



**Address at the 25th Annual Journalists and Editors Workshop
on Latin America and the Caribbean**

**Given by Mark B. Rosenberg
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This speech was presented to attendees of the 25th Annual Journalists and Editors Workshop on Latin America and the Caribbean by Mark B. Rosenberg as Chancellor of the State University System of Florida on May 11, 2007.

As Richard Threlkeld of ABC News pointed out in his presentation to this workshop in 1988, the world of foreign news reporting has come a long way since William Howard Russell first reported the Battle of Bull Run to the London Times in the 1860s.

My thesis is that changes still coming will be fundamental and far reaching – far more change in the next two decades in foreign news reporting than we saw in the period between William Howard Russell and Mr. Threlkeld (and for those of you who knew him, he would believe that this comparison is entirely appropriate).

Indeed, the era of the foreign news reporter is over; foreign bureaus are an artifact of the past; newspapers as we know them are struggling mightily under new pressures – the decline of revenue and the power of the web (real time, on-time, 24/7, digital, visual, and deadlines every minute), and most importantly traditional values that anchored your journalistic world are challenged in primordial ways.

I am not searching for nostalgia – I remember well the good old days. We created this workshop because few if any of us were satisfied then with the state of the art – I love here the reflection on nostalgia written by Bill Vaughn – “its never safe to be nostalgic about something until you’re absolutely certain there’s no chance of its coming back....” So I want to make several points.

My first is that we should not be surprised about the rapidity of change – and its impact on the world of foreign news reporting. Let’s face it – information technology “has already had greater impact on productivity, the nature of tasks, how workers interact with each other and their supervisors, and the quality of work life than the assembly line ever did...” There is no reason that the news media and of course foreign reporting would be somehow exempt from these developments. Indeed, in Ray Kurzweil’s 1999 book *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*, the thesis is advanced that the primary political and philosophical issue of the 21st century would be around who we are. Although he was predicting the debate to focus around the blurred lines of human and machine cognition, today we are addressing this issue within the context of a borderless world that still retains primordial national and ethnic markers as the defining points of identity. Kurzweil warns that the “pace of change is accelerating and that the result will be far greater transformations in the first two decades of the twenty-first century than we saw in the entire twentieth century...”

Given the erosion of national borders, given the sharply contradictory vectors of change at all levels of society, and given more broadly ecosystem fragility, we can predict more rather than less confusion about things in the next few years.

What should not be in dispute however is that foreign news reporting – indeed news reporting more generally is fundamentally changing. David Halberstam--in an exit interview in 1999 to 20th century news reporting-- stated that “the great change in media is driven by technology and nobody really knows how to bring the traditional restraints and strengths of journalism to the new technology.” I believe that what is happening – a morphing or transformation in the world of information is something potentially far more powerful and useful for the informed public than we had in the past. I will explain this in a moment.

A second observation: With these changes – the web, real time on time, 24/7, the data reveal that we are not necessarily either more or better informed as a nation. While we have witnessed 24 hour cable news and the explosion of internet sources, the Pew Center reports that these changes have had “little impact on how much Americans know about national and international affairs.” Further, they point out that “despite the fact that education levels have risen dramatically over the past 20 years, public knowledge has not increased accordingly.” So where does that leave us?

I would be the first to agree with Halberstam that journalistic standards are “declining.” However, even if they are declining or at least in transformation away from some higher standard from the “old days,” there is a paradox. With the decline of foreign reporting and the elimination of foreign bureaus, even with the decline of the international news hole in most newspapers, and even with the deterioration in the quality of news reporting, we are at a point where we can be better informed about foreign affairs: there is more and better information available for those of us who are actively seeking to inform ourselves. Thus, from a foreign affairs perspective, we are probably better off today than we were when we first started our Journalists’ and Editors’ Workshop, even if the quality and quantity of foreign news reporting has declined.

Let me explain: Compared to two decades ago, for those of us who are students of foreign affairs, there is an embarrassment of riches in terms of information. Of course the web makes this possible. These sources vary in quality and quantity. They are often self-serving or flat out incorrect, but their pluralism makes it possible to learn about regions faster, their people, and histories than at any time in the past. For better or worse, depending on your level of professionalism and motivation, you can do all this without leaving the comfort of your own home.

Twenty years ago, I was very dependent upon foreign news reporters for base-line information about events or issues that were of casual or direct professional

importance. Moreover the determination of their reporting was often Washington-Centric or indeed New York Times centric. Today, I can set my own news agenda, and rely on local sources – including newspapers, non-profits, third-party reporting. I can find audio, video, and graphical sources on-line. And the ubiquitous presence of cell phones means that I am within an instant of speaking directly with the protagonists or their observers that I could only read about weeks later just two decades ago. So my sense about things today is that we can be better informed than we were two decades ago, even though there has been a radical morphing in the traditional news business such as to make foreign news reporting virtually obsolete as a professional pursuit.

Thus while I am disheartened that an era has passed during these 25 years, I am heartened that a new era is upon us. It is ill-defined at best, but its profile will look like this:

- 24/7 information available from anywhere – what Morville calls “ambient findability;”
- An explosion of indigenous forms of news and information reporting – more populist, grass-roots, communal and non-profit;
- Variable standards of quality that will make it harder if not impossible to ascertain truth;

Forums such as these will still be necessary, if for no other reason than to compare notes about the truth or the many truths that we will be sorting through. Disinformation and misinformation will be as prevalent if not more prevalent. Our triumphs will be in real time. Our frailties will be in real time. The only norm that will bind us is our commitment to getting the information out, regardless of the quality or veracity of its message.

The state of the art will still need to be critiqued, lamented and nurtured. That was our calling then, it is our calling now, and no doubt it will be critical to our work in 25 years.

Thank you.