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1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Clarke, Judith, Commentary: Journalism education and the reality of journalism practice, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 20, 2010, 225-230.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss20/22>

Commentary

Journalism education and the reality of journalism practice



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A graduate of our journalism course joined a local Hong Kong paper as a reporter. He was sent to write a story about an elderly mainland Chinese couple who regularly overstayed their two-week tourist permits to run a quilt shop in Kowloon. They would come across the border for the good business season before the lunar new year and go back when things quietened down, with border officials apparently turning a blind eye.

A small story, with a little guilt for the reporter because he was instructed by his editor to tell the pair he was actually promoting their shop. But he was as surprised as the couple were when he found himself later assigned, along with a photographer, to cover the “exclusive” story of their arrest – the editor had called the immigration authorities, who swooped on the shop and took them away.

What kind of journalism is this? The couple were certainly doing something illegal, and many good citizens would have done likewise and told the authorities. But setting it up just to get a story? And, a rather weak one at that. Is it the job of journalists to make a story happen? This one undoubtedly stemmed from the pressures of Hong Kong’s cut-throat news market. Our graduate felt so uncomfortable with this assignment and others like it that he quit journalism and became a teacher.

The biggest omission in what students are taught in journalism classes at university is what the profession is really like. School leavers apply because of the apparent attractions of the career. One’s name becomes well known, and maybe one’s face as well. One meets celebrities, one treads the corridors of power, one uncovers wrongdoing, and one helps people. All these things are possible, but the early experience of journalism as an intern or junior reporter with no control over what’s covered may be one of sheer disillusionment if this impression is not tempered with an understanding of what really makes journalism work.

A good course will teach that “best practices” in journalism are not just rejecting “unethical” trends as commercially driven reporting and power manipulation, but

understanding that these are fixtures in a profession that is fraught with difficulties on all levels. Here are the main reasons:

- Just the process of translating an event, a trend, or a performance, into a “story” is philosophically problematic. As the American researcher Mitchell Stephens points out in his 1997 book *A history of news* (p. 247): “When words are herded into any rigid format – from news ballad to two-minute videotape report – their ability to re-create events in their fullness may suffer...”¹ Even pictures may not convey the truth. The famous video of the pulling down of the statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, showing a crowd of cheering Iraqis, was shown to give a false impression: once the whole square came into view it could be seen that the crowd was rather small. Journalists can only do their best to convey what they understand to be happening.
- Accuracy itself is far more difficult than it looks. I learned as a teenager that even eyewitnesses could be wrong. I was waiting for the coach to a netball match one Saturday morning and witnessed a crash in which the son of our school caretaker died after being thrown from his motorbike. In my shock and sadness I lost the plot. At the inquest I found that my memory of the event was completely different from what had actually happened. But experts can also be wrong, and then there are the machinations of the many who wish to put a certain view of things into the media. As long ago as the 1960s Daniel Boorstin was decrying coverage of “pseudo-events” that had no real news value other than the event itself.² Today the public relations business is vast and we don’t even question these made-for-the-media happenings. And what of the powerful who can control the media? We’ll take that one up again below.
- News needs to be newsworthy. A bit of an obvious statement, but not when you are the editor who has to assign the stories and organise the news product. On a slow day news has to be found even if there isn’t much, hence the “helping along” of such stories as the quilt-vending illegals. In my very early days as a radio reporter I was sent to cover a speech by a social welfare sector official and was told that I didn’t have to do a story unless something unexpected happened. So I came back with a tape but no story to find my editor frantic to fill the 6 o’clock news bulletin. He grabbed my tape, listened to it until he found an “angle”, and then put it on the news. I felt both inadequate and embarrassed, and I suspect he did too. Goodness knows what the source thought when he heard it.
- Newsrooms are very conflictual. The editor-reporter relationship is fraught with problems because of the difference in their work and their goals – the reporter wants to reflect correctly the words and meaning of the source, the editor wants to produce a highly newsworthy story. The two rarely coincide, and the newsroom is a pressure cooker where tempers flare.
- Where there’s media, there has to be money. As the British academics James Curran and Jean Seaton so clearly demonstrate, from the mid-19th century advertising brought big money into the news equation, putting out of business much of the working class press that relied for its income on cover charges alone.³ The figurative “free market place of ideas” became a true market place. Websites have provided a new platform for the expression of opinion, but that has put even more pressure on

the traditional media – and big business is already taking over large portions of the internet.

- Even in democratic countries news has links with the political élite. As the American critics Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, Ben Bagdikian and Robert McChesney show,⁴ the major US media are merging into ever-larger conglomerates that have strong ties to the power establishment, so that stories negative to their interests may be played down or ignored. The work of Daniel Hallin and Todd Gitlin⁵ finds that non-establishment views are marginalised in the news because they don't fit. And that is just in America, which considers itself a bastion of the free press. In Asia many governments are far more intrusive.
- The news has to be done at breakneck speed. I was once assigned to write a sidebar on the history of Vietnam-China relations “by 4 o'clock this afternoon”. The result was far from a classic of history but I've kept it as a reminder. The speed factor limits what can be done in most stories. Gaye Tuchman's early study found that this makes reporters rely on establishment figures for information and marginalise non-mainstream viewpoints.⁶

To compound matters, journalism in Asia has its own special difficulties. It doesn't have the glamour or respect the profession commands in the west. It's ill-paid (young reporters' salaries are far lower than those of budding civil servants, teachers or public relations people), the hours are long and the work can be uncomfortable. And more often than not you have no control over what you report: if it's not editors (with a proprietor breathing down their neck) for whom dwindling sales threaten the company's very existence, it's a government that spins, manipulates, censors or even arrests in the name of making sure that the 'right' news is published and the 'wrong' news isn't. In some places it is also a dangerous job. Just check the website of the French watchdog Reporters Sans Frontières. In the Philippines, 27 journalists were among 50 people who died in a massacre in November 2009; in China 49 bloggers are in jail, the largest number of imprisoned cyber-dissidents of any country in the world; and in Cambodia critical journalists also face lawsuits in a judicial system that fears their accusers. The odds are stacked against an easy ride in the profession.

