

Keynote

Mike Hoyt (editor-in-chief *Columbia Journalism Review*)

10th anniversary of *Message*

Thank you very much. I am very happy to be here. Thank you to MESSAGE magazine and its partners for inviting me, and to all of you for hearing me out.

Part of what I was asked to talk about today was about the impact of journalism reporting and journalism criticism, from the perspective of the United States and the perspective of my own magazine and Web site, the Columbia Journalism Review.

One way we try for impact is by trying to get our material widely read. So one small of my job is to send out mass e-mails to lists we have compiled of people who we hope will be interested in various aspects of our work. We have several lists—a list for journalism teachers, a science list, a politics and policy list, and so forth.

As it happens, our list for CJR's business and finance desk, which we call The Audit, is extensive and it includes a number of European reporters, some of them from Germany. Maybe some of you get it.

I often get back notes from the people on the list. Though I cannot read any German clearly most of these notes say "I am on Vacation," or "I am Out of the Office" and so forth.

A few weeks after accepting the invitation from MESSAGE to give this speech, I got back what looked like an e-mail that seemed to say more than that. It had 22 words—long German words—and these words included *Vielen Dank*, which I am pretty sure means Thank you very much. And I thought: Great! Some friendly German soul is thanking us for our insights and analysis.

I have a student at the journalism school named Danielle, who speaks fluent German—and who actually went to Leipzig University—and who is a very *good* student, by the way. So I sent it to her. She sent back a translation. The note, it turns out, said: "Please delete our data from your distribution list. Thank you very much"

I thought, Oh, oh. This could be a tough audience.

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In truth, I am delighted to talk to you. After all, we are in the same business, and, I expect, we share the same mission.

I was asked to talk about some of the questions you are addressing in this conference, which in many ways boil down to a set of central questions about that mission:

- What do we, as media reporters and media critics, contribute to the journalism community, especially now, since that journalism community is threatened by economic and technological upheaval.
- What does media criticism contribute to society as whole? Do we make a difference?

Or put more simply:

What is the impact of our work, and how do we increase that impact?

We hear this question about impact more and more lately at my magazine. And we hear it most often from our funders. The *Columbia Journalism Review* has a business model that includes selling subscriptions and selling advertising. But a large part of our business model is philanthropy. Basically, we ask foundations and rich people for money to pursue our mission.

And more and more lately, those funders ask us variations on this theme: “Your mission is to improve journalism for the good of democracy and society. Show us some those improvements. Prove your impact.”

We get somewhat frustrated with the question. We can assemble all sorts of document—showing that the best of our stories are being quoted and discussed, that they are linked all around the Internet, that readers come to our site and discuss them, that journalism teachers sometimes incorporate them into their curriculums, that radio and television programs call us for our thoughts about them, that they occasionally win awards—and so forth. We can show that we are part of the larger conversation about journalism.

But what people then *take* from those conversations and convert into better journalism is difficult to measure.

Oh, yes, we *do* occasionally get thank you letters from working journalists that say that our work helped make *their* work better. We are grateful for those.

But these are fairly rare.

Please don't tell anyone—and I know this is shocking—but American journalists can be thin-skinned. They can have sensitive egos. I am sure that is not the case over here in Europe. But in America many journalists don't relish criticism and can be slow to give credit when a critic hits the nail right on the head.

We don't have a big collection of letters saying

DEAR EDITOR. JUST TODAY, THE CRUCIAL THIRD PARAGRAPH OF MY STORY WAS GREATLY IMPROVED THROUGH THE INSIGHT I GAINED FROM YOUR WORK. YOU HAVE MADE MY REPORTING SO MUCH MORE NUANCED AND DEEP. MANY THANKS.

Maybe over here you get a lot of letters like that. We don't.

Scientifically proving impact is a challenge. I believe in God and I believe in the impact of media criticism, and I find both to be somewhat elusive.

And, you know what? I think that is all right. If it is partly a matter of faith, I'm OK with that.

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Of course, I do believe—totally—that high-quality media reporting and media criticism can make a great difference—both to journalism and to the societies that it serves. I think it is one of the most important kinds of journalism that anyone can do. I also think that doing it well is crucial—now more than ever.

I notice in the correspondence that MESSAGE magazine sent to me, that the word used was always “media reporting,” rather than “media criticism.” I don't know if that is just a translation factor, or if a distinction was being made between the two.

I would like to say at the outset that we need both.

We need deep reporting about the press; it is through reporting on particular circumstances and situations, of course, that we gain insights about the direction and the performance of the press.

