

UWO professor ‘connects the DOT’ in authoring new journalism textbook

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Starting out as a newspaper reporter in Baltimore, Professor Miles Maguire got the kind of minimalist training that many other journalists have received over the years—not much more than an assignment to go somewhere and come back with something to publish.

“It was, ‘Here, go write the story,’” Maguire said.

The approach worked well enough for Maguire, who went on to a career as a beat reporter, columnist, Washington bureau chief and magazine editor-in-chief while picking up awards from the Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild, the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association and the Society of Professional Journalists.

But the news industry changed over the years, adopting new technology and story forms and venturing into more complex subject areas. In light of these developments, Maguire came to doubt that the traditional way of teaching journalists was sufficient for the increasingly complicated world they are expected to dive into, research and report about.

As he began to look for alternative ways to teach reporting, he discovered that it was easier to find descriptions of “what” reporters do than guides to explain “how.” Taking matters into his own hands, the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh journalism professor now has a new textbook in queue, waiting for release from publisher Routledge this summer.

In “Advanced Reporting: Essential Skills for 21st Century Journalism,” Maguire develops and offers a new methodology for reporting, one that is not designed for any media platform but that could be applied in print, online or over the airwaves.

The book focuses on reporting “as a process of triangulation based on three essential activities: analyzing documents, making observations and conducting interviews.” The idea is for students to apply critical-thinking principles and cross-check the information they find in using these information gathering tools.

Maguire calls this process “connecting the DOT.” The first two letters of this acronym come from two of the three elements, documentary analysis and observations made in the field. The acronym is completed by substituting the word “talking” for “interviewing.”

“I’ve never seen it expressed that way – so simply and sort of an epistemology of journalism and research,” said Ivor Shapiro, chair of the school of journalism at Ryerson University of Toronto, who previously worked with Maguire on a research project a few years ago.

“I totally can imagine using this book in a first-year reporting class or even an upper-year reporting workshop or course,” Shapiro said. “... Having a structure to get your head around and say, ‘Oh, that’s what we do;’ you can explain it to yourself and your parents and your sources in a really simple, three-fold way.”

At the core of Maguire’s connecting-the-DOT methodology is the mindful comparison of facts and purported facts, a testing and retesting of theories and suppositions, as a way of getting closer to the truth.

The idea isn’t to lead students into cookie-cutter approaches but to provide a flexible structure to help them hatch the right questions, pursue interviews and gather and report the news. In the textbook, Maguire elegantly defines news as “what’s not supposed to be.”

“Too many stories are written from a lawyerly perspective: ‘Did I make the case?’” he said, adding that the DOT method helps developing journalists ensure research – and not an unsupported thesis -- inform the end story.

In that way, the methodology in the textbook could also be a timely media literacy tool. It can help budding reporters and news consumers alike be more thorough skeptics, questioning the origins and motivations in the news reports churning out of an expanding and roiling media ocean.

“We focus so much on the content of the story--we don’t focus on how it was derived,” Maguire said.

University of Texas at Austin Moody College of Communication Associate Professor George Sylvie studies the evolving media landscape. He sits on the editorial boards of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* and other publications and has been sought out as an expert on topics including multimedia curriculum, newspaper ethics and other media trends.

Sylvie said more journalism programs “need good reporting texts,” and he said he appreciated Maguire’s straightforward methodology as it can help developing reporters hit the ground running in their careers.

“I applaud him for trying to boil it down because, as somebody who has been teaching for 25 years, it’s a very difficult subject to broach,” Sylvie said, adding he encourages his students to look at reporting “through a critical-thinking prism.”

“I don’t use those words, ... but I try to show them that the job itself is one of constant critical adjustment. It is a formula. But it is a dynamic formula.”

The textbook is full of journalism case studies chronicling the backstories and origins of famous and award-winning news reports of the past. But it is also intentionally designed to stay relevant well into the future, not dating or miring itself in present technology.

As the last approximately 20 years have seen a revolution in news reporting and news consumption with the advent of the Internet, digital media tools and grassroots “citizen journalism,” the fundamental objectives of journalism have not changed. That’s where DOT comes in. It offers an approach that doesn’t latch itself to the devices of the day.

“So much emphasis now is on technology,” Maguire said. “What’s lost is, ‘How do you get a good story?’”

Maguire said he hopes the textbook proves popular with journalism programs around the nation. Early feedback from editors (including his wife, Roberta, chair of the UW Oshkosh Department of English, to whom the textbook is dedicated to) has been positive.

He said the DOT method of reporting provides a solid foundation and starting point for reporters with increasingly diverse talents and backgrounds. It is not intended to produce robo-journalists. Rather the opposite.

“It’s a structure you can grow out of,” Maguire said.

Learn more:

- [Advanced Reporting: Essential Skills for 21st Century Journalism](#)
- [UW Oshkosh Department of Journalism](#)