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Working Towards A Practical Theory Of Journalism

The last issue of APME (January-June 1998) featured a section on the pedagogical conflict between cultural/media studies and vocational journalism courses in Australian universities. The following commentary wraps up the discussion with a plea for journalism to have confidence in itself, to know what it is and what it should consist. It contends that the public have a right to respect and believe their journalists. At present that is not always the case. Journalists, as a profession, are almost at the bottom of the pile. All of this is the fault of poor journalism education. To change the public perception, there must be a change in the way journalists are educated and trained. If not, the media will lose its credibility, and therefore its power.

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Unlike Shakespeare's seven, the journalist has three ages: learning, practising and managing. Any practical-theory of journalism must be about all three. It must be firmly based on the needs of journalism, not on some other discipline.

Journalism is all about news and information. Journalists discover news and report it. Journalism consists of gathering facts, deciding how to assemble them, making important decisions about which facts to include, and which to omit. It is about talking to people, being curious, thinking clearly, and being able to translate difficult ideas into simple ones so that everyone can understand them. Journalism is about analysing and interpreting events; knowing how government, politics, business, industry and modern society works; and being able to make interesting stories out of all kinds of events. Journalism therefore consists of practical skills and a wide intellectual foundation which gives credibility to the reporting.

But journalism is different from other disciplines because integration of the practical and the theoretical builds the discipline of journalism. The theoretical has to be seen always in conjunction with the practical skills. Law and ethics, for example, are not separate entities as far as journalists are concerned; they infuse all their news gathering, reporting and communicating. They are integrated with the practical skills. All the intellectual theory is

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integrated into, not separated from the journalism skills.

Such a practical-theory will also help students enlarge their understanding, test various theories, work out their own solutions to problems in gathering and reporting news as well as developing their own creative skills. Students will also develop important transferable skills which will be useful throughout life, not just in journalism. These include communication, self-assertion and confidence, leadership, co-operation and teamwork; independence, autonomy, self-assessment. Other transferable skills include interpersonal ones of influencing others, listening and negotiation; organisational skills of time management and project management; problem solving and, of course, information technology. But again, none of this is in isolation.

Journalism education has eight vital aims. It must provide:

- the ability to understand what makes a good story; find the best angle and communicate it with interest and enthusiasm to readers, listeners and viewers;
- experience of the various theories involved in gathering, writing and reporting news, through modules on reporting and writing combined with practical workshops and the production of some kind of newspaper (increasingly these days an electronic newspaper transmitted through the internet);
- a critical understanding of journalism through an informed, analytical and creative approach to professional practice;
- transferable skills through written, interpersonal and verbal activities within theoretical and practical frameworks;
- the capacity for rational analysis and argument;
- an understanding of the increasing sophistication and technological advance in the journalism profession;
- a sense of social consciousness towards journalism and an ethical self-responsibility;
- an awareness of the latest technology such as new computer newsroom technology and satellite communications.

These requirements can be further broken down into objectives for achievement by the end of each year. For example at the end of year one students should have the ability to:

- understand the basic vocabulary of news and journalism;
- understand contending theories in journalism studies;
- acquire information from printed and electronic sources;
- use concepts and theories to formulate arguments;
- analyse problems and formulate responses to them;
- present information and arguments orally, and to discuss fluently with others;
- create information and arguments as well written, interesting and accurate news stories;

- work in a team.

By the end of Year 2, the learning objectives to be met are:

- a practical news writing and reporting ability;
- knowledge of the legal and ethical implications of news;
- knowledge of new technology and computer-assisted

reporting;

- use of the latest editing and production techniques to create pleasing, interesting and inventive page layouts, news bulletins and programmes.

By the end of Year 3:

- an appreciation of the various methodological issues and problems of journalism;

- an advanced understanding and critical appreciation of contemporary theories and theoretical approaches to the practice of journalism;

- read, understand and critically assess contemporary contributions to journalism research;

- report in specialist and general areas of journalism;

- conceive, plan, research and prepare an extended journalism project under supervision.

None of these can be achieved without a finely tuned approach to journalism theory and practice. But there is more, specifically related to broadcast journalism.

A national survey in the United States in 1994 found the most common reasons for employing a new reporter in broadcast newsrooms were: self motivation, journalism skills, dedication, news judgement, on-air presence, personality, voice quality, physical appearance, broadcast news experience, audition tape quality. (Hilt & Lipschultz 1994). All of these should figure in any modern broadcast journalism courses combining theory and practical skills to attain these perceived employment attributes.

Whatever the result of these continuing arguments, the time for a change in the culture of journalism education, and to develop a proper journalism education culture has been too long delayed.

Journalism has come a long way since the Gutenberg Bible of 1455, the result of new technology. The arguments concerning journalism education have not always been as speedy. Newspaper journalism has grown up alongside constant new technology: the telegraph, telephones, satellites and news agencies. Satellite delivery of copy to printers is now commonplace. Newspaper copy, complete with layouts, are sent by satellite from central editorial offices to remote printing plants, which makes delivery times even faster and global.

Computerisation is making even greater changes. Software such as Pagemaker and QuarkXPress now allow journalists and editors to do much of the work at their desks on their own computers. Journalists now can carry with them their own personal newsroom.

The technological revolutions of radio in the early 1920s and television in the 1950s transformed the news industry as dramatically as the computer and internet are doing today. The electronic newsroom, modems and satellite phones have transformed the working life of the journalist. Technological change in television has affected work practices in the broadcast news profession. Video is now universal and two-person or even one-person reporting teams using lightweight cameras can file by cable or satellite from just about anywhere.

