1-1-1998

Cultural studies in journalism education: Obscurantism equals profundity

K. Windschuttle

Recommended Citation
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss4/6
Cultural Studies In Journalism Education: Obscurantism Equals Profundity?

This essay first appeared in Quadrant, May 1998. It revisits the intellectual conflict between media/cultural theorists and vocational-oriented journalism educators. The author argues that the convoluted theorisations and postmodernist verbiage used by cultural/media theorists to expound their ideas and assumptions are so obscure that very few people outside the field can understand what is being said, nor see their relevance to journalism education. Obscurantism is assumed to equal profundity. The author asserts that journalism educators should draw from their professional experience, write their own textbooks and develop their own 'journalism theory'.

Keith Windschuttle
Journalism Educator & Author

University degrees in communications and media studies in the past decade have had the highest entry level requirements of any courses in the humanities and social sciences in Australia. In some institutions, it is as difficult to get into a media course as it is to get into medicine or law. This popularity has been important in ensuring that many of the new universities created since 1988 have been able to attract a high calibre enrolment and have not been seen to house a second rate student body.

Not surprisingly, this development has been a source of pride to many of the new university administrators. In fact, these courses are changing the very idea of what it means to study for an arts degree. Every year, more of the older universities, faced with declining entry aggregates in the humanities, are reappraising their traditional liberal arts degrees to accommodate media and communications studies and thus shore up their student demand.

Within media studies, journalism is one of the options from which students choose. Journalism is offered as a major or a subject stream by more than 20 universities in Australia. In a typical Bachelor of Arts (Communications) degree, the journalism stream
or any other media practice stream like, say, film production -- occupies between one third and one half of the total hours a student spends as an undergraduate. The rest of the program normally contains a small number of liberal arts subjects, with the remaining one third to one half of the total degree devoted to media theory. There are a number of variations on this model, including some programs devoted almost entirely to media and communications theory, but it remains fairly typical.

There are three characteristics of journalism that most teaching in the field upholds. First, journalism is committed to reporting the truth about what occurs in the world. Journalists go out into society, make observations about what is done and what is said, and report them as accurately as they can. They have to provide evidence to verify and corroborate their claims and they have to attribute their sources. Journalism, in other words, upholds a realist view of the world and an empirical methodology.

Second, the principal ethical obligations of journalists are to their readers, their listeners and their viewers. Journalists report not to please their employers or advertisers, nor to serve the state or support some other cause, but in order to inform their audiences. The measure of journalists' success is their relationship with their audience.

Third, journalists should be committed to good writing. This means their meaning should be clear and their grammar precise. In our society it is journalists and sub-editors who are the front line standard bearers for good English expression. In practice, these three characteristics are usually taken so much for granted that they form an implicit background rather than the overtly stated principles of journalism education.

However, in most of the media theory that is taught within Australian communications and media degrees none of these principles are upheld. In fact, they are specifically denied, either by argument or by example, by the dominant intellectual field that has reigned in media theory for at least fifteen years. The methodologies and values of journalism are undermined, contradicted and frequently regarded as naive by the proponents of media theory.

In those institutions that teach both journalism and media theory within the one degree, the result is a form of intellectual schizophrenia among students and staff alike. But even in those journalism schools fortunate enough to avoid this material, it remains completely unsatisfactory that the practice of professional education is overshadowed and denigrated by the dominant theory.
When journalism was taken up as a subject by a number of colleges of advanced education in Australia in the mid-1970s, prevailing academic opinion held that vocational education on its own was insufficient to constitute a bachelor's degree. So to get their courses through the higher education boards which most state governments had set up to accredit the new college degrees, journalism educators had to add something else to their own subject matter. In most cases, this additional material comprised some liberal arts subjects plus communications studies or media studies. At the time, however, the field of communications was dominated by American management theory, and hence was largely inappropriate, while academic discussion about the media was then focussed on the relatively narrow issues of the organisation of work, the ownership of the press and the selection of news. So there was a big gap in the market for a more all-encompassing field of study.

