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Looking out from Terra Nullius: Journalism, modernity and the 'vacant lot'

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It is with faint damnation that I find myself praising Windschuttle. While I acknowledge that some media theory is good for journalism students, I question the usefulness and validity of much that the postmodernists believe in.

I criticise cultural studies as an attempt to colonise the “terra nullius” of journalism theory (Hartley 1996: 39) and would argue strongly that journalism education should be taken seriously in universities as a legitimate cross-disciplinary field of study (Guerke & Hirst 1996, Hirst 1998).

Still Windschuttle’s assertion that “[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 audience” (1998b:11) cannot be the basis for a defence of journalism education, or journalism. Notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘ethics’ remain contentious topics of debate as journalism academics discuss their implications for the profession (King 1997; Herbert 1997).

Journalism is not an easy pursuit of the ‘truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth’. It is a problematic practice that is made more difficult by the material and social conditions in which news-gatherers and publishers operate. Obviously a ‘good’ education in journalism requires this kind of understanding as much as classes on news writing. But there is a wider debate - about so-called ‘vocational’ training (what journalism educators are supposed to do) and a ‘humanities’ education (provided by the ‘serious’ disciplines) - that even some of Winschuttle’s critics acknowledge (Cunningham and Flew,1998).
The truncated newspaper version omits Windschuttle’s references to a John Hartley article (1995, pp. 20-30) which was part of an earlier version of his argument (Windschuttle 1998b, pp. 11-18). This omission is significant. In their reply Cunningham and Flew refer to several points from this article and Hartley’s book, Popular Reality (1996), each proceeded by a hearty “John says”. They assert that the “hard news” paradigm is under threat from “the rise of lifestyle journalism, celebrity journalism and the intermeshing of journalism with the ‘persuasion industries’”; and that journalism, characterised by Hartley as one of the “smiling professions” can be no longer taken seriously as a representor of the ‘truth’ about real-world events.

Following Hartley they describe Journalism as the suburban vernacular in which “modernity” converses with itself. While in itself this is not a bad idea it goes horribly wrong, in my view, if it leads to the proposition that “postmodern journalism” actually exists (Hartley 1996: 188).

A related claim is that the “modernist-realist model of journalism”, as a cultural form of ‘news’ in the public interest, is challenged by “changes in the industry itself”. Modestly, given Hartley’s own position, Cunningham and Flew argue: It becomes clear [from Hartley’s analysis] that the erosion of the “hard news” paradigm is not the result of white-anting by postmodernists (Cunningham and Flew 1998: 41).

Hartley’s postmodernism, however, is fundamentally flawed by its reliance on a one-dimensional, culturally-determinist view of media arts and journalism; it assumes the dominant ‘text’ thesis in the following terms: Culture -- the discursive, media, knowledge-producing and sense-making sphere of life -- might itself determine such matters as class, conflict and the state (Hartley 1996: 237). This is the ‘mediasphere’ where we (couch potatoes all!) experience our lives ‘at a distance’; through the Warkian process of “telesthesia” in an age when “cultural studies has arrived, like the owl of Minerva”, and “culture too abstracts itself from all particularity” (Wark 1994: 43, xiii).

It is highly debatable to suggest, as Hartley does, that one 1994 edition of French Vogue, edited by Nelson Mandela, is serious evidence of a new “Postmodern political journalism” (1996: 127); or that a random collection of stories about Kylie Minogue and Sophie Lee constitutes a highly personalised and sexualised new form of journalism, speaking directly to the “quintessentially Australian ‘class’ which lives in ‘the suburbs’, the petit bourgeoisie,” (1996: 188).

While no one appears to have taken up Hartley’s thesis with much enthusiasm, such ideas form the subtext of this debate. Journalism educators need to be clear on the implications of these
forms of journalism and to theorise changing news cultures from their own perspective.

Graeme Turner takes issue with Windschuttle’s article, claiming that had the relevant texts (Turner’s), been read “he would have found a sustained defence of ethical journalism - not the rampant ‘relativism’ he insinuates might be there” (Turner 1998:40). But the issue is not whether Turner argues for ‘ethical journalism’; it is an argument about the fundamental grounding of ethics in both practice (critical thinking) and epistemology -- the truth and reality of what we ‘know’. If you like, the ‘modernist methods’ at the core of journalism.

