

ALUMNI

The Press Professor

As dean, Nicholas Lemann sets a new course for Columbia's journalism school.

NICHOLAS LEMANN '76 seems an unlikely candidate for the role of higher-education reformer. Best known as a columnist and Washington correspondent for the *New Yorker*, he doesn't hold a graduate degree. He has taught occasional journalism classes, but has never held a full-time teaching job. And until two years ago, he had exactly no experience in university administration. He doesn't even like the idea that the august institution he now heads—the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism—needs reforming. “I thought it could be improved,” he says. “I always had in my mind an idea about this being an institution that could be taken to the next level, about being a great institution that could be made even greater.”

And yet Lemann (pronounced “lem-on”), who is entering his third year as dean and Henry R. Luce Professor at the school, is spearheading a series of changes that are redirecting its curriculum for the first time in decades. His effort comes in the wake of media scandals ranging from revelations of plagiarism and falsification at the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times*, to the disclosure of a CIA officer's identity by the political columnist Robert Novak, to a *Newsweek* report about American interrogators' mistreatment of military detainees at Guantánamo Bay that was credited to an unnamed government source, blamed for deadly rioting abroad, and later retracted.

“Things are not great,” Lemann acknowledges when asked about public perceptions of American journalism. “We have an unregulated and unlicensed profession—and that's the way it should be for a free press.” At the same time, he notes, the barriers to entry have dropped: thanks to websites and blogs, anybody can publish anything anytime. That circumstance has not only generated tremendous new competitive pressure for the mainstream media, but fueled a credibility crisis as well.

Lemann acknowledges that even the nation's best-known journalism school can't single-handedly salvage the profession's integrity, but he believes that better education would help. To that end, he has joined the leaders of four other prominent journalism schools in a three-year initiative to intensify journalistic training by, among other things, promoting stricter academic

and ethical standards. At home, he's overseeing a major expansion of the 93-year-old school's offerings by supplementing the existing master of science degree, which offers a broad, practical, learn-by-doing syllabus, with a new master of arts degree consisting of a highly specialized and somewhat more intellectual program that debuts this fall with 26 students. The new M.A. lets students immerse themselves in such areas as business or science journalism. Instructors are themselves top practitioners in the fields they teach.

IN RETOOLING the school's curriculum, Lemann has stepped squarely into a long-standing debate about journalism education. Do journalists really need craft-specific higher education, or might they be better off getting a general liberal-arts education, or even degrees in the areas they plan to cover? If journalism school is necessary, what should

the curriculum include? Finally, as at least one critic has charged, do journalism schools in general—and Columbia's program in particular—simply teach the elite to report on the elite?

The debate dates back at least to the mid nineteenth century, when some journalists for the first time began viewing their craft as a profession worthy of college-level study. Then, in 1902, Joseph Pulitzer, a Hungarian immigrant turned millionaire newspaper publisher, broached



Nicholas Lemann

the idea of founding a school for journalists. He envisioned the school teaching both scholarly subjects—literature, constitutional principles, history—and practical skills, such as reporting, editing, and writing. He also believed that it should award annual prizes for journalistic and literary excellence (one of which became, in 1917, the prestigious Pulitzer Prize program that recognizes achievements in newspaper journalism and literature; later, the school began overseeing top broadcast and magazine awards as well).

With a \$2-million pledge in hand, Pulitzer took his proposal to Columbia president Nicholas Murray Butler and Harvard president Charles W. Eliot. Butler replied first. In the next few years, Columbia built the school and launched an undergraduate journalism program that switched to an exclusively graduate-level program in 1935. Throughout its history, the school's degree has always been offered in *science*, rather than in the arts, a tradition that reflects Butler's view of the school as a skills-based professional institution.

Today, the school's 10-month M.S. program still focuses on craft. Students study the basic reporting and writing skills necessary for most newspaper, magazine, broadcast, and on-line media jobs, then practice what they've learned by, for instance, producing TV documentaries or writing and editing the *Bronx Beat*, a weekly community newspaper. Although the M.S. program has some specialized courses, such as international, metropolitan, and business reporting, it emphasizes the good general grounding it provides.

