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The magazine of
the Mizzou Alumni Association

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Building journalism's future

Looking ahead, MU's journalism dean sees technology and struggle.

As the School of Journalism anticipates its centennial in 2008, its future looks bright with a new building, new programs and updated curricula. But the field of public affairs journalism itself has hit on hard times.

dean mills
Dean Mills

Even esteemed newspapers such as The Wall Street Journal are facing dwindling audiences and scrambling to remain profitable. Newsroom staffs are shrinking. Many citizens no longer believe in the value of journalism. What does all this mean for the future of journalism, and how will the J-School work toward solutions? An interview with Dean Mills, dean of journalism, takes a look.

The age of ruthless technology

“New technologies are completely obliterating the old one-way model in which authoritative journalists talked to the masses,” Mills says. Audiences for network TV news shows are predominantly in the 55–70 age range, a demographic trend that holds little hope for the future. Instead, he says, ordinary citizens are taking over some of the functions of journalists and demanding journalism that is delivered on their time and their terms. These are earth-shaking changes from when the school was founded in the pre-radio, pre-TV, pre-computer days of 1908.

Young readers are deserting newspapers in droves for the Web, Mills says.

“It’s pretty clear that people under 30 find the Web more engaging, efficient, interactive and more to their liking in the amount of time they spend and the content they select.” On one hand, that’s capitalism at work, and the Web is winning. The problem is that most Web services that people get free are what Mills calls parasitic. “They make news free to consumers because they get news free or cheap, unlike the Associated Press, New York Times or National Public Radio, which have to pay lots of money to get it.”

If parasitic isn’t bad enough, Mills describes the Web as a ruthless technology. It is the users who are ruthless, as they pick and choose what they want to read from a Web-wide world of

possibility. That makes it easy to say no to important stories for unimportant reasons. For instance, people might reject a big story simply because its accompanying visual isn't eye-catching. In contrast, Mills says, TV viewers see a lot of boring pictures on news broadcasts, such as the talking heads of anchors, but viewers must stay tuned if they want the news.

At some point, the problems boil down to money. Nobody yet knows what kind of business model will support the core of old-style journalism — investigative and public affairs reporting — that helps keep democracies alive.

If you can't beat 'em ...

The upheaval has prompted the J-School to update its curriculum for the 21st century. It's the same sort of work they did in the 1930s when radio was new and in the 1950s when TV was added to the media mix.

Predictably, the new curriculum will incorporate substantially more training in technology. This includes a convergence journalism program, where students become generalists as they learn to use print, digital, video and broadcast to create a single product.

The new curriculum also will push the famously hands-on Missouri method of journalism education even further by decreasing the time students spend sitting in lectures and increasing the time they spend practicing journalism with faculty as coaches.

Talk and tech may save the day

"But now things are moving so fast that it's not just a matter of changing the curriculum," Mills says. "We have to deal directly with changes in the environment." That's why in 2004 the school founded the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute, which is scheduled by 2008 to occupy three buildings — Walter Williams Hall, the former Sociology Building and a new structure linking them.

The institute, an idea factory for creating a new brand of 21st century journalism, doesn't fit the J-School's traditional mold of programs that educate students. In fact, Mills calls it a dramatic departure and the first of its kind for any journalism school. One of its missions is to reconnect journalists and citizens and get them working toward good journalism. The other is to re-invent the field by using technology innovatively.

"The idea for the institute comes from the conviction that there is a rupture between citizens and journalists," Mills says. "The result has been that we have core functions of democracy — dissemination of information, stimulation of debate — that are no longer respected by many citizens. You don't have to go too far back in history to find the time when journalists were seen as the good guys. I think that's no longer true."

For starters, the institute's staff will work hard to reintroduce citizens and journalists alike to the First Amendment, which protects the right to free speech and makes the free press possible. Mills plans meetings on campus and all over the country to get citizens talking about how journalism does or doesn't serve them and how to reform it.

To pursue the technology mission, a Journalism Futures Lab in the new addition will be a place where journalists, students and visiting professionals invent the future of journalism, Mills says.

“Although they are disruptive and although they have a major impact, the new technologies are, after all, only gadgets. Humans have always adjusted to gadgets.” He cites journeyman reporters for the Gannett newspapers chain who have rejuvenated their careers by taking three-day workshops to learn how to create video stories for their papers’ Web sites.

Closer to home, Roger Fidler, director of digital publishing at the Reynolds institute, is developing a new way to put a nearly unlimited number of newspapers and magazines into a digital “reader” the size of a magazine page. Mills is convinced that this portable device will become standard equipment to replace magazines when its price comes down to \$200 from its current \$800.

Fidler is working out the software and procedures that would make the readers viable devices for journalism. He also is researching ways in which the digital world opens options for advertising. For instance, in Fidler’s digital newspaper, eMprint, readers could potentially click on a restaurant ad to view the menu, then click on an individual dish to learn about calorie content and more. The sales possibilities grow with each succeeding click.

Is there hope for journalism?




Despite all the gloom and doom, Mills holds out a measured hope.

“Sure, journalism is going to be OK, but OK comes in degrees,” he says. Soon, there may remain only a handful of serious news outlets, and they may no longer hold a mass audience that consumes the day’s events and the advertising that pays for it. “That part is genuinely scary,” he says.

“But I’m confident that at least the slivers of audiences will be interested enough and will need good journalism, and I have no doubt whatsoever that there will be journalists who want to deliver it. We just have to figure out how to finance it in this new environment.”

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Last updated: Feb. 15, 2013