Very quickly, this gap was filled by British cultural studies, a movement which came to define the nature and methodology of media theory and which, despite several twists and turns, has held sway ever since. In Australia, cultural studies came to be taught in media degrees that contained vocational majors such as journalism, film production and the like which were confined to the then colleges of advanced education, as well as in a number of new courses in communications theory offered by English and sociology departments in the established universities. Cultural studies was developed within a number of English universities, with Birmingham the most prominent followed by Leicester, Leeds and the Open University. It was a field created by English literary critics, most of whom were Marxists. Instead of the usual poetic and dramatic fare of English high culture, they wanted to study working class culture. This very quickly led them to film, television and the press. The seminal text had been Richard Hoggart's 1957 book *The Uses of Literacy*, which saw the mass media as a corrupting influence on what he regarded as the authentic, organic culture of the working classes. However, by the late 1970s cultural studies academics regarded Hoggart's views as naive and sentimental compared to the brands of Marxism coming out of Europe in the writings of the Frankfurt School and the French Communist Party theorist Louis Althusser.

Both the Frankfurt School and Althusser were trying to answer the question of why the workers didn't revolt against capitalism the way Marx said they should. Both argued that under post-World War Two capitalism, there was no longer any scope for an independent working class culture. The Frankfurt School blamed much of this on the nature of the mass media. Both radio and television were claimed to produce intellectual passivity in
their audiences. According to the Frankfurt Marxists, even the syncopated rhythms of jazz music turned fans into helpless and passive subjects of capitalist totalitarianism. Althusser agreed that capitalism resembled a totalitarian formation. It had eliminated the independence of the institutions of civil society, he said, so that the education system, trade unions, churches and the media all operated as 'ideological state apparatuses' to support the capitalist status quo.

These claims look so obviously ludicrous today that it is hard to believe they were ever taken seriously, though they were certainly repeated faithfully by several of my ostensible colleagues who lectured in the BA (Communications) degree at the NSW Institute of Technology (now the University of Technology, Sydney) throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s. However, what had a much more lasting influence was Althusser's injection of structuralist theory into analyses of the media.

Structuralism derives from the nineteenth century linguistic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure and enjoyed a considerable revival in the 1950s in the work of the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. The attraction of structuralism for literary critics is that it offers them a theory of literature. Instead of being confined forever to analysing nothing but particular pieces of literature, literary critics turned to structuralist theory in an attempt to study the forms of literature as a whole. Not only this, structuralism appeared to be a universal approach which bore its own epistemology and its own ontology, both of which are extremely congenial to literary critics. The epistemology of structuralism, its view of how we get to know things, is hermeneutics or textual interpretation. The ontology of structuralism, that is, its view of what exists, is that the world should be regarded as a 'text'. The theory contends that we cannot have access to an objective understanding of any real world. We 'create' the world we inhabit by employing our own linguistic and cultural categories that structuralists insist cannot, by their nature, refer to any real world, only to their relations with other signs and categories. We thus cannot know things in themselves because we are locked within a closed circuit of signs or 'texts.'

According to Graeme Turner, professor of English at the University of Queensland and co-editor of The Media in Australia, the current standard undergraduate media textbook: "Understood this way, language does not describe reality, it actually constitutes it. Our language system determines, delimits and shapes the way in which we understand the world. Therefore, to examine the structures of our language is to examine the structures of culture in general."

In short, what most of us believe to be the 'real world' is...
regarded by literary theory as nothing but a text. And the proper way to study this text is by hermeneutic literary analysis.

Now, because of the determining power of culture and language, structuralism goes on to claim that individual human beings are unimportant in shaping the world. The individual decisions taken by people, even those colossuses who stride the world like a Caesar or a Napoleon, do not figure in the structuralist view of history because it holds there can be no autonomous human subjects. Men and women are said to be dominated by their languages, codes, cultures and ideologies, irrespective of their conscious wishes. You can see why this doctrine became popular in English departments: it elevated the textual analysis of language and culture to the top of the methodological ladder and allowed literary critics to move into not only media studies but psychology, sociology, history, legal studies, and just about any other field in the humanities and social sciences.

