

Zeitschrift: Studies in Communication Sciences : journal of the Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research

Herausgeber: Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research; Università della Svizzera italiana, Faculty of Communication Sciences

Band: 6 (2006)

Heft: 2

Artikel: Comments on Russ-Mohl

Autor: Dennis, Everette E.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-791119>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.05.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

EVERETTE E. DENNIS*

COMMENTS ON RUSS-MOHL

In his manifesto on the economics of journalism and the creation of infrastructures linking knowledge and practice, Professor Russ-Mohl correctly posits that *media scholars* and *media industry professionals* need greater interaction and that can lead to mutually beneficial results. While this may at first seem self-evident, it is not. Even though both parties are involved in information and knowledge exchange, albeit for different purposes, they rarely engage each other.

There is some irony to this. Journalism is, after all, part of a knowledge industry and is organized for the acquisition, processing and distribution of a particular type of information, defined as news or public affairs content. Media scholars are concerned with the creation of new knowledge about journalism, the journalistic process and its resultant impact on individuals, institutions, society and culture. And as Professor Russ-Mohl notes, they operate within certain theoretical norms, established by their peers and those from related fields, such as social-psychology, sociology and, increasingly, economics, all accommodating an understanding of media systems. Along the way they consider an array of questions about who journalists are, what they do, how they do it and with what effect. They consider what types of information are valued by different actors in the political, economic and social sectors. In short, there is nearly a century of communication and media research going back to Max Weber's empirical studies of the newspaper (Sica 2003) and continuing to the present day, a corpus knowledge that includes the history of the press, comparative and international studies, social scientific inquiries integrating survey research, content analysis and experimental design. Along the way there has been conflict between scholars who divide along qualitative and quantitative modes of analysis. In the early

* Fordham University's Graduate School of Business, New York, dennis@fordham.edu

days of journalism research in the first fifty or so years of the 20th Century, humanists as represented by historical, legal and ethical studies of communication doubted the value of the social scientists led by such figures as Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld and codified in the work of Wilbur Schramm and his progeny. Before long, the social scientists were the premier researchers and enjoyed two, nearly three decades of preeminence before the qualitative scholars and commentators, such as those from critical theory and cultural studies, offered a formidable challenge. By the early years of the 21st Century, the qualitative scholars had achieved a cutting edge profile as the work of quantifiers was sometimes vigorously challenged (Dennis & Wartella 1996).

These battles went unobserved by most media professionals and executives, though on occasion, studies of public or civic journalism ignited their interest and the growing field of media economics, beautifully represented by the work of James Hamilton, cited in the manifesto, captured significant attention. Of course, most media/journalism research occurred in universities in the U.S., Europe and Japan with some being generated in a relatively few industry research centers, in the U.S. and Europe, operated by universities, publishing firms, public broadcasters or industry associations. The general disconnect between media scholarship and media industries was occasionally the cause of lament by those who value orderly systematic information. The distinguished news researcher Leo Bogart (Bogart 1999), for example, often remarked that media industries really had no R&D (research and development) interest or capacity, even as other industries relied heavily on such intelligence. Even market research about journalism was decried by some with arguments fearing that such endeavor would impinge on creativity and freedom of expression. Worrying that market research would result in a pandering journalism beholden to business interests, media critics continued to declare war on the commodification of news (which in truth was always a commodity, though a cultural product) and on the evils of concentrated ownership. Indeed, if there is an explanation for the distance, even distant, between journalism's owners and managers and academe it is that scholarship is often equated with criticism and is seen as having little value to the commercial media of which journalism is an integral part.

