



## **Journalism Day Henry Pringle Lecture**

**By Nate Silver**

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I deeply appreciate being invited here today and having the chance to speak to all of you.

When I look at some of the prestigious names that have given this lecture before, I know I'm in tremendous company. Frankly I feel a bit undeserving. I don't even know whether you should call me a journalist. I'm flattered if you do, but I also get called a blogger, a statistician, a reporter, an editor a columnist, an analyst -- and all of those labels are fine too.

But it does occur to me that this conundrum -- this inability to be defined by the types of labels that we once thought we deeply understood -- is really at the core of the challenges that many of you will face as you embark upon the next stage of your careers.

Journalists

and media organizations, because of the economic pressures that the industry faces, are being asked to do more with less. That creates a lot of problems -- let's not pretend that it's good news when it isn't. But it also rewards a different type of skill set: a broad, multidisciplinary skill set that almost invariably involves much more than what we'd traditionally think of as reporting.

At various points throughout your career, you'll probably need to act as your own editor, as your own web designer, as your own PR person and as your own CEO -- and much of this holds whether you're working for yourself or for a major newspaper like the New York Times.

I wanted to talk to you about some of the things that have helped me in my career and which I hope might be helpful to you as well.

To give you just a little bit of background, my path here has been somewhat circuitous. I graduated from University of Chicago in 2000 and had two potential career paths to contemplate. One was working as an assistant at the *Washington Post*; I was one of several

finalists for a fellowship that was offered annually to a University of Chicago student. The other was working as a financial consultant for a major accounting firm.

The *Washington Post* position wasn't a sure thing. The consulting job was. And it paid more. So I took it. Biggest mistake of my life. It was depressing – I don't think there's any other word for it. I'd been on the debate team in high school, worked on the newspaper in high school and college; I know it sounds self-inflated, but I was used to having an audience for my ideas. Instead, I found myself writing reports to help multinational companies optimize their international tax strategies. It didn't make for very good dinner party conversation.

But I was restless and began to pursue a number of “extracurricular” activities, one of which was playing poker – I won't bore you with the story, but I was pretty good at poker, and it gave me a certain amount of financial freedom. The other activity was developing a system called PECOTA to predict the performance of baseball players, another lifelong interest of mine. I eventually sold the system to a start-up called Baseball Prospectus, which I wrote for and managed for several years.

Baseball Prospectus was focused on statistically-savvy analysis of baseball – basically, the stuff you read about in Michael Lewis's book *Moneyball*. It was a fascinating time in the industry back then, a tense time, with a clash between old and new ways of thinking about the game. Some of our methods just starting to gain mainstream acceptance. Now, just about every baseball team has a statistical consultant or two on staff, something which was unthinkable ten years ago – there's really been a revolution within the game.

After several years – this was in 2007 or so – I found myself getting restless again for a variety of reasons. I was also developing an acute interest in politics. It seemed that, just as sportswriters spent most of their time trotting out meaningless cliches about “clubhouse chemistry” and “veteran leadership” and not enough time reading a stat sheet, the political coverage you'd see on FOX News or MSNBC was just as bad, with little real analysis. There seemed to be too much focus on Hillary Clinton's gender and Barack Obama's race. There was too much emphasis on which candidate had “won the day” by making some clever quip at a press conference – things that 99 percent of voters didn't really care about.

It seemed to me that there was an opportunity for a sort of *Moneyball* approach to politics. So I simply started writing – first anonymously for the website Daily Kos, and then for my own website, FiveThirtyEight.com, where I focused on polling and developed statistical models to forecast the outcome of the election.

I was in very much the right place at the right time, given the interest in the 2008 election, and the site really took off. Our traffic began to increase by orders of magnitude – from 1,000 hits a day to 10,000 to 100,000 – and eventually to about 3 million visitors on Election Day, 2008.

More recently, in August of last year, I licensed the blog to the *New York Times*, where I'm working today. It was a very deliberate choice, as I had a half-dozen other options in new and traditional media.

What I love about the *Times* is that they're really focused on quality as opposed to quantity. Almost every media company gives lip service to this – but it's really at the core of the *Times*' value system. They're very broad in their coverage – everything from their reporting on Libya to their restaurant reviews are among the best in the business – but they also exercise a lot of editorial judgment, and they hire great writers and reporters who are at the top of their game.

I don't speak for the *Times*, but I think the alternative – just throwing a lot of crap out there and seeing what sticks -- is exactly 180 degrees wrong. If nothing else, the web and other forms of new media give the consumer an unprecedented amount of choice, and the spoils will go to those who differentiate themselves from the pack.

So let's make that our focus – how to you differentiate yourself as a young professional in such a competitive environment? I think there are four skills in particular that will help you.

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**The first skill is simply in learning how to read.** In developing a good media consumption diet.

One of the bigger mistakes that people make when they think about *writing* a story is that they assume that it literally consists of typing -- or, absent that, staring at a blinking cursor on a computer screen. But really, that should normally come close to the end of your process. The *third* step is writing. The second step is thinking. And the *first* step is normally going to be reading.

What should you be reading? *Everything*. This is the flip-side of cheap content: you have access to more information than ever before.