By the late 1970s, the dominant form of structuralism was the Marxist version of Louis Althusser. Media students were then taught that capitalist ideology was generated in the form of a system of linguistic rules by the agents of the ruling class who worked for the media. Ideology was transmitted by communication signals and lodged not in people’s conscious minds but at a level of ‘deep structure’ in their unconscious. There it sat, like a computer program, continuing to receive data and instructions from additional media messages, processing them and eprinting out interpretations in the person’s conscious mind. Thus the prevailing ideology or culture prescribed the whole way of life necessary for the individual to accept his or her subordinate place in the capitalist social formation. This view of people as little more than robots was the product of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the leading British institution in the field and, in the 1970s and 1980s, the mecca for Australian media academics on sabbatical.

Instead of the notion that journalists and other media workers should serve their audiences by providing them with information and entertainments that they, audiences, want, academics from cultural studies claimed there were a different set of relationships involved. As agents of the dominant ideology, workers in the media exercised control and authority over the minds of audience members. For example, in her influential 1978 book Decoding Advertisements, Judith Williamson added the views of the French Freudian theorist, Jacques Lacan, to Althusser’s theory of ideology to argue that advertising trapped and compelled its audiences to buy its products. When you recognise yourself as the person addressed by an advertisement, Williamson claimed, you exchange your own self for the person addressed in
the ad. Identity under capitalism, she claimed, is thereby constituted by advertising.

Similarly, in their 1983 book *Australia's Commercial Media*, Bill Bonney and Helen Wilson also drew upon the theories of both Lacan and Althusser to argue that when an individual reads an advertisement in the press he or she "not only draws upon dominant ideologies, but in doing so reproduces them". Bonney and Wilson went on to claim that television studio interviews, narrative films, television drama, televised sport, as well as conventional paintings done before the Cubist era, all offer their viewers "safe, unchallenged spectator positions" which "simply reproduce the dominant, ideological representation of subjectivity".

Now, if everyone was as dominated by the culture of capitalism as the Althusserians claimed, we might well ask how could anyone who shared that culture escape? In particular, how could M. Althusser and his acolytes themselves think anything different to the mindless masses? Once it dawned on these theorists that there was no place in their great structure to account for the existence of their own critique, there was a scramble to create some small openings in the closed circle. Althusser claimed it was possible to distinguish between 'science' (his own views) and 'ideology' (the views of everyone else).

At Birmingham, Stuart Hall resurrected the theory of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to claim that there were a few people -- mainly leftist intellectuals and workers who accepted a Marxist theory of history -- who could take media messages that had been 'encoded' with capitalist ideology and 'decode' them in ways that overturned their political content. Most academics in media studies failed to recognise this logical subterfuge for what it was and so from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, encoding/decoding theory was fed to a generation of media students.

It is not difficult to see that all of this stands in opposition to the practice of journalism which assumes there is a real world to report and that it is possible to report it accurately. Moreover, publishers and broadcasters would go out of business overnight if they shared the theorists' elitist attitudes to the unthinking robots who supposedly constitute media audiences. Partly because of this obvious conflict between the theory and media practice, in 1984 when my book criticising these presumptions, *The Media*, was published I thought this whole approach was due for a fairly prompt extinction. At the time, Althusser's theories had been subject to some pretty damaging critiques, the most prominent of which was *The Poverty of Theory* by another Marxist, Edward Thompson, who identified with deadly accuracy the affinity between the attitudes of Althusser and those of Joseph Stalin.
Moreover, Althusser removed himself from the scene by strangling his 74 year old wife and being declared insane. This behaviour had an understandably negative effect on his status as an academic celebrity, especially among all those Marxist feminists in media studies who had till then hung on his every word.

However, I was completely wrong. Rather than withering away, this movement simply changed tack and, in fact, became stronger than ever. Today, cultural studies is widely recognised as the fastest growing area in the humanities and social sciences. The American editors of a recent collection of essays on the field talk of its 'unprecedented international boom'. Not only have many of the new universities established in Australia since 1988 set up departments but the occupants of the principal chairs of English at older universities like University of Melbourne (Simon During) and University of Queensland (John Frow) say that what they are doing now is not literary criticism but cultural studies.

In retrospect, we can see that the appeal of this theory to academics had lain not in its Marxism, which could be shed without too much loss, but in its linguistic idealism, that is, in the notion that the world is nothing but a text and that the way to study it is by textual analysis. Although some of the earlier French gurus of structuralism were dumped in the mid-1980s, a new breed were quickly taken up. Some of these were themselves former French Marxists like Jean Baudrillard and Jean François Lyotard who now called themselves 'postmodernists'. Others were the French theorists Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida who their American followers called 'poststructuralists'.

