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Malcolm MacLean, Jr.:

Ahead of His Time and Ahead of Our Time

Will Norton, Jr.

In a recent essay Stephen Reese (1999, 70), chair of the Department of Journalism at the University of Texas, assessed the media today and analyzed the condition of journalism education and concluded that foundations and media corporations are having more influence on journalism programs than at any time in the history of journalism education. As I read the essay by Reese, I noted many observations that Malcolm MacLean made three decades ago, but nowhere was MacLean cited. In fact, I do not believe Reese could have described the influence of media as a new problem if he had known about the influence of media on the program at the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa. For example, Reese (1999, 71) asserts that “criticism of journalism education is tied to the crisis of legitimacy within journalism itself.” The media were doing well during the 1970s when the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa faced remarkable challenges.

The tone of the essay Reese wrote is not as respectful of the role of media in our society as are the writings of MacLean. I believe MacLean’s radical theories on learning and severe criticism of media derived from his deep appreciation of the role of media and of education in our society. I concluded that Reese’s critique of corporations and foundations was because of his sense that the academic world is under siege and not strong enough to resist. In contrast, MacLean proposed changes in the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa because he wanted to improve media, not allow it to continue to decline. Moreover, he acted out of great respect for what education can do in our society. The changes he administered were discussed and approved by the faculty with little fear about how media would respond. Indeed, MacLean often was astonished at how little corporate leaders knew about media and education, particularly journalism education.

I became acquainted with the radical restructuring of the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa when I enrolled in the Ph.D. program during the fall of 1971. My adviser was Bill Zima, a former editorial writer for the *Des Moines Register*. Won Chang, another Ph.D. student, also was Zima’s advisee. Chang was in his second year at Iowa, and he knew MacLean well. He often asked me to join him on weekend visits to MacLean’s home during the 1971-1972 academic year.

Chang understood MacLean’s theory intimately and helped me collect copies of nearly all of MacLean’s articles and speeches. In the process, I read and re-read MacLean’s thoughts, trying to relate his theory to my world and life view. I quickly realized the breadth of MacLean’s reading, the depth of his thought, and the clarity of his speech.

Now, more than a quarter of a century later, as I have reread many of MacLean's speeches and articles, I am convinced that much of what he articulated would be ahead of our day, just as it was ahead of his day.

In these twenty-five years, I have worked as an instructor in the School of Journalism at the University of Iowa, a progressive journalism program, while having a leadership position at the Daily Iowan. I also have worked at quite traditional programs, the Department of Journalism at the University of Mississippi and the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska.

My experience at these universities and in the media has convinced me that MacLean's views are even more relevant now than they were when he asserted them. Today MacLean's critique is significant because of the increased visibility of the media and other institutions in our society. Today his critique is more important because of the media's failure to fulfill their roles, according to the American people.

Indeed, the American people seem to be revulsed by the media. They are affirming MacLean's assertion more than twenty-five years ago that responsible behavior comes from "knowledge of and sensitivity to the consequences" of decisions. Even many journalists and former journalists are appalled by the state of journalism today. Such knowledge and sensitivity seem to be missing too often in our media and in our society. Robert Haiman (1998), former editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*, called for journalists to reverse current trends. I doubt that he would have found it necessary to write a similar article during the early 1970s when MacLean was assessing the weaknesses of media in our society.

Reporters and editors are our representatives. However, as Ralph Nader pointed out many years ago, they are not elected and cannot be recalled, and herein lies the rub. They have information that we make use of to shape our attitudes and decisions. They work for institutions that provide information to mass audiences. These institutions have changed along with consumer demands and with technological developments (MacLean 1968, 8).

These changes are complicated by the fact that many reporters and editors face daily decisions for which they may not have been well prepared. They need a broad base in social science. They need to understand fully the critical problems of today. Such background can help them understand the implications of their decisions (MacLean 1968, 11). That understanding will demonstrate responsible behavior. That responsible behavior is the result of knowledge of and sensitivity to the decisions and actions of journalists (MacLean 1968, 17).

