On Campus

In the Eye of the Storm

Columbia Magazine talks with Lee C. Bollinger about Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, new media, and the value of French poetry.

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The September 24 appearance of the Iranian president in a World Leaders Forum event was one of the leading international news stories of the day. Could you summarize the mechanics of just how Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to speak at Columbia?

Professor Richard Bulliet, who teaches courses in Middle East history and Islamic society, came to John Coatsworth, the acting dean of the School of International and Public Affairs, and to me. He said that he was in contact with representatives of the Iranian mission to the UN about a possible visit by Ahmadinejad. John pursued this and then informed me that he wanted to extend an invitation.

In the academic world there's a deep and long-standing principle that faculty, heads of schools or departments, and deans have the freedom to invite people to come speak. It is the responsibility of the institution, and of the president in particular, to defend that freedom. So I told John Coatsworth that I would certainly defend the freedom of the school and Professor Bulliet to create this event. I had to decide then whether to incorporate this into the World Leaders Forum, which was going to occur at the same time and would make it possible for more people to participate. I decided to do that.

But there were conditions. We invite people for academic purposes — for research, for teaching, for helping us to better understand the world. As I tried to convey in my remarks, universities cannot make war or peace. We're in the business of making minds, and to do this, we must have full and robust freedom of inquiry. We thought through Ahmadinejad's visit to make it consistent with academic purposes.

Of course one of the key requirements was that there be significant time for questions and answers and for opportunities to cross-examine the speaker. I felt that because of the magnitude of this event, and because of the views, beliefs, and actions of Ahmadinejad, it was important for me to make an opening statement framing the questions and the issues as I saw them. That was all part of the discussions that John Coatsworth and Richard Bulliet carried on with the Iranian representatives, and it was well understood. Before the forum, we publicly stated that I would make an opening statement and would be very sharp, and that questions would be asked.

You made the point a few days before the forum that you did not want to give Ahmadinejad a legitimacy that wasn't due him, nor did you want "to honor the dishonorable." Might his simple presence and the association of his name with Columbia's have, in fact, honored the dishonorable?

I don't think so, no. In any case, my focus was on the benefit of this event to those in our community, particularly students. Iran is a nation of critical importance to the

world they will be entering, and yet for many, it is an elusive country. I saw this as an opening to generate that discussion. For me, that was the story of the day — not so much what took place inside the event, but the peaceful, spontaneous exchanges between students that took place all over campus. It was electric, and a reminder that for the academic mission to flourish, we need an environment — we *must* have an environment — where the largest and most controversial issues of our time can be addressed.

This is what the press does, as well. Yet I heard no voices saying that *60 Minutes* was inappropriate in interviewing Ahmadinejad, or that it was inappropriate for the National Press Club to do so, or for the Council on Foreign Relations to meet with him last year. That is a somewhat different environment, but the notion that universities should not be places where the most controversial issues are discussed and debated is surely one to which I don't subscribe. The largest challenge is, How do we engage meaningfully with really controversial problems? It's extremely difficult, but also essential.

My role, as I saw it, was to introduce and help frame the Ahmadinejad appearance from my own perspective — and to give voice to my personal sense of intellectual objection and moral outrage — in order to set the stage for a serious debate about serious matters. The greatest danger is that we will not live up to our academic responsibilities to take ideas seriously. Questions and answers are very important, but sometimes we need more than that, and I felt that this was such an occasion.

You did more than frame the appearance: You came out of your corner swinging. Did you feel it necessary, strategically, to give Ahmadinejad a slap and say, "We understand who you are, we know what you represent."

I would not put it the way you put it at all.

I didn't think you would.

There was nothing strategic in my motivation. It was heartfelt and mind-felt. It is what I felt needed to be said, given the views and beliefs and actions that were on the table by virtue of the president of Iran's visit. Had I not expressed the full sense of opposition and challenge, I felt I would have let down the academic values at stake. I think part of being able to hold forums that address the most difficult and controversial issues is to be able to live with sharp exchanges that incorporate the

passions, emotions, feelings, and beliefs that are directly challenged by the controversy of speakers. Other people might have done it differently, and I fully respect that.

Wasn't it, though, also a way of getting Ahmadinejad's attention? It was, after all, a breach of protocol.