In time some, if not all, of these arguments cooled as rational minds realized that journalism is, in fact, mainly a commercial venture (there are some exceptions) and that knowing and understanding how to navigate those shoals with the benefit of rigorous research might have some

value. Thus, the idea of research transfer in journalism was born. It was mentioned favorably in the famed Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press in the U.S. in 1947 which called for “centers of intelligence,” de facto think tanks long before research policy centers as we know them today developed. As Professor Russ-Mohl has noted, a handful of media research centers, based in academe, but respectful of and responsive to the media did develop. I was privileged to lead such an enterprise at Columbia University in New York City for 12 years in the 1980s and 1990s (Dennis & Stebenne 2003). There we promoted mutual respect between journalism (and other media) and academe, believing that a mutual exchange of ideas would be useful and productive. And so it was. Leading scholars and professionals enjoyed a heretofore unknown exchange of ideas, research evidence and conclusions. With the improvement and advancement of the media as its goal, the Gannett Center for Media Studies (later the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center) studied institutional norms, journalism practices, content mandates and imperatives as well as the impact of new technologies on journalism. With journalists, media executives and scholars moving in and out of the Center on half-year and year-long appointments there was, in fact, knowledge transfer in a place which a leading broadcaster praised for creating a space where “neither journalists nor scholars could parade their prejudices,” rather than engage in problem solving with real evidence. At present, another such enterprise is being created at the University of Missouri where the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute will be journalism’s think tank and where the best of practical university based research will address real world activities in journalism.

The European Journalism Observatory has the promise of delivering much of what the Gannett Center did and what the Reynolds Institute aspires to do. The key to such an effort is: first, mutual respect between the parties developing the program; second: a method for agreeing on the agenda for research; third: clear ideas about how key questions will be focused and studied, and finally: a method for the practical and effective dissemination of the results of any work done. Each of these objectives is formidable, but the last is especially demanding. Agreement on the need for research is almost self-evident in a digital age when change is a constant and new knowledge is crucial. Similarly, some diplomatic process whereby research questions are formulated in the context of speculative long term and short term considerations, are part of the agenda. But the transfer and use of the knowledge generated to practitioners, their man-

agers and leaders is more difficult. Here research must be harnessed to provide background briefings on what people (especially intuitive journalists) think they know and what the yield of rigorous research actually shows. Here seminars and workshops plus onsite research activity will enhance understanding and redound to the benefit of the journalistic enterprise.

The mutual benefit of an exchange between journalism scholars and practitioners (including managers and executives) is especially critical in an age when traditional media are severely challenged by economic forces and there is much talk about the death of the newspaper and the news-magazine, for example. Journalistic formats and infrastructures may change over time, but basic functions such as information, entertainment, opinion and advertising/marketing will presumably be ever present, though in what proportion is yet unknown. Media scholars are not of one mind or mind set as we mentioned earlier. Should they decide that a robust relationship with the commercial world has value, they must write the rules for it. Those rules ought to include the absolute independence of the mandate and purpose of the organization, agreed upon protocols for acceptable research projects as well as a well articulated strategy for disseminating them.

In sum, journalism research without an appreciative audience is of little value and a journalism industry that preens itself on competence, but lacks the wherewithal to benefit from research findings is myopic at best. By the same token, academics who have been anti-professional, rarely venturing from the cloistered hall of universities, could benefit from a mutually arrived at and directed program. They need not sacrifice their integrity or independence to do so. Long ago, the sociologist Daniel Bell (1976) declared that we're entering an information society in which information storage and retrieval would be critical aspects of the quality of life. As Professor Russ-Mohl has so ably put it — this is the time for a commitment to a productive interchange and true knowledge transfer — between scholars and professionals. The case he makes is compelling and it is for true leaders in universities and research centers to establish effective working relationships with the leaders of journalism — as well as rank and file journalists. Citizens who rely on the yield of the press for daily intelligence and decision-making deserve nothing less.

References

- BELL, DANIEL (1976). *The Coming & Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*, Reissue, New York: Basic Books. Last retrieved on August 15, 1999 from <http://www.newamerica.net/index.cfm?pg=article&DocID=346>.
- BOGART, LEO (1999). *Commercial Culture*, Somerset, NJ: Transaction Publishers, and in personal interview with the author.
- DENNIS, EVERETTE E. & WARTELLA, ELLEN (1996). *American Communication Research - The Remembered History*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum: 4 ff.
- DENNIS, EVERETTE E. & STEBENNE, DAVID (2003). Requiem for Think Tank: The Life and Death of the Gannett Center at Columbia 1984-1996. *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 8/2: 11-35.
- SICA, ALAN (2003). *Max Weber and the New Century*, Somerset, NJ: Transaction Publishers: 76.

