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Cascade Learning Approach To Broadcast Journalism Education

This article advocates a "cascade learning approach" built on combined theory and skills, in the training of broadcast journalists. It attempts to show that the contemporary broadcast journalism curriculum for the Asia-Pacific region can develop its own core curriculum, not based on any educational imperialism or indeed on a traditional mass communication or communication studies approach. It also highlights the inadequacy of the "media/communications" approach to university education for journalists; and gives details of an experimental alternative approach to integrated learning in broadcast journalism.

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Developing a professional educational programme for broadcast journalism is a slow process. There are various problems to overcome: the industry wanting someone to fill tomorrow's shift rota; the university authorities wanting something that is underpinned by relevant and obvious theory (otherwise it becomes only "vocational training"); the students wanting to learn as much as they can about the profession and get as much "hands-on" experience as they can. The list goes on.

Journalism is not in itself an academic discipline; neither is it a sub-discipline of sociology nor a sub-field of communication. Journalism is a professional activity and the purpose of a journalism degree is to provide students with an appropriate academic preparation to engage in that activity.¹

There are basically three ingredients of such a professional degree:

- a broad scope of basic knowledge;
- professional reporting and writing ability;
- independent thinking and sense of judgement;²

These divisions coincide with the three elements suggested in a forthcoming book by Tim Hamlett:

- Life: politics, sociology etc.
- Journalism: writing, editing etc.
- Theory: questions of meaning and significance.³

Others have suggested similar core approaches to journalism education. Henningham⁴ suggested a core curriculum for journalism education at the university level comprising

Reporting and Writing, Editing, Ethics, Law, Media Research Methods, Theories of News Media, International Media, Journalism and Society, with the rest of the curriculum to comprise of "non-journalism" subjects.

In the US, the AEJMC Curriculum Task Force recently reported that journalism courses should aim at providing students with an advanced level of competence in a major emphasis. The Report wants components that will improve student reasoning and creativity and stimulate their curiosity about the world."⁵

What journalism should not be is an education in communication. Journalism is communication (just as nuclear physics is communication); but communication is not journalism. That is where journalism education is going wrong. A communication degree is not a journalism degree. Communication is not a profession. Journalism is. Journalism education must never lose touch with the requirements and needs of the profession. Journalism courses, and universities, must take into account the wishes, and the needs of both the students and the industry. Which is why accreditation of one kind or another is a good thing -- as it is with the National Council for the Training of Broadcast Journalists (NCTBJ) in the United Kingdom.⁶

Journalism education has been offered for a very long time in most countries. In the United States, where formal journalism education first began, the necessity for education was generally recognised by about 1920 with a consensus that universities should offer instruction for future journalists. Initial undergraduate degrees in broadcast journalism appeared in the 1930s at several of the "Big 10" midwestern state universities and elsewhere.⁷ More than 300 universities in the US⁸ were offering at least one course in radio by 1938. Today there are 409 universities or colleges offering broadcast journalism courses of one kind or another.⁹

According to Weaver and Wilhoit, journalism education in the US can be divided into four periods:

- 1700's-1860: apprenticeship system.
- 1860s-1920s: college level journalism education (during this time the country's first journalism school was founded at the University of Missouri and the professional graduate programme started at Columbia University in 1912)
- 1920s-1940s: other universities took on the Missouri/Columbia models.
- 1940s-the present: huge growth of journalism facilities in the large research universities, and the start of doctoral degree programmes in journalism or communication.¹⁰

In Europe, on the other hand, there was no consensus and

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university education for journalists has not been considered as important. There, university training still remains one of the three recognised paths to entry into the profession. The other two: instruction at purely vocational institutions (Further Education Colleges) and on-the-job structured training.¹¹ In the first Belgian curriculum proposal, as detailed by Bjork (1996), students would take courses in European, African and Asian history, law, and political science. In addition, "practical and theoretical" knowledge of five foreign languages - French, English, German, Spanish and Italian - would also be part of the curriculum as would theoretical courses in press law, the international history of newspapers, the writings of great journalists of the past, and the art of newspaper criticism.

