Conference 2014 Speaker Series: An Interview with Eric Newton

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Eric Newton is senior adviser to the president at the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which funds ideas that promote quality journalism and media innovation, based on a principle that democracy thrives when people and communities are informed and engaged. A former managing editor of the Oakland Tribune, he is also author of the innovative digital educational book on the history and future of news, Searchlights and Sunglasses.

eric-newton

He will be speaking on two panels at the Polis Annual Journalism Conference on Friday March 28, one on the role of journalism education in the future of transparency journalism, and one on innovation in transparency, which will address how new technology is increasing transparency in journalism.

Free tickets, as well as information on our line-up, are available here. Our keynote speakers are Alan Rusbridger, Editor of the Guardian, and Ian Katz, Editor of Newsnight.

Interview by Polis reporter Emma Goodman.

Do you agree with David Weinberger's 2009 statement (since repeated frequently by journalists and media commentators) that 'transparency is the new objectivity'?

I'm not entirely sure people agree on what he meant. Is transparency a substitute for objectivity? No. Is transparency as important as objectivity? Yes.

In the networked digital age, transparency is fundamental. Today, being fair means more than reporting a story's many sides; it means being open about yourself as a journalist, a person who is searching for truth. We need to let people behind the curtain. Who are we? Why are we doing this story? What tools are we using? What's our news ethic?

But objectivity also is fundamental. Is anyone else growing weary of how objectivity is discussed? There's too much debate about whether a person can be neutral and not enough focus on whether a tool or a method can be. Whether someone is acting journalistically depends on what people do, not so much on who they are. Anyone can perform an act of journalism. The definition is situational, not occupational.

Let's apply this to a basic-yet-often-ignored journalistic task: counting a crowd.

An event's backers say 500,000 people were there at the peak. An aerial photograph, divided into grids and analyzed, estimates only about 80,000 were there. It no longer works to say, "We have no bias; we counted. Trust us." In social media the partisans simply shout, "You lie!" Today, the journalistic action is to show one's work. We should publish the photo online, explain the crowd-counting method and let people check what we did themselves. See, folks? The crowd is what it is, no matter what your personal beliefs. That's being *transparently objective.*

Personal information can add authenticity. You could write a column that begins: "As an environmentalist, I believe publicists who hype the size of crowds at party rallies are hurting our cause…" Transparency can help others hold us accountable. Post the picture. Post the source documents. Explain what you are trying to do. Be humble. Use transparency to bring more to the table, not, like the bogus "he said, she said" form of objectivity, as an excuse to avoid facts. Great acts of journalism have been committed by advocacy journalists who dug for the facts and stuck to the facts.

But an open-minded journalist's view, if truly held, is a legitimate view in its own right; neutrality is only a "view from nowhere" if it is an excuse for being obtuse. When we are lucky the journalist's view is a view from a wonderful place, a place of curiosity; human and imperfect, yes, where we resist the temptation to abandon accuracy by going too fast or losing perspective; but at its best a panoptic vantage point where context for a moment may become clear; a place of inquiry, where the journalist honestly doesn't know a thing but is driven to find a tool or technique that may reveal it, in the same way that a doctor uses a CAT scan to peer inside a patient or a referee an instant replay to know if a player was out of bounds.

Both transparency and objectivity serve the greater idea of fairness. While people are rarely totally objective or transparent, they can be fair by following rules and standards and avoiding the temptation to cheat. News organizations that post their ethical codes – or go further and embed source information, writer bios and ethical goals as metadata underlying their stories, or even further and write all their news algorithms, crowd-counting software and other newsbots in open source code – would be transparently objective in superb fashion.

Have you personally faced dilemmas over transparency in your work?

Of course. Here's an example: I helped Knight Foundation establish a policy that its journalism grantees be transparent about their sources of revenue. If a nonprofit news organization gets more than $5,000 from a donor, the level at which it must report the contribution to the IRS, then to receive support from us we required those contributions be reported to the public as well. This kind of transparency is becoming standard for the new breed of nonprofit news sites on the Web.

High-quality journalism sites such as ProPublica are meticulous about listing donors. But sites that lean one way or another politically are much less transparent, a study by Pew researchers showed.

As we were considering the policy, a dilemma arose around public broadcasting. For more than 50 years, those outlets have allowed anonymous donations. We certainly would like to see public broadcasting successfully make the digital transition to the 21st century. But we also believe people should know who is paying for their news.

In the end, we created an exemption that allows legacy organizations that have always allowed occasional anonymous donations to win grants for specific projects from us, not general support, so long as they revealed all the other donors (above the $5,000 level) to that same project.

The idea was to get started on the road of greater transparency and see where we are after we've had more experience with the rules.

How significant a role would you say that online comments and social media have had in increasing the transparency and accountability of journalism?

Both online comments and social media are extremely significant. The mass interactivity of the new communications world in all its forms – online comments, sharing stories, social media, mobile media – is what makes the digital age an entirely new age of human communication. We still do not understand how profoundly this is changing society. What were once media audiences are now communities that can themselves verify and clarify news as well as share or debunk the work of professional journalists.

When journalists are open to it, this can be a good thing. The Texas Tribune, for example, is one of the new breed of nonprofit digital news organizations. It has established a strong new policy of listing every significant donor to the news organization in "real time" with the actual amounts of the donations, not waiting until the end of the year when annual reports and IRS forms are filed.

The Tribune, which covers Texas politics, made the changes in response to a blog post alleging it had become a "lapdog" because of donations from corporations and lobbyists. (The Tribune also posted its events policy; regardless of event sponsors, it invites credible panelists on all sides of the issue being debated.)

Its tougher transparency rules return to an earlier policy it had requiring every donor mentioned in a news story to be identified as such. I think that's a great development. If the Tribune sticks with them, its real-time transparency innovation of listing corporate sponsorship details may be picked up by other news sites.

We don't know exactly how the Tribune's new policy will play out. Will sponsors withdraw? Or will the increased transparency bring more support? My guess is that in the long run, it will help them. The Tribune's reporting is filling a huge gap in coverage. All across America, coverage of state government has dried up. This trend has been happening for 20 years, as daily newspapers have steadily reduced reporting staffs. In many states, it is a great time to be a crooked politician.

Do you think that journalism education institutions put sufficient emphasis on transparency and accountability in their teaching?

No. In general, digital age tools, practices and values have been slow to spread throughout journalism education in the United States. So the lack of emphasis on transparency and community engagement is not necessarily the fault of any one school. It is hard for all traditional institutions to adapt to the pace of innovation. At universities, this can be even harder. A new curriculum can take two years to approve. But game-changing digital devices come out every year.

Even so, the best schools are moving forward. Journalism funders have argued that the best way to teach digital age complexity is for schools to produce digital journalism themselves. At great schools, this means journalism students have first-hand experience with transparency and accountability. They use social and mobile media to engage with communities and are starting to learn how to involve them in news production from start to finish. More of them are teaching students to write and work with open source code (another kind of transparency).

I don't see why learning by doing should be controversial. It's an ancient idea. More than 2,000 years ago, Confucian philosopher Xunzi wrote: "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand." One of the most successful journalism schools in U.S. history, and the oldest, the University of Missouri, has been practicing the form of learning by doing it calls "the Missouri Method" for a century.

Interview by Polis reporter Emma Goodman.

Photo: The Knight Foundation.

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