Satellites and computers are changing the way reporters collect their information, and the way they write their information. They are also changing dramatically the whole editing and transmission process with digital computer editing and storage. The 'tapeless' newsroom is almost here. Convergence is the new buzz word, in which all forms of communication affect the way audiences receive their information. The journalists of the future will need to be something altogether new. They will have to be tri-media skilled, able to move with ease between broadcasting, newspapers and the internet. They will have to think globally.

There is also a growing awareness that journalists are not good managers; but that perversely the best people to manage the creative people that inhabit newsrooms are journalists themselves. Journalists of the future need to be taught how to be effective managers of themselves and of others. So a practical-theory of journalism must be tri-media based, linguistically simple, technologically literate, convergent in its international outlook and include personal and group management techniques.

For most of the 20th century, journalism has been dominated by a production process of the 1880s. Broadcasting began to have an impact only in the 1970s. The changes brought about by first of all radio news and then by television became irreversible in the 1980s, as style and news values changed as a result of broadcast techniques. These spilled over into the print media. The new forms of information collection and dissemination - the internet and satellites - are having a new and even more profound effect.

Journalism is now a mixture of tradition and of a new digitised future. Even the basic tools of ink and paper are changing as they rely on satellite links, satellite phones, portable computers and electronic imaging. Now as the 21st century arrives, these new forms require a new approach, a new converging

professionalism that is local and global at the same time. And that's where a convincing journalism practical-theory comes in. It should stop the argument - usually unproductive and led by academic non-journalists - which says that all that is needed is the theory (usually communication theory) and the rest will take care of itself. It won't. Journalism has its own theoretical foundation upon which then builds the journalism practice.

While journalists must believe in the neutral, unbiased approach to news, they should do so within the parameters of the three main roles that they involve themselves with in their professional job: they are disseminators of news and information; they are interpreters of news and information; they are adversaries of the newsmakers and politicians; testing the case and arriving at the truth. The journalism we practise in Australia is deeply embedded in our Australian culture and history. This needs to be part of a journalism course. It is part of our practical-theory.

Having reported the facts, there is then the problem of explanation, and speculation. Information can include explanation, but should exclude the interpretation or selection of material so as to point the listener or reader towards a particular opinion about the facts reported. All selection implies some interpretation. More for the practical-theory box.

In modern journalism the elegance of well-written prose may well be slipping. But then journalism language is not prose. Any practical-theory of journalism has to have many qualities. It must, in the last analysis, provide a well educated and skilled journalist for the future. It will introduce students to news writing and reporting, and to the way journalism fits within society. It will investigate the way the press and broadcasting works, about the national, international and, very importantly, the local press and its problems. It will also, very importantly, enlarge knowledge of news events and their implications at local, national and international level.

However it is organised, a practical-theory of journalism will develop the core skills areas of:

- news and feature writing and reporting;
- legal and ethical issues for journalists;
- editing and production;
- photojournalism;
- broadcast journalism;
- political reporting;
- computer assisted reporting;
- specialist journalism.

In terms of a practical theory of journalism, these can probably be combined into:

Conclusion

- writing and reporting;
- knowledge of public affairs;
- computer assisted reporting;
- shorthand and keyboard skills.

The world is changing fast. In the journalism world the change is cyclonic. Today it becomes even more important to consider the principles and practices of journalism in totality, not in isolation. The newsroom as an isolated entity no longer exists. The days when ABC news editors would stand at the door of "their" newsroom and not allow any non-journalist staff to enter have also, thankfully, gone. The journalism of the future cannot be realistically taught in a vacuum. Journalism education involves both basic journalism grammar, as well as fundamental wider knowledge which forms the basis on which to graft the skills. The end product is something new, exciting, creative, which means the industry will have better journalists, more highly skilled journalists, who haven't been taught to do something because this is the way it's always been done. But they will be instinctively looking for ways of doing it better; doing it differently, with greater accuracy, greater creativity, more honestly, more ethically.

As the end of the millennium approaches, journalism needs to have confidence in itself to know what it is and what it should consist of. Taken over by Communication and Media Studies in the United States; hammered within the academic community to reduce skills and expand theory; criticised by the industry for not being aware of the "real world", there needs to be a confident re-appraisal of the role and need of journalism

The public have a right to respect and believe their journalists. At present that is not always the case. Journalists, as a profession, are almost at the bottom of the pile. All of this is the fault of poor journalism education. To change the public perception, there must be a change in the way journalists are educated and trained. If not, the media will lose its credibility, and therefore its power. And if that is lost, press freedom is lost. If people have a low opinion of journalists, it's much easier for governments to curtail press freedom. It's only if the press is trusted that press freedom is safe. Journalists have therefore a very great responsibility. On their shoulders rests the future of the freedom of the press.

Journalists have to find the best ways of gathering the facts, and to find the best ways of communicating those facts in language that is stylish, accurate and instantly understood. They must also lead the way in integrity, honesty and tenacity. They have to be ethical. Journalists of the future must take their responsibilities

seriously; know about their profession; have competency in the technical and practical skills; and have a thinking approach based on credible, rigorous, academic research that is at all times based on reality. All of this is dependent on a practical theory of journalism which will be enunciated by journalists, taught by journalists, and researched by journalists. That is the journalism education of the future.

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