In terms of philosophical underpinnings, the move from structuralism to poststructuralism and postmodernism meant dropping the theory of history of Marx and the philosophy of language of Saussure and replacing them with the theory of history of Friedrich Nietzsche and the theory of language of the Nazi philosopher Martin Heidegger. Politically, this meant abandoning support for the industrial working class and adopting the 'identity group' politics that emerged in the 1970s. Eventually, the newer theory became the de facto ideology of the feminist, gay, black and indigenous 'liberation' movements.

However, in terms of its assumptions about the influence of language and culture, very little actually changed. The French Heideggerian theorist, Jacques Derrida, argues that language relates not to any outside reality but only to the differences of meaning within a text. Moreover, there is no such thing as fixed meaning either. The meaning of a word or speech act, he claims,
is never stable but is always 'deferred'. Hence, not only can there be no reference from language to any outside world but there can be no reference from a text to any permanent meaning within the text. We are adrift on a sea of linguistic relativism.

Nietzschean theorists such as Michel Foucault claim, just like structuralists, that the autonomy of the human subject is an illusion. In contrast to traditional humanist beliefs about the importance of human consciousness and free will, Foucault's 'anti-humanist' philosophy denies the significance of these for social life and history. The individual is not a free agent who uses his conscious mind to decide what to do, Foucault contends, but rather is merely the instrument of language and culture. In other words, poststructuralism offers a view of human nature little different to Althusserian structuralism.

While Nietzsche argues that there are no facts, only interpretations, Foucault adds that all history, as well as any contemporary statement about society, is necessarily fictitious. Translated to the media, the consequences of all this are much the same as the assertions I cited above from Judith Williamson and the Bonney and Wilson book. Let me give two examples from this newer body of theory.

The first comes from the French postmodernist Jean Baudrillard who claims that the media generate what he calls a "hyperreality" which dominates people's "primary" consciousness. People suffer from a surfeit of information, he says, a timeless store of too many events, a proliferation of memories without experience. He claims most people experience life through terms defined for them by the media, hence what is called "real life" is indistinguishable from its "simulation". Dramatic events like the 1991 Gulf War do not exist in their own right but only as figments of mass media simulation and war games rhetoric. There is no way we can tell whether any "real war" has been engaged, he claims. Everyone, from presidents and generals down to the ordinary citizen, relies on second-hand knowledge of events derived mainly from television. Nobody is in a position to know whether a war has actually broken out or whether they are seeing or hearing some fictional "simulacrum" of the real, conjured up by the media. Accordingly, the title of Baudrillard's recent book is The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.

Baudrillard doesn't mention them but, to be consistent, we should extend his claims about the non-reality of the war to the tens of thousands of dead Iraqi conscripts who provided the cannon fodder for this simulated event. We should reassure their bereaved wives and parents that there is no point in bewailing the hyperreal representations produced by a war that might not have occurred. The reports of the deaths of their loved ones have no
higher status than media propaganda. This is what passes for reality in the postmodern condition.

The magnitude of what media education has lost under the postmodern ascendancy can be gauged by what is no longer taught. Baudrillard deserves to be compared with a book about media coverage of warfare written from the practising journalist’s perspective. Philip Knightley’s *The First Casualty* (1975) is a history of war reporting from Crimea to Vietnam. Knightley acknowledges full well the enormous difficulties placed in the way of the correspondent who wants to report war accurately. These have included a natural loyalty to report his own side favourably, a seductive tendency to portray himself at the centre of events, military censorship of the release of information, restricted access to the battlefield, and the direct and often threatening measures used by commanders and politicians to get the coverage they want.

Despite these barriers, and despite the fact that the majority of war reporters have succumbed to them, Knightley shows that there have been some who have been able to report truthfully and to tell their readers what really happened. Moreover, for those reporters who want to follow in the latter’s footsteps, Knightley provides advice both about how to get accurate information and the choice of genres available to write the story.

