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Keeping at bay media studies onslaught in journalism

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It will come as no surprise to anyone knowing my background that I have been opposed to the media studies/cultural studies onslaught for more than a decade in my own institution and in the wider media community. I was in the audience privately cheering when The Poverty of Media Theory, was given its first outing at the 1995 Journalism Education Association conference in Christchurch, New Zealand (Windschuttle 1995, 1998). The media theorists were given both barrels at that conference with my close friend and colleague Myles Breen (1995) taking on one of their gurus, John Hartley, for what many journalism academics with a professional background in the media consider at best ill-informed. Hartley's now oft-quoted line 'the difference between journalists and academics is simply this; academics must cite their sources; journalists never do' (1996: 26) gave many of us a good laugh.

But much of the media/cultural studies approach is not so laughable; it gives one a feeling more like heartburn. Without going into detail (and risking an accusation of Windschuttle/Breen repetition), let me just say many of the points made in their Christchurch papers struck a chord with this industry-backgrounded academic.

Students come to journalism courses for training to get them a job in what they see as an exciting career. They 'take the medicine' of media theory as necessary in order to get the background in journalism practice. Over many years as Coordinator of the BA (Communication) and more recently as coordinator of the journalism course, I can only recall one or two students taking a cultural studies elective sequence; as Windschuttle suggests, it creates 'intellectual schizophrenia' (1995: 15). Journalism academics often struggle to gain qualifications and acceptance in the academic community while trying to convince their contacts in the media that they haven't 'gone over to the other side' of the harsh media critic. Admittedly the media needs constant monitoring and often deserves criticism - but, I
believe, from a position of having 'been there' and understanding some of the problems associated with the various media production processes, rather than being criticised by people who, in most cases, have never worked in any area of the media.

Last year, the course with which I have been associated for almost 20 years, the BA (Communication) at Charles Sturt University in Bathurst (formerly Mitchell College of Advanced Education) changed its structure to scrap an introductory subject in communication theory and three compulsory subjects in Australian Studies – politics, literature and history – and replaced them with three media studies subjects and an expanded elective sequence. Had not Myles Breen and myself fought through the various committees up to the Faculty of Arts Board, we would have had an undergraduate journalism degree that could be completed without a student having taken even an introductory subject in Australian politics. Given that so much of what mainstream media reports has a political element, it has always been my belief that every journalism student should study at least some politics as part of their undergraduate degree.

Thankfully, wiser heads prevailed at the Faculty level, and all journalism undergraduates are now required to complete at least two politics subjects (including an introduction to Australian politics) as part of their degree. The inclusion of the media studies subjects was rejected by those attending the Course Committee but passed on two proxy votes, hardly a ringing endorsement from those most closely-associated with the course. It's not so much the inclusion of media studies subjects but rather the loss of an introductory communication theory subject and the politics subject that worried me.

I await the students' reaction to the theoretical introduction to their journalism course with some interest. Knowing how adversely they have reacted to any theory subjects in years past, I wonder if it will gain widespread endorsement. In most other courses I surveyed as part of my MA (Honours) thesis recently, media studies is an elective sequence students can choose to study, not a compulsory component.

Overall journalism courses are popular and prestigious, drawing many more applicants than there are positions - and applicants with high tertiary entrance scores. Many of the course coordinators interviewed during my MA (Hons) research reported pressure from their administrations to take more students into their courses -- an understandable reaction by administration, given the general downturn in recent years in the number of tertiary applicants.

As an example, the BA (Communication) at CSU (until 1998) had strands in Advertising, Media Production, Theatre Media,
Organisational Communication/Public Relations and Journalism and a quota of 160 students overall. Journalism is supposed to account for 60 out of 100 positions (about 30 in the two journalism strands, print and broadcast).

In 1996 it took in slightly above the quota, with more than 90 finally electing to study print or broadcast journalism. We now have a final-year broadcast journalism cohort of about 50 – about 30% of the entire degree.

In 1997, in an attempt to even out the numbers, the strands became separate degrees. Journalism took in 60-plus. Another separate degree was added to the BA (Communication) for the 1998 intake (believe it or not) in Media and Cultural Studies.

This year, because of the dwindling number applying for tertiary places, and the relative popularity of the BA (Communication), CSU administration decided to increase the quota in the various strands; journalism was given an additional quota of 10, an increase of about 16%. The various BA (Communication) degrees took in about 225 students, an overall increase (including the new Media and Cultural Studies degree) of about 40%.

Naturally, we are now pressing with administration for adequate resources to cater for the overall increase in students, particularly when they flow through to the practical subjects in years two and three of the communication degrees.

From an university administration point of view, it is easy to see why media studies subjects are popular for inclusion in communication degrees. They are 'chalk and talk' subjects requiring nothing like the resources of practical subjects in print and broadcast journalism, radio or television production. It's a constant battle in practical-based journalism courses to keep at the cutting edge of technology – to use equipment in practical subjects that the students are likely to encounter in the workforce once they graduate. And it's not cheap. If they haven't already at least partially won the battle, journalism course coordinators across the country are seeking massive injections of money to convert to digital technology in their various practical laboratories.

Windschuttle, in his updated article in Quadrant (1998) calls on journalism educators to write their own general textbooks and develop their own theory (1998: 18). That's been a topic for discussion among Australian journalism academics for a number of years and it is finally being seriously addressed. Journalism educators have always maintained that there is a 'journalism theory' and have long pointed to the American experience in the area.

At last the journalism education fraternity in Australia is doing something about it. Two books on journalism theory,
drawing on the experience of journalism educators around the country, are in the pipeline. One is being produced in memory of our colleague, the late Charles Stuart, who began gathering material from his colleagues over the past couple of years, and had been trying to pull it together at the time of his death in January, 1998. Myles Breen has taken on the task of producing the work. The other is a proposed publication edited by two other JEA members, Suellen Tapsall and Caroline Varley at the Queensland University of Technology.

Hopefully both books will be published before the end of the year. Added to that, the 1998 JEA conference, to be held at the Capricorn International Resort at Yeppoon (near Rockhampton in central Queensland) in the first week in December, has as its theme *Towards a Journalism Theory and Journalism Today*. The conference will be an important watershed in the current debate.

**REFERENCES**


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