Clearly, MacLean (1967c, 1) understood that journalists significantly affect our well-being by helping us to know our world. When MacLean was expressing this point of view, most Americans appreciated the media. They expressed approval of the performances of journalists. However, MacLean was not as complimentary. He felt the media were not doing a good job.

Today a variety of polls show that most Americans agree with his assessment. The public rates media quite unfavorably. Clearly, the media should not have reacted so negatively to MacLean. They should have listened and carefully considered his critique.

After some evaluation, they might not have adopted MacLean's suggestions. However, by focusing on weaknesses in journalism, media and journalism education would have been working to improve practices that have been on the decline for decades. The result would have been more effective media, more highly regarded journalists in our society.

MacLean's critique extended to journalism education. He believed that most journalism programs were merely trying to teach practices the media were following. As a result, he thought journalism education was perpetuating skills and activities that were not serving society well (MacLean 1967c, 2). He thought graduates of journalism programs were defining their roles too narrowly (MacLean 1967b, 3):

We spend much too much time in trying to teach our undergraduates mechanical matters such as spelling and style, which might be better handled by self-instructional approaches. We don't have them read or write, especially read, nearly enough. We tend to limit their writing to the amount we can correct, as though they could learn nothing from writing that is not corrected by a teacher. Though we pay lip service to the need for broad, liberalizing influences, we often seem to act as though the most important purpose of a student's journalism education is to please his boss on his first job. Our students learn today's formulas rather than the kind of communication theories which might bridge them into the future. (MacLean 1967c, 2)

It is incredible to me, a traditional administrator at a traditional college, how many editors and or publishers I hear decrying the poor quality of graduates today. They say very similar things to what MacLean said more than twenty-five years ago. Many are calling for journalism education reform. Indeed, today they might have accepted the radical reshaping of journalism education for which he called and to which he gave his life.

MacLean (1967c, 9) articulated three principles to follow in preparing media professionals: "(1) develop students' knowledge and abilities through (2) personal experimentation and discovery in tasks which (3) provide a high degree of involvement." Those principles are still vital, but they are not practiced commonly in journalism education.

Let me briefly note several ideal characteristics of journalism education that MacLean (1966) described and that we need desperately today:

- To educate persons who accurately will inform members of our society about matters of concern to them, as citizens in a democratic society.
- To teach specific topics or skills in context, i.e., in a broader fundamental field of knowledge. This will enable students to generalize from things they meet now to those they meet later.
- To develop self-instructional approaches to learning grammar, spelling and punctuation.
- To avoid "the traps of our traditional courses and cumcular structures and our foggy dichotomies: skills versus broad background, humanities versus applied, quantitative versus qualitative, you name it." [MacLean realized the futility of such distinctions.]
- To require students to choose the special fields they wish to go into late in their university work rather than early. [MacLean realized that journalism graduates move about considerably among fields. He was trying to facilitate preparation for such mobility.]

For MacLean (1972, 5), learning rested on metaphorical process: "We move from not knowing something to knowing it, or knowing it in one way to knowing it in another way by metaphorical processes. The unfamiliar becomes familiar through our ability to use and understand appropriate metaphors." Thus, he urged journalism educators to make more use of metaphorical processes. He

urged journalism educators to be more creative and flexible in creating a learning environment. He criticized the use of rote memory and instruction that directed students in a follow-the-numbers fashion (MacLean 1967, 2).

Although MacLean was viewed as being antimedia and against practical instruction in journalism, he actually was an advocate for the media and the practice of journalism. As a result, he wanted the media to take more responsibility for journalistic apprenticeships (MacLean 1972, 16). He took the long-term view, but his was a time when journalism was riding high, when most could be content in taking the short-term view.

Moreover, he wanted journalism education to be flexible. He railed against the practices that continue to this day:

... too much concern for fact storage, too little for processes of learning, too little for contemplating purposes, too little for basic philosophical matters, too little for exercising our precious intellects. (MacLean 1967c, 3)

The leading professionals I talk to do not want students trained for journalism. They want imaginative, aggressive problem solvers.

