

Mr Stephen Halliday

Thursday 21 March 2013

UniSA - School of Communication Graduation ceremony

Thank you Chancellor Ian Gould,

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen and our graduands.

I want to congratulate you on your achievement. This is a significant thing you have done in gaining your qualification today.

It is important in your life and in the lives of those around you. To the partners, parents and grandparents, I also give my congratulations.

It is now some 30 years since I sat out in an audience like this preparing to receive my degree in Journalism from what was then called the Magill Campus of the South Australian College of Advanced Education, while I was working as a journalist for the ABC at Collinswood.

And as much as I'd like to avoid this hackneyed phrase – given the incredible developments that have occurred in the media and the workplace since then – I am legally obliged to utter the following understatement:

*“My haven't things changed since then.”*

In 1983 I was in a newsroom where;

- people smoked at their desks, where they had a proper phone with a dial;
- there were tea ladies, serving coffee so bad that it would be illegal now;
- we had manual typewriters with carbon paper to create copies;
- stories were sent interstate and overseas on telexes;

Our camera operators shot on 16mm film and we used tape, cassettes and cartridges for audio on radio. To edit razors were used to cut film and tape which was stuck back together.

There was not a single computer screen in the place.

Now there's no-smoking; no tea-persons but plenty of soy lattes; there are no typewriters or telexes; stories are recorded on handheld digital recorders or shot on small cameras and edited by journalists themselves.

There are of course computers everywhere; they are literally in our pockets; and video shot on phones is going to air in TV news bulletins every night.

But that's all taste and technology which will always change.

Let's remember the French phrase that I will re-count in English - because French is a language too beautiful to kill - *the more things change the more they stay the same*.

The fundamentals have not changed.

The stories haven't changed.

The questions haven't changed; who, when, where, how and always most importantly why?

The message hasn't changed.

It's still all about acquiring the facts, assembling the story and communicating effectively, whether you are in a newsroom, a public relations firm or in corporate affairs.

[And when I say the stories haven't changed, I mean it. Back then there were major issues surrounding the number of commercial television licences you could hold and there were big changes in media ownership rules. For the past two weeks, these same laws have been dominating headlines and Federal Parliament for past two weeks. The more things change...]

The skills I acquired in my studies at this institution in the early 1980s have remained relevant throughout my twisting and turning career.

I suspect it will be the same for you regardless of the technology.

Whether it has been as a journalist or a press secretary, a union official, the Premier's Chief of Staff or a lobbyist, the lessons of this place have proved invaluable to me.

Because at the heart of all of those roles is communication.

No plan, invention, idea, thought or directive becomes a reality much less a success without being effectively communicated; there will always be a demand for effective, professional communicators.

Of course technology has had a huge impact on the media.

The failure to monetise on-line product has had a dramatic effect on the employment of journalists.

But you are in on the start of the next generation of media. For you communication is already a seamless 24/7 flow that moves across a range of platforms and applications.

That puts you ahead of old schoolers who still see print, TV and radio as separate silos.

You will have a real chance to help shape our future media and hopefully make a better one.

The old media has done its part to lose the confidence of the community.

I urge you to take what you've learnt regarding ethics and standards and apply it vigorously.

Just like true communications skills, the need for integrity does not disappear with the arrival of a cool new app.

The arrival of bloggers and so called 'citizen journalists' has proven to be a mixed blessing.

Your generation will need to help re-establish the value of the professionally trained communicator in the community's eyes; that is someone who informatively writes what they have learnt versus someone that just types whatever they think at the time.

Above all, I urge you not be cynical. Cynicism is not smart. It is used as a lazy substitute for research and experience.

Instead be inquisitive, challenging and open minded.

Be respectful of your power as a communicator and in your dealings with those you question.

I will say again congratulations, good luck and enjoy yourselves.

You have a clean sheet of paper before you, or more accurately a clear screen with a cursor flashing.

You have to build a career – and a new media for all of us in the process.

You have work to do.