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Not My Culturalist Debate: Journalism And Methods

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That Keith Windschuttle's potent poke in a culturalist eye should provoke so much response among journalism and mass media educators is an interesting situation. While it is refreshing to see a lively debate played out in public, one hopes it will lead somewhere, especially given his call for development of Australian theory textbooks written by practitioners. Many in journalism education would support Windschuttle's fundamental characteristics of practice: journalism upholds a realist view and an empirical methodology; journalism's ethical obligation to audiences is paramount; and journalists should be committed to good writing.

Windschuttle's definition of media theory may dominate journalism teaching and research but actual practice often reveals a different picture. Cultural studies is difficult to define and, in my view, what one group defines as core content, another group dismisses or relegates to the periphery. As cultural studies theorist Professor John Fiske (1994: 189) succinctly puts it: "Cultural studies is such a contested and trendy term that I must disclaim any attempts to either define or speak for it".

I cannot speak for cultural studies but I will speak for journalism. I think Windschuttle would agree that his media theory critique passes over more fundamental concerns about journalism and media education, and mainly ignores the obvious point that not all media theory is defined by cultural studies.

The current talk is reminiscent of the clash within journalism education in America in the 1970s between the practitioners - 'the green eye shades' - and the theoreticians - 'the chi-squares'. There is no doubt that this latter group of quantitative, media-oriented social scientists would be casually dismissed by most in cultural studies. Unfortunately, this debate did not result in many useful outcomes but perhaps the catalyst provided by Windschuttle offers a more promising turn.

Can I propose a slightly different agenda? A main focus of journalism research and teaching must be method. By method I
mean first, how do journalists plan for, gather, select and present news, and what does that tell them about journalism and the societies in which they work. Even surface understandings of these complex processes will always, by definition, involve cultural questions. By method I also mean how do researchers, scholars, commentators, politicians, and various publics, arrive at judgements about journalists and their institutions? Again, by definition, such examinations involve cultural questions.

Within the constraints of academic or public discourse, we are free to question media theory or cultural studies as we see fit. But one goal of journalism educators must be to equip our graduates with adequate tools by which they can examine media theory, or any other theory for that matter.

A focus on method would shift the debate to fundamental questions about what it is to be a journalist and what it means to be a communicator in contemporary Australia. A communication model portraying the journalist as a neutral and detached transmitter of information has never been valid. Indeed, in reacting against this once dominant myth, journalism periodically searches for new pathways for practice; the "new" literary journalism, development journalism, the use of an ombudsman, press councils, investigative journalism, precision journalism, computer-assisted reporting, and the latest, public, civic or communitarian journalism.

Critiques of these reactions against traditional practices (see, for example, Journal of Mass Media Ethics (1990) usually point to Habermas' (1989) analysis of the collapse of the public sphere and, by inference, the ethical dilemma this poses for journalism. The 'public' or 'publics' are words trotted out all the time by educators and others (Carey, 1995) as core values in journalism. But as Glasser and Craft (1996: 156) frame the questions: "Are journalism practices and the performance of the press issues of public concern? Does public journalism have a special commitment to this kind of discussion, an obligation to debate, specifically the role and responsibility of the press in setting the agenda of public discourse?" Pardon me, if I take far more note of Glasser and Salmon's (1995) edited volume Public Opinion and the Communication of Consent than Hartley's (1996) Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture.

Throwing would-be journalists into the mind of Walter Lippmann is a good place to start. His 1922 classic Public Opinion predates the cultural studies tradition yet Lippmann's elegant writing is full of ideas and examples that can be easily informed by contemporary Australian journalism practice, and by cultural studies. "For when a system of stereotypes is well fixed", he writes for example, "our attention is called to those facts which support
it, and diverted from those which contradict ... [S]ometimes consciously, more often without knowing it, we are impressed by those facts which fit our philosoph.” (Lippmann, 1922: 78).