The postmodern tendency to abstraction and denial of ‘truth’ in many readings of a ‘text’ (audience is king in the market place of ideas), is taken to its (il)logical conclusion in Wark’s contribution to the ‘debate’ (1998b). His is a seemingly random collection of comments from media studies students who were given Windschuttle’s piece to read in class. I’m sure a few of us got a moment’s pleasure trying to guess the second names of Ken’s famous friends, but what are to we make of these gems:

“Stuart” wonders who Althusser is. Nobody else has heard of him either. “Megan” thinks it strange that a story in a newspaper should be ‘about things that all happened ages ago. Why is any of this news? [Megan] thinks Windschuttle is out of touch and obsessed with things about his own past.

[Windschuttle’s] use of Martin Heidegger’s Nazi associations strikes “Virginia” as guilt by association. She thinks this is ‘tabloid’ and ‘cheap’. Hassan thinks it ‘typical’ that a middle-aged white man dismisses criticism of the media from marginal people.

“Kate” ‘hates theory’ and just wants to get on with it. “Helen” thinks it sinister that [Windschuttle] only permits questioning of other people’s grasp of the truth while his relation to his own truth is ‘unthinking’ (Wark 1998b).

I can understand changing the names, but did you say they read the Windschuttle piece? Wark’s contribution doesn’t indicate where the ‘class discussion’ might have ended, but I must wonder if he let each ‘relative’ truth in the statements stand, or did he point out the misunderstandings as expressed by his ‘students’.

It is postmodernists’ fixation with the ‘relativity’ of the ‘real’ or ‘truth’, that Windschuttle correctly identifies as the problem. As Windschuttle says, the “appeal” of postmodernism which he says lies 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” (1998b: 14).

While Windschuttle is maintaining the rage against postmodernism, post-structuralists and the poverty of media
theory perhaps he has also forgotten his own materialist analysis of the press, radio and television in Australia (1988) which is still fundamentally sound, if empirically out of date. His book, The Media, is grounded in a political economy methodology that takes account of the active nature of journalists' role in the production of the news commodity.

Breen in examining cultural theorists rejection of this approach to 'social control' in the newsroom and makes the point: "The task of the cultural studies educator is to speak to the consumers and citizens; the task of the journalism educators is to speak to the practitioners and, most importantly, to maintain a dialogue with them." (Breen 1996:99-100).

I agree with Cunningham and Flew that there is no evidence of a media studies conspiracy against journalism. There is however evidence that in some situations and institutions the validity of journalism educators' theoretical grasp on their subject is rejected by the media studies/cultural studies tradition. Some administrators, as Breen points out, have attempted to collapse the difference between media studies and journalism -- one of the key concerns of Windschuttle's essay.

Part of the 'real' debate is over the recognition of professional experience as a suitable 'alternative' to postgraduate qualifications and more generally the distinction between practice and studies and the relation of both to 'markets'.

Cunningham and Flew describe Windschuttle's "attack" on cultural studies as: "a subset of the wider debate about the relationship between vocational and generalist or liberal arts education in an Australian higher education system under pressure to deliver vocational relevance as much as intellectual stimulation to its student 'clientele' " (1998: 41). This is self-evident, but not particularly helpful.

Neither is Windschuttle's: "One strategy would be to try to influence demand by enlightening the potential customers [about] just how far removed from reality [cultural studies] has become" (1998a: 43). Both would have us deal pragmatically with 'market forces'. In some institutions this means transforming 'teaching' into 'marketing courses' and 'research' into 'industry-partnerships'.

While pragmatically it could be argued that cultural studies needs the vocational support offered by journalism, public relations, writing, advertising and professional communication skills often there is a form of intellectual imperialism along the following lines: If cultural studies can convince the rest of the university community that journalism education is purely "vocational", then cultural studies will provide a good dose of "intellectual stimulation" to communication students deprived of
what a ‘real’ university education is supposed to be. Thus the strength of Hartley’s dismissal of the work of journalists turned academics as intellectually and organisationally lightweight and a ‘vacant lot’, a terra nullius to be occupied by cultural studies theorists (1996: 39). It’s an interesting use of a legal phrase that for so long was used to justify colonisation and oppression.

This situation is not unique to Australia. Betty Medsger’s report for the Freedom Forum, *Winds of Change*, highlighted institutional recognition, the qualifications debate and intellectual legitimacy as issues for American journalism education (Medsger 1996). In fact there is a growing body of solid material written about journalism by Australian journalism educators. They are not only ‘how to’ books devoted to lead-writing and the ‘inverted pyramid’. Many encourage their readers to ‘question everything’ about the industry and ideas of what makes a good journalist and, perhaps, how they may set themselves apart from the fetishised ‘sense-makers’ of the smiling professions.

*Journalism education does have a “respectable paradigm”* (Breen 1996). It is not a ‘vacant’ lot - it’s a dynamic construction site.

**REFERENCES**


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