It was to say, "This is a serious exchange. We are not here to listen politely and ask a few questions. You have stood for and you have repeatedly articulated a number of positions, and I want to express very directly how I feel and think about them." And as I said, he and the Iranian representatives understood the terms. It might have happened after he spoke rather than before, but I felt it was necessary.

Did you and Ahmadinejad have any exchanges either before or after the public part of the program?

No.

Did he say anything you found to be unexpected or new?

I would have to say that I did not think that he addressed the issues that I and others raised. I understand that for some, that only contradicts the value of academic exchange we were defending. I don't see it that way. For me, his answers — at times confusing, at others frustrating and abstract — said a lot about the way he chooses to see the world. That in itself was illuminating, and I think, important for students to experience. Unmediated experiences like it require us to interpret things critically for ourselves — the very skills a university education seeks to develop.

With the Ahmadinejad visit, and several times during your five years as president, you've been in the public eye in this new-media, YouTube age. I understand you're in the early stages of working on a book that deals with how the press and free-speech issues have been affected by technology.

I'm still in the thinking stage, actually. New technologies obviously matter enormously on the ground, day in and day out, for journalism and major publications. We've seen it play out in a number of cities across the country, most recently with Rupert Murdoch's purchase of Dow Jones in July.

The erosion of the advertising base for newspapers and television is a serious matter that strikes fear into the hearts of publishers and journalists. If readership is

declining, as it is across the board by about 5 percent a year, and if your advertising revenues, as a consequence, are falling by 16 percent quarter over quarter, that is a dramatic change in your revenue base. The immediate consequence of that is that you are under pressure to cut back on your foreign coverage because that doesn't bring in the readers. Then you cut back on your general reporting staff, and that begins to change the nature of the organization. Then you begin to cover different kinds of things to get a broader reader base. The subject matter of the news changes. Then you begin to worry that young people are not going to go into the profession because you can't pay them as much as other professions can pay. So with the new technologies of communications, the risk is that journalism as we know it is being vitiated.

Some people say that's just the market at work: If people want to have a first-class piece of writing about some public issue, they will find it and pay for it. If they don't, that's the way it goes. Other people say this is an enormous moment for the country and we can't trust the market to organize our democratic life. One possible response might be to have public funding, although that's abhorrent to many journalists - even though we do have NPR and public television.

On the constitutional level, it is also quite significant, although we're only beginning to understand the legal implications. When I teach freedom of the press, I'm covering not only the legal doctrines that have evolved over the past 60 years to protect the institution of the press, but I'm also teaching how the legal system, and the Supreme Court in particular, nurtured a journalistic spirit or character through the way they talked about the press and structured the legal doctrine. I've written about this at enormous length, I'm afraid, and all of that is now open to reconsideration because the underlying reality is being eroded. There may be a need to reconsider the constitutional foundation that we built.

Especially if you consider that freedom of the press used to belong to the man who owned the press, and now it belongs to anybody with a computer and cell phone with a little camera in it. Anything at all can be put out there for anybody who cares to look at it or read it.

My father owned and ran a small-town newspaper. It reported on a variety of incidents, episodes, and events, but it also provided interpretation in a way that an institution with a particular intellectual character does. But if you believe, as I do,

that journalism is a profession defined by a set of intellectual values, then to what extent can those values continue to thrive in an environment in which anybody can speak, at any time, free, to any number of people who want to have access to them? Our journalism school is trying to address exactly that question in its curriculum and in its own identity. Obviously, it is proceeding on an assumption, which I share, that those values and the profession of journalism matter to the country. But that's still an open question.

Does the deinstitutionalization of the press have implications for academia?

Five years ago, certainly ten years ago, publishers and journalists would never have predicted what is confronting them today. I hear this from major journalists all the time, and it leads me to wonder whether we in academia are in the same position. We are not asking ourselves enough whether this technological transformation might profoundly affect us — and maybe even undermine us — in our traditional roles.

There is a view that universities as we know them will fade away in the new technological era because someone who is 18 or 20 or 25 will say, "Why should I pay tuition and take out student loans and spend four or five years going to classes when I can get a job, make $40,000 or $50,000 a year, and set aside a certain amount of time every day to go online and hear the most gifted economist teach me basic economics and the most gifted political scientist teach me political science?" Will that be what we will face?