Finally, the curriculum connected the education of journalists to the status of the profession by sending future newspaper journalists to special "journalism universities" which it was hoped would put an end to the popular view that the profession of journalism was a refuge for "young men who have chosen it only as a last resort".¹² However, the debate continued not along the lines of what is the ideal journalism curriculum, but whether there was any need for a curriculum at all. The debate in Europe currently is whether it is indeed possible at all to teach journalism.

In the United Kingdom journalism education is divided into courses in Further Education (which tend to be a practical sub-degree); undergraduate degree; postgraduate courses (which include postgraduate diplomas in journalism and broadcast journalism); short courses (usually run by colleges in conjunction with the industry). There are three Bachelor of Arts in broadcast journalism or broadcasting¹³ and about nine postgraduate qualifications in broadcast journalism.

The NCTBJ advises would-be broadcast journalists in the UK to gain qualifications in subjects such as politics, history and economics rather than in communication studies. However, NCTBJ cautions students that such an intellectual foundation will not guarantee a job in broadcast journalism. "What you need now is a place on a company training scheme or an NCTBJ recognised course".¹⁴

The emerging pattern in the UK is that the journalism schools will provide the basic entry level skills in particular subject areas, while the industry then takes these students and offers them more intensive, hands-on training to develop their production expertise through in-house and industry-led work schemes. The development of trainee competence in broadcast techniques is

assessed by the British system of qualifications established through the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). The competency area of interest to broadcast journalists are: sound, research, journalism and factual writing, production co-ordination and production management.¹⁵ These competency standards are monitored by Skillset, an industry led body which represents the training interests of the broadcast, film and video industries in the UK and which is responsible for industry standards. Much is being developed in the way of vocational professional education in British universities, which are trying to shake off their "ivory tower" image of the past.¹⁶

In Asia, development in broadcast journalism education has been slow. In Hong Kong for example there is as yet no specific broadcast journalism degree or course, although Hong Kong Baptist University and Chinese University of Hong Kong both include broadcasting and broadcast journalism in their overall journalism or communication degree programmes.¹⁷

The situation in Australia is slightly better. Lloyd records the first interest in Australian university education as a foundation for the profession in 1860 when the Victorian Review called for the establishment of a university Chair of Journalism, and queried as to why a journalist's pay should be so inferior to that of a doctor or lawyer?¹⁸ It took about 60 years before the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne, Western Australia and Queensland introduced journalism courses to their degree offerings in the years following World War 1. Except for University of Queensland the other universities had dropped their journalism degree offerings. There are now more than 20 universities with journalism courses in some form or another.

There are media studies and communication studies educators who believe that there needs to be a critique of the knowledge, values, and institutional arrangements underlying and impinging on journalism as a professional career. This is one of the major problems with media studies courses: they are almost exclusively directed at the media consumer -- the viewer or listener or reader rather than the media practitioners, the producers.

Some believe that courses which teach students to become members of one of the journalism professions should first and foremost undertake the role of media critic. This implies there is something different about journalism which puts it in a separate category from other vocational courses such as medicine, law, dentistry, architecture. Medical Schools have as their aim and

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objective the education of doctors who can diagnose and heal patients; they are not aimed at producing graduates whose aim in life is to undertake a critical appreciation of the health service provided by the government or privately. There is certainly a place for such research courses; they probably are best placed in social sciences. But they have different educational roles.

One of the reasons for the lack of acceptance of the separation of journalism from communication and other forms of media studies is the basic assumption about the role of media studies or communications. Obviously if you believe that journalism studies is basically a critique of the profession, the course will not be based on the intellectual foundation of politics or language but on media science. But if you believe that journalism courses can provide, within the university context, journalistic practitioners of the highest intelligence and educational ability there must be room for such professional and vocational education to achieve this aim. Too many suppositions of an intuitive kind have been made about the underlying constituents of journalism education.

The answer is not to start with a number of discrete subject ideas which it is hoped will form a combined subject called journalism but rather the opposite. The first objective is to identify broadcast journalism (or radio journalism) as an abstract subject in its own right. Having done that you then add the components identified as peculiar to radio and television journalism, separately or together.

