Swindle says technology challenges media

By Elizabeth Clark

Swindle, Mayborn Graduate Institute's first guest lecturer, is writer-at-large for the News, where he has directed three reporting teams to Pulitzer Prizes. He launched a graduate class, Advanced Reporting Techniques, this semester at UNT.

"Journalism is changing, and the challenge of universities is to anticipate those changes and prepare students to meet them," Swindle said.

"The problem is, of course, that the changes are coming so quickly, they're almost impossible to keep up with, much less predict. Given the fluid situation, writers, I think, need to have broad backgrounds, from computer technology to design.

"But writing is writing," Swindle said. "The ability to write clearly, concisely and accurately is always going to be the bedrock, whether you read the words on a CRT or newsprint. And though the delivery vehicle for disseminating the information may be up
for grabs, we're still going to be writing about the human condition. So good liberal arts backgrounds are still going to be extremely valuable to writers."

What concerns him most about technology is that it allows the process of reporting to become so impersonal.

"Answering machines, commercial databases and e-mail actually make it possible to interview people and research their backgrounds without ever laying eyes on them. And in that regard, I fear that, in some cases, technology is breeding a new generation of reporter who merely regurgitates facts and knows nothing of personalities or emotions," Swindle said.

"Technology is wonderful. But it can't be wonderful if it's at the expense of humanity," he said.

Swindle's journalism career began at UNT in the 1960s, when newsrooms were filled with the clatter of wire machines and typewriters, and the school was known as North Texas State University.

A journalism major with a minor in political science, Swindle served as editor of the Campus Chat, a twice-weekly newspaper, in 1968.

Stints with the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal and Dallas Times Herald led to a job with the Dallas Morning News and, in 1987, an induction into UNT Journalism's Shuford Hall of Honor.

Following a brief interruption in his career - a bout with esophageal cancer in 1999 - Swindle resumed his schedule as father of three, award-winning book author, community volunteer, and now, guest lecturer at his alma mater.

"We're pleased that our guest lecturer represents newspaper journalism at its best," said Dr. Mitch Land, director of the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism.

Swindle said one of the reasons he has remained active in journalism at UNT is because "I've never forgotten what a wonderful experience I had here."

"I was from a small-town, rural atmosphere (Hamilton, Texas), scared to death of college, and full of self-doubt. Fact is, several professors, but Roy Busby, Red Gibson and Barbara
Colegrove in particular, took me under their wings. They were much more than professors. They took personal interest in their students. And they were absolutely unselfish with their time. Without them, I doubt I would have ever earned a degree," Swindle said.

By Peggy Heinkel-Wolfe

Student Profile: Clayton Wright follows family traditions

Before Clayton Wright became a Mayborn Scholar, he graduated from Texas Tech University on the "grandma scholarship." But don't inquire about that scholarship at just any college. You have to belong to the three generations of this Dawson County family who attended Texas Tech in order to be eligible for the family matriarch's bankroll.

For Wright, a returning student from Weatherford, family tradition also fostered a love of politics.

Although he also is interested in educational writing, "my dream job would be political reporting for the Washington Post," Wright said.

Ironically, he finds it difficult to be politically active in the school environment.

Aside from the possible conflicts of interest inherent in the local political scene, Wright also knows that his political views could pressure teachers he evaluates or students of voting age he supervises. "And parents," he said, "want to see schools as nonpolitical."

Still, he occasionally manages to produce an underground newspaper that pokes fun at local politics. Wright's light-hearted publication takes its name, Kangaroo Court, from the
mascot at Weatherford High School.

Wright said he has always enjoyed writing, and recalls that newspapers were among the first things he ever read. As an undergraduate at Texas Tech, his minor was in English, but "journalism is kind of the way I like to write."

In the sixth grade, when he and many other Baby Boomers were watching the Apollo space program on television, he says, "I used to write news stories about space or rocketry, just for fun. I would dateline them Cape Canaveral."

It was also at this tender age that he was introduced to politics.

"My parents were very active," he said. "My Mom was the Democratic chair for Dawson County that election year. I went door to door to talk to people."

When asked whether this inspired his love for politics, he doesn't paint the memory rose-colored.

"Well, my Mom made me do it," Wright said.

In 1985, he received his bachelor's degree in political science from Texas Tech. He remembers fondly what he learned from a professor who served as Jimmy Carter's gubernatorial campaign manager. Political science is important, Wright said, "because there's so much spin out there. It's important for people to know what's really being said."

With all the family tradition behind him, perhaps Wright really is destined to be the next Bob Woodward or Carl Bernstein.