On Campus

Carl W. Ackerman: The Journalism School’s Other Founder

Although his vision was never realized, longtime dean Carl W. Ackerman largely shaped the Journalism School as we know it.

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Columbia University’s School of Journalism (now the Graduate School of Journalism) is properly considered the creation of the publisher Joseph Pulitzer. But the school had what amounted to a second founder: its first dean, Carl W. Ackerman — not only because he stuck around for 25 years, but because he cast the school in a format that almost 70 years of successors were unable to dislodge.

Ackerman is largely forgotten; even those who attended the school in his era did not know him well. We in the class of 1951 recall seeing him perhaps three times in our year: at an opening reception, maybe at a holiday party (but maybe not), and at graduation — those few of us who chose to attend. He did not teach, and I suspect he was rarely glimpsed even peeking into a classroom.

He looked a little like a bespectacled Buddha and was formal, even fussy, in his dealings with colleagues. His papers at the Library of Congress reveal a man much concerned over personal status and real or imagined slights. He thrived on ceremonies and honors. This is not the profile of an ideal, or typical, journalism dean. So why remember him? Primarily because the steps he took early in his tenure determined into the indefinite future the nature of the curriculum and instruction at the school.

How did such an unlikely figure come to be named dean in the first place? To explain, it is necessary to reach back to the school’s origins. The agreement that

created the School of Journalism in 1903 melded the idealism of Pulitzer, a wealthy magnate of the yellow press, and the practicality of Nicholas Murray Butler, the University's president, then at the start of his long tenure. Pulitzer envisioned a school that would foster a new breed of practitioners who would turn journalism into a "great and intellectual profession" — a vision indeed, because newspaper journalism at that time could scarcely be considered either intellectual or a profession. For his part, Butler accepted Pulitzer's proffered $2 million endowment, which became available after Pulitzer's death in 1911, and turned it into brick, stone, faculty, and a student body.

When the school opened in 1912 Butler made a good-faith effort to carry out Pulitzer's vision of an encyclopedic education for omnicompetent journalists. He lent leading scholars from other divisions to teach the students government, law, history, languages, science, fine arts, and, of course, journalism history, ethics, and skills. Students who took to this backbreaking load cherished it. But many dropped out, and others felt so oppressed that the school was several times on the verge of a strike.

More significantly, Butler soon realized that the scheme was too expensive to be covered by the Pulitzer endowment. Sizable chunks of the money had gone, of course, to construct the journalism building on the corner of 116th Street and Broadway, and to create the prizes in arts, letters, and journalism that bore Pulitzer's name and have been administered at the school ever since.

To make ends meet, the four-year program was cut back to its two final undergraduate years, and the scholars from other faculties were summoned home. The remaining teachers were primarily retread newspapermen.

The school suffered from unsteady leadership. The first director, Talcott Williams, was a garrulous elder statesman of the press, worn out by the time he retired in 1919. His successor was a pipe-smoking professor of literature, John W. Cunliffe. The school spent the 1920s in the doldrums, fortunate enough to attract talented students but falling far short of giving them the education Pulitzer had envisioned.

Butler took decisive steps in 1931 to restore the school's reputation. First, he found, or rediscovered, Carl W. Ackerman. A graduate of Earlham College in Indiana, Ackerman had entered the school as a fourth-year student and had earned a degree in 1913 with the school's first graduating class. In the First World War, Ackerman

made a name as a foreign correspondent, initially with United Press, covering the conflict from both sides, and was one of the first on the scene of the execution of the tsar and his family in the Bolshevik Revolution. In the early 1920s his stature was such that he became an extraordinary intermediary in negotiations between the Irish and British governments. Then he switched to public relations, wrote an admiring biography of his employer, George Eastman of Eastman Kodak, and was just starting a new job at General Motors when Butler called him back to Columbia.

At the announcement of Ackerman's appointment as the school's third director (he soon became the first dean), the GM connection played badly. Ackerman was attacked in the professional press as representing the calling — public relations — that was destroying honest journalism, and one of Pulitzer's sons denounced the appointment. Butler, however, himself a master of publicity, regarded Ackerman's PR experience as an advantage. In fact, Ackerman was far from alone among the school's early graduates in having left low-paying pure journalism for corporate money.

Ackerman took charge in the fall of 1931 and, carrying out Butler's mandate, began steps designed to win the school respect without overburdening its parent institution.

Even before he was in office, Ackerman made it clear that the school would no longer welcome all comers. He said he would exclude those who, he believed, dulled the school's professional reputation and sense of purpose: would-be novelists, would-be playwrights, drifters, and women. Women had been admitted since the school's first days, but under Ackerman their numbers were reduced to single digits in each class; they didn't gain numerical equality until 1977, long after Ackerman was gone.

He tightened the curriculum by tossing out such frivolities as playwriting and fiction, and he focused instruction on newsroom skills. The school's bulletin was stripped of Pulitzer's idealistic words about public service and referred instead to the duty of journalists to make the news business prosper.

Ackerman found his formula for the future in a call by the leading professional association, the American Society of Newspaper Editors, for journalism education on the graduate level. In 1934 he proposed, and the faculty approved, that the two-year program become a graduate school requiring a bachelor's degree for admission. The

proposal came back from Low Library stripped of its second year, so the program became a one-year capsule leading to a master of science — “science” because Butler did not want to attach the prestige of an arts degree to so humble a calling as journalism. (A second year was not restored until 2004, under Dean Nicholas Lemann.)

The new scheme had the advantage of focus: students pursued an almost lockstep course of study and had to finish in one academic year or not at all. It had the advantage, budgetwise, of demanding few tenured professors — the bulk of the instruction could be offered by part-timers hired from the downtown press.

