Engaging theory and practice in journalism education

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Keith Windschuttle's campaign against media theory would not have been receiving so much comment if a reprint of his article in the conservative magazine *Quadrant* had not received an extraordinary amount of space in *The Australian's Higher Educational Supplement*. A few weeks later, he was given a spot on *Radio National*’s breakfast show.

This public exposure for Windschuttle’s on going campaign against media theory in university based journalism education comes at a time when competition between Australian universities, suffering from Federal government cuts, is intense. In the biographical notes at the end of the *Higher Education* piece, Windschuttle did not mention his close connection with Macleay College, a private institution, where journalism, hospitality and other courses are offered.

Windschuttle is so out of touch with debates and the range of research taught within media studies that I suspect he gave up reading in the area some years ago. At a personal level, I do not mind what he reads. He covers this lack of knowledge of the present, however, by dismissing shifts in debates and approaches in media studies as being a sign of weakness, whereas I would have thought it was a sign of vigorous intellectual life. But to describe so wrongly what is taught in media studies in Australia is very poor journalism on his part.

As one academic who teaches both media theory and journalism production in a university, I do agree with Windschuttle on a few points. I agree with him that a position of absolute relativism which says that it is not possible to distinguish some texts and views as being closer to what is actually happening in the world than others, is inconsistent with critical journalism which sets out to tell stories about what is happening in the world. However, there are few absolute cultural relativists amongst those involved in media research and scholarship in Australian universities. By exaggerating the importance of theorists (for example, Baudrillard) Windschuttle creates a straw person which
he projects as the enemy of journalism.

I also agree with Windschuttle that in some universities, journalism academic staff have been denigrated, even in a few cases pilloried, by some cultural studies academics who wanted to turn their own narrow brand of cultural studies into a monopoly at particular institutions. Since much of this was not dealt with publicly, it bred resentment and I suspect Keith Windschuttle speaks for more than himself.

I also agree with him that pressure on journalism professionals in university to turn into conventional academics (which almost certainly means they will have to give up any serious journalism) will tend to leave journalism students without strong role models who are in touch with industry practices. If traditional doctorates become necessary for promotion or even employment in journalism education, journalism education will not be led by top journalists and it will suffer. There are signs however that a number of universities are moving in more creative and innovative ways to develop more appropriate higher degrees for media professionals who also want to be engaged in scholarship and research.

I disagree with Windschuttle on many other points. He wants us to adopt the traditional tenets of professional journalism in an unquestioning way. Whereas some journalists of my own generation may be content to mouth objectivity, balance and fairness as if they were all transparent ideas beyond discussion, many younger journalists have more complex views. For instance, Windschuttle confuses a critical discussion of the notion of objectivity with a rejection of the notion that the world exists. It is possible to teach what has traditionally been called "objectivity" in the context of doing journalism (for many journalists it means keeping yourself open to information and ideas which conflict with the views you have already formed) while also examining how the work of conscientious journalists who believe they are "objective" may be built on underlying assumptions which are rarely questioned (for example, assumptions often made about economic rationalist policies benefiting the public).

It is also possible to explore how different principles of professional journalism may be used to support different media practices in different situations. All of this will assist young media professionals who seek jobs in a world of shifting and competing media practices. Journalism education which ignores such complexities and contradictions is, as John Hartley has suggested, little more than a training in technical operations (Hartley 1996).

Windschuttle underestimates the impact media studies has had on journalism itself and mainstream public discourse. As recent coverage of the national waterfront dispute in Australia
shows, an analysis of media coverage has now become a standard part of the way journalists cover the major events. This can perhaps be partly attributed to the success of media scholars (through public commentary and education) in developing an understanding in the community and amongst journalists that the way the media interprets and constructs a story is an important part of the story itself. In the days when journalists believed that their reports were a straightforward mirror to outside events, the media itself was never such a topic of discussion.

Keith Windschuttle describes staff and students in universities such as my own -- the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) -- as being in a schizophrenic state. The assertion is unattributed and I'm not sure what its basis is. In fact, one of my own tests for the usefulness of a theory is whether I think it will help me explain my own and others' experience of journalism. I first adopted this approach when working as a professional journalist; I found myself reaching back to distant readings in undergraduate sociology to explain why particular stories could get a run and others could not, why the framing of a story was important and how news values operated. I found this understanding helped me operate more effectively as a professional journalist.

How can we teach journalism if we do not seek to explain what it is in relation to the rest of society, and powerful institutions? How can we do journalism well if we do not understand the history of our craft, its strengths and its limitations from the point of view of audiences, including those who are rarely heard? How can we make it serve the public (rather than simply markets and existing audiences) better if we do not think about how professionals, both future graduates and staff, can be innovative and intervene in the media? This is the stuff of media theory.

It is now time to move on from Windschuttle and to start talking more explicitly about how we do link theory and practice in media education. The phrase linking "theory and practice" rolls easily off the tongue but "in practice" it is complex and difficult to do both well.

At the UTS we find it is a challenge to teach our students to think critically about the media while at the same time maintaining their belief that journalism can be a worthwhile occupation. Separating theory and practice into separate packages which do not speak to each other is not a solution. Journalism and academic scholarship have their different genres of representation, their methodologies for knowledge creation and industrial contexts for knowledge production, their language and the intended audiences, but they both have an undeniable place in the
university. The educational challenge is not to substitute one for the other (in either direction) but to bring them into fruitful dialogue and engagement with each other.

Our solution is currently to teach professional and theoretical subjects in separate streams but to make each relevant to the other. We are doing case studies (for example, extended interviews with journalists analysed in the light of scholarly readings) and ‘web’ debates where students use their readings and conclusions to test ideas through defending or asserting arguments. We have also attempted to turn some research essays into publishable features. We constantly draw on examples of media practice and draw on the advantage of having working professionals in many classes to discuss the relevance of the ideas we are studying to their work.

Our postgraduate students often finish their studies with work which links both interests in theory and practice. For example, journalist Phil Thornton found himself interested in examining the ways work is covered in the media. He found little journalism which told stories about what people, particularly manual workers, actually do at work. He used media theory to explain this gap, while carrying out interviews with a number of workers. These are now being published in the Sydney Sunday paper the *Sun Herald* and a feature based on his research article will be published shortly in *Reportage* -- a magazine produced from UTS.

Another postgraduate student Bonita Mason who won a Walkley Award for her feature on a death of an Aboriginal woman in Mulawa Women’s Prison followed up with a research paper on how and why a government report on Mulawa failed to get reported in the metropolitan media.

One of the problems with Windschuttle’s position is that he assumes some pedagogical consensus at the 20 or more Australian universities teaching professional journalism. In fact there are a range of practices. But underlying the issues he raises about what media studies we teach are more important questions about the nature of our approach to teaching and practising journalism. If we explore this angle, we will find that while the influence of cultural studies may be relevant, other important questions emerge.

What are the characteristics of the journalism we practice in universities? What kind of scholarship links with this practice? What are the implications of theory for the journalism we do, and just as importantly, what are the implications of journalism for the theory and research we do? What is the relationship of journalism to ideas of critical public intellectual practice? What role might university-based journalists play in maintaining a
critical intellectual and public culture, particularly at times when that culture is threatened? And how do our answers to these questions relate to the international relationships we form with journalists and journalism educators in the region?

REFERENCE


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