Getting students to react against Lippmann’s ‘scientific’ solutions, to understand the progressive reform movement, and to appreciate his good writing, are useful departure points (see also Carey, 1995). In support of Windschuttle, Australian journalism students and educators need a comprehensive socio-cultural history text which focuses on how the founders of our profession developed their practice. This call leads to an examination of news values.

Nearly 20 years ago, Gans (1979) identified in the American press both enduring and hidden values in the news; values defined in cultural, political and institutional codes of practice. Tiffen completed a more complex analysis in his 1989 seminal Australian study, News and Power. Journalism’s media theory must retain these literatures examining the social, cultural, political and institutional constraints on journalism with a clear focus on how research conclusions are reached. Would your journalism students agree that ‘anti-intellectualism’ is a dominant and enduring value in much Australian news? There is a wealth of literature from various disciplines that moves our attention away from simplistic journalist-centred ideas of news toward more critical standpoints. Not all this research is informed by cultural studies.

I expect my journalism students to have a good understanding of statistics in reporting: government statistics; public opinion polls; financial, medical and environmental statistics, and similar. But I do my students a disservice if all they do is use statistics in a news story. It must also involve broader questions; what Gephardt (1988) calls ethnostatistics. What are the dominant and hidden news values in a political poll story commissioned by a morning metropolitan newspaper?

As Gephardt (1988: 10) says: “The prefix ethno suggests a concern for the actual behaviour, and the informal subcultural, folk, or ethnic knowledge and activities of statistics producers and users. This informal knowledge complements and extends the formal, codified technical knowledge involved in statistics. Ethnostatistics is concerned with the mundane, everyday life practices, and the lay and professional knowledge necessary to implement and use statistics.” This domain must be routine business for my journalism students and it might lead them to focus on what ethnographers and social anthropologists do, and how it might relate to their journalism practice.

Reflecting my bias, my proposed agenda will get heated when audiences and journalism are examined. I cannot claim to be a leading international researcher of audiences but my view is...
this: it is critical that students examine and understand what is actually done, and what is actually said, in cultural studies audiences research and reception theories, as well as in Anglo-American quantitative and qualitative social science examinations of audiences. Journalism students have no trouble in seeing the differing perspectives of, say, Ang’s (1991) classic on audiences and Jacka’s (1994) rejoinder.

My agenda, though, seeks to highlight the faulty claims made by some theorists, and in that purpose I owe much to Windschuttle’s critique, although I cannot agree that all reception studies are bankrupt. For example, Morley (1980: 16), in advocating his culturalist perspective on audiences, writes that the whole tradition of American effects studies mobilises ‘a hypodermic needle perspective of influence, in which the media are seen to “inject” their audiences with particular messages.’ This assertion is wrong. American effects research, notwithstanding its theoretical and methodological limitations, proposed the independence and autonomy of media audiences, and challenged the conventional wisdom that audiences are easily manipulated.

The tradition argued that the predispositions audiences brought to their reading of texts crucially influenced their understandings (Curran, 1990). All of this is easily seen if students focus on original sources (rather than relying on what someone writes about them) and what was actually done (rather than what is said to have been done, or not done) (see also Potter, 1996). No wonder Curran writes that some of the new radical, culturalist viewpoint is about rediscovering the wheel. He takes to task those who would ‘write out’ a whole generation of researchers, presenting as innovation what is really a process of rediscovery - or even revisionism. But this should not distract us from examining culturalist research which contributes to our understandings of audiences or from taking a hard look at what is actually being done in the non-culturalist camp.

My agenda for media theory also includes the newer cognitive models of media influence, which are grounded in empirical methods. Cultural theorists of audiences, and Windschuttle, cannot easily dismiss two decades of agenda-setting theory, and the related issue framing and priming research tradition. The growing issue framing literature, for example, owes much to the cultural studies tradition. I believe, along with many others in journalism education, that these theories are important for our students, who can approach them with a journalist’s eye. After all, many of the current debates about journalism practice (Patterson, 1993) are centred on questions of how social issues are framed and reported, about who sets the news agenda, and the consequences for audiences and the wider society.
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