

from the director | jim detjen

Promoting a worldwide culture of peace



Jim Detjen is a professor and director of the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism at Michigan State University. He is the founding president of the Society of Environmental Journalists and was president of the International Federation of Environmental Journalists from 1994 to 2000.

I returned to the United States in mid-July after spending nearly six months teaching at Nankai University in Tianjin, China as part of a Fulbright Scholarship. It was a remarkable experience in so many ways. I lectured about American journalism in newsrooms and at universities throughout China.

At Nankai University I taught a course in environmental journalism. My students were wonderful—bright, curious, hardworking and idealistic. They also had an excellent command of the English language.

In teaching in a developing country it is important to be resourceful. We lacked many of the things taken for granted in America. At many universities it was nearly impossible to obtain audiovisual equipment—such as an overhead projector, TV or VCR. Our access to the Internet was limited, both because of the shortage of computers and because many Web sites were blocked by Chinese censors.

So, I learned to take advantage of opportunities as they came up. During a bus tour of a scenic gorge north of Beijing, I accidentally met a young Australian, Mark Wayland. He had traveled from his home in Melbourne, Australia to work on an innovative UNESCO project, called the Culture of Peace News Network.

The goal of this news network is to create a culture of peace and nonviolence around the world by encourag-

ing people to communicate with individuals in many countries through e-mail and Web sites. It is his belief—and one that I agree with—that much of what people know about other countries is through negative reports in the news media. For example, news organizations usually report almost exclusively about famine, disasters, political unrest and other problems in other nations. But by only reporting negative news, people's views about these countries are skewed in unfavorable ways. Rather than cherishing the cultural differences between nations, people become fearful of them and this contributes to a climate of distrust and hate. The goal of the Culture of Peace News Network is to communicate about everyday life in many different countries and to explain cultural differences through the eyes of average citizens.

My students wrote essays about many aspects of Chinese life for the Peace News Network. They wrote about the winter snow festival in Jilin, China; eating dinner outside at sunset with their families in rural China; observing fireworks with their friends; playing the piano during the Chinese spring festival; watching meteorites soar through the night sky and listening to the heartbeats of their boyfriends.

Mark and I edited these essays and posted many of them on the Culture of Peace News Network for people from

around the world to read. Similar stories about life's simple pleasures have been written by participants in Russia, France, Spain, Greece, Jordan, Japan, Argentina, Australia and the United States. These articles provide a remarkable view about life around the world and show that the positive values most people share are far greater than their differences.

When I've talked about this project with friends, some journalists wonder if the Peace News Network is really journalism. After all, some of the "news values" that journalists traditionally look for include conflict, controversy, timeliness and celebrities.

Most of the stories posted on the network don't involve famous people, conflicts or controversy. Instead of being timely, these articles deal with timeless themes. These articles don't deal with negative aspects of a culture; instead they celebrate the positive aspects of life.

By traditional journalistic values, these stories aren't newsworthy. Yet, they capture a sense of everyday life in China, Russia, Jordan and other nations that is usually lacking in the news media and in popular culture. They show signs of joy and hope and real community around the world in contrast to the daily barrage of conflict, violence, sex, celebrities and commercialism that appears in much of the mass media.

Eric Utne, the founder of *Utne Reader* magazine, wrote a beautiful essay on the media in a book called, "Imagine: What America Could Be in the 21st Century," which was edited by Marianne Williamson. In it he makes the provocative statement that the popular media "have been the principal destroyers of community around the planet over the last 100 years."

He argues that the mass media "barrage us with an unrelenting cascade of mindless entertainment and commercial drivel." He notes that the mass media's emphasis on controversy, violence, sex and celebrities are undermining community by distracting us with information that separates us from our neighbors.

Photo by Connie Detjen



Jim Detjen lectures about life in America to students at a middle school in Tianjin, China, in May 2002.

continued on page 33 ►

Detjen: continued from p. 6

"Think about what life was like before the advent of commercial media," he writes. "People got their news from one another, through storytelling and small talk and shared observation. You'd learn when to plant, what the weather meant, and the gossip about what was happening in the community. There was little interest in the notion of celebrity; outside the circles of political leadership there were few nationally famous people."

