The Return of Good Work in Journalism

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In the wake of the "attack on America", national priorities have changed abruptly. A month ago President Bush focused on domestic economic and educational matters; today his attention is beamed on international affairs, national security, and placing a nation on a wartime footing. A month ago, talk of sports, entertainment, and celebrities filled the summer airwaves and seaside chatter; today conversation everywhere turns to personal safety, the risks of air travel, the appeal of remote and uninhabited sites, the dilemma of ethnic profiling. Excitement about the internet and stem cells has cooled; the personal security business and video-conferencing have become growth industries. And in a trend that has been little noted, the role of the press—both print and broadcast—has suddenly been enhanced.

I've been in a position to notice this trend first hand. With my colleagues Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and William Damon. I have been engaged in a large scale study of the professions in America. Through intensive interviews and background studies, we have probed how leading figures in these professions carry out their work at a time when conditions are changing at warp speed and market forces have unprecedented and unpredictable powers. In particular, we have asked about the fate of good work: Can the core mission of a profession survive under apocalyptic circumstances? And we found

that certain professions are at risk because they have become poorly aligned—that is, the various stakeholders disagree fundamentally about the proper course of that profession.

In our study, largely carried out in 1997-1999, journalism turned out to be a specimen case of misalignment. According to the 100 journalists to whom we spoke, the "golden age" of journalism is past. Most journalists enter the trade because they want to cover stories fairly, thoroughly, accurately; they want to report events that are important for the society; and to do so in a way that is respected by colleagues and citizens. In fact, however, journalists feel thwarted at almost every turn. Those who want to carry out investigations are told that investigative journalism is too expensive, may yield nothing, or may compromise the outlet's relation with advertisers. Journalists who want to cover important international political or economic stories are informed that the public wants to have gossip, scandal, stories that are dramatic, easy to understand, ripe for gossip—"if it bleeds, it leads." Shareholders of publicly traded companies want bigger profits each quarter; the line between market and news is increasingly blurred; the journalist feels caught in the middle. Most of the journalists whom we interviewed felt that their profession was on the wane, and many volunteered that they could go into another line of work.

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Not all professions reported such malaise. For example, in a parallel study, we interviewed 100 geneticists. Their self-reports could not be more different. Geneticists enjoy membership in a profession of unique importance and excitement. All of the stakeholders—citizens, shareholders, researchers—want the same thing—good health,

long life—and they look to geneticists and other biologists to fulfill this wish. The geneticists to whom we spoke could not wait to get up in the morning. From all reports, members of this profession feel well-aligned at the beginning of the 21st century.

And now, suddenly, journalism matters in a way that it has not mattered in decades. I am not old enough to remember World War II or the beginning of the Cold War. But as one who was in college at the time, I remember very vividly the "13 days in October" at the time of the Cuban missile crisis. My contemporaries and I—young and old-- sat glued to the radio or television. We did so not because of the marriage or death of a celebrity—but because the future of our world seemed at stake. We avoided the more sensational or superficial broadcast outlets; we wanted to listen to the best and most respected reporters and analysts. During the last week, I have been reminded of that period forty years ago.

The good news is that journalism has come through. While tabloid coverage in print and broadcast has not evaporated, there has been a surprising and reassuring resurgence of quality journalism around the country. In my own city , the performance of both the "upscale" Boston Globe and the "popular" Boston Herald has been notable. Investigative reporters have rapidly uncovered many aspects of the events leading to the hijacking of the planes. There have been few blatant errors or excessively sensationalistic accounts. In fact, given the indifferent performance of our national investigative agencies before and immediately after the attacks, many of us have come to feel that our best reporters know and understand more than do our leading intelligence agents.

Nothing in the attack in America directly impacts the status of genetics. And yet in a number of indirect ways, the alignment of genetics has been challenged. There will be less money, and certainly less readily accessible money, for scientific research. There will be less patience for those who propose outlandish biological experimentation. And there is renewed appreciation that no science or technology is inherently good. If Bin Laden has indeed attempted to purchase plutonium, as a means of making a nuclear weapon, he and his associates are certainly capable of causing terror using toxic biological agents or pathological genetic experimentation.

In our study of journalism and genetics, we indicated that all alignment and misalignment is temporary. We stated that the sorry state of journalism at present could harbor positive aspects; serious journalists could band together, embrace the core values of their profession, and drum the false journalists like Matt Drudge out of the field. We also stated that the alignment of genetics might well be transitory. One poorly designed or improperly funded experiment gone out of control—one genetic "three mile island"—and the hallowed status of genetics would be shattered.

All aspects of the 'attack on America' are lamentable. I join others in praying that it will never be repeated. But if recent events catalyze a journalistic profession that is more responsible, and a reading and viewing audience that demands and rewards serious coverage of serious events, an indispensable feature of democracy will have been reinforced.

Howard Gardner is co-author of Good Work: When Excellence and Ethics Meet.