

“Philip Meyer and the Emperor’s New Clothes” was here as of June 2, 2012:

<http://ejournalist.com.au/v1n2/lamble.pdf>

And here is the response that I finally found time to write:

The Straw Man: A Rejoinder to Lamble

By Philip Meyer

Stephen Lamble is quite correct when he says that I should receive no credit for the use of the Internet by journalists to find information. But why would anyone care? Does anyone remember the first telephone-assisted reporter? An application so obviously useful that it is adopted almost simultaneously by everyone does not need an instigator. Moreover, the notion that I have been credited with that role is a straw man of Lamble’s own creation. He cites no journalist or scholar who has ever credited me with, or blamed me for, inventing journalistic use of the Internet.

Moreover, I do not claim, nor have I ever claimed, to be the first journalist to use a computer. The first that I know about is Louis Harris who started using a computer to tally his polls sometime in the 1960s. In 1967, I used a computer programmed by somebody else to analyze a survey of the Detroit riot neighborhoods, and that might have been a first by a newspaper reporter. But I have carefully refrained from making even that claim in the certain knowledge that, if I did, somebody would discover an earlier case.

Whatever reputation I have for advancing the cause of Computer Assisted Reporting (CAR) is the result of publishing *Precision Journalism: a Reporter’s Introduction to Social Science Methods* in 1973. But, as the subtitle shows, social science methodology, not computing, was the central theme. The CAR frame was conflated with my work because the computer in those days was still drawing attention as an exotic novelty, inaccessible to most of us. *Newsweek* (August 26, 1968) profiled me as a “computer reporter.” But computer use by journalists did not become common until the PC was introduced. (I got a head start only because Harvard taught me how to use mainframe software in 1966.) The real point of the book was to persuade journalists to utilize aspects of scientific method. The computer was necessary because it made quantitative methods available to wordsmiths.

Lamble asserts that my goal of pushing journalism toward science was not set until the third edition. There, he says, “Meyer recanted methodologically – dumping social science in favor of the much more ‘scientific’ method of pure science.” I was

puzzled enough to have some correspondence with him about this statement, and it turns out that social science, in his definition, is something fuzzier than real science, “dealing with human and social behavior and therefore being an area in constant flux wherein the emphasis leans more towards subjective qualitative data than quantitative.”[1]

Anyone who thinks that *Precision Journalism* shifted from subjective to objective data or from qualitative to quantitative methods across its four editions hasn’t read it very carefully. I suspect that Lamble was misled by the change in title in the third edition (to *The New Precision Journalism*) and a different emphasis in the theoretical justification. In the first edition, striving to make its ideas acceptable to traditionalists, I argued that precision journalism was still journalism -- using more powerful tools but with the same goals.

By the third edition, I stressed that continuity less and added more methodological detail because I had learned more by then. Today I am emboldened to claim that what I now call evidence-based journalism is a much needed shift from source-based journalism.

Lamble’s failure to read carefully shows in a number of ways. He asserts that I waited until the third edition to credit Everette Dennis with providing the title for *Precision Journalism*, evidently overlooking the following sentence in the preface to the first edition: “Everette E. Dennis of Kansas State University provided the title.”

He also accuses me of a conflict of interest by failing to disclose the extent of my relationship with the Russell Sage Foundation as “the foundation’s project director.” If he had checked, Lamble would have learned that I wasn’t “the” project director. I was “a” project director. Russell Sage is an operating foundation. Its grants come in the form of work-for-hire projects whose fruits, mainly publishing rights, are the property of the foundation. The only project I directed was my own. I did the writing in the company of the foundation’s staff, visiting scholars, and other grantees. The first edition credits “their continuing guidance.

Lamble obviously loves irony, so he would have liked the fact that, when the manuscript was complete, the Foundation thought it over for a year, decided that the work did not fit its publishing program, and signed the rights back to me. It took another year to find a publisher on my own, and that explains the three-year lag between writing and publication. The Foundation, to which I am still grateful, is credited in each of the four editions.

As I told Lamble after his paper was delivered in 2001, I am pleased to have my work distinguished from CAR, but he could have found better ammunition. Two years before his paper, I published a plea for abandonment of the term because I thought the emphasis on computers detracted from the main issue, which was adoption of scientific method.

“CAR is an embarrassing reminder that we are entering the 21st century as the only profession in which computer users feel the need to call attention to themselves,” I wrote. “All of the other professions take computers for granted.” Why is that it we never hear of computer-assisted accountants, computer-assisted architects, or computer-assisted farmers? Could it be because they adopted the technology faster and more universally than journalists did?[2]

Lamble, who was a graduate student when he wrote his paper, claims that his research “is primarily based on a mix of methodologies from history and law – disciplines very closely aligned to journalism.” I wish he had put more journalism into the mix. The methodology of journalism requires fact checking and contacting the people one writes about. I am easy to find. My email address is posted on the web, and I would have been glad to save him from the factual errors that spoil what, on the whole, could have been a helpful contribution to the literature.

Chapel Hill

July 10, 2009

[1] Stephen Lamble, email to the author, May 21, 2002

[2] Meyer, “The Future of CAR: Declare Victory and Get Out,” Poynter Institute, *When Nerds and Words Collide: Reflections on the Development of Computer Assisted Journalism*, 1999.