The combined elements of radio journalism education are therefore: speech studies, radio studies and news studies. None of these can be thought of as separate subjects, but all are integrated into a single educational entity. The strands are unified into a single subject called radio journalism; and practical expression can then be given to these theoretical strands through workshop and laboratory sessions as well as background and case studies where relevant.

The culmination of theoretical and practical ingredients are the projects into which any radio station or television station can actually divide their output. These are such things as feature/documentary work; and the local magazine programme which might involve such things as music and speech, interviewing, information giving, phone-in interviews or chats, general traffic information and news bulletin preparation. Such a course becomes not a course in Media Studies but rather a study of a medium, namely, either radio or television. By changing the ingredients and identifying the basic strands, the course could

just as easily be a print, periodical or television course, or indeed a postgraduate course in broadcast studies or broadcast journalism, or media management. There is a continual relationship between the three strands.

Take for example the relationship between news studies and radio studies. News studies begins by studying news in the abstract - its definition, components and history; its collection and selection; its constraints (ethics, law etc.) It is only then that the study branches out into individual specialisations and is then related to the central, radio studies themes.

It is time that broadcast journalism is recognised for what it is: a professional study and profession in its own right requiring its own form of core curriculum, theoretical basis and practical education. Journalism degrees of this kind can be grouped into three broad classifications: liberal, practical and liberal-professional. They can also be grouped into core curriculum areas such as communication or media studies, or some other intellectual foundation such as politics, history or language.

The "liberal philosophy" has best been expressed as a "liberal arts education with an introduction to the field of broadcasting"¹⁹ The "practical" philosophy is oriented towards job-entry skills, along with a basic understanding of the industry. The "liberal-professional" philosophy includes liberal arts background as well as professional job training skills and knowledge of the broadcast industry. The majority of such courses in modern universities, certainly in the United States, follow this "liberal-professional" philosophy which aims at giving the student some liberal studies combined with technical and theoretical courses.

W.G. Christ has found at least four different kinds of department/university combinations for journalism schools and degree courses:

- The professional programme within the "trade school" environment whose primary mission is entry-level training.
- The professional programme within the liberal arts environment.
- The liberal arts department within the professional or trade school environment.
- The liberal arts department housed within a liberal arts and sciences university.²⁰

Academics are not taking into account the wishes of the industry and the students themselves when deciding on the various philosophies into which their broadcast journalism

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programme will fit. The big problem with journalism education - and broadcast journalism education -- is that it is not seen sufficiently as a unified programme of study. There has to be an integration of the the right kind of theory and practical professional education. For instance, the subject taught is not politics per se but politics for journalists; not a writing subject but reporting and interviewing; writing and speaking; and packaging and production. This subject integration is being recognised in journalism education in the United States. The AEJMC task force has challenged the notion that skills and philosophical concepts are separate entities. The two are intertwined. Educators are not faced with an either/or option.²¹

Some educators refuse to mix the practical with the theoretical because they believe that they should be giving their students a higher goal than merely training them for a job.²² However, many of us -- particularly those of us who have actually worked in the profession --- believe that students must receive technical training since the tools of the profession, and learning how to use the tools, are an accepted part of all professions. To deprive students of the knowledge of the way the newsroom or broadcast station operates is to put them at a great disadvantage.²³ To say that broadcast journalism courses in universities should not teach skills, only theory, is the same as saying that drama and music courses should teach history and theory but no practical performance courses.

One American academic suggests that the best curriculum for broadcast journalism is to combine two elements: "a core curriculum (in which a student gains practical knowledge of both audio and video techniques, writing and newsgathering skills, knowledge of basic broadcast laws and regulations, and basic communication theory); and electives from theoretical areas of most interest (that is, media criticism, advertising, management)."²⁴

Blanchard and Christ say there are at least three reasons for building a common core into a broadcast journalism degree:

- "Utilitarian", in which there are some knowledge and skills that are integral for all students without exception.
- "Introduction/orientation" which provides students with subject matter that is wide-ranging and integrative rather than specialised and atomised".
- "Integrative" which requires students to complete certain core courses which
" seek connections and commonalities among both conceptual and applied specialities."²⁵

Webster believes a core curriculum should consist of three areas:

- Production: performance, writing, direction,

programming, management, media economics, technology law and policy.

