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# Educating the Friend of the Family: The Local Journalist

To survive, the regional newspapers in the UK have to be at the forefront of modern technology, with reporters being not just multi-skilled but competent at all aspects of the editorial and production processes. This is the first point worth noting for those interested in the subject of journalism education for the modern local newspaper. Point two is that work experience for journalism students is best done on local, small, suburban newspapers where they will get to do everything. They will need to master QuarkXPress; know about law and ethics; know how to take photos; know how to get accurate names and addresses as well as quotes; know how to write a succinct caption; and know how to placate readers when they are angry and complaining.

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Journalism education in Britain only started in 1908 with the first course in 1919, but then it stopped and did not restart until the 1970s. However, Britain has had a provincial press for more than 300 years, and it was that provincial press which provided on-the-job training for the journalists who later became the thunderers of the British national and colonial press overseas. By 1760, the local newspaper was firmly established as part of British provincial life. One hundred and thirty newspapers were being published, together with a number of literary magazines and periodicals.

However, the original provincial press contained very little local news and was local only in the sense that it was printed locally. Professionally this early provincial press was also considered a bit of a joke:

There was scarcely a single provincial journalist who could have hazarded an original article on public affairs. Their comments were confined to events in their own towns and districts so sparingly administered. With such obvious distrust of their own ability, and with such cautious timidity, that they were absolutely of no account. The provincial journalist of that day was in fact not much above a mechanic... and intellect had as little as possible to do with it (Franklin1997: 76)

The British provincial press came of age in the nineteenth century. The growth in published titles was considerable. In 1832, there were 23 local weekly newspapers in Lancashire (there are now 68) and 20 in Yorkshire (there are currently 29). By 1854 there were 290 provincial newspapers with five in Manchester and 12 in Liverpool alone. Now there are about 520 local and regional newspapers. This breaks down into 364 in England, 44 in Wales, 36 in Northern Ireland, 71 in Scotland, two in the Channel Islands and four in the Isle of Man. The vast majority of these are small-circulation, very local newspapers, born of and wedded to the local community. Their philosophy is: we're a friend of the family. The mere fact that there are more than 500 for young recently trained journalists to choose from, as against 14 national daily and Sunday newspapers, means that the vast majority of new journalists start their careers on local newspapers whether they like it or not. This figure does not take account of the freesheets, which number at about 1000.

The first destination of the local press for newly educated journalists from university journalism courses is important because at the same time many of the local newspaper companies try to get the young journalists-in-waiting and set up company training schools to train their employees in the company ethos. This occurs without them being exposed to training on professional ethics, which, as Bob Franklin says "would have regarded the blurring of the role of the reporter with a tub thumper for corporate promotion and a spieler for the advertising department as entirely unacceptable" (Franklin and Murphy 1997: 226).

About two-thirds of local journalists receive some form of in-house or block-release training at the request of their company or undertake one of the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) qualifications. When I talk with students who have joined local newspapers from some UK courses, they tell me that they have had to learn quickly about local newspaper circulation, advertising sales and marketing, how to communicate with the local reader and, most importantly, how to communicate and deal with the local government politicians. Many of those who join local newspapers are vocal about what they perceive to be the inadequate training prior to entry to their professional life. They often believe they have been given insufficient training in newsroom operations, feature writing and the local lifeblood of tribunal and court reporting. Many local editors tell me they still look for, in preference to graduates, the street-wise local youngsters they can mould into their own house style. They are also cheaper.

Good local journalists cannot merely be good reporters or talented editors. They must also be experts in graphics, budgets, marketing, publishing software and be able to write for hypertext or be a multimedia scriptwriter. Good local journalists must add to their traditional skills the many abilities that digital revolution and

the increasingly complex features of newsroom management have introduced into the profession.

Generic training for would-be journalists in Britain is plentiful and widespread (UCAS 2001), with 21 tertiary institutions scattered around the country. There are Bachelor-level degrees in journalism. University graduates from various disciplines can take a Masters level degree or a postgraduate diploma or certificate in journalism. There are also other shorter, lower-level tertiary qualifications, such as Higher National Diplomas (HND), General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) courses, or Business and Technician Educational Certificates (BTEC). Those who pass from these two-year courses with sufficient distinctions can continue for another two or three years to complete a BA (Honours) in Journalism at a university. Others sign on at a private school of journalism or an employer-approved training scheme to get a diploma or certificate issued by the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ) (Herbert 2000: 122).

UK journalism courses, whether accredited or not by the industry through the NCTJ, tend to have similar curriculum structures. They aim to develop broad, basic, general knowledge; professional reporting and writing ability; independent thinking; a sense of news judgement and ethical reporting. Students learn, in one way or another, reporting and writing, editing and production, ethics and law, and how the press works. Some learn shorthand, news knowledge of current events, how society works and where journalism fits into society, the elements of photojournalism and magazine journalism. All this, of course, is capped by the latest technology and online knowledge and practical experience. Some courses, but not all, pride themselves on creating thinking journalists for the future, not simply clones of past experience (Herbert 2000: 122).

The NCTJ exams in newspaper writing are aimed at focusing students and the curriculum on local events and local news. The exam questions and handouts, which students have to rewrite as part of their examinations for the NCTJ certificate, are all firmly based on the goings on in a mythical county called Oxshire. The council is the Oxshire County Council; the newspaper is the Oxshire Gazette. The inevitable press handout from the police is from the Oxshire Police superintendent. The floods annually bring chaos to the centre of the main town, Oxtown. Oxtown businesspeople regularly complain about the goings on of the local council. Thus the NCTJ is trying to get students and courses to realise the importance of localness. However, most of this is transmitted to students through non-university, part-time courses rather than through the influential university courses in journalism. Only four university degree courses are accredited by the NCTJ, but not even they always bring this local flavour to their teaching

## **Localising journalism education**

## Generic journalism education

and learning processes. When I ask students from some courses, they often say they are being trained for national newspapers rather than for the less prestigious local ones.