In other words, Knightley’s book performs a genuine service for journalism since it both criticises and enhances the profession at the same time. By contrast, there is nothing in Baudrillard of any value whatsoever for journalism or media practice. To teach his supercilious illogicalities as part of an allegedly professional education is a complete waste of time.

My second example is an analysis by the media theorist John Hartley of the way to understand the audiences of the press, radio and television. Hartley was until recently Professor of Media Studies at Edith Cowan University, Perth, and is now head of journalism and cultural studies at the UK’s largest media school at the University of Wales at Cardiff. Despite his prominence in training people for the industry, he has long been known for his anti-industry views, arguing, for instance, that television is a “paedocratic regime” that treats its viewers like children. He is also author of what is undoubtedly the most ill-informed article written about journalism in recent times (in *Australian Journal of Communication*, 22:2, 1995) which is replete with such howlers as: “academics must always cite their sources: journalists never do”. However, it is an article about audiences in the undergraduate textbook, *Australian Cultural Studies: A Reader* (edited by John Frow and Meaghan Morris) that I want to focus on here.

Any approach to studying an audience, Hartley says, will
necessarily bring its own methodology and its own definition of the subject, both of which are decided arbitrarily by the researcher or by the prevailing social science "discourse". Therefore, he reasons, "audiences are literally unknowable". Audiences, he claims, are:

"... the invisible fictions that are produced institutionally in order for various institutions to take charge of the mechanisms of their own survival. Audiences may be imagined empirically, theoretically or politically, but in all cases the product is a fiction that serves the need of the imagining institution. In no case is the audience 'real' or external to its discursive construction."

Hartley's position is not simply that the categories into which researchers define audiences are artificial ones that suit research purposes. He is arguing that we have no grounds for believing that there is an audience of real people "out there", in itself. He contrasts his own approach with the mistaken views of "empirical research" into television which is so naïve as to be based on "the presumption that audiences are not merely the product of research into them but exist prior to, apart from and beyond the activities of both television and television research".

Now, for all its naivety, the empirical approach is the one that television producers and newspaper editors are forced to adopt. If they want to increase their ratings or their circulation they have to believe that there are real people out there in the world, beyond their existing audience, who might be persuaded to watch their program or buy their paper if it ran more appealing current affairs or news stories. Despite Hartley, they have to assume there are people "external" to their current "discursive construction" who could become part of the larger audience they are trying to build. The logic of Hartley's approach is that all these editors need do is simply adopt a different methodology to measure the audience or a different definition of what the audience is, then give themselves whatever ratings, circulation and revenues they choose.

It is true that editors and producers often do engage in things that might be called audience manipulation or reconstruction. By changing their editorial content or the type of program they offer, or by varying things such as cover price and distribution, they can go upmarket or downmarket, or attract a younger, older or wealthier audience. But it is a theoretical delusion to conclude from these familiar industry tactics -- or from the choice of any of the available methodologies of audience research -- that readers, listeners and viewers do not have an independent existence of their own. This might be a conclusion one could draw from the idealist discourse of cultural studies, but from a realist perspective it is absurd. Audiences are not fictions. They are made up of real
people who make decisions about what they will read and watch based on their own tastes and their own free will. It is irresponsible to pretend to students that there is some kind of methodological gimmick or theoretical discourse that can change this reality.

The failure of the varieties of media theory I have discussed here is not only a matter of their logical irrationality, or even of their opposition to the assumptions and practices of the industry they purport to be analysing. It can be seen quite clearly on the few occasions when the theorists try to take stock of what they have accomplished over the last fifteen years or so. If you wade through the account of the history of textual analysis in media theory published in Stuart Cunningham and Graeme Turner's *The Media in Australia*, you come to this conclusion:

While textual analysis has had to relinquish any ambition to reveal the meaning through its consideration of media texts, it still insists that one cannot just wheel in any old meaning at all. Most agree that the text does have the power to limit the range of uses to which it is likely to be put. Exactly how much power, however, or how one might define the limits, is more difficult to decide. The balance of power between text and reader seems to vary from text to text, from reading context to reading context, from audience member to audience member, and over time.