- Content: history, aesthetics and criticism, communication /cultural studies, content analysis
- Audience: reception analysis, audience behaviour, media effects and uses and gratifications.²⁶

A modern curriculum in broadcast journalism should have as its core at least the following: an introductory course for broadcast journalism; radio reporting; television reporting; advanced multimedia reporting; long-form broadcast journalism; new technologies; computer assisted reporting and research; broadcast research; and then politics, law, history, and economics for broadcast journalism. Some courses prefer to break this core down into even more units but including such separate elements as news writing, performance, programming and radio and television production.

The big problem with journalism education in universities, particularly in Asia, and perhaps even Australia, is that it is derived almost exclusively from one particular source -- American academics in the communication field of study. Ahmad Murad Merican, pointed to the need for journalism education to be founded on something more. He says: "In Malaysia for instance if we trace the development of journalism and communication schools, and analyse their course structures, course readings and journal publications, the American (read United States) thinking - and a particular way of thinking at that - has dominated communication and journalism education. ... But of late there is some realisation that journalism and communication education depart from the Schramm-Lerner-Berelson paradigm and posturing towards a seemingly more cultural and holistic tradition normally identified with Europe, in particular the epistemology adopted by certain British universities."²⁷

The same is true of universities in other parts of Asia, for instance in Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand and South Korea. This is a particularly worrying form of cultural and media imperialism. Education is expanding the local mind to an American view of communications and journalism. For this view, journalism is a part of communication rather than being seen, as it is for example in the United Kingdom and Europe, as a discipline of its own. The time has come to fight against the colonial mentality in the sphere of journalism and communication. There needs to be a new and different kind of education not a mere transplant.²⁸

Adhikarya, Lent and Maslog have also expressed concern that communication education delivery and direction was

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patterned on United States models. Adhikarya complained about a tendency of US-trained Asian scholars to ignore media communication models more applicable to Asian cultures such as broader social contextual elements of the communication process, rather than the direct effects models of US researchers.²⁹

An integrated form of journalistic education is required that combines both theory and practical applications of the theory, as a unity, not as separate subjects. The proper role for a university is not to separate skills and theory but to produce a new approach to skills (newsmaking) through theory. The real answer is integration of theory and practice. This cannot be done through the odd Mass Communication or Communication Studies courses disconnected from the production and journalism classes, as is the case in some universities.

We have been trying in my own department of journalism a "cascade learning approach" which I initiated in the United Kingdom. The basic skills required for a broadcast journalist revolve around a writing style that fits the broadcast media; and the way in which interviewing fits in with writing, reporting, and presentation skills. None of these can and should be seen as separate entities. A broadcast journalist needs to know a lot about production and technology. None of these can be taught in isolation either since they all integrate with the preparation, the research, the reporting, the collecting of information, the compilation of information and its dissemination to the listener or viewer.

We experimented by starting on a foundation of ad libbing before any reporting or normal journalistic education. The point is to get the future broadcast journalist used to speaking aloud in front of an audience. The ad lib gets the student used to speaking under pressure, having to think on their feet as they speak. Sometimes, there is very little preparation time available for a broadcast journalist who must at the very least be able to answer some basic questions if not do a full piece-to-camera or a voice report into a radio news programme.

As a start, all students in the class were required to come prepared with a 40 second topic about something which they knew a lot about. It could be topic "where they lived", or something simple. After each ad lib, the exercise would continue with other members of the class having ONE question to ask of each ad-libber. The individual student would have to reply.

