

Journalism still must serve the public trust

by *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

"I believe in the profession of journalism ... I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of a lesser service is a betrayal of this trust."

So begins "The Journalist's Creed," written in 1914 by Walter Williams, who six years earlier had founded the nation's first college school of journalism at the University of Missouri. These were the politically rambunctious years of the Progressive Era, when newspapers were the main news source. Too many of them were scandal sheets with sensational coverage dubbed "Yellow Journalism."

Williams and some others, including Joseph Pulitzer, founder of the Post-Dispatch, whose Platform written in 1907 is published daily on this page, expounded eloquently on the need to redefine the role of newspapers. They saw journalism's role as holding accountable institutions and people who had subverted the public trust to amass wealth and influence.

But now, nearly 100 years later, amid an ever-changing smorgasbord of news media, what is the proper role of the professional journalist?

At a community forum in St. Louis last Wednesday, the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri posed this question to journalists and non-journalists: "In the 21st century can public-service journalism survive? Is it time to renew the Journalist's Creed?"

Technology now has altered how and when professional news organizations deliver news and information. But the change is more than newspaper reporters recording video and audio or columnists who blog or file real-time online messages in short bursts on Twitter. Such change was unimaginable in the Progressive Era when newspapers stood alone as the juggernaut that determined what was the news of the day.

So, what is journalism today? Who is today's journalist? Is it a blogger working in his den? A radio talk-show host? A late-night comedian? An author of an online book?

Opinions at the forum varied about whether newspapers and local broadcast news provide enough quality watchdog journalism and whether the execution or motivation of the journalists always are as sanctified as the creed pronounces. But those at the forum agreed that the professional media are obliged to ask tough questions and look out for the average guy.

St. Charles County (Mo.) Executive Steve Ehlmann astutely asked the audience to ponder this question: If newspapers survived the advent of radio news and later television news, why won't they again evolve to the competition?

Professional journalists cross their fingers that their companies are adapting successfully into a full-fledged media world. People are changing their lifestyles and daily habits in most facets of life, not just in getting the news. They use "smart" phones, laptop computers and gadgets with multiple purposes. News consumption is one part of a huge technological sea change.

Adam Hosp, an online developer and Web entrepreneur, talked about how he gathers large amounts of information through the Internet without a printed newspaper. But he also talked about how the professional media are a fountain of credible information from which many other forms of online interaction flow.

Newspaper and media companies already were transforming in the digital age. Then a relentless recession blanketed the country to compound their challenges. Even though second daily newspapers in a few large U.S. markets closed recently, newspaper companies will continue to provide their essential function of making an increasingly complex world more accountable.

Some people think the news media act crazily or annoyingly or get things wrong and miss the boat at times. They're right; sometimes they do. But the forum audience was clear: They want professional journalists to hold onto their moorings and continue the public watchdog role. The audience told us: If you don't do it, who will?

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