“The Relationship Between the Media and Higher Education: Married, Divorced, or Separated?”

By Gene I. Maeroff

Senior Scholar

The Hechinger Institute on Education and the Media

Teachers College, Columbia University


Introduction

Professors who study newspapers are fond of content analysis. One element of this analysis is the measurement in column inches of articles. Or, in the case of broadcast journalism, counting the number of minutes devoted to a particular topic. This is a crude form of analysis, but it bears some connection with the real world.

Any comparison of coverage of higher education and K-12 education, for example, would almost certainly conclude that the number of inches or the amount of airtime devoted to colleges and universities pales by comparison with the quantity lavished on elementary and secondary schools. Why is this so?
First, because there are more Americans with an active connection to K-12 schools than there are with active links to higher education, and, presumably, more interest in K-12.

Second, the taxpayers plow much more money into elementary and secondary schools, and have their local property tax bills to show for it.

Third, the issues in K-12 are perceived by both news consumers and the news media as more compelling – and therefore more worthy of coverage.

Fourth, the news media fail to see higher education as a landscape rich in story ideas and instead largely limit their coverage to a few predictable topics, leaving much of the rest of what happens at colleges and universities largely unmentioned in news columns.

Fifth, this the way it has always been and the status quo counts for a great deal.

Let me elaborate.

**Magnitude**

The number of students, the number of institutions, the number of teachers in elementary and secondary schools dwarfs colleges and universities. Such factors help determine news coverage – the size of the potential audience for that particular kind of coverage in terms of those affected and those interested. Add to these elements the perceived importance or magnitude of the story, the freshness of the information.
Expenditures

Follow the dollars. That’s the glib suggestion we frequently hear. Well, if you were to follow the dollars you would more likely be on the trail of pre-collegiate education, a more than $400 billion-a-year enterprise. It is enormous, by far the largest object of expenditures by state and local governments. In most locales, the largest portion of property tax goes to the support of K-12 education. How is this money spent? What are the taxpayers getting for their expenditures? These questions, in part, drive the coverage of elementary and secondary education.

Issues

In at least one sense, advocates of more coverage for higher education should be satisfied by the situation as it is. Much of the coverage of K-12 education stems from a belief in its deficiencies. The public does not ask commensurate questions about higher education. They should. But they don’t.

Diversity of Stories

One of the media’s biggest shortcomings so far, as the coverage of higher education is concerned, is the failure of journalists to present a whole range of stories on diverse topics. Instead, the same stories are covered over and over again. And the same sets of distortions are dispensed. Not counting college athletics – more about that in a moment – the “Big Two” are tuition and admissions. And what do I mean by distortions? Well, one could get the idea from the news media that every college costs an arm and a leg and every institution is so selective that only super students should bother applying.
But that’s not a sexy story. It’s much more compelling to write as if getting into college is tough for everyone, just as it is jazzier to depict higher education as unaffordable.

**Status Quo**

It is really difficult to get newspapers to alter their ways. This is an industry steeped in tradition. Not that there have not been changes. Production methods for newspapers have changed vastly since the 1960’s. Cold type has replaced hot type. Linotype machines are in museums. The ways in which newspapers are physically assembled have changed. Yet, the news itself – or what constitutes news and its manner of presentation – has changed less than these other features. This adherence to the status quo places newspapers in a difficult position, given these forces of change:

- **Competition**
  - Many, many sources of news.
  - Many uses of leisure time.

- **The appeal of technology**
  - Feel more comfortable with gadgets than with paper.
  - Not oriented to read, an alliterate society.

- **Waning interest in news of substance**
  - News wrapped in amusement.
  - Public apathy about current events other than those driven by personalities.
How Can the Media Contribute to Discussion of Higher Education?

Given these dynamics and the limitations that I’ve cited, the question is how can the media contribute to the national discussion about higher education? Two main ways of doing this would be through sufficiency of coverage and by exercising better judgment in what gets covered.

Sufficiency of Coverage

How can we tell when and if higher education is covered sufficiently? This is a tough call. I suspect that partisans in most fields don’t feel that coverage is sufficient for the topic that they champion. Consider the issues in transportation, health, science, technology, labor, the environment, foreign affairs and state government – to mention just a few subjects.

Public discussion in all these areas is woefully handicapped by the news media’s scant coverage. Higher education is not generous in this regard. It is a fact, for instance, that the news media – up until 9/11 – had gradually reduced coverage of foreign affairs. Furthermore, far fewer reporters than in former years are assigned to cover the news out of state capitals.

Here are some questions, particular to higher education, which one might ask to determine if, from a whole array of sources, it receives sufficient coverage:

- Do members of the general public have enough knowledge to carry on a reasonably cogent discussion of such higher education topics as tenure, admissions standards, financial aid policies, affirmative action, the role of varsity athletics, and how students choose their majors?
- Is the public able to evaluate the fiscal policies of the their state legislatures in regard to allocations for higher education?
- Can members of the public pose solid questions about the worth and purpose of a college degree?

**Exercising Better News Judgment**

The other half of this equation, as I said, involves the news judgment of journalists, their ability to identify the information they ought to be providing. You can see that we are talking about obverse sides of the same coin.

Journalists must grow familiar with the higher education terrain. Reporters and editors who parachute into the higher education story only occasionally are not apt to be able to make keen judgments about what to cover and how to cover it. Their coverage will be largely reactive – the fleeting issue of the day.