This should be read as an admission that, when put to the test of providing a theoretical analysis of the media, cultural studies has failed to deliver. All it can offer are specific analyses of specific media items in specific contexts. But this is what old-fashioned 'practical' English literary criticism has always been able to do. Turner is admitting that textual theory cannot go any further to make generalisations or even provide methodological guidelines for the study of the media. In short, its attempts to theorise its subject matter have not worked. Hence, under this regime, media analysis is no more advanced today than it was in the early 1970s. Even those charitably disposed towards cultural studies would find it hard to deny this represents the dead end of a blind alley.

Another index of the achievements of this movement can be gauged from its waste matter, that is, the range of concepts and terminology jettisoned along the way to the above conclusion. The great majority of these were adopted not because of their intellectual weight or clarity but because they were mouthed by whoever was the then current theoretical guru. Intellectual fashion has constantly prevailed over reason. Who, for instance, now talks about Althusser's "ideological state apparatuses"? Who now uses the "encoding/decoding" thesis of Stuart Hall and the Birmingham school? Who now thinks it important to spend time distinguishing between "denotation" and "connotation" or between "dialogic, diachronic" and "synchronic"? All these concepts are now museum
pieces. Yet over the period of several years each was taught as
gospel by the same people who are now recommending a
postmodernist or a poststructuralist or a hermeneutic or an
ethnographic or a “feminist reader-response” approach as the
definitive word on the subject.

One can only feel terribly sorry for the hapless generations
of students forced to dutifully learn and regurgitate these now
dead and useless concepts. All of them come from the field of
structuralism, now so disdainfully dismissed by its one-time
enthusiasts as passé. The academics responsible have thereby
rendered the intellectual capital of two or three of the recent
generations of their own students as so much detritus. And it
doesn’t take much foresight to predict that every single one of the
current crop of fashionable terms -- “reception studies”, “audience
ethnography”, “deconstruction”, “discourse analysis” even
“poststructuralism” and “postmodernism” -- are headed for the
same fate, soon to be replaced by something even newer but just
as evanescent. Indeed, at the end of 1997, one of the principal
initiators of the postmodernist mindset, the American philosopher
Richard Rorty, recommended that, since nobody has “the foggiest
idea” what postmodernism means, “it would be nice to get rid of
it”.

At the start of this article I listed three characteristics of
journalism to which media theory is opposed: a realist view of the
world, an ethical regard for audiences, and a commitment to good
writing. There is little need to go into the third of these in great
detail except to say that I would be surprised if anyone could point
to worse examples of bad expression than that found in the writings
of media theory academics. While journalism educators are trying
to teach students to use active voice, short sentences, concrete
nouns and verbs, precise grammar and clear meaning, they are
faced with cultural studies courses that reward students who ape
the passive voice, arcane abstractions, long and turgid expressions
and grammatical howlers that characterise the latter. Here, for
example, is the revered Stuart Hall in the book Mass Communication
and Society trying to say what makes an effective communication:

“The overall intention of effective communication must,
certainly, be to ‘win the consent’ of the audience to the preferred
reading, and hence to get him to decode within the hegemonic
framework. Even when decodings are not made, through a ‘perfect
transmission’, within the hegemonic framework, the great range
of decodings will tend to be ‘negotiations’ within the dominant
codes -- giving them a more situational inflexion -- rather than
systematically decoding them in a counter-hegemonic way. ‘Negotiated’ decodings, which allow wide exceptions to be made in terms of the way the audience situates itself within the hegemonic field, but which also legitimate the wider reach, the inclusive reference, the greater overall coherence.”

Perversely, one of the reasons the cultural studies movement has been so successful is because it has adopted verbiage of this kind. Very few people outside the field can understand what is being said and so wider opposition is thereby minimised. Obscure expression is a clever tactic to adopt in academic circles where there is always an expectation that things are never simple and that anyone who writes clearly is thereby being shallow. Instead of signalling a communication theorist’s inability to communicate properly, obscurantism like the above is assumed to equal profundity.

But if media theory is as degenerate as I am making out, how could media courses be so attractive to students? How could the phenomenon I described at the outset have arisen, the substantial shift not only in student demand but in the very structure of liberal arts degrees?

