

Regional

Hicks studies power, problems of the media

While the mass media are arguably among the most powerful social and cultural institutions of the 21st century, the current state of journalism – impacted by new technologies and drastic changes in business models – is thought by some media scholars to no longer serve the best interests of a democracy. Slashed news budgets and changes in the way people get their news have, they argue, diminished the role of journalists in shaping public discourse and have led to a proliferation of sensationalized coverage and “fluff” in the news. While disturbing, these trends are nothing new.

“If you look back to the late 1800s and early 1900s, you will find many horrific stories of so-called journalists doing things like breaking into people’s homes in order to get photographs of deceased people – mostly victims of crime – to run in the newspapers,” said Gary Hicks, professor and chair of the department of mass communications at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. “These practices, like some that we are seeing today, were brought about by changes in technology, transportation and an increasingly literate population hungry for information and entertainment. Many papers were happy to oblige with sensationalism and reporting techniques that skirted the boundaries of ethical behavior.” It was his concerns over more contemporary journalistic practices that led Hicks to a career in teaching and research.

Born in Houston, Texas, Hicks received his bachelor’s degree in broadcast journalism from Texas Christian University, his master’s in journalism from the University of Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia and his doctorate in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin. After several years working as a newspaper reporter and television news producer, Hicks decided to go back to school, earn a doctorate and start teaching younger generations of aspiring journalists. The two areas that interest him the most are media ethics and media law. While he noted the problems that accompanied early 20th century journalism, he pointed to even more disturbing trends today.

“They have mastered the idea of taking a polarized nation and making a lot of money by furthering that polarization,” Hicks said of today’s news corporations. “But it is not that different from what was happen-



Professor Gary Hicks in his classroom.

ing in the past, just that the scale now is quite remarkable.” And new technologies are making things worse, he added. “What concerns me most is the technology that is involved. Things now move so fast that I don’t know whether there will be another renaissance when people will step back and consider what’s the best way to be a journalist and to serve democracy.”

Despite these problems, Hicks does not think that striving for pure objectivity is the answer. He doesn’t believe it exists anyway.

“That is a question that from my very early classes as an undergraduate we wrestled with,” he said. “After working in the

industry for years and now working in the academy, I tell my students there is not. There is, however, such a thing as fairness, as being careful and complete and honest. Honesty leads us the closest we can be to being objective. If you strive to be honest you’ll do your very best to getting close to that objective state that we so much want to see in the media.”

With studies showing that most people today get their news from the Internet, which often-times lacks any editorial filters, one wonders if this is good or bad for journalism. “I think both,” said Hicks. “It has been bad in that it has allowed individuals almost too many choices.

When you have too many choices, then you go for just those items that are interesting to you. But when you do that you are walling yourself off from a tremendous amount of the world and information that is out there. On the flip side of that, I think we are not going back and there is a lot of good material on the Internet. It’s just that you have to be a savvy consumer. You have to seek out views that are different from your own.”

Hicks recently published a book titled “Prophets of the Fourth Estate: Broadside by Press Critics of the Progressive Era.” There he describes many of the social factors that influenced journalism at the turn of the

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

20th century and points to shared characteristics with today’s media. Given these similarities, Hicks said that it is important that his students learn from the past.

“It is essential,” he said. “We can see almost the exact things happening in the 21st century now as happened in the Progressive Era, and you can also see how certain people had very important things to say and had real concerns about the way that the nation was going in the period between 1890 and 1920, and that they could make a real difference by using tools of the mass media. The world that we are living in now is reflected in the Progressive Era.”

Another area of research for Hicks has been how the media have portrayed gays and lesbians through time, from being presented as people with some kind of disease to becoming mainstream characters. Has society changed media perceptions and practices or is it the media that have changed society? “Both, obviously,” Hicks said. “Culture changes and media products keep up with it, but there have been some remarkable instances over the history of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) representation in the media that have been, in fact, ahead of where society was at the time.”

His next project is a book that looks at public perceptions of mental illness. “My entire research agenda has always been on how media represent and interact with marginalized communities,” Hicks said. “The book is going to look at the history of film and television and how they have represented the most common mental illnesses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, the anxiety disorders, etc. I am approaching the project as a three-part process by looking at the text itself, interviewing the creator and talking to people who have these illnesses to see what their reactions are.”

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