In week two, the topic of the ad lib was made more difficult: it would be on a topic of news in the paper that morning. Again, after each ad lib, every other student in the class would have to think of a question to ask. This then had the additional quality of

making everyone read a newspaper (no mean feat with some students but essential for building the data banks for the future journalist knowledge). In week three, things moved on. This time the ad lib would be about some aspect of the immediate or current news, but the topic would be given to the student at the start of class. This time, the questions of the other participants increased. Instead of one question, each student would have to ask two questions. The ad libber would have to know enough about the story to give a coherent and accurate answer to each question. The ad libber learnt fluency, and how to put thoughts together quickly for an audience to hear. The listeners learnt the absolute importance of listening to what the ad-libber was saying (how many interviewers forget to listen!) and then being able to frame a coherent and interesting question.

As the integrated learning approach continued, each student had to think of three questions to ask, and then more than three questions. We then discussed what was happening, and to everyone's surprise they discovered that they were at one and the same time collecting their thoughts, listening to what the speaker was saying, formulating and asking questions, and then thinking of more questions to ask. In other words, the speaker was learning to put together a news story; and the listeners were learning to interview, and take part in news conferences.

Each of these sessions was recorded, for playback and analysis by the group, or in individual tutorials later, to assess the quality of the questions, what could and should have been said, how it could have been better constructed, whether it was interestingly said (both questions and answers), and whether it sounded as though the questioner was really interested. The questions were also analysed to discover whether the points were sufficiently newsworthy to make a story.

Then, the students wrote a news story from what they had heard, both questions and answers. The news story was written in the form of a piece to camera or a voice report or a cold piece of news copy to be read by a news anchor. The approach can be expanded to include ethics, reporting techniques, production techniques, law issues, politics, economics.

The change in interviewing technique as the exercises progress was startling. By the end of the first term, just before December, every student was capable of presenting excellent, intelligent, fluent, interesting interviews, well edited and prepared as a package. The integration continues with the end products: interviews lead to news stories and inserts; interviews lead also to packages; packages lead to magazine programmes; packages

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and interviews lead to documentaries and features.

Most employers these days feel that a university degree of some kind is a minimum requirement for the broadcasters and journalists of the future. The question is whether it should be a mass communication/ communication degree or something else. The other question is whether we should equate journalism with communication studies or treat and develop journalism (including broadcast journalism) as a discipline and field of study in its own right.

A 1990 study in the United States found that professional broadcasters surveyed by the Roper Organisation were critical of university education programmes that are perceived to have too little hands-on training.³⁰ And another survey, in 1989, said that two-thirds of US news directors said broadcast journalism training at universities generally gives students a head start with solid grounding in the basics.³¹

News directors and news executives I have surveyed in Hong Kong and Britain all believe that most broadcast journalist students lack certain key skills such as how to write for radio and television and how to operate broadcasting equipment. They expect these essential ingredients of professional knowledge to be taught as part of university journalism degree courses, not left to newsrooms to teach. Similar research in the United States reported the same conclusions.³²

It is common in the academic research literature to try to separate professional skills from perceptions of academic theory such as mass communication as a basis for all journalism education.³³ It is equally wrong to suggest that future journalists only need professional skills. They also need a mature understanding of the world, and of specifically related subject areas to allow them to perform their journalistic endeavours better. The question is whether this should be what is commonly called a "liberal arts" background or something else. A survey of University of Missouri-Columbia undergraduates placed a liberal arts education for journalism at the bottom of a list of nine essential attributes of the journalist graduate. Ranked higher than a liberal arts background were such areas as : enthusiasm and initiative, oral and written communication skills, professional experience, appearance, technical training, reporting expertise.³⁴

Broadcast managers and news directors in the United States say they consider a combination of professional skills and general education when hiring a new reporter. 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.³⁵ A university degree and the degree major were always put at the end of the list.

In Europe, Asia, Australia, and possibly even in the United States, the role of the universities in journalism education is still not settled. Where universities are responsible for preparing future journalists, the balance between providing students with a general academic education and equipping them with practical skills is still being debated.³⁶ As in the 1890s, some members of the profession still doubt that journalism education is needed in the first place. Whatever the result of these continuing arguments, the time to develop a proper journalism education culture has been too long delayed.

Notes

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