During my sabbatical in China I read fewer newspapers and magazines and watched far less television than I usually do in the United States. This is because not many TV programs, newspapers or magazines were available in English and my knowledge of Chinese is minimal. I got much of my news about the world from in-depth conversations with friends, e-mail messages and letters and direct observations about life in China. I read more books. I played more board games with my wife and children. It is amazing how much time and energy is freed up by ignoring the mass media and how informed you can stay by simply keeping in touch with your neighbors and friends.

Is there something intrinsic about the mass media that requires it to focus on the negative? Some would argue that the commercial mass media must concentrate on these themes in order to ensure large audiences and profits for the advertising-driven corporate media.

But there is ample evidence that there is a hunger in people for more uplifting fare. Look at the success of Oprah Winfrey, the *National Geographic* magazine, environmental and science magazines, religious and spiritual literature and many other genres.

I've argued for a long time that the news media should write more about success stories and solutions to community problems. Societies around the world are experimenting with new ways to solve environmental and economic dilemmas, to foster education and to promote real community.

A few years ago *Utne Reader* invited its readers to let them know whether they'd like to meet subscribers in their area. Nearly 10,000 people responded and soon more than 20,000 people all over North America were meeting monthly. As a result, people married, started schools and new cooperative enterprises were formed.

Similar experiments have been tried by newspapers and television stations in the United States as part of the movement

known as public or civic journalism.

Efforts such as the Culture of Peace News Network are underway around the world. People are using desktop publishing, community-access television stations and online computer conferences to find solutions, bring about connections with other people and to bring meaning to their lives.

In his essay, Utne asks, "Imagine what life would be like if every magazine, every newspaper and every radio and television station the world over made community a top priority?"

Imagine. We might see a day when the mass media helped people to really know their neighbors, to learn more about cultures around the world and to assist citizens in working together to find solutions to seemingly insurmountable problems.

To find out more about the Peace News Network, call up the following Web site: <http://www.cpn.org>.

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Two pioneers who increased awareness about nature and the environment in very different ways died in August.

The first was Eugene P. Odum, a retired professor at the University of Georgia who is widely considered the father of modern ecology. When he began teaching in 1940, ecology was seen as a minor subdivision of biology. He argued that ecology was not a branch of anything but was, in fact, an integrated discipline that brought all of the sciences together. He saw the world as a series of interlocking communities, or ecosystems, each of which embraced a "unique strategy of development."

He was the author of one of the field's classic textbooks, *Fundamentals of Ecology* and other seminal books in the field. I still refer regularly to several worn copies of his books on my book shelf. I first studied them in an introductory ecology course that I took more than three decades ago. Odum was 88 when he died on August 9.

The other pioneer was Galen Rowell, a mountaineer and nature photographer, who was killed with his wife Barbara in a plane crash in Bishop, Calif. on August 11. Rowell was a brilliant landscape photographer who used natural light to create stunning photographs of mountains in Nepal, India, Tibet, China, Alaska and the High Sierras in California. He published 16 books of photographs, including his 1986 best seller, *Mountain Light: In Search of the Dynamic Landscape*. He also was an adventurous and courageous mountain climber who scaled many of the world's highest and remotest mountains to capture hauntingly beautiful images. He was returning from a photography workshop to the Bering Sea when he died at the age of 61.

JOB OPENING

DIRECTOR OF THE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

THE POSITION: The School of Journalism at Michigan State University invites applications and nominations for the position of Director of the School of Journalism. We are seeking a collegial leader with an established background in journalism and/or journalism education to direct one of the nation's largest and oldest accredited journalism programs. Candidates should have credentials suitable for appointment to the rank of full professor. Salary is competitive and commensurate with experience and qualifications. The appointment will begin in the summer of 2003.

THE PLACE: The School of Journalism has an established reputation for research and scholarship as well as a record of consistent innovations in curriculum development and outreach activities. It is the home of several specialized programs, including the Knight Center for Environmental Journalism, the Victims and the Media Program, the nation's first university CNN student bureau and overseas programs in Great Britain, Mexico, Australia and the West Indies.

APPLICATION PROCEDURE: Applicants should submit a letter of interest, a curriculum vitae or résumé and three letters of reference to: Professor Fred Fico, 305 Communication Arts and Sciences Building, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824. Tel: (517) 355-4489. FAX: (517) 355-7710. E-mail: fredfco@msu.edu. Web: www.jrn.msu.edu

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Solution to Word Search, page 7

B	M	G	O	P	Q	L	N	W	Q	S	R	W	C	X	M	O	G	S
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