

PRESS & MEDIA

Is J-School a Joke?

“Can J-School Be Saved?” by Jack Shafer, in *Slate* (Oct. 7, 2002), www.slate.msn.com;
“Some Ruminations on Journalism Schools as Columbia Turns” by Orville Schell, and
“Getting Journalism Education Out of the Way” by Betty Medsger, in *Zoned for Debate*
(Sept. 16, 2002), www.nyu.edu/igsas/dept/journal/forum.

The prestigious graduate school of journalism at Columbia University, the sainted press critic A. J. Liebling once wrote, had “all the intellectual status of a training school for future employees of the A&P.” Columbia president Lee Bollinger may not have harbored so subversive a view last summer when he suspended the search for a new dean and called for communal reflection on the school’s purpose. But some have begun to think the unthinkable.

“The biggest losers in J-school abolition . . . would be (in order) the janitors who maintain the physical plants, the faculties, and the Annenbergs and Gannetts who’ve purchased naming rights to the buildings,” maintains Shafer, a *Slate* columnist who is a former editor of the weekly *Washington City Paper* and never went to J-school himself.

A 1996 survey, he notes, found that only 10 percent of newspaper editors and reporters had graduate degrees in journalism (though 54 percent held undergraduate degrees in journalism or communications). “In the 17 years that I hired and fired,” Shafer says, “none of the J-school graduates who worked for me did better work than the many English majors I’ve employed.” Medsger, a freelance writer, found in 1996 that 59 percent of the journalists who had won a Pulitzer Prize in the preceding 10

years had never studied journalism in college or graduate school.

The schools do serve a limited function, Shafer concludes: They help would-be journalists who are clueless about how to proceed and have \$10,000 or so to spend explore their interest and land a “substantial” journalism job. But he urges Bollinger to warn prospective students that “you can get as good a journalism education via an internship or by working a year on a small-town daily.”

For the most part, however, “media outlets” no longer “mentor and cultivate young journalists in the best traditions of the craft at the lower reaches of the professional ladder,” argues Schell, the dean of the journalism school at the University of California, Berkeley, who also enjoyed a successful career in the field without benefit of a journalism degree. That function now belongs to the journalism schools.

Schell agrees with Bollinger on the need to transcend the trade school model. He argues that M.A. programs must last two years instead of the usual one, and that the schools must “broaden their curricula” to include history, culture, science, and other subjects that a journalist—or any educated person—ought to know about.

The Jungle of Journalism

“Upton Sinclair and the Contradictions of Capitalist Journalism” by Robert W. McChesney and Ben Scott, in *Monthly Review* (May 2002), 122 W. 27th St., New York, N.Y. 10001.

Just as his novel *The Jungle* (1906) led to reform in the meatpacking industry, so Upton Sinclair’s *The Brass Check* (1919), a searing critique of the commercial press, helped bring about the rise of journalistic professionalism and “objectivity.” Sinclair, however, was not impressed, and he was right not to be, argue McChesney, a professor of communications at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Scott, a

graduate student at the university.

“American journalism is a class institution serving the rich and spurning the poor,” Sinclair declared. Newspaper publishing, once crowded with highly partisan dailies of diverse viewpoints, had become, by the turn of the 20th century, a big business, and much less competitive. Sinclair saw most journalists as little better than prostitutes, the authors write, and he “believed that, ultimately, those