way I was teaching my Writing for the Mass Media and Introduction to News Writing courses at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where I was getting my PhD. Working with a colleague, Amanda Womac, we organized the Writing Green environmental journalism conference in 2009, which I also used as a hands-on assignment for my students.

So, if many academic programs are outdated and hardly useful for journalism education, and professional associations are taking the load of educating future journalists, why would anyone pay a fortune to get an undergraduate, or even a graduate, degree in journalism? Isn’t it much cheaper and useful to just join a couple of organizations and go from there? The truth is, at this moment and in many cases, yes. Yes, it is probably cheaper, more practical, and a smarter use of anyone’s time and resources to invest in a series of hands-on learning experiences, such as the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources fellowships, than it is to get a degree in journalism. Not always, but maybe even in the great majority of cases. I mean, journalists can even get paid to go on some of these amazing experiences. Of course, the new journalist would need some guidance, but many of these organizations also offer mentorship programs.

Let’s be clear, I am not saying that there is no value in formal education. That would be somewhat hypocritical coming from me as I have been in either a student or a teacher role in formal education institutions for more than forty years now. What I am saying is that many formal journalism programs have a lot of catching up to do to become a beneficial choice in a journalist’s career. If all a program offers is basic journalism skills and techniques or purely academicism and abstract concepts, then I would recommend a future journalist to skip all the money and either pick another major and/or go knock on the door of your local community news organization and spend the first four years applying to fellowships and free online courses. Add to the mix a healthy diet of reports, podcasts, and newsletters from ProPublica, Harvard’s Nieman Reports and Journalist’s Resources, Columbia Journalism Review, IRE, On the Media, Media Matters, etc., and you will probably end up better educated and with much less debt to repay at the end.

However, there are good environmental journalism and comprehensive journalism programs available that are certainly worth your money. They are directly connected to a number of professional publications, offer specific hands-on classes that allow students to work as professional
journalists, have science and other environment-related fields of study, not as other majors or minors, but built in the journalism curriculum, have links to professional journalism associations, and much more. Above all, they have a host of instructors who are well educated, experienced, and view their jobs as helping you, not generically but particularly, to become the best journalist you can be.

References