We especially need reporting now about the question of journalistic survival. We are entering an age in which it is unclear how the economics will work, and we can afford the kind of newsrooms that have traditionally done the serious reporting a society needs in order to function.

An American media writer recently used this metaphor: It is, he said, as if journalism is a tribe whose traditional valley can no longer sustain it. Journalism must find a new valley where it can sustain itself, and migrate to that valley.

We who are in the business of media reporting must act as scouts for that migration—finding new ideas, reporting on experiments that work, or don't work and searching for new opportunities, whether these are innovations, new ways of charging for content, or new ideas about government policies that might help the situation. We need to bring these findings back to the tribe for discussion. That takes deep reporting.

But in order to have a real impact, I believe we must also offer a high level of journalism criticism as well. As critics, we can:

- Assess the performance of the journalism on the stories that matter. We can critique particular stories, particular news outlets, or whole sectors of the press.
- As journalism goes through a wrenching period of change and experimentation, we can critique those experiments—which ones are valuable? Which ones are not?
- As journalism evolves in a digital age, its traditions and practices, and even its standards, are changing. Which of those traditions and standards should rightly be tossed away? Which should evolve? Which should never be diminished? Just for one example—speed vs. quality. The digital age demands greater and greater speed. What is being lost? We can advance the discussion on all of these things.

We're in the kind of fast-moving period in which such decisions will shape the future for decades. And thus, this is a period in which our work can be most helpful, and also can have maximum leverage.

The best work, I think, the kind that has the most leverage, the most impact, is that which *combines* media reporting and media criticism. The kind of work in which an intelligent and empathetic critique is built on a foundation of deep reporting.

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Let me back up a minute and give you a brief history of our publication and the thinking behind it, and how that thinking evolved. Next year, 2011, will be our 50th year. I read that the University of Leipzig is preparing for its 600th anniversary, so I feel like a youngster here.

Columbia Journalism Review was founded back in 1961 when a kind of fresh breeze was blowing and people started realizing that the news they read and saw didn't just happen as a natural phenomenon—like the tides or the seasons—but that human beings made choices, good or bad. And that those humans were sometimes hardworking and curious, sometimes lazy and smug.

A group of professors at the Columbia Journalism School explained the underlying reason for this mission this way in the first issue—Fall 1961:

“...There exists, in and out of the profession, a widespread uneasiness about the state of journalism. The Review shares this uneasiness, not over any supposed deterioration, but **over the probability that journalism of all types is not yet a match for the complications of our age**. It believes that the urgent arguments for a critical journal far outweigh the hazards.”

I love that formulation—*not yet a match for the complications of our age*. It is very positive way of putting it. In other words, they thought that journalism had not yet risen to its full stature, and they were here to help.

And of course, if they thought their age was complicated, they should see ours.

These journalism professors wanted a magazine of ideas that cared about journalism not for its own sake—or cared about journalists not for *their* own sake—but for the sake of the democracy they served.

So how would they do it? The editors went on to say that this new magazine had a fairly simple job: You try to improve journalism by stimulating a conversation about its many challenges. You do that with high quality reporting and criticism.

But: How different editors interpreted that mission over the years made a big difference in the kind of journalism criticism it produced. And, I'd argue, on its impact.

Over those fifty years the magazine had eight editors. I worked under four of them, and each had somewhat different visions.

One of them in particular, in my opinion, took our magazine down what I consider wrong track. He made it more of a slick trade magazine than a journal of ideas. What I mean by that is, he focused inward, on the industry and the business—its economic health, its success, its glories and failures and controversies, its morals and standards. All of that is fine subject matter. Yet to me, the magazine in this period felt to me sealed off from the society that journalism is supposed to serve,

In his first issue he featured a pair of profiles:

- * Tom Brokaw, then the pre-eminent anchor man for NBC Nightly News
- * Marjorie Scardino, an up and coming media manager. The Economist Group.

They were OK, I guess. In both cases, you learned about the subjects of the profile and how they climbed up the ladder, and what they were doing and what they thought. But, in my memory anyway, the profiles showed little curiosity about the *effect* of the subject's work, little healthy criticism of its ambition or its value. They seemed celebratory. They did not tell a larger story about the challenges of the times, which is what I most articles of media criticism—should do.

Another example: Some months later under this editor we ran an issue whose cover illustration was a huge fat arrow pointing upward. (Perhaps our ugliest cover!). The headline:

JOURNALISTS' PAY IS GOING UP.

