

3. Education and the Survival of Newspapers

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I have been experiencing the lifestyle of university students abroad at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for the first time. I have seen many things that are “old hat” over there but which are still very new in Thailand. Many of those things could be valuable for the education system in Thailand.

I must admit that from the first day that I observed classes at the Department of Life Sciences Communication I was impressed. Even though it was a required course that all students in the department must take, the style and technique of teaching was inspiring.

My Thai journalist colleagues and I were lucky that the day we went to observe was also the first day of class. All the students had been previously assigned to read a local Wisconsin newspaper and to select a news item or column they wanted to discuss.

The first thing that struck me when I walked into the classroom was the level of informality. Students were allowed to select their own seats and arrange themselves as they wanted. That is different from our country where chairs and tables are lined up in rows and the students must sit facing the professor.

At Wisconsin, students could sit wherever they wanted in the room, but when the professor spoke, they had to turn to face him. The students did that automatically anyway because Michael J. Flaherty, the professor teaching the course, was good at eliciting the interest of the students through his teaching style, his voice, and his actions. He walked around the room so he could communicate with all of the students. That made for a lively classroom.

Every time that Michael asked a question, the students responded. They didn't wait for their name to be called or for the teacher to stare at them until they responded. Everyone was eager to express their ideas.

This course focuses on practical applications, but the professor injected theoretical concepts from time to time. He explained and emphasized the importance of the basic principles of mass communication: precise, clear, comprehensible explanations. He used examples from the newspapers that the students had been assigned to read.

Michael said that a good journalist should be able to make an article memorable and interesting to the reader.

Being a good journalist also means working hard. It is necessary to be aware of the importance of what you have seen in a straightforward manner, focusing on the principles of news reporting: who, what, when, where, why, and how. It is necessary to avoid confusing readers.

That means to be a good journalist, it is necessary that you be aware of every word you use.

Then Michael shifted to a news story in the magazine *Isthmus* that he had assigned the students to read. The cover story was “The Future of the Newspaper”. The first issue the professor raised was the current struggle for survival of traditional media, a situation which is making reliable information a scarce commodity.

Discussion of this issue, which is becoming a popular topic on many blogs, includes a level of concern, especially ethical risks. Many blogs, especially those popular with women, housewives, etc., are the target of many companies looking for an avenue to promote their products.

It is certain that when business interests become increasingly involved with either the expanding new media or traditional on-line websites, concerns are raised about content that used to be posted without question.

“In the future, the difference between independent reporting of news and publicity will become increasingly ambiguous” is one of the conclusions of the article. There were many other worrisome examples. (Next time I will provide more information on that.)

From Michael's point of view, those are all problems that challenge the newspaper profession, both in print and on-line. The main thing is to establish a balance between news space and advertising space.

The future of the newspaper is not a definite dead end. Michael and other faculty in the department believe that a creative strategy – “good journalists have specialized skills which meet the needs of the market” – will allow newspapers to survive and to continue indefinitely.