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Commentary

The intellectual component in best practices of journalism



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Historically, the key questions facing journalism curriculum designers are: Should journalism education be about imparting a set of skills or the preparation of a philosophical mind infused with a spirit of inquiry? Is it about a way of doing or a way of knowing?

The news industry have found the answers in a way that give them control over the education – or rather, the training – of journalists. Many organizations have set up their own “news universities” as have many teams of “retired” journalists. These in-house learning centres typically have experienced journalists at the helm designing curriculum and enrolling their own journalists into training programs. An example is News College, set up by News Limited to train its journalists in editing, reporting and legal vetting of stories.

Dedicated training institutes comprising experienced journalists have also made the outsourcing of training tasks easier for the industry. An example is the Poynter Institute in Florida, which runs many short-term courses for the benefit of practising journalists. The intention is to upgrade the practical abilities of journalists in the essential tasks of content production, whether it relates to text or images.

Universities, in this scenario, have failed on two counts. They have failed to make the distinction between education and training. And they have failed to close the learning loop for journalists. Training is the teaching of a practical skill. Education is the imparting of knowledge. For example, teaching game theory in economics is part of education – it provides universal frameworks of wide-ranging applicability. Teaching students how to construct financial charts is imparting a skill. In general, the acquisition of knowledge is irrelevant to its immediate practical use – for example, learning about the social history of Shakespearean England as part of a course in English literature. Essentially, training is highly directed towards practical applications.

There are, however, commonalities between education and training: both help professionals adapt to change in internal and external environments. Both provide

learning opportunities. Where they differ are in its purpose, scope and duration. Education aims to make individuals think differently by providing a wider knowledge base; training intends to make them perform differently by imparting new capabilities of doing. Education provides diversity of outlook; training is task specific. Training lasts from a few hours to a few days; education is imparted through semesters lasting weeks and continued through several semesters. In the larger context of individual learning, training sessions are miniaturised loops of education focusing on “doing” competencies.

Journalism knowledge is derived from practice, like medicine or carpentry. It is largely based on “doing”. Theory is an after-thought, a refining statement on techniques used in journalism. It has as yet little overriding power to dictate practice although it is useful as an analytical tool. Journalistic knowledge – the kind that can be articulated, documented, passed on through education and perpetuated through practice – is constructed by analysing and codifying practice. Diagrammatically, the knowledge constructing phases are as follows:

External phenomena → observed or experienced first-hand by “news sources” → mediated by journalists → mediating techniques perfected at work → techniques collated into books or incorporated into journalism curriculum (at universities) → taught to intending journalists who practise the techniques of news narratives → improved by peers → incorporated into the curriculum (at universities)

But this model of knowledge construction is becoming outdated for two reasons:

1. The industry is changing. It is not merely journalists who are left behind for want of adequate “know-how” to cope with change. Organisations are constantly updating their practice. Convergent newsroom is the industry’s effort to adapt to changes in the external environment, but whether it is an adequate response is not within anyone’s powers to speculate.
2. Industry is setting up in-house knowledge warehouses – mini colleges with the specific purpose of teaching younger journalists using the expertise of older journalists. The job of collating accumulated practical wisdom – the result of newsroom’s collective experience curve – is being done at marginal costs by large news organisations. In-house teaching units are generally run efficiently through the intranet with minimal supervision. Another way in which industry captures its own accumulated knowledge is through teams of journalists establishing training units. Both these efforts by experienced journalists give organisations greater control over learning outcomes. There is great scope for organisations to explore the possibilities in educating their own journalists. This is an expanding area of educational enterprise by organisations that were not primarily set up as educational institutions. Their gains in education must no doubt be counted as lost opportunities for universities.

The new, evolving learning loop is:



This is the first level of lost opportunity for universities. At this level, journalism production houses become formal centres of learning. Although the higher aspects of theory formation do not occur at this stage and are generally avoided by in-house training centres (which profess a bias towards learning by doing), theory is only a few steps away.

