ASU Cronkite School Convocation Address
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December 16, 2011

It was the summer of 1981. I was 21 years old and working at a small commercial radio station in northern Minnesota. One day, the News Director announced that he was going on a trip to Europe— for a month. And he asked me to fill-in for him. I was thrilled!

Being News Director at this station also meant that I would be the assistant News Director, the senior editor, the senior and junior reporter, the copywriter and the only newscaster – I said it was a small station.

During that long month of 18 hour days, I learned – I experienced – what it meant to be a real journalist. I wrote and filed more than a dozen stories, every day. I covered the city council meetings, the fire department, the school board, the police blotter, local businesses and the community events. I did my best to help people understand what was going on in our community. Our listeners depended on us…on me…to decide what was truly important, to tell them why it mattered, and to get it right. It was exhausting. But I couldn’t wait to get up in the morning to go to work.

That’s still true. I still have the best job in the world. Which is why I’m so excited about what lies ahead for you. I am honored to be here, with you, on such an important occasion. And I want to thank you for choosing to build your career on public service—for making the conscious effort to have an impact on our society, and the world beyond where we live. I’m looking at a room full of highly-trained and ready journalists, at a time when America needs journalists more than ever.

Down in the southwest corner of my home state, not far from where Laura Ingalls Wilder grew up, there’s a small town called Marshall, Minnesota. It’s not the kind of place that makes the national news very often. But it did, back in April of this year, when Haylee Fentress and Paige Moravetz—two 8th grade girls having a sleepover—hanged themselves.

WHY did it happen? It’s the first question you want answered, isn’t it? The other facts of the event are easier to come by – the Who, What, Where, When and How are quickly reported and easily understood, especially since everyone now carries the internet in their pocket.

But WHY would two 14-year-old girls do what Paige and Haylee chose to do that night? The story of Paige and Haylee helped me put words to something I’ve felt for a long time – the best journalists are those who do not tiptoe around the WHY of a story because it’s just too hard, or too complex.

The world IS complex—getting more so all the time – and what we need, now, are a few trusted guides to help us work through it.
That’s where you come in. You’re the people we’re going to turn to, so I’m asking you to make a special effort to help us understand the WHY behind the stories you report. Because once we understand WHY something matters, we’re better equipped and more motivated to take informed action. And taking informed action is about to become even more important.

We’re in the throes of another national election. Presidential candidates are being forced to address concerns and questions across powerful spheres of influence. America’s great diversities of ideology, age, ethnicity, and sociology all enrich our culture and make it more dynamic. But our differences are also helping to splinter this country into galvanized factions. And these factions don’t seem interested in listening to any other point-of-view than their own. And if we will not listen to other points of view, how can we make progress on the challenging issues we face? Many of these mounting challenges threaten not only our lifestyle, but our lives.

I don’t know about you, but some of these topics are so highly charged, my family cannot discuss them around the Holiday dinner table. And we LOVE each other.

As this national election season develops…Are you confident that those who want to be our leaders will discuss these issues in a sophisticated way, offering nuance and bringing fresh perspectives? How many of us now expect only heated political sound bites, empty rhetoric and self-serving agendas?

I believe the solution to this mess is something YOU can provide: Information. Sir Arthur Clarke said, and I’m paraphrasing here: Information isn’t knowledge…and knowledge isn’t wisdom…and wisdom isn’t foresight. But each grows from the other and we need them all.

Information. Knowledge. Wisdom. Foresight. These will help cut through the noise, so we can hear new perspectives. And you can help get us there.

Our country has polarized itself over every national issue, and the media has contributed to the situation. And why is that? Because media companies know they can make a lot of money by causing people to be afraid, or getting them all lathered up and angry. Controversy and conflict can attract an audience. But merely reporting the conflict does nothing to move us beyond the disagreement. You have the power—and because of that, the imperative—to help America find solutions. And that important work begins by making sure we hear the WHOLE STORY.

THE WHOLE STORY

Let me give you an example of what I mean. Last week in Minnesota, an unexpected $876 million budget surplus was announced. As you can imagine, legislators and the governor were quick to take credit, claiming their own party’s policies were responsible. Most media simply jumped to share the good news. But journalists at Minnesota Public Radio decided to dig deeper. Our reporters found that the surplus actually had little to do with state policies, and in fact is the result of changes in accounting processes and unexpected revenue from the federal government.
As a citizen who believes in Thomas Jefferson’s ideal of an informed democracy – I hold journalists accountable for telling the whole story, and doing so with integrity.

THE CONVERSATION

Journalism is a wonderful opportunity…and an awesome obligation. One obligation is to tell the WHOLE story. Another is to use a story to start a CONVERSATION. To engage your readers and listeners and viewers with original ideas, and introduce new authentic voices; not to establish a position, or advocate for a particular outcome, but to get the right people talking about the real issues, so change can begin. Your job is to find the topic, find the language, find the way into minds and hearts. And once you’re there, to stimulate the conversation. And this brings me back to Marshall, Minnesota—where two teenagers at a slumber party did the unthinkable.

After the initial community outcry and grieving, the story might have been forgotten, at least until it happened again in another town. But instead, when Paige and Haylee’s parents reported their belief that BULLYING had been a contributing factor to their child’s deaths, journalists at Minnesota Public Radio decided to dig deeper.

And we found that Minnesota has one of the weakest anti-bullying laws in the entire country. But nobody was talking about it.

So in May, our newsroom launched an investigation resulting in a series of reports that took a clear-eyed look at bullying in our schools across the state. We examined what could be done about it, and what WASN’T being done. And now, seven months later, our Governor, the Attorney General and our Legislature are all taking concrete steps to change our laws. All because journalists rolled up their sleeves, asked uncomfortable and unpopular questions, plowed through piles of complicated information, and told the story in ways that made sense. By telling the whole story, Minnesota Public Radio News started the conversation. And now our laws on bullying are about to be strengthened. Now schools will have clearer guidance and accountability. And maybe those new laws will save a child from making the same terrible decision that Paige and Haylee did.

As a journalist, you wield tremendous power. You may be familiar with this quote from Margaret Mead: *Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

You are that small group of committed citizens. I am placing great hope in you – hope for you to make a real difference in this country—in arenas where no one else can.

And the pressure to do otherwise will be tremendous. The business models of many news organizations are threatened, and you’ll be expected to think about profit and loss. But your first allegiance is to the people you’re obligated to inform.

Providing real context takes air time and column inches that most news organizations are not willing to invest. Will you have the courage to say to your editor, “it’s not that simple”? Will you have
the integrity to dig a little deeper? Will you persuade your boss that you can tell the WHOLE story in all of its complexity, AND make it compelling?

That level of excellence is hard to come by. But obviously, you’re not afraid to choose the tougher climb. Isn’t that why you came to the Cronkite School? If it was easy, anybody could do it.

Thirty years ago, at that small radio station, I learned what it meant to be a real journalist. I still remember the thrill of receiving a $5 check for the first story I ever filed with UPI – United Press International.

I never cashed it. And maybe the scope of my job has changed since then, but not the passion I feel for it.

Good luck in what I know will be an invigorating profession. And I hope to see some of you working at American Public Media someday. Thank you.