It was chock full of statistics about how reporters and editors were getting more money for their work, sector by sector. I am not saying this is insignificant or that it was not informative. We all like to get paid. But what was missing were good questions about what this meant:

Journalists' pay is going up...Does this mean that journalism companies have more resources now and command better workers and demand better work? Is there evidence of that? Are there any dangers here, as journalists move steadily away from the working class and into the upper class—what connections and empathies and understandings are we leaving behind? Questions like that.

As a reader, you would have had to supply your own, because the story did ask any. It was too much of a trade magazine, in my view, too insular.

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Having given you a couple of examples of where my magazine went off track, please allow me to give you a couple of examples in which I think we did right, both from this past year, and where I believe we had some impact.

As you know, the United States just went through a huge debate about reforming our health care system. It was a very complicated problem, and a very

complicated debate, made more difficult for people to understand by a lot of misinformation. It was a real test for the American press.

To cover this, we hired a woman named Trudy Lieberman. To start with, Trudy has a great deal of expertise about the health care system, because she covered it for years, many of them for a respected U.S. magazine called Consumer Reports.

We featured Trudy's work exclusively on the Web site. She reasoned that the coverage of health care was too big and complex a subject to do in long takeouts. She thought nobody would read those. She instead critiqued the coverage of the health care reform debate in short sharp bursts.

Over and over and over again, her stories prodded the press to dig deeper, to ask more questions, to get more specific, to get off the politics and onto the substance so that people would have a fighting chance of understanding the debate. She did this by focusing on specifics. She praised some stories generously; she was quite tough on others—usually by showing what was missing, what questions had not been asked. We ran a series of stories by her that we called “The Devil in the Details,” for example, that focused relentlessly on specifics about reform that the press had failed to clarify. She pushed the press to focus more clearly on the money behind the scenes, the contributors who were influencing the politicians. She regularly interviewed voices in the debate that she thought were getting short shrift in the debate.

But mostly, she was her own expert. And she was tough. When an American political magazine, *The New Republic*, argued that the press coverage of the health care debate in America was an example of the best coverage of any major issue in recent history, she wrote that *The New Republic* seemed to be located on the planet Mars.

Through this steady punching away at the story, she slowly built an audience. Those letters that I mentioned that we rarely get? From journalists thanking us for our work? We did get them in Trudy's case, from reporters, editors, and editorial writers. Some thanked her in writing, which, as we have discussed, is a rare and wonderful event.

She was noticed by other media, interviewed by dozens of radio stations and some television as well. She appeared on dozens of panels. Her stories got passed around on various lists and among people who had never heard of the *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Perhaps most important, we began to get a large number of e-mails comments from ordinary people, who repeatedly told us they were appreciative of the clarity Trudy brought to a complex issue, through her press criticism. One of them called her a national treasure. Which she was quite happy about.

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The other story I want to mention to you took a different approach. Instead of the slow build approach, this one was a Big Bang, a single article in our July 2009 issue.

The article was about another huge news event—the great economic meltdown, and the question of whether the press had given us warning of what was happening to undermine the economy.

The question had come up, of course, after the crash in 2007—where was the press? A surprising number of business reporters began to argue in public that the press had done its job, that it had provided fair warning of the impending disaster, and that, unfortunately, no one had paid adequate attention. In other words, it was the people's fault. *You didn't listen to us.*

We suspected this was not the case. To find out, we did what reporters can do: we reported.

Our business editor, Dean Starkman, with two assistants, read some 2,000 stories from the elite business press—from 2003 through 2007—and carefully analyzed and categorized them. And with that deep base of reporting, Dean was able to build a powerful critique.

What he found was that—while the press had warned its readers about the housing bubble, and how that bubble might eventually pop, such warnings had been all but drowned out by celebratory profiles of leaders in the lending and banking sector.

And most important, the press had done almost *no* investigations during that period of the partnership between the selling of these bad debts all around the world and the predatory home lending that created those toxic debts. This predatory lending had ruined thousands of people and thousands of neighborhoods, and it was done in partnership with the most powerful economic forces in America. And there had been almost no investigations of that partnership.

A few exceptions—in the *Los Angeles Times*, for example—only proved the rule. In one case, a reporter who was ferocious about the rise of predatory lending was treated more or less as a pariah, and pushed out of his newspaper, The Wall Street Journal.

Dean's story made a big impression in the business press. Not everyone in the business press liked it, of course, but they had trouble ignoring it. He was invited

to speak about it at journalistic events. But it resonated beyond newsrooms—into blogs that cover politics and policy and economics.