The second level of lost opportunity arises from universities focusing on training-level courses in their journalism curriculum. While universities are trying their best to meet industry needs, the message arising out of this practice is that industry can match university level courses with a bit of innovation and effort. After all, the strength of expertise already exists in the industry. Thus meeting the industry at its level is a losing game for universities.

It is possible that universities are losing out on both these counts – first in failing to meet industry needs, and secondly, through the paradoxical situation of trying to meet industry needs by downgrading their curriculum to industry-level practice.

Closing the learning loop of journalists

Universities have traditionally emphasised theoretical rigour, reflecting the awareness that students leaving their portals are unlikely to submit themselves ever again to an intensive education. Hence, universities have the responsibility to go beyond the training paradigm to give students more than just the tools, which will get them a job.

Media practitioners, however, have viewed journalism education with some scepticism, rejecting both the emphasis on media theories and the narrow skills-based treatment. Some of the most prominent pundits do not hesitate to make their contempt for journalism schools known, as former *National Post* editor Ken Whyte did after hiring 135 journalists for the start-up daily in 1998. “Given a choice of two people with more or less equal experience, we would choose the person who hasn’t gone to journalism school,” declared Whyte. “Journalism schools leave people with a narrow appreciation of the craft and a hard-and-fast idea of what it takes to be a journalist.”¹

Perhaps in response to media industry requirements, leading journalism schools have pitched their weight behind practical ability coaching. Quoting mass communication theorist and media critic James Carey, the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism website says, “Here you will study the practice of journalism. Not the media. Not the news business.”

Against this background, my commentary aims to show the plausible pathways for universities to educate practising journalists amidst the accelerated pace of change in newsroom management and news production paradigm. The key changes are:

1. Readership is migrating from the low technology to high technology end of the journalism output spectrum – from newspapers to the web. This has resulted in newspapers, to an extent, writing their own obituaries. The slow death of the newspaper as we know it – a printed product on paper that can be priced and home delivered in the morning – is a foreboding that is gaining credibility, deriving its momentum from the demise of many newspapers in the United States and the mergers and acquisitions taking place in the industry. Where newspaper circulation is rising – in developing nations such as India and Indonesia – it is mainly fuelled by increasing literacy rate and the time lag between new technology development and its proliferation. In the developed world – the largest consumer per capita for newspapers – the downsizing of old technology has been accompanied by a simultaneous proliferation of new technology offerings – pay television channels, news web sites, social networking, mobile phone news content. The combined effect of these changes can be seen in the form and content of journalism – a far-reaching transformation that goes beyond a technological makeover.
2. Journalism has become more accessible from a production perspective. There is a frontier territory mentality that has the potential to make every mass media consumer a ‘journalist’. Websites, blogs, emails, mobile phone texting, and social network sites such as Facebook and Tweeter have altered the factory settings for media. Factory-like buildings and large newsrooms are no longer necessary for the practice of journalism. The aggregation of content that used to take place in the newsroom – news gathering, writing, rewriting, copy tasting, editing, embedding of content into ‘news bearing’ formats such as television or radio programs or newspaper pages, and ultimately the firing of the magic bullet that prints or broadcasts news for simultaneous consumption by a mass audience – has now been reprogrammed to occur within the minds of the consumer. Websites do not need a number of journalists and broadcasters or printers to come together at the production centre. The means of production do not require a capitalist to fund them, a management practice to maintain them or the confluence of many professionals – journalists on payroll adhering to an established system of practice and delivering outputs of predictable quality – to ensure their periodicity. News websites and blogs can be maintained and updated by individuals at a low cost. The barrier to entry has been smashed both in terms of cost and preparation of content prior to publication. The “capitalist” system that underpinned journalistic endeavours has been dismantled, at least theoretically. The production of news, however, still relies on on-site collective endeavour with specialised professionals assembling in the one place to produce an output. This production paradigm continues to give the impression that journalism is about staffing newsrooms and switching on huge machines that make ‘impressions’ or copies of news stories. The

Victorian era factory will not go away easily even though the death knell has rung. As a model of news production, the large enterprise is hanging on because the current crop of news producers need them even if the consumers have grown out of them.