I continue to think it will not, because people will want the experiences that universities offer as intellectual centers with special values.

A related question is, What is it like to be one of the great universities in one of the great cities in this kind of universe where external people can comment all the time? I would say that it's very troublesome because we're not used to responding. It's not only that we are not used to responding, but also given our values, we must be wary of stepping into a media environment in which the attention span is so limited and the method of participation is oversimplification. We are attuned instinctively to the complexity of issues and matters in a world that is increasingly less and less so. This creates a tension of significant proportions. We must find a way to engage the searing issues of our time, without surrendering the distance and nuance we bring to

them.

That complexity is part of what goes on in the classroom. A term that gets thrown around an awful lot is *interdisciplinary*. Will we reach a point in the coming decades where we no longer have either disciplines or departments?

The answer is clearly and emphatically that there will still be disciplines. That's because specialization is one of those profound human discoveries. It is absolutely fundamental for the economy, of course, but also for knowledge. As knowledge grows, we can't know everything, and we naturally, collectively decide that we will subdivide the areas and develop disciplines.

However, as people specialize more and more, we've found they may be pursuing things that are not as important as other things they might pursue - or not as comprehensible to other people. So we lose some of the benefits that we sought initially by breaking down knowledge.

I see this in my own field. I can think of only one First-Amendment scholar from the 1940s: Zechariah Chafee. In 1960, law schools would have one course on constitutional law and, among a faculty of 50 people, perhaps two or three of them specialized in constitutional law.

Law schools responded to the profound transformation of American society that took place in the '50s and '60s through the prism of constitutional law and doctrine by creating greater and greater specialization in constitutional matters. By 1970 or 1980, every law school had at least one First-Amendment scholar. Now it is even more subdivided.

I taught media law, and most First-Amendment scholars didn't know much of anything about broadcast and electronic communication/media law. And then there is church and state; so First Amendment became a specialty, which then became a series of specialties.

I joke that I know everything there is to know about the First Amendment, but I don't know anything about the Second Amendment or the Third Amendment. The point is, the idea of a general constitutional scholar has faded. That was a response by the intellectual community to what was happening in the outside world.

Now we really should be thinking about international trade law in more depth because that's going to affect hundreds of millions of people. Being a First-Amendment scholar, I'm naturally reluctant to give up my field. That's the point! How do you shift intellectually as the world changes?

What about the liberal arts? With all this specialization, and with the growing emphasis at Columbia on the sciences, will there be a place for French Renaissance poetry deep in the 21st century?

BOLLINGER: Oh, yes. Every alum I ever meet — every *person* I ever meet — understands that a liberal education means understanding, studying, reflecting on human achievements in every area, whether it's poetry, or social theory, or drama. Everybody understands that learning about the human condition in all its forms is of enormous value. The university is the right place to emphasize such learning, and we should not give up on that, even though we cannot in any serious way articulate the relationship between that knowledge and making a living.

What we don't think about so much is how you actually preserve that in an environment in which the world's concerns press upon universities and on individual students. Whether it's because of global wars and conflicts or because of the enormous attractiveness of financial rewards or any number of things, how do you preserve an environment in which somebody can feel happy, comfortable, and fulfilled by reading a medieval poem? That's a hard problem. But that's another reason why universities are so valuable to society. And why we need to have some insularity from the outside world — even as we seek to understand it.

Given the pressures on your time, how do you manage, in addition to running the University, to deal with extracurricular activities involving community service, the board of the *Washington Post*, the governor's Higher Education Commission, and so on?

It's a mistake to think about life in terms of the number of hours in a day. What really matters in a job like this are the ideas that you can develop. Creating the conditions in which ideas can flourish is probably the most important part of figuring out a professional life.

Then there are clearly lots of things that just require basic labor: answering letters or going to a meeting or doing this and that. I don't want to minimize that in any way.

I think what everybody finds in life is that by doing a variety of things, you actually end up being more productive. If you put me in front of a computer for 10 or 12 hours and say, "write this," it's not going to be productive. Adding some things can really enrich that. I try only to do things that relate to my life, my professional life, and to Columbia's life — such as joining the board of the Washington Post Company. It's been true with joining the board of the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. They all relate in a deep way, not only as a way to get information or network. What we are talking about is structuring a life that maximizes what you can do and create.

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