Reporters and editors involved in higher education coverage should be able to set priorities for coverage, making certain that enough of the stories that the public needs to be sufficiently informed find their way into the paper or onto the tube. Supervising editors should be able to stand up and argue at story conferences of the news organization in behalf of the higher education stories they deem worthy of coverage. This ability implies confidence that comes with knowing a subject.
How Different Forms of the Media Play Roles

If you expect more quantity and more thoroughness in the coverage of higher education, don’t look to commercial television. It simply won’t happen even though that’s where most people seem to get their news. It is not in the nature of the beast.

News coverage in commercial television – whether network or cable – is ratings driven and as much as you personally might want to see more coverage of colleges and universities, TV news directors consider the subject a yawner.

And maybe higher education is better off with its invisible status on television. Drive-by coverage, so typical of commercial television, does not lend itself to depth and understanding, which ought to characterize the coverage of higher education. The best you can hope for is sound bites and with this alternative, you might be better off with no coverage at all. If it bleeds, it leads. Look at how poorly commercial TV covers what it does cover.

Orville Schell, dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Berkeley, wrote, “there are fewer and fewer outlets where smart, able young people with ambition and a sense of dedication to quality can do satisfying work.” He bemoans the loss of the role that journalism schools have traditionally played as farm teams to groom aspiring broadcast journalists. The major league for them to join has virtually disappeared. It is already gone in commercial radio and, for all practical purposes, barely hanging on at local television stations.

If there is to be improvement in the coverage of higher education, it will have to come primarily from the print media. But an unfortunate development that began in TV is infecting the print media. Every day, more and more, print news coverage is subsumed
by entertainment. Amusing viewers has grown more important than informing them. I like the way that David Shaw, the media critic of the *Los Angeles Times*, puts it when he casts his practiced eyes on this alarming phenomenon. He talks of the “four horsemen of the journalistic apocalypse: superficiality, sensationalism, preoccupation with celebrity, and obsession with the bottom line.”

These four horsemen seem to squeeze out intelligent, informed coverage of higher education – or most any other topic of substance. So, as a result, we see a surfeit of coverage, especially in commercial television, of such trivia as Scott Peterson, Michael Jackson (not to mention his sister Janet), Britney Spears, and Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck. Such stories, masquerading as news, consume space that might be used for real news. And they insidiously undermine the ability of the public—especially younger readers, listeners, and viewers—to distinguish between real news and garbage.

**Overcoming Barriers**

In order to begin thinking about how to overcome the barriers to more and better coverage of higher education, one must understand the workings of the news media and the needs of reporters on the higher education beat.

This means considering the circumstances under which reporters, including those who cover higher education, work. Many simply are not given enough time to produce the stories they cover. Moreover, at some news organizations they operate under a quota system requiring them to turn in x number of stories a day, or a week. It’s as if they are pressing pants at a dry cleaner’s.
Think about the implications of these time limitations – there is not ample time to grasp the details of some of the more complicated stories. They look for what they can comprehend and sum up easily and quickly. No wonder that education reporters gravitate toward articles about admissions and tuitions. These are relatively simple stories: print the numbers, fill in the blanks, and shake up the reader.

Thinking about newspapers, one must consider the turnover on the higher education beat, even at the leading news organizations. At the Hechinger Institute, we work each year with those who cover higher education by offering them an annual seminar on the most salient issues.

Whether you are talking about K-12 or higher education, it takes time to become a good beat reporter – to know the issues, the history, the contacts, and the context. Moving journalists through this beat as if they were caught in a revolving door is not the way to do it, no matter how skilled the journalists. They simply cannot cover the beat the way it ought to be covered. But rotating reporters through beats is pro forma at most newspapers, for most beats. Editors tend to treat reporters as fungibles, no different from potatoes in a sack, one interchangeable with another.

What the Public Can Do

The news consuming public must take part of the responsibility for the problems we are discussing. What degree of interest do people evince in higher education? So-called reality TV didn’t evolve because networks thought that people wouldn’t watch the programs. These inane offerings have wide appeal. Too many people just want to kick
back and not get their minds too involved. Serious articles about profound issues in higher education? Who’s going to read them?

**What Institutions of Higher Education Can Do For the Media**

- Get to know the reporter.
- Get to know those in decision-making positions at media organizations.
- Provide access.
- Always tell the truth.
- Utilize your own methods of assembling and disseminating information and don’t depend on news organizations to do it for you.

**What the News Media Can Do For Institutions of Higher Education**

- Keep a dedicated person on the beat and keep the person on the beat for a reasonable number of years.
- Allow for professional development.
- Be willing to run stories of substance.

**Summary**

For all I have to say here about the media and institutions of higher education getting along with each other, I must remind you that this remains an adversarial relationship, as it probably should be. Reporters sometimes want access to information that may put a college or university in an unfavorable light. Reporters will go to all lengths to obtain
this information. They are not and should not be advocates for higher education – or else they lose their credibility.

Grin and bear it. And remember what I said earlier about telling the truth. Your lies can get you in big trouble. Just look at the Nixon White House and the Watergate scandal. You can reasonably expect neutrality and impartiality, but not advocacy from independent media.

Reporters and representatives of higher education will not always view story possibilities the same way as those inside the institution. Some of what higher education wants covered will not be what journalists want to cover and some of the stories by journalists may not please people in higher education. Skepticism, after all – you will notice that I didn’t say “cynicism” – is a proper stance for a journalist and those on the higher education beat should not regard colleges and universities and those associated with them with awe and reverence.