

**James Bettinger, director, Knight Fellowships Program, Stanford University --
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James Bettinger, 58, is director of the John S. Knight Fellowships Program at Stanford University. Before Stanford, Bettinger worked in newspapers for 20 years as a reporter, editorial writer and editor at the Riverside (California) Press-Enterprise, and then at the San Jose Mercury News as a city editor. He has been a writing and editing consultant and speaker with Knight Ridder, the American Press Institute and the Society of Professional Journalists. His articles have appeared in the Boston Globe, Washington Post and MSNBC.com. Bettinger graduated with honors from the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1969. He spoke with JournalismJobs.com about the future of newspapers and the role of blogs.

JournalismJobs.com: First off, what do you think of McClatchy acquiring Knight Ridder and then immediately reselling the San Jose Mercury News and 11 other papers? What does that say about the future of newspapers?

James Bettinger: The fact that McClatchy was eager to buy a larger company is an indication that it believes that papers have a future. [McClatchy CEO] Gary Pruitt himself has said as much in several statements. I regret that they sold those papers, as one [The San Jose Mercury News] is one where I used to work. I thought they would have done a good job running it, but I understand the financial constraints they were under.

JournalismJobs.com: Are newspapers losing their relevance to blogs and other media outlets?

James Bettinger: For a long time newspapers have been declining in circulation (by a long time I mean at least 30 years). There is no way to read that other than to say that it is a decline in relevance. People don't find them necessary to read. Newspapers have awakened to this and they are striving to find ways to be more relevant. But the news media landscape today is much more fragmented than it was 10 or 20 years ago.

JournalismJobs.com: Is journalism a dying profession? What is needed to revitalize it?

James Bettinger: No, I don't think it's a dying profession. Though it may need something drastic to revitalize it. I think there will always be an audience for the kind of fact-based news that journalism provides. In a free-functioning democratic society it is essential to have an independent news source bring you the news. The alternative is some sort of biased media, through the government or a different organization. People want some form of news that they can trust.

JournalismJobs.com: Polls over the past 5-10 years show an increasing mistrust of the media. What does the media need to do to regain its credibility?

James Bettinger: I see a few different reasons for this. One is the arrogance of the news media (the previous attitude had been "We know best, and we'll tell you"). They are losing some of that. Also, it is a matter of transparency. It has been hard to find out how news organizations operated, but this is changing. The New York Times online now has a page where readers can ask Bill Keller questions, and CBS has started a blog about its news practices. Also, it is a matter of people being able to recognize themselves and their community in the news that they read and see. If they read a paper and it isn't their world that they see portrayed, then it isn't relevant to them. They want to be recognized.



JournalismJobs.com: What's your opinion of blogs and the citizen journalism that has come out of it? Are blogs here to stay or just a fad?

James Bettinger: A blog is just a tool. The issue is which blogs, which audiences, and what use they have. Part of what they represent is good: a real time running commentary on real events. Good bloggers are good aggregators. They are good at gathering lots of information, but they don't do a lot of original reporting. Other functions they do very well. The definition of citizen journalism is still evolving. To the degree that it refers to using the resources of the community, it is good. There must be a distinguishing between this kind of reporting from the anything-goes kind of reporting. Bloggers are able to do everything much more quickly than the traditional news media, which is an ongoing problem. The news media gathers information and gives an authoritative assessment. But by the time we do this, the online people have already posted a story and relied on others to either corroborate it or modify it. This is different and hard for the traditional journalist.

JournalismJobs.com: On another note, why did you leave daily journalism for the academic world?

James Bettinger: I spent 20 years in daily journalism, and I really liked it. I had been a fellow in this program in the early '80s. I thought the program had great possibilities. When the number two person retired in 1989, I decided to apply for the position and I was fortunate enough to get it. My attraction to the program was a desire to work with great journalists as they were trying to reshape their careers and improve journalism. I consider myself a journalist in academia, not the reverse.

JournalismJobs.com: How have your experiences as a reporter and editor influenced your teaching style?

James Bettinger: I treat my classes as though they are writing workshops. I always have my students work on writing publishable stories. I make comments on them and rather than just returning them to the students and being done with the process (like a traditional academic class) I focus them on doing rewrites. I orient my classes around the notion of story conferences. I try to make it a collaborative process-they do individual stories but the process is collaborative.

JournalismJobs.com: Any regrets on being a journalist? Would you do it again?

James Bettinger: I would absolutely do it again. There have been times that I've been discouraged by elements of journalism, but there's nothing else that excites me in the same way that journalism did, or does. I have a strong feeling that journalism is public service. Through journalism people can hold their government or sources accountable. And also it [journalism] is fun.

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