

Interview with
Michael Parks
Director, School of Journalism

Conducted by
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Norman Corwin: You are characteristically kind to submit to an interview in the season of your departure from the directorship of the School of Journalism. I wish to avoid anything which might sound autumnal or valedictory, but you have discharged with great distinction not one but two careers in Journalism – professional and academic. In the first, you were Managing Editor of one of America's and the world's great newspapers, the *Los Angeles Times*, and on the way to that post, you won a Pulitzer Prize for your reporting out of South Africa. The second major distinction was your selection, in the year 2001, to direct the Annenberg School of Journalism at the University of Southern California. I'd like to begin by asking what you have concluded to be common to both major divisions of journalism, and what you consider their major differences.

Michael Parks: I don't think I had considered that before. Let's see: the way I characterized what I've tried to do here was to improve the practice of journalism to benefit the society that it serves. And so I guess the difference is that in 38 years in daily journalism, I was doing journalism, and whether I was a reporter or an editor, we did it every day. Here, I'm trying to improve that practice by educating men and women to do journalism by critiquing the way journalism is being done, and by suggesting better ways to do things, so I suppose those are the differences. The similarities, I think, are in the basic thrust of good journalism serving democracy, whether you're doing it, or trying to improve it.

NC: I was very much moved to read recently of the contrition of F.W. de Klerk, who at one time was head of the South African government. He said, “I apologize in my capacity as leader to the millions who suffered (the) wrenching disruption of forced removals; who suffered the shame of being arrested for past law offences; who over decades suffered the humiliation of racial discrimination.” (That is the end of the quote). To me it was refreshing to hear an apology for social crimes! If only it could be studied as a model of behavior by statesmen who in any society have stubbornly pursued policies that bring disaster and death to their own people, and humiliation to their national histories.

Do you have in your experience other examples of contrition that you have observed from the architects and supporters of apartheid?

MP: F.W. de Klerk is a very interesting man. His worldview is shaped by the very small branch of the Dutch Reform Church in which he was raised and where he worships. It’s the smallest of the three branches of the Dutch Reform Church in South Africa. Are there other examples? Yes; I pick Botha, who was the foreign minister for a long time in the Apartheid government. He joined the African National Congress, and remains a member of that Congress. But is his depth of repentance the same as that of F.W. de Klerk’s? I don’t know how to judge, but there are a number of men and women who renounced what they have come to see as a sin. In many respects, I think that one of the great contributions of

Archbishop Tutu and others, as Christians, was to help those white South Africans who had supported apartheid to recognize it as a heresy and a sin, and as you said, a social crime. The changes in South Africa in consciousness and conscience are quite amazing, not to say that South Africa has solved all its problems; no society has. They have more than most, and it was an amazing change.

NC: I could not help thinking when I read de Klerk's apology, of how striking it would be if in our own history, let's say for instance President John Adams, apologized for the Alien and Sedition Acts or other abortions of justice committed during his administration. If there an Apology Day just as there is in the Hebrew calendar there is a Day of Atonement.

Now when I last checked on this ten years ago, education was the second largest industry in America. That's a fantastic ranking, and I'm wondering whether it is still No. 2. That figure would include, of course, secondary education, with its thousands of high schools, but the accredited colleges and universities alone number in the hundreds, and the grand total of endowments would certainly run that figure into the billions. I am happy to note that USC does very well in endowments. This School for Communication alone in recent years has received a grant of 100 million dollars from a single donor, the estate of Walter Annenberg. And there is hardly an issue of USC's weekly publication, *The Chronicle*, which does not carry news of seven or ten million dollar endowments for various special

studies or institutions on the campus. To attend some colleges and universities for four years can cost well in excess of \$100,000, so we are not discussing peanuts.

You have for years been in a position to know a good deal about what it takes to run a successful journalistic enterprise, whether it be professional or educational.

I just received an advance copy of a book by a man who recently resigned as president of George Washington University, Stephen J. Trachtenberg. In his preface, he recalls a flight that he made, during which a man sitting next to him asked what line of work he was in. I'm now quoting ex-president Trachtenberg, "I told him I managed a large community that sits on 40 acres of land; that I watched over 5,500 residents living in various housing units on the site, and helped plan the activities of 10,000 others commuting to and from the site each day. My work force runs a fitness center, a hospital, two hotels, a multitude of restaurants, various theaters where we sponsor performances by musicians, politicians, visiting heads of state, comedians, actors and dancers. I told him I have a police force, the largest payroll in the city after federal and local governments, and, most important, more than 1,400 experts lecturing on every subject under the sun and doing research as well on matters with implications for the betterment of mankind. We have librarians and computer experts who find things for members of the community to read and study. We have our own newspapers and TV production facilities. Most

of our residents stay for four years. Our enterprise is so popular that I have to hire people to decide who of the thousands who apply will be invited to be a part of our community. In my line of work, I have my share of critics, but I'm pleased to say I also have a number of supporters, many of whom give me money to use for my programs.