Life is very different for the local newspaper person, not least in the pay level (a miserly A\$20,000 or thereabouts a year). But local newspapers are the nursery slopes for future career progression in many cases. That means great stress on the local editors and management as well as those colleagues who opt to remain as big fish in small ponds rather than move to bigger pools. They find themselves constant trainers as well as journalists. Local newspapers become the training ground for the big national newspapers and magazines, the radio and television networks and, increasingly, the multimedia aspect of the job, because most local newspapers in Britain have an online version, and they weld together the printed form with the electronic for online versions. This adds extra strain to the training and expertise required of the young just-out-of-college reporter.

This in turn means that it makes sense that there be greater relationships between the local newspaper industry and the university courses, with local reporters and editors being constant visitors to the lecture room. A quick glance at the various courses currently being offered to would-be journalists in the UK shows a wide variety, but only of a certain broad type. Local journalism is still the educational Cinderella of journalism education. Local journalism is the second rate, the port of last resort. It is for most the first port for work.

Some journalism educators in the UK are waking up to this problem. The University of Central Lancashire in Preston, for example, for the first time has a professor of journalism who came from a regional newspaper. Additionally, at universities based in small regional localities, rather than in London, students learn by practical experience the importance of the local community to the local newspaper.

At my own university (Staffordshire, in Stoke-on-Trent), a particular effort has been made since the courses there started in 1998 to make journalism education locally specific. The story ideas that Staffordshire University students come up with are universally local. They must relate to what is happening in the local community: either that of Staffordshire, or, for assignments required during the semester breaks, within the students' home community. The relationship to the local community and to local democracy and government is what their educational practice is all about. Staffordshire's journalism students focus on the local community and their involvement with it as journalists who can truly become friends of the family – each and every family in the circulation area.

Students not only learn this way of writing to the highest standard possible; they also learn how to edit and produce local newspapers, in local newspaper style. The Times readership is left for

later. They also learn about the local press – its warts, its running sores, its pleasures and importance, its stresses, its strains. They learn about local court reporting and local government reporting; they are given many talks by local government politicians and officials. They learn the importance of getting to know and be known at the Town Hall. The follow-up ideas they produce must result from a day in a local village or small town, finding out from local inhabitants what makes the local community tick, what the news is to the local community, and how to make it important to the local community. National journalists would, I hear the cry, laugh at this bread and butter approach calling it unimportant parish pump. But that is where the real human-interest stories lie. They also need to learn the importance of the local angle and how to translate that into a regional or national angle for later publication (and extra money).

## Local newspapers & cadet

Journalism students also need to be educated in the ways of the local source and the local importance of the local newspaper journalist. They need to feel for themselves the power of the local press – a power rarely felt by national newspaper journalists who might rarely come into contact with real readers, only with the important political or VIP faction. To the local newspaper journalist, the reaction is instantaneous, every time they walk down the street.

Students learn about instant feedback. They know that whatever they write, whomever they talk to, and whatever they get wrong will be instantly criticised and commented on whenever they are seen in the street or the pub or the local church. There is no anonymity for the local reporter in the way there is always anonymity for the national journalist. In my course, students are given an exercise at the end of their first year in which they imagine they are working on their first local newspaper, it is publication day and everyone else has gone to the pub. Only they are left to answer the telephones and wait for breaking local stories. The telephone rings, and it is a woman whose daughter you went to school with (being a local lad or lass). The newspaper that day had a picture of the schoolgirl teenager with the story about her getting married. Her mother says it is wrong, and asks what you are going to do about it. Just then the schoolgirl and her father march into the newsroom (local newspapers are like that) and demands an apology in the next issue of the newspaper. The students write 100 words saying what they would do. That case study provides the seed for many important discussions.

My very first interest in the localness of news stems from my early upbringing in North Queensland. I very vividly remember helping on the Townsville Bulletin when I was still at school, and being made to walk the streets of Townsville during the holidays, asking the regulars

whether there was any news. I visited the local (as it was then) TAA Airline office, the local Ansett airline office, the local Customs officials, the racing club, and the rugby club. In those days to phone a contact was considered the height of laziness. Foot leather was the thing to use. Along Flinders Street, down to the Strand, and up the hill to the old Court House, local MPs offices, city council, old magistrates court, ambulance station and the fire station. Everyone knew me and talked to me, even though everyone knew I was only 16 and not a real reporter. What a marvellous eye-opener for the young not yet started journalist to find out the importance of the local reporter to the local community.

Twenty years later when I returned to Townsville briefly to work with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), we did it by phone, except I still made my daily walk, picking up what I could where I could. From then onwards, my insistence of the importance of the local journalist flowered. Students today get, I hope, some flavour of that importance in the local UK context.

Journalism courses should not treat the local as parish pump – something to be avoided and not discussed. Young journalists need the educational foundation to make them good, accurate, intelligent, caring, ethical, legal and self-disciplined journalists. But they also need the practical experience that local newspapers can give them. It is on the local newspapers that they will find themselves being all things to everyone: taking photos, writing stories, finding stories; pacifying angry local readers and advertisers, digging into the dodgy dealings of the local council or businesspeople, and finding the human-interest story that to local people is the most important thing happening today.

That is the real importance of journalism education. Its indictment is that UK journalism education is missing the point. Paradoxically, while claiming to be vocational, it largely ignores and even denigrates the professional culture of most young journalists' first work destinations.

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