3. Differences have developed in the answer to the 5Ws and H of production. Journalism has, before the advent of the web, been engaged in answering this key question: who is situated where to produce what kind of news and how often for audiences situated where. The “why” was a tacit business assumption couched in key competencies of the journalists and the value or sustainability (read profit) statement. The “how” was a factor of visibility and distribution of content – words in print (symbols), voices in the air (invisible), images on television (high visual appeal) – that reflected the preferences of audiences for convenience, and producers for cost. The pre-web paradigm of television, radio and print answered the 5Ws and H in a way that assumed a static readership. A business news channel’s production mission – the answer to 5Ws and H – may read thus: business news (what) on television (how) produced by professional journalists (who) in major capital cities of the world (where) every hour (when) that will change the way you look at the real values of life (why). A radio station’s or newspaper’s “where” question will be more location specific. A news web site’s production mission statement may, however, read like this: a news source (what) that tracks the reflections of experts (who) constantly in touch with a multitude of sectors (where) whenever it is possible to do so (when) through the power of the web (how) for the benefit of anyone who may care to benefit from them in whatever way they may think fit (why). Although it may appear too non-specific for a traditional news production centre, the dynamic nature of the migratory readership and the transitory, ubiquitous, cross-border journalist is clear in the new paradigm. The assumption is that the journalist as well as the reader may cease to exist in their specific roles at any point.

The journalist may transmute into the sole reader and the consumer may decide to produce news at any time without economic sustainability being a key issue. The change of production paradigm has implications for the journalist in how news is being produced. It affects the way in which news is produced. Key assumptions stand challenged. Subjectivity is important instead of objectivity because it is assumed that the means of production are open to all for an equal and opposite point of view. News can be constructed in any sustainable manner – in fact, a new grammar has evolved around the language of mobile phone texting. As to the inverted pyramid, it may just as well be a rectangle (equal importance to all points), a small but normal pyramid (a quick, chronological sequence) or a point (a one-line news break as conveyed through mobile phones). The main takeaway from the expansion of the production spectrum is the subversion of the production paradigm – the blurring of the lines of division between the producer and the consumer, the capitalist and the worker, the news giver and the news taker, the source and the media (that mediates) and news and views. Dichotomies that characterised the news production process have merged into a continuum.

Learning cycle of journalists

Because of these changes, the journalist's role and self-perception have changed too. But educational curricula as well as the training agenda for journalists have been slow to track these changes. Traditional journalism education follows a linear, unidirectional cycle. Universities educate young individuals who enter the journalism profession and progress through the ranks with occasional technological training updates in the use of essential software. Education is a one-off flow occurring at the beginning of the career for the journalist. This is not to discount learning being a continuous process: industry takes charge of the learning process as soon as the "graduate" becomes a "journalist". The obvious question is: how can organizations that are themselves struggling to cope with changes in the external environment educate individuals and help them learn to adapt to changes?

The position taken by universities on curriculum design has a significant influence in determining the profile of journalism educators. The dilemma facing journalism education is: should it be research-focused or skills-focused? A research focus will be encouraged by the university tradition, even though it may be viewed with far less enthusiasm by the industry. A skills-based approach forces journalism educators to draw upon their own experience – subject to constant pressures of obsolescence – but it may give the deciding voice in education to current practitioners, who are outside the classroom. This approach also sets the universities on a quest for seeking educators with the strongest profile of industry experience – a situation that leads to unhappy compromises for both parties.

These dilemmas at the pre-employment level of journalism education have only served to distract educators from the essential qualitative issue: how can they ensure that students make meaning out of transformational forces in the world around them and communicate it effectively to their audience? This is a larger exercise than the use of news-gathering and news presentation skills. It involves a discussion of the nature of intellectual freedom available to media practitioners.

