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Editor's Note: Contextualising the teaching of journalism

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Editor's Note

Contextualising the teaching of journalism

Three years ago in Toronto at the AEJMC pre-convention workshop I met with a group of journalism educators. We explored how we could better contextualise the delivery of journalism programmes to stay in tune with an internet-wired world. One of the imperatives we noted was to expose journalism students to learning opportunities where they could look at issues and affairs beyond the boundaries of their immediate community; and to develop in students the journalistic aptitude for interpreting and contextualising issues from a cross-cultural, 'global' perspective.

We concluded that an "internationalised" program should be defined less by economic imperatives than its subject contents, context of course assignments, and outlook of the course instructors - all geared to produce journalism graduates capable of understanding and contextualising issues in different cultural, geographical and political settings. At a micro level, such a journalism curriculum should thus be responsive to the diversity [and commonality] of the students' cultural background and learning experience.

While we recognised that the underlying principles of media writing and production are almost universal in its applications, the interpretation of events and issues will require different approaches in different cultural and political environments. This imperative to go beyond the mechanics of reporting in "today's electronically wired world" is taken up in the opening commentary by **KC Boey**, former editor of *Malaysian Business* and *The Malay Mail*, currently a journalist in Melbourne. As a journalist with a background in politics and culture, but who "has never taught media or anything at any level", Boey calls on journalism educators to not lose sight in preparing "their charges for the world beyond the university gates, beyond the mechanics of the 5Ws and H".

Boey's commentary alludes to the irrelevant bifurcation of praxis and theory in journalism and media studies programs. Where praxis dominates, what is often neglected is the theoretical explication of journalistic contents and practices. Evidently, journalism students enrolled in vocational-oriented programs tend to see this contextual exercise as a pre-requisite to graduate from the program than as a cognitive tool to reflect on their function and influence as agenda setters in the community. Consequently, vocationalism in journalism courses tends to de-politicise the media and diverts attention from the media's critical function to one that sees the media as essentially a product in the open market of information and entertainment. The increasingly diverse cultures and learning experiences of the student population should challenge journalism educators to rethink their teaching methodologies, and subject contents at a time when students have ready access to cyber-sites from Wikipedia to weblogs.

Internationalising the print media curriculum arguably involves the effective use of new learning technologies to re-construct course contents and assignments for global access and interaction. One of these enabling teaching tools is weblogging, as **Marcus O'Donnell** suggests in his paper. He argues that "blogs should not be seen merely as a technological tool for teaching and learning but as a situated practice that must be brought into appropriate alignment with particular pedagogical and

disciplinary practices. A model of blogging as a networked approach to learning suggests that blogging might achieve best results across the curriculum not through isolated use in individual units”.

The 2004 AEJMC print media pre-convention workshop also took the view that the mechanics of reporting with impact and precision, page design and sub-editing, are universal in its application. The mechanics of clear effective reporting and writing are not in question here. It is the scope of global [cross-cultural] perspectives in the subject contents, whether vocational journalism programs are adapted to different learning situations, and whether course assignments are contextualised against global realities. This theme is variably covered in this issue.

David Robie reflects on his case studies of three ‘independent’ student newspapers from Fiji, Papua New Guinea and New Zealand. **An Nguyen** delves into the challenges of teaching journalism in Vietnam amid the constraints of “outdated teaching materials, undue focus on theories and politics at the expense of practical training, lack of qualified teaching staff and inadequate teaching resources”.

Kathryn Bowd looks at the changing nature of media-audience relationship in Australia and Singapore arising from the changing notion of “community” and thus the definition of community-based news reporting.

One of the well-known ‘independent’ community-based news media in Southeast Asia is the online daily Malaysiakini.com. **Augustine Pang** looks at how the award-winning news site manages to survive this far since its first issue in 1998 in a highly-regulated Malaysian media environment. Pang concludes that extramedia forces, such as lack of press accreditation, and thus, exclusion from government press briefings and conferences, and legal constraints pose the almost insurmountable impediments to Malaysiakini maintaining its editorial independence.

External controls on the Malaysian media, and thus its undermining of professional journalism standards and practices is taken up by **Mustafa K. Anuar**. Malaysian mainstream media, Mustafa argues, “seemed to have lost vigour and spontaneity in reporting and analysing important issues ... particularly since the days of Reformasi movement (in 1998). The mainstream media appeared to have taken its ‘cue’ from the powers-that-be before reporting on a particular issue or event”. How does this apply to Malaysian journalists who are sent on overseas assignment? Thus, a fitting closure to this issue is an interview I conducted with **Shahanaaz Habib**, news editor at *The Star*, who covered the war in Iraq in 2003.

I would like to acknowledge the coordination of paper reviews and input to this issue by journalism lecturer, **Usha M. Rodrigues**; and visual culture lecturer, **Belinda Smaill** - both from Monash University in Melbourne.

- Eric Loo, Editor