

Gabor practices, teaches reporting the truth

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr.
College Talk

In these days when Watergate is being discussed anew, some journalism professors remember that time as an inspiration for their profession. “I grew up on stories about journalism and civil rights and became fascinated. That was also the Watergate era, which influenced many journalists of my generation, so I was very interested in journalism, although my family, like many families, tried to discourage me. But that’s where the roots of my interest really took hold.”

That is how Professor Andrea Gabor explains how she became interested in journalism. This Chicago native went on to obtain a master’s in journalism from Columbia University and is today a Bloomberg Professor in the Department of Journalism and the Writing Professions in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, CUNY.

Gabor soon became interested in business journalism and went to work for Businessweek, where she covered corporate strategy and technology. One of the first stories she wrote was about General Motors’ CEO, who wanted to replace auto workers with robots. “Around that time, gradually there was the realization that pesky auto workers weren’t really the problem. The problem in Detroit and in the auto industry was American management. So, having backed into business journalism, I ended up covering the workplace and management,” she says.

Gabor decided to dig deeper into issues of management and wrote a book about W. Edwards Deming, one of the most important management thinkers of the 20th Century. He was a scientist who married a scientific approach with a humanistic approach to management. “One of his great insights was that the only way to really improve organizations is by getting knowledge from the grassroots, from the people closest to the process. Management’s job is to make that knowledge actionable. In other words, to find how you train employees to identify problems in the system and then to improve the system.”



Prof. Gabor being interviewed for the radio show “College Talk.”

Photo by Amanda Becker

Something that we all experience is bombardment with surveys by the corporations we do business with. And Gabor says those surveys that are supposed to improve their companies are misleading. “What are those survey questions about? They’re never about the system, they’re never about the process, they’re never about the fact that Verizon doesn’t have DSL lines throughout New York City, that they’re not maintaining their copper cable, that they have terrible service. Those surveys are always about the poor people on the other end of the phone who’re trying their best to meet your needs, but they’re not in charge of the system. The companies aren’t interested in how you really feel about the system as a whole; it’s always about the worker. ‘Let’s rate the worker, let’s beat up on the worker’—that’s all they really care about.”

Gabor has also explored surprising subjects for a business journalist. She wrote a book entitled *Einstein’s Wife* about Albert Einstein’s first wife, Mileva Marić.

“There was a big news story that there had been these passionate love letters between Einstein and his first wife, Mileva. Suddenly people asked, ‘Who was this Mileva?’ She was sort of this forgotten wife, who had been a physicist, a fellow student of Einstein’s. There’s some evidence that she was more than just an intelligent sounding board, but she did not write the theory of relativity. That got me thinking about women in the 20th Century. This was the first generation of women who had the opportunity to have a professional life. At the time, I was newly-married, I had just had my first child. What was that balance like for that first generation of women?”

Gabor is now working on a book that has to do with education reform. “We have escalated the nuclear testing arms race to such an extent in schools that civics is completely neglected, and so we go into the classroom and students very often don’t read the newspaper. They are overwhelmed with what they are hearing on television. They don’t have a clear sense of civics and the role of the First Amendment or even the founding of this country.”

For her, public education is under assault in this country. “What we’ve had is a very business-minded regime arguing that teachers are terrible, public schools are terrible, and imposing these testing regimes. There’s a great deal of pressure to teach to the test, so we are getting bright kids, very often bright young students out of high schools, who haven’t been taught civics, haven’t been encouraged to read the newspaper, haven’t been encouraged to engage in freewheeling conversation, debate about the issues of the day, let alone how they relate to our history,” says Gabor.

The question for her is how to teach at the college level. “One of the things that I argue in journalism classes—and this is a little bit unorthodox for a journalist—is that there really is no such thing as “objective news,” because every journalist filters it through his or her own experience. The job of a journalist is to be fair and to try to get to the truth,” she says.

“What I tell my writing students,” Gabor continues, “is if you approach a story from here at the beginning and you don’t end up over here at the end, you haven’t done your job, because what you learn through really rigorous reporting will inevitably change your view of the story. I think that’s true of academics as well. You have to teach students how to think about this great and rich world of information and literature and history and philosophy out there.”

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