The new 10-month M.A. program is targeted at young journalists seeking to specialize in politics, the arts, science and technology, or economics and business. Lemann sums up the difference between the two degrees this way: "The M.S. program offers concentrations in the types of news media; the M.A. program [offers] concentrations in realms of knowledge." One could argue that this fulfills the other half of Pulitzer's original dream: an intellectual component for journalistic training. The M.A. is geared to students who have completed the M.S. program and want to specialize, or to working journalists seeking their niche. "We should try to be educating for the whole career, not just

the first job," Lemann explains. "The whole curriculum flows from that."

LEMANN'S FIRST JOB came while he was a senior in high school, in his native New Orleans, when he began covering education and politics for the *Vieux Carré Courier*, an alternative weekly newspaper. He continued writing at Harvard, where he was president of the *Crimson* and an American history and literature concentrator. "I covered everything there was to cover at the *Crimson*," recalls Lemann, whose Harvard years coincided with the Watergate scandal and the end of the Vietnam War. "I basically lived at the *Crimson*." He remembers, with some embarrassment, the *Crimson*'s "very, very strong position that the Vietcong were a democratic independence movement"; later in his *Crimson* career, he wrote an editorial repudiating the paper's earlier stance.

After college, he became an editor at the *Washington Monthly*, later moving on to *Texas Monthly*, the *Washington Post*, and *Atlantic Monthly*. Along the way, he wrote four books, including the *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, an exhaustive examination of the SAT.

Beginning in the late 1980s, Lemann also occasionally taught magazine writing at the journalism school, with no intention of becoming a full-time educator or administrator. That changed early in 2002, when Dean Tom Goldstein stepped down. In a controversial move, Columbia's then-new president, Lee C. Bollinger, a First Amendment lawyer whose father was a newspaper executive, put the search for Goldstein's successor on hold—a departure from the university's traditional hands-off policy toward the school. Instead, Bollinger convened a 30-plus-member task force that included Lemann, *BusinessWeek* editor Steve Shepard, CBS News correspondent Susan Spencer, novelist and *Newsweek* columnist Anna Quindlen, and other important journalists to rethink its mission and curriculum.

At the time, Bollinger said he felt a graduate journalism program should go beyond "basic skills training" and that true education takes more than 10 months. He initially suggested doubling the length of the M.S. program to two years, but this sparked opposition from faculty, alumni,

and some well-known journalists who viewed a two-year program as unnecessary or too expensive. *Newsweek* columnist Robert J. Samuelson '67, in an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, dismissed Bollinger's plan as "snob journalism: journalism by an elite for an elite." (Columbia estimates the cost of the current 10-month program at \$56,000, including tuition and room and board.) As part of the task force, Lemann drafted a 7,000-word memo describing a possible two-year graduate-degree program, which he presented at one of the task force's final meetings in early 2003; by the time the committee wrapped up its work that March, Bollinger had offered him the dean's job.

Early in his tenure, for what he describes as "practical, policy, and political reasons," Lemann shifted his vision from one two-year program to two one-year programs. During the next two years—an astonishingly short time for academic-program development—he and his staff pulled together the curriculum for the new M.A. track. His plan won final approvals late last February; the first year's class was selected from 70 applications received during a one-month admissions window that closed on April 1.

About two-thirds of the inaugural class came from the M.S. class of 2005; the rest are working journalists. Class members are typically in their late 20s, with a few years' experience at small or midsize newspapers—and a passionate interest in one of the four major subjects. Each M.A. student will complete a journalism-history course, a class on gathering and analyzing information, seminars in their specialties, a thesis, and relevant courses at an historically underutilized resource: the rest of Columbia.

Lemann has tapped some major figures from inside and outside the school to teach the M.A. specialty courses. Current faculty members James B. Stewart (J.D. '76, author of *Disney War*) and Sylvia Nasar (*A Beautiful Mind*), both Pulitzer Prize winners, are coordinating the business-journalism curriculum. *Village Voice* theater critic Alisa Solomon directs the arts and culture concentration, while Alexander Stille, an author, journalist, and the school's professor of international journalism, will oversee the political seminar. Former *Scientific*

American news editor Marguerite Holloway heads the science curriculum, and Jonathan Weiner '76, who writes for the *New Yorker* and won a Pulitzer for *The Beak of the Finch*, will teach science courses.