Read blogs. Newspapers. Trade magazines. Books. Interview transcripts. Financial filings. And this is an important one that a lot of journalists miss: academic papers, which are more accessible than ever on sources like Google Scholar. Some academics don't know how to write, but a few of them do, and there's a lot of wisdom there once you get used to parsing through the language.

You should read broadly -- from people who come from different backgrounds and different sides of the political argument. You should read critically. Don't assume that someone is right just because they have a big credential attached. There have been a

number of studies -- including some I've conducted myself -- which have demonstrated that a group of four political pundits is often no more insightful than a barbershop quartet. A high percentage of what passes for news is really just filler.

But definitely spend a lot of time reading. Don't feel guilty if you spend the first 90 minutes of your day drinking coffee and reading blogs -- *it's your job*. Your ratio of reading to writing should be high.

**Second, learn how to be entrepreneurial.** Odds are that most of you are going to spend some part of your career working for large media outlets like the New York Times, some part working for smaller media outlets, and some part where you're more or less completely on your own -- being a freelancer, working on a book, writing a blog, in between jobs. I've done a roughly equal amount of all three of these. There are different challenges intrinsic to each of these landscapes but there are also commonalities.

It's important to develop a sense for what your time is worth -- to learn how to say 'no', to learn when to shift gears. Yes, there's such a thing as paying your dues -- but you should have less rather than more patience for a job you don't find rewarding.

It's important to keep an eye on your competition -- read Gawker and the New York Observer; read the tech press.

It's important to develop a sense of yourself as a brand -- don't let yourself become defined too narrowly because that will limit your opportunities as your career evolves.

Learn how to read a contract, even the fine print. Learn how to do your taxes. Learn how to negotiate. Learn how to manage people. These are traditionally "business skills" but they're also, increasingly, the skills that you'll need to find success as a journalist.

Part of this, by the way, is coming to peace with the fact that being an entrepreneur is not a 9-to-5 job. And neither is being a journalist -- that's *never* been true of journalism. That *doesn't* mean that you can't have a life -- quite to the contrary, journalists are people who need to be intensely curious about life in all its various dimensions. But it does mean that your career and your personal life are going to be all meshed together -- your work network and your social network are going to overlap. If you're not comfortable with that, it's time to pick another profession.

**The third skill: learn how to make an argument.** This is something that came naturally to me as a former high school debater. One of the things that distinguishes (quote-unquote) "new journalism" from some of its more traditional forms is that the reader is really going to be looking for analysis, meaning, context, argument. Unless you come across some *really* fresh and proprietary information -- it's great to get a scoop, but it won't happen very often -- it's not enough just to present the information verbatim. One of the flaws of political

journalism, in fact, is that a lot of what amounts to spin is given authority by being reported at face value.

Instead, the reader is going to be asking you to develop a hypothesis, weigh the evidence, and come to some conclusion about it -- it's really very much analogous to the scientific method. *Good* journalism has always done this -- but now it needs to be done more explicitly.

**And fourth -- and this one is closer to my heart -- learn how to work with data and statistics.** A lot of the math and science education in this country is really poor. It's much too abstract. There's much too much emphasis on calculus, on proofs, and not enough on probability and statistics. The classes are designed to weed people out rather than engage them.

And so -- no surprise -- a lot of people get intimidated. Or worse, they get bored. People who might otherwise be quite proficient at statistics instead become phobic of them.

So what do you do? You can read books, you can hang out at Columbia and audit a stats course -- those things probably aren't going to hurt you. They'll probably help. But by far the best experience is going to be hands-on -- download a data set, play around with a spreadsheet. Ideally, this should be in a field that you already know quite a bit about -- then the numbers are going to be imbued with more meaning.

What you're looking for, ultimately, are *stories*. Statistics, to anyone who knows anything about them, aren't factoids -- 4 out of 5 dentists agree that Colgate is the best toothpaste, Uganda is the 118th most populous country -- but instead quanta of information that can be pieced together, just like all the other information that you collect as a journalist, to help you write stories and inform others about the world.

If there's one skill that's particularly important -- that really brings together journalism and statistical analysis -- it's learning how to distinguish cause and effect. This is especially problematic when it comes to polling data. Say that the unemployment rate is increasing and because of that, Barack Obama's approval ratings are declining. What you'll often see is literally dozens of stories which are framed as "Barack Obama's [blank] problem". Barack Obama's approval ratings are declining among women! Among men! Among Hispanics! Among whites! Among soccer moms! Among NASCAR dads! But really, all of these have the same root cause -- it's the economy, stupid. The bigger picture is lost.

It's lazy journalism and It's bad math and developing some fluency in statistics can help you to avoid it. Journalists need to take the same critical attitude toward statistical data that they do with any other type of information.

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You should all be very proud of the career that you've chosen. The industry is facing a rough time financially -- but people are consuming more news than ever before. There probably *is* more news than ever before -- just think about all the tragic and spectacular and unexpected things -- from Libya and Egypt, to the tsunami in Japan, to Osama bin Laden, to Gabby Giffords -- that have happened within the past several months.

You're going to be right at the heart of that. You're going to be catalyzing the conversation and making the world a better and more informed place. Be critical, but never cynical, and never forget that your first commitment is to the truth.

Congratulations and good luck to all of you.