At the start of each year, the entire class of 65 or so was caged in a single newsroom and subjected to boot-camp training. As the year went on, instruction gradually eased off into benign neglect, to the point that students in effect did a lot of self-teaching, fanning out from the 116th Street IRT station to cover stories anywhere in the city, sometimes not seeing an instructor all day. Laboratory news pages, edited by students, displayed their work in the format of a New York afternoon newspaper.

Within its limits, it worked well. In general, students emerged feeling they knew the ways of metropolitan journalism; just as important, they shared a lasting sense of collegiality. No matter that critics called the curriculum merely undergraduate training transferred to graduate level, the graduates regarded themselves as an elite.

The man who shaped this prosaic new version of Pulitzer’s dream seemed, curiously, not to take much interest in how it was executed. Ackerman, as is minutely revealed in his papers, continually looked for diversion, political or otherwise. He had an itch to play on grander stages than the tiny institution he headed.

In 1934, when the American Newspaper Publishers Association got into a spat with President Franklin D. Roosevelt over an effort to enlist newspapers in a recovery program, Ackerman pitched in on the side of the publishers, coming close to accusing the president of plotting a fascist state. In a similar dispute four years later, he again joined with the publishers, who were trying vainly to avoid paying overtime under the new Wages and Hours Act. He saw himself as a spokesman for the American press — at least for that part of it that owned the presses — and in return his declarations in his annual reports were treated in the press as holy writ.

Ackerman also tried to expand his on-campus visibility. In 1938 he reached an agreement with the wealthy Godfrey Lowell Cabot and his diplomat son to establish awards to journalists for promoting “inter-American understanding.” The Maria Moors Cabot Prizes, named for the senior Cabot’s late wife, were troubled in their early years. Candidates were customarily scrutinized by the U.S. State Department; even so (or perhaps inevitably), journalists touched with fascism made the list — with one awardee so suspect that Jews invited to the prize dinner boycotted it. But Ackerman never wavered in his determination to continue the prizes, and he treasured the trips he took to Latin America and the Caribbean to vet candidates. But in setting up the Cabot Prizes Ackerman created the first real competitor under the same roof to the Pulitzers, which he also administered, and opened the door to a plethora of awards that turned the school into a prize-giving machine.

His neglect of the daily operation of the school earned Ackerman a written rebuke from President Butler in 1939, and he promised to do better — to meet with the faculty regularly, to pay closer attention to instruction, and to create opportunities for journalism students to draw on the resources of the University. But none of this happened. Instead, he continued to search for new fields to conquer, and World War II gave him a unique opportunity. One of Ackerman’s classmates in the journalism class of 1913 had been Hollington K. Tong, who was then a minister in the government of Nationalist China under Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek. Tong proposed to Ackerman that Columbia establish a school of journalism in the wartime capital, then known as Chungking.

Ackerman was taken with the idea. In Washington, he gained secret funding from the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the CIA. After recruiting his associate dean, Harold R. Cross, and a group of young graduates, he sent them off to China in 1943, by slow boat and by plane over the Hump. Only when the instructors arrived did they find that the school would be under the direction of the Kuomintang, the ruling political party. Moreover, although the American instructors did their best to teach straight-ahead American journalism, it was clear that the party had in mind the training of secret agents and propagandists. Cross fumed and fussed at the situation and left after a year. The school closed at the end of the war, and Ackerman subsequently received an award from the Nationalist government.

After World War II, President Butler retired and died, and the University searched for a successor. Ackerman, Butler’s protégé, favored Butler’s deputy, Frank D. Fackenthal, and was distinctly chilly toward the name that rose to the top of the list,

General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Ackerman had nothing good to say about Eisenhower during the search or during the general's relatively brief tenure in Low Library.

He carried this dislike over into the election campaign of 1952, after he became irritated because Eisenhower, long since away as NATO commander, continued to claim the Columbia president's house as his residence. When Columbia spokesmen hinted that all of Columbia stood behind Eisenhower, Ackerman loudly proclaimed that he supported the general's opponent, Adlai E. Stevenson — this from a man whose politics had apparently always been to the right of Stevenson's, and Eisenhower's, for that matter.

Ackerman knew he was nearing the end of his career and could afford to be independent. In 1953 he took an even bolder political position. While most American institutions, including universities, were bowing to the demands of the McCarthyite inquisition, Ackerman abruptly declared the files of the journalism school closed to investigators without subpoenas. Earlier, he had let the FBI see the files of the wife of Alger Hiss, a chief target of postwar investigations. She had attended the school briefly in the 1920s. Now he changed his mind, asserting that McCarthyism was placing a damper on free expression. The University's head of public relations begged him to grovel before the FBI or at least back off, but Ackerman felt no need to make such compromises. Invoking the Pulitzer tradition of independence, he dramatically made his stand public. (This apparent conversion may in reality have been a last expression of his deep conservatism, a rooted distrust of state power.)

Ackerman no longer wished to continue, especially after the death of his wife, so in 1954 told the administration he wanted to leave. He had to wait two years, though, until Columbia found a successor, just as he completed his 25 years in the dean's office. He accepted a few honors as he departed and then retreated into isolation in his apartment not far from the campus, visiting the school rarely and only by invitation.

To the students who passed through the school during his tenure, he was a distant personage. Among his colleagues, if not loved, he was certainly respected for his expansive vision and administrative tenacity. And to his successors, the one-year graduate program remained a rock in the middle of a stream, an obstacle to be dealt with, tinkered with, reshaped, and incrementally improved into something resembling a challenging graduate education; and never, in the 20th century at least, was it entirely overcome.

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