



CHANGE OF SUBJECT

Observations, reports, tips, referrals and tirades

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Reporters and professors: What are they thinking?

I was invited to give the keynote speech today to the Media Relations Faculty Recognitions Luncheon at DePaul University. Here is my prepared text:

I feel a special affinity for academics since my parents both teach on the faculty at the University of Michigan; both my grandfathers were professors at Indiana University and my father-in-law was a professor at Carnegie Mellon.

Most people assumed as I was growing up that I'd join your ranks – the family business -- in some capacity.

Then I took a little detour to dabble in journalism and, well, here I am.

No sabbaticals. No tenure. No summers off. No real expertise. What was I thinking?

I'm guessing that some of you have considered a career in print punditry – maybe even consciously turned away from the opportunity to join the Fourth Estate in order to devote your energies to academia.

And that occasionally you look at a guy like me and think, hey:

No vicious departmental politics. No spending five years researching some arcane topic that only a few dozen people will ever care about. No requirement to engage slack-jawed, materialistic American youth with lectures and assignments. What was I thinking?

Truth is, there's a special relationship between academia and journalism, and part of that relationship is based on mutual envy.

We envy you your credentials, your reputation, your deep knowledge in one or more areas.

We are generally without portfolio or esteem. In the respect rankings, the public puts us somewhere between rodeo clowns and pimps.

Our knowledge is broad, but, honestly, usually superficial and almost always second-hand.

I've written quite a bit about the death penalty and the criminal justice system, and am sometimes called upon to speak or offer my views as an expert. But, really, all my expertise comes from talking to researchers, lawyers and other genuine experts. So I'm sort of a fraud but, because I'm up front about it, I'm not a phony.

And you, the professoriat, in my experience, envy us our pulpit – our audience, our reach. Your brilliant ideas generally reach an audience of hundreds — maybe thousands if they're published in the peer-reviewed journals — over the years.

My most mediocre ideas land on half a million doorsteps. And my good ideas, when I have them, are quickly forwarded and reprinted and posted all over the world where they're seen by tens of millions of readers.

I suspect you also envy us our ability to dip in and dip out of topics that interest us. One day I'm immersed in digital rights management and copyright law. The next day I'm studying the immigration issue and consulting experts. Or I'm plowing through archived articles on Archie comic books or customs in wedding-reception seating arrangements.

So another part of our relationship is based on mutual dependency: We need your depth of knowledge, your credentials, your authority. You need — or at least enjoy access to — our megaphone. It's a win-win.

Ideally, this is how it works:

An editor driving to work notices that there are lots of pre-fab garden sheds in backyards along the way. A growing number, he suspects.

So he summons a reporter when he gets to work and assigns him what I'm calling a "more and more."

A "more and more" is one of those news features that highlights a trend —preferably an actual one -- and generally contains a passage such as these, all of which I culled from the Tribune and Sun-Times in just the last week:

More and more companies are adopting text messaging as a way to target consumers

More and more kids are playing fall (base)ball

More and more guys are indulging their inner Imelda Marcos.

More and more people pay attention to actors' private lives

More and more couples are turning to an embryo-screening technique that allows them to choose the genetic makeup of their children

Plus-size fashions are getting more and more attention,

More and more (retail tobacco licenses are being issued to) cafes where tobacco can be legally sold, served and smoked.

More and more (spa) patrons are seeking youthful good looks, glamor or social status as opposed to escapism

That's just one week's worth of "more and mores." I see an extended scholarly monograph in this phenomenon. Have at it.

Anyway. The editor says "give me 30 inches on the shed fad."

The reporter calls local building-permit offices and home supply stores, conducts interviews in a few neighborhoods and then calls the media relations department at a nearby university.

Ideally, again, someone in media relations says, "Ah! Professor Stanley in urban studies has just published a university press book titled 'The increase in modular rear-property storage structures as sociological phenomenon.' Here's her cell number."

Professor Stanley tells the reporter, yes, her analysis of census and satellite data shows a 30 percent increase in backyard sheds related directly to an increased emphasis on gardening and other landscaping activity in the aging and inward-turning baby-boom population.

This fact, this insight, impresses the top editors very much. The academic gloss gives the story gravitas and significance worthy of big play on page one, with photos. Professor Stanley is quoted in the third through sixth paragraphs.

Garden sheds are the perfect symbol for our increasingly homebound, increasingly old, increasingly appearance obsessed culture.

“Nightline” picks up the story . “60 Minutes” does an expose on shoddy, dangerous sheds constructed in the third-world of toxic materials. “Frontline” looks at international patterns in shed construction. Professor Stanley’s book is republished under the spiffy new title, “Shedding Our Values: Storing our Future.” It becomes a best-seller and wins the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction. And the reporter is awarded a Neiman Fellowship at Harvard.

Ideally.

In reality, of course, what often happens is that the media relations person thinks, “Sheds? How slow a news day is *this*?”

And she sends the reporter to the only person on the faculty she can think of -- Professor Livingston, who used to teach classes in residential architecture.

Livingston has never given two thoughts to sheds, but he mulls over the question, figures out the quote the reporter wants to get and offers an educated guess about sheds.

Good enough. The story runs. Professor Livingston gets teased at lunch by his colleagues, who ask him if he plans to open the Institute of Shed Studies or teach a graduate seminar in lean-tos and hovels.

Still, everybody’s happy. The editor and reporter have apparent confirmation from a real-live professor that this shed thing is not just some bogus whim; the University gets its name in the paper in a favorable context.

It’s a fine relationship. And from my end I’m very grateful for all the times over the years that the men and women of academia have either supported a thesis I’m pursuing, turned it 180 degrees or added new layers of information and insight.

So how can we – all of us in the media and all of you in our universities – improve this relationship?

I have two suggestions. One is to be very accessible. All of you have cell phones, home phones, e-mail. Many of you have BlackBerry devices.

When we need an egghead --- our term of endearment for you --- we almost always need one now. Not in a week or a day, but in an hour or two. We know you go on vacation and to conferences and that you teach and have office hours. But make sure your university relations staff knows how to reach you 24/7.

And my second suggestion is to keep your media people up to speed and up to date on all the topics you feel comfortable opining upon.

I get annual media guides from colleges and universities all the time. But, honestly, I never consult them when I want an expert because they lack the nuance and depth I need when I’m looking for the one best faculty member on a given topic. I call media relations. I just ask: “Who’s your best person on sheds?”

If Professor Stanley hasn’t gotten word to her press people, I may end up talking to Professor Livingston – which is not good for the reporter or Dr. Stanley or, for that matter, Dr. Livingston, I presume.

Follow these suggestions and you’ll find that your institution will get favorable publicity.... more and more