“My flight companion listened intently to my job description. Then he asked, ‘So you’re the mayor of a big city or something?’”

The answer was, “No, just president of a college.” I am sure the director of a school also has to deal with the inhabitants and activities of a large area, and when that area is part of a dense community in the second largest city in America, the burden is heavy and complex.

I beg your pardon for the length of that quotation, but am I right about this?

MP: I have nowhere near the responsibilities that [USC] President [Steven B.] Sample has here, thank heavens. On the other hand, the way I look at it and have looked at it since I became director, I am responsible for the future work, and in some respect, the success journalistically, professionally, of 500 undergraduate students, and of 180 graduate students, and the work that they will do in the course of careers that will stretch over 40 or 50 years, begins here, and their ability to do that work well depends on how well we teach them, how well we educate them, how well we prepare them, and the quality of that work, and whether it improves

the performance of society, depends on how well we teach them. Whether they are committed to seeking truth, whether they are committed to sharing understanding depends on the work we do here. And so I don't have the responsibilities of President Sample, but I feel a very direct responsibility for everything that these men and women will do when they go forth.

NC: That's a stirring credo. I have noticed that you and your chief assistant, Patricia Dean, are constantly in touch with both the main and adjunct faculties at USC, with instructions, reports, congratulations on work well done, and general news of importance to the teaching profession. What do you consider the up-and-downsides of your office, and, finally, what would be the essence of whatever you recommend to your successor as director?

MP: There are several questions embedded there. One of the things that Professor Dean and I have really worked to do is to create within the faculty, and thus, within the school, a sense of community; that we are interested in each other, that we share common purposes, that we want to do our work well, that we want this to be a good place in which to work, that we care about each other, and we hope that these values get carried over into the work that our students will do when they go forth. I think back to what friends of mine in the African National Congress used to say before they came to power, and they would have these long meetings trying to discuss and resolve issues, and there would always be somebody

who said, “Why don’t we just make a decision?” and the response was you can’t build a democracy by undemocratic means. Apply that to a school like this. We can’t expect our students to be working to improve the performance of society by seeking truth and sharing understanding unless we create a community that is focused on that. And so that is one reason that you see all of these communications from Pat Dean and from me.

What will my successor do? I don’t know. I will help in any way I can, but I think that the challenge of this job is thinking about ways to improve the practice of journalism, to keep your mind on why we do journalism the way we do it, what are our traditions in American journalism, and to make sure that those values and that sense of ethics continue, even as journalism changes rapidly. You know we’re in an era of active change, and some of the changes are discontinuous, that is it is not a straight evolution. The digital transformation of so many means of communication has amplified the social and political and economic changes under way, and so teaching journalism in this turbulence is hard. Preparing students to do good journalism while everything is changing is hard, but good things are never easy. And so I hope that my successor sees in the challenge great reward.

NC: Your answer to that question should be engraved in marble, and I thank you, Michael, for your patience and frankness. I join the faculties and staff and student body of this university in wishing you years of contentment and

achievement, with the hope that you will not stray far from the paths of education and that you will continue to root for Trojan teams and activities that will go on making history within the precincts of this second largest industry in the land.

Thank you very much.

MP: Thank you, Norman. It's a pleasure to see you and a pleasure to talk with you

NC: All of that in return, and more. My chief regret in the nearly 30 years, or perhaps a little longer since I've been associated with the University, is that we haven't met oftener. But you insisted on picking up the cafeteria checks, and there's a limit that I wanted to impose on that.

MP: It's good to see you.

NC: What are you planning to do now in your retirement?

MP: Next year I'll be teaching in the Masters and Specialized Journalism Program here.

NC: *Here?* Good!

MP: Yeah, I'm not leaving. I'll be teaching in August, and in the spring. Then I'll be teaching in the Public Diplomacy Program next fall; I think I will probably be working on a project to assess the international reporting that Americans get, because I don't think it's sufficient, or properly focused. I'm going

to take a lot of time to look at it in a very detailed and careful way, to see if I can't make some suggestions on how it might be done better.

NC: Beautiful. I'm heartened by your plans, and especially glad that you will not drop out of sight.

MP: I'm not going anywhere, at least not very far.

NC: I thank you again, and my best wishes go with you for good health and good spirits, and a few more years in which we can be number 1 or 2 in the – what's it called – the P.C.?

MP: Pacific Conference?

NC: No, I mean the national....

MP: Oh, the BCS?

NC: That's it. By the way, are we holding onto Pete Carroll?

MP: I hope so. He's a winning coach; and you know, he's well paid, but money can always be found to hire him away. I hope he likes it here and stays.

NC: So do I.

MP: He's great with students and generous with his time. USC is very fortunate to have him.

NC: I agree. You were very kind to give me this time.

MP: Well, I hope it's helpful.

NC: I join both faculties, staff, and student body in wishing you years of contentment and achievement, with the hope that you will not stray far from the paths of education, and that you will continue to root for Trojan teams and activities that will go on making history within the precincts of this second largest city in the fifty states.