Freedom – obtaining it and making use of it – is an exercise in negotiation. It usually starts with a less-than-ideal situation, given the political constraints imposed by governments. The newsroom hierarchy is the second limiting factor. It can be hypothesised that journalistic decisions are made within a culture of "management" – where the organisational structure restricts what can be written and how it ought to be written.

A third constraint is the media product's strategic position in the marketplace – whether it has been designed as a popular product or a niche product, and where it perceives its core audience and revenue sources to be, and how it organises the flow of information to them. Its business strategy creates goalposts that cannot be easily altered, irrespective of whether or not the journalist works within a broader governmental framework guaranteeing a reasonable amount of freedom to collect and disseminate information. There is a little room to move, but not much. No single journalistic heaving will uproot the media product's anchor in the marketplace. Such a freedom is ordinarily not available, except through operational inefficiencies.

What is guaranteed to journalists, even under controlled regimes, is the freedom to think – about superior ways of engaging with the task of content gathering and

presentation. Journalism education addresses this freedom, at the individual level, and develops it by identifying key questions a journalist can ask. The answers inevitably undergo a process change before they can be broadcast or published. The journalist's main task is to ask the right questions, given any situation, and seek the most complete set of answers.

Journalism education at the university level achieves its purpose in making the student frame qualitatively better questions. The storytelling, the bullet lead, the analysis, the backgrounder, the sound bites are often the accessories that help the journalist tell the audience with confidence, "These are the questions I have asked and these are the possible inter-relationships between the answers". However, journalism education that focuses on the accessories misses the point. Journalism as a way of doing misses an opportunity to create a platform for best practice. Best practice is the use of the ability to reflect that results in a superior performance. It is about seeking better ways of knowing and better ways of doing.

Paradoxically, the framing of the research question at the academic level is a very similar exercise to the journalist's inquiries before embarking on a story. Educators who see a parallel between the two achieve long-lasting results. They impart a skill as well as the knowledge base on which it rests. They teach a way of knowing.

Classroom exercises, group discussions, simulated newsroom practices and the production of a student newspaper or website are useful steps that contribute to the task of embedding skills. But journalism education needs to go beyond the ability to create content. The interview, the background research, the writing and the editing are activities that need to be practised. They can be perfected until the student-originated content gains instant publishability. But these activities do not constitute the core of education. These are the very skills that journalism trainees pick up from the newsroom merely by being there. The industry can justifiably claim to be able to impart these skills within a few weeks to anyone who has not had the privilege of undergoing a journalism course. Journalism education will be running out of puff if it aims to give students an advance standing amounting to a few weeks in the newsroom. Important as these activities are, best practice in journalism emerges from the long-term knowledge base of each student. Here the universities have a strategic advantage. The academic component that underpins the skills – which consists in the debriefing, the reflective discussion and ability to justify and improve upon the activities – is the most significant aspect of university education. This intellectual engagement provides the would-be journalists with a methodology that can be adapted to changes in the industry. It gives them endurance. With sufficient application, it can lead to excellence.

At the mid-career level, education takes the form of training. Studies have shown that training is hardly undertaken in media organisations except to update technological skills in the use of new software.² Technological process improvement sums up most of the training programs in the industry. Practitioners may point out that the interpersonal exchanges – conversations, emails, discussions, presentations – which occur during content production routines are essentially educative: they contribute to efficiency achievements and the industry imperative to justify current best practice. Learning on the job has been the practitioner-preferred way of career advancement. Journalism schools pay a tribute to this method when they create simulated newsroom environments.

Apart from technology updates, mid-career journalism education occurs only when motivated individuals enrol for courses that will lead them into an educator's role. Some media organisations have made it mandatory for journalists to attend a course on journalism law and a sub-editing course, especially if they are reporters intending to become editors. These courses are activity-oriented, laden with practical examples and a minimal amount of accompanying notes so as to impress on the journalists the need to act quickly under deadline pressure. In many ways, they are an extension of the simulated newsroom.