Today fewer and fewer news media are training their own staff, leaving the job instead to universities. Universities are keen to open journalism programmes because they are under pressure from governments to finance themselves and journalism is popular with students. University staff, under the erroneous impression that journalism as a subject should be more academic, fill the schedules with theories, more theories and research methods. These are all certainly worthy of study, but the centre of journalism courses should be real knowledge of the profession, real practice and real experience. Anthony Burgess said in his *Homage to Quertyuiop*, “Art begins with craft, and there is no art until craft has been mastered. You can't create unless you're willing to subordinate the creative impulse to the construction of a form. But the learning of a craft takes time, and we all think we're entitled to short cuts.”⁷ Universities should ensure that the requisite effort is taken.

The subject should be taught by journalists who understand first-hand the pressures on the profession, for whom ethics is not an academic pursuit that ends up with a list of “shoulds” and “shouldn'ts” in given situations but who have experienced the real problems that don't have comfortable answers. If a journalism lecturer has a

PhD, that's to the good, but experience is the key. Students should be provided with opportunities to practise the media in all its forms – print, broadcast, internet – and to develop a reasonable level of professionalism. They should examine the news, visit news organisations, have talks from visiting practitioners, and above all produce their own work. They need to get into situations where they have to deal with the difficulties and constraints all journalists face and to deal with their feelings in facing them. Internships are most beneficial if they can be found. One veteran Hong Kong journalist, Raymond Wong, says he feels like putting up a sign in the newsroom for young journalists saying “No one ever told you it was going to be easy”. They should know that before they get there.

They should understand journalism as it is, including its compromises – that it has to make money, that it is open to manipulation by sources – and learn that the main object is to inform readers and audiences as accurately as possible about what's going on around them while not getting bogged down or disillusioned by the pressures. Students benefit from knowing about the heroes of the profession, the people who stand out for standing up to big business and big government. In Asia we have quite a few examples, including:

- Steven Gan and his colleagues at the online newspaper *Malaysiakini*, who have faced government pressure ranging from their reporters being barred from government events to the confiscation of their computers by police and rejection by the Ministry of Home Affairs of *Malaysiakini's* application for a printing press licence. The web publication, which started in November 1999, is still going strong.
- Radio broadcaster Mam Sonando, whose *Beehive FM 105* station in Phnom Penh was attacked by soldiers during the 1997 coup and shut down the next year during the general election. Sonando himself has been arrested twice, once in early 2003 on charges of inciting the anti-Thai riots and again for three months in late 2005 and early 2006 accused of defaming Hun Sen. Each time he was released without trial. Sonando survives by renting out time to other broadcasters who are critical of the government, including US ones and a local US-supported operation, seen by some as foreign interference.
- Tarun Tejpal's *Tehelka.com* in New Delhi pulled off what must be the best-ever sting in Asia when its reporters posed as arms dealers and caught government officials on camera in the act of taking bribes in 2000. Journalists from the website were subsequently arrested, and *Tehelka.com* was more or less squeezed out of business. It has recently returned as a weekly, though has not yet equaled that early investigative reporting.
- Jimmy Lai, once owner of the clothing chain Giordano, launched *Apple Daily* in Hong Kong in 1995 into a market controlled by a newspaper cartel whose members did their best to keep him out. Lai, who runs magazines as well under his Next Media company, is much maligned for his tabloid journalism, but he is one of the few Hong Kong media proprietors who dares to take on the Chinese government. Lai is best known for saying in the 1990s that the then prime minister Li Peng had the IQ of a turtle's egg. Lai has suffered in consequence the banning of his reporters on the mainland. He defends his tabloid style by saying that the paper needs to make money, and that people like it. When it called on people to demonstrate against a government proposal on security legislation in 2003, a million turned out and the

draft law was shelved. Lai has taken his business to Taiwan and shaken up the news media there too.

There is no one path to being a good journalist. The key is to know what's to be faced and to face each situation, and understand what can be strived for. You might wonder, after all this, why I started with the example of the graduate who quit because he was upset at the stories he had to do. I'm pleased to say that he found teaching to be a far less suitable job and is back reporting again – at another paper.

Notes

- ¹ M. Stephens (1997). *A history of news*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College.
- ² D. Boorstin (1967, 1971). *The image: a guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York: Atheneum.
- ³ J. Curran and J. Seaton (latest edition 2003). *Power without responsibility*. Routledge: London.
- ⁴ E. Herman and N. Chomsky (1988). *Manufacturing consent: the political economy of the mass media*. New York: Pantheon Books. B. Bagdikian (latest edition 2004). *The media monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press. R. McChesney (1999). *Rich media, poor democracy: communication politics in dubious times*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- ⁵ D. Hallin (1986). *The uncensored war: the media and Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press. T. Gitlin (1980). *The whole world is watching: mass media in the making & unmaking of the New Left*. Berkeley: University of California Press,
- ⁶ G. Tuchman (1978). *Making news: a study in the construction of reality*. New York: Free Press.
- ⁷ A. Burgess (1987). *Homage to qwertyuiop: selected journalism 1978-1985*. Abacus Books, p. 101.

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