

Mills Teaches the Current State of Journalism

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“I don’t want to say that I was ahead of my time, but my instincts just ran that way. To its credit, City College of New York accommodated me as best it could.” That’s how Professor Joshua Mills explains the way his alma mater allowed him to take a variety of courses outside the usual track of any major. He later was awarded a bachelor’s degree in political science and another in history.

That would not be the only change in career interests for this native of the Bronx. He went on to receive a master’s degree in English from City College. Today he is a professor and chair of the Department of Journalism and the Writing Professions in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College/CUNY.

But how did he end up in journalism? “What I really like about journalism is that it is a real opportunity to learn things that you are curious about. In fact, someone once referred to journalism as ‘applied curiosity.’ I think it’s really a chance to explain to people what’s at stake. Those opportunities continue today, whether we’re talking about education and healthcare or about overhauling the tax system. It’s a real challenge sometimes to engage people and show them what’s at stake for them,” says Mills.

He is a true believer in fact-based news. “Over the years, I have been working with journalism educators, with organizations of professional journalists, and with government officials like the economists at the Federal Reserve to try to develop better metrics and better embed them in stories. Now, of course, with the Internet you can link. So that to me is what is so satisfying.”

Mills has had an impressive experience when it comes to news organizations, from being a freelancer (very common in his profession) to having worked for Bloomberg News, The New York Times, Newsday, the Daily News of New York, and the Associated Press. Thus, he has witnessed a lot of changes in the landscape of reporting the news.

“I think that what we’ve seen is a democratization of the process. The barriers to entry were much higher seventy to eighty years ago. But



Professor Mills with a student, Yulia Rock.

Photo by Gulinoz Javodova

this has also had a negative side as well, which is that you have a lot of people posting and distributing things that aren’t true. Winston Churchill spoke about how messy democracy really is. That’s a good word for thinking about journalism today: it’s very messy, it’s coming at us from all over the place. You don’t always know what the source is or what the motives are. Absorbing it all and sorting through it can be very trying.”

Another big change is what has happened with television. Millennials, for example, claim that they do not even watch TV. Does that mean that TV news will disappear? “I think it will survive because I think there are some news companies and publishing companies that still care about public service. I think the number of companies willing to do it will probably shrink. We even see that now, when radio stations and cable stations that describe themselves as ‘all news’ or ‘all news all the time’ increasingly include sports events and commentary.

They’re backing away from all news. What I would hope—and it’s just a hope—is that young people, particularly our students, will move beyond using Facebook and Twitter for news,” says Mills.

Then the next logical question is: How about print journalism? Will that disappear? “I think there are two answers to that. One, it is already starting to disappear. There are newspapers that were quite important that have gone out of business. The Times Picayune in New Orleans, switched first to weekend only print, and now it’s just a website. I think the strategic thinking at The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal is that you have to do both. They think there will always be a market for print, but not necessarily an everyday market. It is not out of the question that in our lifetime the Times will be a weekend only paper.”

Because of all these changes, it is hard not to think that those who seek a career in journalism will feel the impact. “That’s what we’re seeing

with our students who graduate with journalism degrees: most are looking for jobs, and most of them find a job. It might not be what we think about as traditional journalism, but there are hundreds of websites. Some are specialized by politics, some are specialized by religion, some are specialized by the nature of coverage, whether it’s fashion or sports. But there is still a pretty robust job market out there,” says Mills with great relief.

The other big challenge journalism faces today is in the area of ethics. “I think it’s very damaging when the president and his followers and many elected officials, as soon as they see news they don’t like, label it ‘fake news.’ It undermines people’s trust. I think it’s been hard to date for journalism to find an effective counter to that,” says Mills.

Another challenge we have in today’s society is determining whether something is a really important news story or just a show. Mills has an explanation for the current situation. “One of the very disruptive things that President Trump does is tweeting. Because now journalists get up in the morning and instead of having a meeting and deciding what’s important, they have to respond to a tweet that has been tweeted at 4:30 in the morning and has been retweeted a thousand times. The President has sort of preempted their setting the news agenda, which is something that, for decades, journalists have accused The New York Times of doing, because they said that the NYT decided what’s important and everyone else would follow.”

It certainly looks like the way journalism was portrayed in the movie “All the President’s Men” is gone now, but maybe that’s not entirely a bad thing. “I show that film to my classes every semester, but one thing I note is that scene (and it’s a very realistic scene, based on my experience) where everyone sitting around the table making decisions is a white male. That was the case in the 60s and 70s.”

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