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Communications now a culture war in academia

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Regional

Communications now a culture war in academia

In December 1990, the newspaper Sunday Grit announced that it would close after 108 years of publishing only what it deemed “good” news. This Williamsport, Pa., publication characterized itself for being “The nation’s original good-news newspaper.” Its 25-year old German immigrant founder Dietriock Lamade, liked to call it “the joy-bells of life.” Aimed mostly at rural America, it was supposed to bring joy to its readers in the form of highlighting good news, innocuous comic strips and the like.

As Lamade told his employees in 1900, “Always keep Grit from being pessimistic. Avoid printing those things which distort the minds of readers or make them feel at odds with the world. Avoid showing the wrong side of things, or making people feel discontented. Do nothing that will encourage fear, worry, or temptation. Wherever possible, suggest peace and good will toward men. Give our readers courage and strength for their daily tasks. Put happy thoughts, cheer, and contentment into their hearts.”

A lot of things have changed since then. For one thing, the number of newspapers in this country has declined steeply. According to the website Statista, in 1981 there were more than 1,700 daily newspapers being published in the United States. Today, there are little more than 1,300. Despite the attempts of making them more available online, their numbers keep falling – as do their revenues. According to a study by the Pew Research Center published this year, the revenues from newspapers (in both their printed and online formats) have declined by half between 2008 and 2014. One of the consequenc

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es of these declines has been the decimation in the number of reporters working for those media.

This sad landscape has been the result of many changes in society. Increasingly people tend to read the news online regardless of the source, particularly if they don’t have to pay for it. Also, more and more people like to read or hear news from outlets that conform with their own ideological biases. And, of course, tastes have changed. Superficiality and catchy headlines are now the favorites among a significant sector of the population. News about celebrities dominate, only to be interrupted by stories that feed into our greatest fears, whether they have to do with terrorism, immigration, or contagious diseases. In-depth analyses of complex issues have become less noteworthy to that public.

Higher education is facing many public image problems nationwide. Cost, enrollments, finances, sexual assaults, shootings, leadership failures, and even a justification for its utility are many of the communication challenges that academia is confronting today. All these are becoming part of the negative picture in which the academic world is being portrayed today from people-on-the-street and social media chatting to disparaging mentions in the current presidential campaign.

Unfortunately, the response from colleges and universities to these challenges has not been very

effective. These institutions continue to broadcast headlines that have to do with athletics, major fundraising coups, or other “feel good” stories. They seem to be oblivious to the fact that the bad rap higher education is getting these days can only be confronted with a more in-depth approach to issues that help to educate people.

The other aspect institutions of higher education are not paying attention to is where prospective students and their parents are getting information about a particular college. Glossy brochures and unattractive Web sites no longer satisfy students and their parents. According to a series of articles published in the last few months in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, students who are looking to make a final decision about where to attend school spend more time looking at the social media related to the college they are exploring rather than to the “official” literature.

Because of its culture of insularity, not many in higher education are realizing the serious crisis this change in communication behavior is posing. Increasingly the leadership of colleges and universities are leaning on their marketing staffs to be the conduits of their image, and that is where the first of many cultural clashes are taking place. To begin with, most people with a marketing background are more inclined to take the stance that what they need to do is to “sell” something. However, higher education is not toothpaste or a detergent. It is not even a commodity. It is a unique intellectual enterprise aimed at improving society through better educated and skilled individuals.

Higher education leaders tend to emphasize “feel good” news over substantive stories that convey why we need more and better higher education and why that matters today more than ever. To that end we need to emphasize the contributions colleges and universities have made in the past, are currently making, as well as those that will help to change future for the better. The stories should be about how postsecondary education has the ability to change lives, to better the economy, and to contribute to a safer and more prosperous society. They should also be about the current challenges facing higher education and what we can do to overcome them.

One of the first lessons I learned about responsible journalism when I started to write for the media in the 1970s was that the press should be the light illuminating where the ship of society should be going, not just shedding light on its wake. If colleges and universities cannot be the beacon of society, they are failing one of their major roles. And that is too bad, since they are supposed to do more for the community than to become diploma mills.

That is the difference between being an intellectual endeavor and a factory of commodities. Between being an administrator and being a leader. And also the difference between marketing and communication.

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