He called for journalists with broad backgrounds who were devoted to scholarship and imagination. He wanted the same qualities in journalism educators. "Our present emphasis on number of years experience in the media," he said, "would not produce the kind of journalism graduates that the professions require to meet society's needs" (MacLean 1967c, 2). I find it fascinating that Neale Copple, dean of the College of Journalism at the University of Nebraska during the 1980s, did not hire only journalists with significant media experience. He employed persons with a diversity of backgrounds and experience. He emphasized the need to hire persons with a rich vision of what a graduate should be. He stressed creativity and practical theory.

In his day MacLean was calling for a journalism education that I hear newspaper and broadcast executives demanding today. To provide that kind of education, he described an education enriched by theory. By this he did not mean theory as opposed to practice. Instead, he meant

... the hows and whys of things. When we make decisions, choose to do or not to do, select this or that alternative, we use theory—that is, we use our understanding of the way things work. Sometimes we do this consciously; most of the time we are quite unaware of our theories or the fact that we are using them. (MacLean 1967a, 2)

MacLean believed that if we understand how and why things work the way they do, then we usually can cope. For MacLean, theories had to be explicit and in a form in which research can test them. For such theory, one must define the decisions one makes, then reflect on one's beliefs and assumptions about those decisions.

In summary, Americans are more critical of reporters and editors today than they were in MacLean's day. They indicate that media do not fulfill the information needs of their communities. Clearly, this means journalism educators must do more than teach what media professionals do. They also must teach what media professionals need to do (MacLean 1970, 3).

Nonetheless, it could be that many journalism and mass communications programs today are not much different from those that MacLean criticized during

the 1950s. Even then, MacLean wrote, "With a few exceptions, the faculty simply didn't have the intellectual power and curiosity. . . . Each faculty member had his teaching assignments. Few seemed to care what the school as a whole was doing in its programs" (MacLean 1971, 8). I have seen many similar programs during the 1990s, and I know many faculty and administrators are focusing on those issues that MacLean was discussing and analyzing during his day.

I will be the president of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications in 2000–2001, and Charles Self, associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Texas A&M, will be president of the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication. We are committed to calling a symposium or conference to reflect on the roles of the media in our society and on creative educational principles for educating professionals in the media. I am confident that MacLean's ideas will be central in that discussion.

Note

I have wondered for many years why Wilbur Schramm changed his views of professional education. As director of the Writing Workshop at the University of Iowa, he had presided over a very hands-on type of curriculum. When he returned to the campus after the war and was made director of the School of Journalism, he developed a Ph.D. curriculum that resided in the social sciences. If he had kept the same type of curriculum as the Writing Workshop curriculum, journalism education today would be more focused on journalism and less on mass communications. Earlier, Willard Bleyer had developed an undergraduate curriculum at the University of Wisconsin that was heavily based in the social sciences. Thus, a dichotomy developed between journalism educators who have been educated with a foundation in the social sciences and journalism practitioners who know one can practice journalism without being educated in the social sciences. I am not sure that this dichotomy can be overcome. MacLean tried to do it by focusing on integrating journalism education from the freshman undergraduate through the Ph.D. graduate. I do not share the same grand undergraduate-through-graduate vision of journalism education that MacLean proposed. My preference is for a mass communications undergraduate major that provides introduction to mass media. Thus, an undergraduate major in mass communications would be similar to a major in communications studies. It would provide information about mass communications and only introductory skills courses. Those who major in mass communications as undergraduates would be required to have a double major, a content area outside of mass communications. Because so many undergraduate students do not go to work for the mass media and because mass media often do not attract graduates of small liberal arts colleges, I believe the skills portion of journalism should be taught at the M.A. level. The instruction should be intense and very accelerated. It should include writing and editing skills for print, video, and audio. Thus, any faculty who teach at the M.A. level would be required to have significant media experience and a Ph.D. They would need to be screened carefully to make certain that they are not merely teaching what media are doing. They also should be teaching what media need to do to improve their performances. The Ph.D. degrees should be in a variety of areas: political science, economics, history, mass communications, English, and so forth.

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