In planning the curriculum, Lemann looked to the professional schools of Columbia and Harvard (rather than other journalism schools) for inspiration and ideas, and decided that he “wanted to apply [the case-history] model to journalism, to use it in interesting new ways.” In one case, for example, students will use the actual “raw,” or unedited, stories, news budgets, photographs, and other resources that editors at the *Washington Post* used to make one day’s editorial decisions.

To address objections about the cost to students, Lemann has engaged in another area new to him: aggressive fundraising. Since his arrival in 2003, he has raised \$26 million in outside donations, says Jeffrey Richard, the school’s associate dean for development and alumni relations. Equally notable, in Richard’s view, is where those contributions go. “Many of the gifts we got before were for prizes and programs that support the profession rather than the students,” he reports; now most donations go directly to education—supporting curriculum development, faculty salaries, and scholarships. “Nick’s vision is always that journalism education matters the most,” Richard says. Alumni apparently agree: their giving doubled

during the 2004-2005 academic year. (Lemann has also dramatically enlarged the alumni and development office and boosted career and networking services.) In addition, Bollinger has provided “a significant amount” of money—Lemann declines to provide specifics—for the program’s launch and first three years, most of which Lemann is using to provide tuition relief. He expects members of the first class to contribute, at most, \$5,000 to \$10,000 each toward their tuition.

THROUGH IT ALL, Lemann continues to write, albeit less than he used to. “You can’t do everything at once. Life is a zero-sum game,” he says, with just a trace of a New Orleans accent. At home, he and his second wife, Judith Shulevitz, a former *New York Times Book Review* columnist and former *Slate* culture editor who’s now writing a book, have two young children, including a daughter born just as Lemann became dean. He also has two children from his first marriage, to magazine editor Dominique Browning; his oldest son, Alexander, is slated to graduate from Harvard next June. To date, Lemann says, his children have shown no interest in journalism careers.

To those who wonder why he gave up one of the field’s plum jobs—correspondent for the *New Yorker*—to become a university administrator, Lemann emphasizes that “there was never going to be another

chance” for him to take a lead role in creatively addressing the future of his profession. “There was no way of saying ‘Come back and talk to me in five years,’” he adds. “The things I wanted to do were mostly postpone-able. This wasn’t.”

If he ever needs reminding about why he took the post, Lemann has only to re-read Pulitzer’s 1904 treatise in favor of formal journalism education, copies of which he keeps in his desk and hands out freely. While noting that the school’s benefactor certainly had his flaws, the dean is especially fond of the timeless final paragraph, which is also engraved on a plaque in the school’s lobby: “Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mould [sic] the future of the Republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations.”

—ANNE STUART

Anne Stuart is a Boston-based journalist, former assistant editor of this magazine, and 1986 graduate of the School of Journalism.

Harvard’s “Wider Communities”

THE NEW PRESIDENT of the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) Yuki Moore Laurenti '79, plans to expand on the organization’s theme—“Participate in Harvard’s future”—by pinpointing more innovative ways to engage alumni, especially the younger ones. “I want to reach beyond the existing networks and formal structures of alumni organizations,” she explains, “and to the wider communities where Harvard alumni might make a difference.”

The Harvard Club of New York City, for example, has compiled volunteer opportunities throughout the city, including many at organizations with existing ties

to club members. “It’s a way to do outreach that does not directly involve Harvard activities,” she says, “but in which the Harvard connection can provide alumni with a clearinghouse to become active in the Harvard community and outside of it.” Laurenti also cites the Early Awareness Program begun by the Harvard-Radcliffe Club of Maryland (and subsequently emulated in New York, Boston, and Chicago). Alumni volunteers meet with seventh- and eighth-grade students and their parents to “expose them to what it means to go to college and what you have to do to be prepared, such as taking exams and understanding financial aid,” she says. “This takes what we know and translates it in ways that are helpful to a larger community.”



Yuki Moore
Laurenti

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