It is important to understand that the popularity of media courses owes nothing to cultural studies. Indeed, if my own experience is any guide, large numbers of students will freely admit to sympathetic lecturers that they loathe everything cultural studies stands for. Once they have experienced it, most students come to regard media theory as a largely incomprehensible and odious gauntlet they must run in order to be allowed to do what they really came to the institution for, to study media practice. Students who take media courses want to learn skills that will gain them employment in what they perceive to be attractive and interesting careers. Before they enrol, very few of them realise how much of the course is consumed by media theory, nor do they appreciate what media theory actually is. They assume it is something that complements media practice, not its antithesis.

The great irony in the conduct of media courses lies in the relative status of those who teach theory and those who teach practice. Most media practitioners who join academic departments do so after at least ten years, and more commonly twenty years, employment in the industry. However, most only have BA pass degrees and find that while their industry experience will get them a job it will not get them a promotion. To be promoted from lecturer to senior lecturer they are required to complete either a PhD or a masters research degree. Some even need postgraduate
qualifications to get any status beyond a short-term contract position. Undertaking postgraduate work while taking a full teaching load at this stage of life is very difficult and can take many years. The result is that most lecturers in journalism, television production and similar practical subjects languish at the lecturer and senior lecturer level in the academic hierarchy. Apart from a small number of notable exceptions, few have been appointed professors or heads of schools. In other words, even though it is the industry experience of the practitioners that students value so highly, the university system does not reward this experience in any way commensurate with its appeal.

On the other hand, the theorists in cultural studies are invariably people who have done honours degrees at university and then gone onto postgraduate studies in their twenties. They go straight from university study to university teaching. Hardly any of them gain direct experience within the media. The overwhelming majority of cultural studies theorists in Australia have never been employed by any media organisation in any capacity. Most have never even set foot inside a newspaper office or television studio let alone made a living from writing or broadcasting. They know the media only from the consumerist perspective, that is, from what they see on the screen or read on the page. The reality of the industry, its production methods, values and constraints, are understood by them, at best, at third hand, and in most cases not at all. Yet because they have gone through the university system and gained postgraduate qualifications they are considered better fitted to running media studies departments than the real practitioners.

The result is that within Australian universities the theorists have gained the lions' share of positions as professors in the field. They now head most of the departments, chair the curriculum committees, set the texts and pull the strings in making appointments. When the cultural studies movement began in the 1970s, Stuart Hall admitted that he had "to squeeze three or four jobs for anybody under some heavy disguise". Today, however, these people have reached a critical mass where they dominate academic appointments by recommending like-thinking colleagues to any position. University administrators have been completely taken in. They now welcome cultural studies theorists as the intellectual leaders in their field to the great cost of genuine intellectual life in their institutions.

What, then, is to be done? Contra Mark Davis's book *Gangland*, most of the people I am criticising here are members not of a suppressed younger generation but of an entrenched older one. Most have tenured posts and are aged in their forties or early fifties which means they still have another twenty years of working...
life left in them, twenty years in which they are most unlikely to change their ways. The best way for media practitioners themselves to respond would be to compete with them head on. Rather than confining themselves to their specialist areas, they should be writing their own general textbooks and developing their own theory. Those who know the cultural industries from the inside are much better placed than any of their opponents to throw some proper light on the field.

The most important issue is to try to rescue the liberal arts degree from the rising tide that now threatens to swamp it. The threat posed by the introduction of courses in communications and media studies into the older universities, as well as the contamination of traditional humanities subjects by the assumptions and politics of cultural studies, rises all the time. How best to resist this, or, rather, whether it is still possible to actually resist at all, I am not sure, but since the post-Dawkins university system is now driven by student demand, and since secondary school students are so demonstrably ill-informed about the study of media and communications at the tertiary level, one strategy would be to try to influence demand by enlightening the potential customers. Prospective students, their parents and teachers deserve to be better informed about the subject content and aims of cultural studies, the qualifications of those who teach it and, indeed, just how far removed from reality the whole field has become.

KEITH WINDSCHUTTLE is a former journalism educator at NSW Institute of Technology 1977-1981 (now University of Technology, Sydney); and Macleay College, Sydney, 1989-1997. He is author of "The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past, Macleay, Sydney, 1996; Free Press, New York, 1997". This article first appeared in Quadrant, May 1998. Email: keith.windschuttle@macleay.edu.au