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• INTRODUCTION •

MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

A Teaching and Research Perspective

MELVIN L. DEFLEUR
Guest Editor

MASS COMMUNICATIONS as an academic field on our nation's campuses started innocently enough around the turn of the century with a few scattered courses in journalism. These led rather slowly to more formal programs and eventually to undergraduate majors. As World War II ended, journalism was still only a minor corner of academe. Concerned mainly with newspapers, it was largely ignored by more traditional academic disciplines with deeper intellectual roots. Studies of film and broadcasting were obscure enterprises indeed, often tucked into programs like audiovisual studies or theater and drama. The idea that formal curricula and degree programs in such fields as advertising and public relations would ever be developed in higher education crossed few professorial minds.

Then, our society changed. Within a single decade (the 1950s) television swept in to become the dominant mass medium. During the early 1960s, computers began to have a major impact on our technology for storing, retrieving, processing, and generating information. Satellites were thrust into the sky to increase the pace, reach, and extent of all forms of communication. Suddenly, we were an "information society" living in a high-tech age of mass communications.

Inevitably, new generations of students wanted institutions of higher education to assist them in preparing for careers related to these dynamic new media. Because academic institutions are enrollment-driven, such eager applicants were welcomed by the bean counters in the administration building. As in the world of corporations, a series of mergers and even some hostile takeovers took place to provide new organizational structures that could reap profit from this new market. Thus, the school of mass communications on the U.S. campus became a reality (or at least departments were established in the smaller institutions). Curricula, programs, and majors in journalism, film, radio, and television, and in some cases advertising and public relations, were developed under a single administrative roof.

The growth of enrollments in these new enterprises was sometimes at the expense of other fields. In fact, the bottom dropped out in some. In addition, within old and traditional disciplines, with deeply entrenched ideas about the proper nature of higher education, course work related to mass communications seemed out of place. They openly questioned

whether a serious institution should be involved. These attitudes, and the changes that brought them, created controversy—controversy that continues today as departments and schools of communication continue to attract students.

We cannot, however, reverse those transformations and trends in society that led to the creation of our current programs of study related to mass communications. The industries are here to stay; they are critical to our society as we know it, politically, socially, and economically; and they offer a huge labor market for people trained in the necessary specialities. Providing professional education for that labor force will be a continuing responsibility of our nation's colleges and universities for the foreseeable future.

In this issue of the *Syracuse Scholar* seven colleagues who are deeply concerned about higher education for careers in mass communications offer their views on the field, its problems, and its critics. The overall theme of the issue is that, like it or not, professional education for the communications field is now an established part of the U.S. system of higher education. Important questions confront us all, in whatever discipline—how best to educate students who choose to study these programs, and how best to draw on other fields that can make important contributions to helping students understand our media, their proper role within society, and the obligations of those who undertake professional roles within the media labor force. ♦