

## **“It’s not just about a job, it’s about a vocation”**

*A Q&A with journalist E.J. Dionne*

Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne, who will deliver the commencement address for School of Communication graduates in May, recently spoke with the SOC Web site reporter LeeAnn Maton about his views on the future of journalism. Read about his take on how journalism students can weather a tough media market and what responsibilities higher education has to its graduates in the current economic downturn.

**LeeAnn Maton:** “What do you plan to speak about in your commencement address at Loyola?”

**E.J. Dionne:** “There are two things that I’m going to focus on. ... I’ve made the argument for a while that your generation could be the next ‘Greatest Generation,’ like the Depression/World War II generation — and that was before we even knew there might be something like a depression going on! You do service at a much higher rate than earlier generations. You are, on the whole, more politically progressive, more communitarian. There’s something very special about you, and [because] you’re going to come along at a time of significant crisis in the country, I think you have the opportunity to remake the country, and not every generation has that opportunity.

“Probably because it’s something I care about and I am at Loyola, I’ll probably talk something about the tradition of Catholic social teaching and how it lays out an interesting alternative to the standard left/right conversation. I always joke that all Catholics end up feeling guilty about something in politics, and that’s not a bad thing. ... I think that the most valuable thing about Catholic social thought is that it makes us think twice and three times about a lot of questions in public life.”

**Maton:** “You mentioned the concept of opportunity. As the face of the media landscape changes every day, do you think the graduating students you are talking to have more challenges or opportunities ahead of them?”

**Dionne:** “The hardest thing I confront as a professor is fantastic students who want to go into journalism, and I have to give them an honest appraisal of the future of this business. They’re exactly the kind of people I want to see become journalists, and one cannot say to them as one could have 20 years ago that this is a place where you can make money. Now, it’s harder and harder to do that and I think it’s going to take 10 to 15 years before we sort out a new economic model in journalism. ... My hunch is we’ll figure something out because journalism itself is essential to the operation of democracy.”

**Maton:** “What would you recommend for students for students trying to find their way in the industry at a time like this?”

**Dionne:** “I think what I would recommend is that they think about their lives as double lives. That is to say, “How can you pursue journalism, but what other lines of work are also compatible with writing?” ... In a sense, it’s the advice people are giving students generally in all kinds of

scares which is this: your generation is going to have to be more flexible and creative in finding different avenues for your talents.

“My other more general advice to people wanting to go into journalism, which I gave even in the days when newspapers were strong, is that I think it’s better to pursue an interest in something other than just journalism. That is to say, if you care about government and politics, study government and politics. If you’re fascinated by the environment, study science and the environment. If you’re fascinated with legal journalism, study law. I think it’s students who develop areas of expertise ... and passion for their subjects [who] are likely to find their way better.”

**Maton:** “You’re an expert on religion and politics and government yourself, so I suppose it’s served you well in your times as a journalist.”

**Dionne:** “I grew up in a household where my dad would bring home four Sunday newspapers after church. I was always interested in journalism, but I was never sure that this is what I wanted to do for a living. I was always passionately interested in politics — I always joke that in our household we always violated that core rule, which is that you never speak about politics or religion at the dinner table. We did it all the time [laughs].”

**Maton:** “Do you think studying communication for your students at a Jesuit institution offers any unique benefits as opposed to a state school or other school?”

**Dionne:** “That’s an interesting question. The classic journalistic questions are “who, what, where, when, how and why,” and I suspect that one of the great advantages of being at a Jesuit institution is that there is a greater emphasis on trying to answer the “why” questions. The facts matter enormously but it’s not simply about facts. It’s also about “Why do things happen?” “What is the underlying meaning of what’s going on?” ... I think good communication’s programs encourage that probing anyway, but I think that a good Jesuit institution might be more inclined to encourage that kind of probing.”

**Maton:** “Is there anything else you think is important to say about journalism or higher education at this moment in history?”

**Dionne:** “I think that the challenge now is that the purpose of higher education is not simply to train people for jobs but also to get them to answer larger questions about themselves. So it’s not just about a job, it’s about a vocation. I think that it’s harder in this economic time because we in higher education fail you when we don’t prepare you for work, and we’ve also not done our jobs if we don’t encourage you to think more broadly beyond the professional life. I think the challenge is greater in this area than ever because you have to do both at the same time.”