The practice of journalism differs a great deal from one media organisation to another. Different narrative styles define the tabloid, broadsheet, television and web approaches to a news story. Within the industry, there is hardly any attempt to document practice – what constitutes an acceptable level of practice, let alone a superior performance, or best practice. Journalists inducted into new roles from the outside take a sink-or-swim approach, trusting their instincts and the ability to “learn from the newsroom”. Externally administered or monitored standards are absent. In fact, even internal monitoring of key performance indicators is seldom done. The subtler observances of harmony – and disharmony – within the team are not calibrated on a visible scale. Competency levels are not defined or benchmarked.

What constitutes competency? A competency has been defined as an underlying characteristic of an individual that results in a superior performance in a job.³ It “is a fairly deep and enduring part of a person's personality and can predict behaviour in a wide variety of situations and job tasks”.⁴ Few newsrooms have systems in place to define and measure competency. Practice has dwelt for too long on what will suffice or “pass muster”. Best practice can be identified only if current practice is documented. Practitioners may point out that:

- Current practice is in a state of flux because of technological and competitive forces at work.
- Current practice differs from one media product to another.
- The market is changing. Audiences are migrating from one form of media to another.
- Media fragmentation – the concurrent existence of different formats – obfuscates theory formation from practice.

These may be the reasons behind the absence of best practice standards that could be applied consistently across geographical regions, technological platforms and format differentials. There is no single best practice standard: there are many. It is a rich field of individual pickings for the eager learner – it's an unmapped terrain for the trainer.

Mid-career training of journalists is a largely unexplored area. Externally administered education of practising journalists has great potential if only because it has not yet begun. There are at least three areas in which such an education can be anchored:

- Improving current practice and setting best practice standards.
- Introducing newsroom management concepts to those who are on the threshold of career progression.

- Introducing methods of specialisation to those who wish to acquire depth of knowledge in areas such as economics, business, health, industrial relations law, politics and environment studies.

Best practice has a good reason to exist under normal circumstances, outside of the journalism of prize-winning efforts. It does not need the incentive of accolades to prevail. But it does need some groundwork: it can only survive within an organisational culture of excellence. Competition forces metropolitan newspapers to achieve some form of best practice. However, competition is globally declining. Single newspaper cities are increasing in number because economies of scale are becoming harder to sustain. Websites, on the other hand, are benefiting from increased competition. It is quite likely that best practice definitions will emerge from them.

But it is immaterial which mode of delivery will set the benchmark for newsroom competencies. News selection, news gathering, news writing, news design and news distribution – the core activities of news journalism – could only improve with the application of philosophical reflection. Excellence in the newsroom is a product of thoughtful minds at work. The production of media narratives, which deepen our understanding of world events is not an accident. It is the result of know-how and intellectual inputs at the learning stage. It is a reward for training that works.

University classrooms have a strong role to play in fostering this culture of excellence at the workplace. But this role is still being defined by trial and error and by a hit-and-miss curriculum. Many universities have surrendered it to institutions that market a fast turnover of vocational courses. Others go through the routine of student intake and graduation ceremonies with the intervening period marked by very little passionate belief in the educational values professed. For all that, the enthusiasm of students has never been higher. Let us not make them cynical about the benefits of education. Their attendance in the classrooms is an opportunity – it is a chance to reinforce the truism that strong practice needs strong theory.

Notes

1. Marc Edge, “Balancing Academic and Corporate Interests in Canadian Journalism Education”, *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator*, Summer 2004
2. Kathleen Woodruff Wickham, “Newsroom technology: form, content and style”, Thesis for EdD, University of Memphis, 1999
3. Spencer, L.M., & Spencer, S.M., *Competence at work: models for superior performance*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993
4. Spencer, L.M., & Spencer, S.M., *Competence at work: models for superior performance*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1993

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