And it broke into academic circles. The story has been incorporated into coursework in some college courses at major universities and into a book about the crisis. And it has made its way into the political conversation: Last month in fact, Phil Angelides—the man who is leading the U.S. government’s investigation into the economic crisis—publicly praised the article, as he was questioning witnesses in a hearing. So we know he read it.

We feel the story changed the conversation about the performance of the business press before the crisis. It elevated the debate about it, from a knee-jerk defensive posture to, at least in some newsrooms, “How can we do better next time?” Again, that is hard to scientifically prove, but we believe it.

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One more example:

While in both those cases we were critical of the performance of the press, that is not always the case. And we think it is important to explain and encourage good journalism.

In America, many acknowledge that the Washington press core did a poor job of challenging the facts behind the Bush administration’s rationale for the war in Iraq.

But not enough, in our view, was written about the reporters who covered that war, from the U.S. and the world. These people took great risks to bear witness to history.

What we did: We hired three reporters with experience covering conflicts. One in London, one in Lebanon, and one in the U.S. We asked them to catch war reporters on their time off from Iraq—because the work was so intense, they took fairly frequent breaks—and simply interview them about their experience in Iraq—what they did and saw in their time there.

We took transcripts of those interviews—44 of them—and created an oral history, organized by themes and roughly chronological, which we ran in a special issue of the magazine. We let the reporters tell the story in their own words—about the challenges of this kind of work, about seeing one thing and hearing another from political officials, about the risks they took and the lessons they learned.

We thought it was illuminating, and so did others. A publisher asked us to extend the oral history, which we did, and put it into a book that I am glad to report made its way into more readers’ hands, and into a few journalism schools.

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I can't say that all our stories have impact. Some have none. But it's worth thinking about what does give the best press criticism its impact.

* One is authority. In our line of work, sometimes we simply critique a work or works of journalism without a lot of reporting. On the other hand, sometimes we simply report, without much of a critique.

Again, I think the best of our work is when we do both—when an honest and sophisticated critique is informed by good reporting.

These two reporters I mentioned—Trudy and Dean—thanks to their knowledge of the subject matter and their deep reporting—they became their own experts. Thus their work had a level of authority that was hard to ignore.

* Another ally of impact, I think, is a positive attitude. I don't know if the word "snark" translates well into German. In America it means writing with sarcasm, lots of put-downs, and a sense of superiority to the subject. I think that makes some writers feel smart, but it diminishes their impact.

* And an independent point of view is helpful.

To explain that: We try to approach journalism criticism with one foot inside the business and one foot out.

With the foot that is inside, we can *empathize* with the members of the press. We are journalists too. We understand that *good* journalism is very difficult to do. We respect that.

With the foot that is outside the business, however, we can empathize with the readers and the viewers. Are they getting what they *deserve*? And are they getting the world explained in terms they can understand?

In the business press, for example, there is such a trend toward specialization and oversophistication and access journalism—interviews with top business insiders—that many readers don't feel at home in the space. It can almost feel as if elites were merely talking to each other rather than reporters talking to the readers, the people. That's not acceptable.

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I take the bus and the subway to work in the morning in New York, and the sights at the arrival to the city never cease to amaze me. The bus circles down toward a tunnel under the river, with hundreds of other buses that are full of thousands of other people.

We flow into this huge station and file our way to the underground subways and somehow we all get to our offices and cubicles, our factories and work stations. And somehow we all help this city and this nation and this great world to function.

I feel the same thing when I flew into a place like Berlin, and ride your wonderful high-speed trains and see so many different kinds of people making a place like Germany function.

And you think, how does this all work?

And I know it works in part because we can communicate with each other through the press. And so it is important that the press be kept in good working order.

A great democracy needs great journalism like lungs need fresh air. And great journalism needs great journalism *criticism* to encourage and sustain it.

We media critics are all in the business of helping journalism circulate the intellectual air that the world needs in order to breathe. It has to have that air. So we must constantly push journalism, as the founders of my magazine put it fifty years ago, to “match the complications of the age.”

Everything about journalism is changing—in some ways for the better, in some for the worse, and in many, many ways that can’t yet be evaluated. There are a million questions to explore and decisions to make.

Those decisions will be based on a big ongoing conversation that all of us—as journalism critics—have a chance to influence.

We can do that if we do our work well. That is our impact. Even though it can be hard to measure.

Thank you.