

1-1998

Cultural studies critics miss the point

J. Ravell

Curtin University of Technology

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Ravell, J., Cultural studies critics miss the point, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 4, 1998, 90-95.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss4/10>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Cultural Studies Critics

Miss The Point

Julia Ravell

Curtin University of Technology, Perth

Keith Windschuttle's attack on cultural studies' relevance for journalism education (*The Australian*, 25 March 1998) is characterised by a simplistic genealogy of cultural studies and conveniently elided the contribution to journalism education made by crossover works on media and popular culture written by scholars working outside the academy such as Catherine Lumby (1997) and Mark Davis (1997). Windschuttle's concept of "cultural studies theory" is made monolithic by a selective version of its Frankfurt School antecedents and an assertion that it is blind to the practical exigencies of hard news reporting.

Windschuttle's "history" doesn't acknowledge the many differences between English, Australian, North American and continental theories. His polemic is predicated on a naive opposition between theory and practice -- a version of journalism education derived from the liberal model still taught in many Australian universities. In this model, disinterested media practitioners act as vertical channels of communication between the government and an abstract, but always under-theorised notion of "the people". Journalists are the Fourth Estate of the realm and the press is a watchdog for the people, a vigilant guardian of the public interest.

Liberals teach that journalists can separate fact from opinion and write balanced stories representing "both sides" of an issue. There is an investment in such idealised notions of journalism as it is largely responsible for 'bums on lecture seats'. But this only partially accounts for the resistance to theory among mainstream journalism educators for whom Windschuttle presumes to speak.

In my response, I will argue that journalism educators have a social responsibility to expand their curricula beyond courses teaching technical skills along with "theory" vaguely underpinned by outmoded liberal humanist notions of the centred subject. There is little point in teaching journalism at universities unless course contents include elements of intellectual inquiry which instil self-reflexiveness among future media practitioners. Graduates must

have access to discourses which allow them to gain a more complex perspective on the role of power as knowledge in contemporary society.

Often journalists and academics who have been initiated into "the craft" through vocational cadet training think about the media functioning in democratic society as an objective forum for rational debate - a kind of unnuanced Habermasian public sphere. Here the media occupy a space which is "open" or equally accessible to all members of society. Here, under ideal conditions, the workings of democratic government are laid bare by skilled observers and reporters for the scrutiny and debate by informed citizens.

Consequently, media constructions of race, class, gender and ethnicity as objects of hierarchical representations receive little classroom treatment because skills-based teaching lacks the conceptual and critical tools necessary to examine the following issues: subjects are people with free wills; countries are often characterised as capricious individuals; infotainment is a necessary evil, a pernicious form of distraction, which only gets in the way of factual news reporting.

The suggestion that the media (as a synecdoche of the Habermasian public sphere) employs an intertwined series of discursive formations which legitimise and institutionally endorse particular versions of hegemonic reality isn't entertained within a curriculum with an avowed aim of producing people who can "do" the news and present it "as it is".

These under-theorised assumptions about the role of contemporary journalism hark back to the progressivist ideologies of early capitalism: they occlude the complexity of flows of images, information, power and knowledge in late capitalist (or, dare I say it, "postmodern") society; they ignore the effects of contemporary transnational and global processes; and lack the critical vocabulary to assess the impact of increasingly disembedded social relations. The journalists produced by such vocational programs tend not to reflect on their role within mediated, multiple semiotic environment in which individuation customarily takes place through consumption.

According to Windschuttle's doctrine of impartiality, hard news is free from the pernicious influences of conglomerate capitalism, advertising markets, politicised news values, social contexts - even history itself. Reporters are honest brokers pursuing the "facts" and "The Truth" in the comfortable knowledge that their impartiality is ensured by fixed codes and ethics courses whose conveniently decontextualised ancestry includes all-time greats such as Aristotles, Plato, Hume and Kant.

But Windschuttle seems unaware of the problematic history

of impartiality; even late eighteenth century critics have argued that newspapers have always been in the business of persuasion. Somewhere between then and now it is assumed there has been a "golden age" of objective reporting.

However, I contend that pure information, unsullied "facts", simply do not and cannot exist in language, whether one is selecting which exhaustive report of which event to highlight on which particular page or consciously employing the techniques of fiction-writing to relate one's idiosyncratic "slice of life" to a narrowcast market/audience.

Journalism school's ethical fixities and its technical emphases on "correct" grammar, punctuation, spelling and logically-constructed prose depoliticise the classroom and make it difficult to problematise issues of narrative and representation, and strategies of authoring/authorisation in the media. If journalists are discouraged from cultivating close relationships with their readerships, how does one introduce "the audience in history" as a textual, socio-structural and conceptual entity capable of negotiated and oppositional readings of media texts?

The question liberal model avoids is how does one move from Sally White's (1997) injunction against reporters relying overly on press releases and the liberal model of heroic individualism to Daniel Boorstin's pseudo-events (1971) or Jean Baudrillard's (1988) hyper-real simulations, without disenchanting an entire generation of would-be social justice campaigners?

Paulo Freire's term "conscientization" (1973) has a very sixties ring to it these days. Nevertheless, I want to advocate a return, through cultural studies theories, to some of the precepts of the Freirean classroom because of its potential to produce graduates who are aware of their political role both in the media and society. Liberal journalism training has arrogated this pedagogical role. It encourages a naive individualism in students who will be working in a commercially-driven mainstream which tends to reinforce, legitimate and extend existing social inequalities.

Journalism "training" needs include understandings of the complex networks of capital, power and information and their effect on Enlightenment notions of Truth and objectivity. Cultural studies theories provide tools for situating news values in their historical contexts and interrogating their complicity with the projects of modernisation, developmentalism and consumerism.

Combining journalism training, media and cultural studies with skills acquisition teaches students not only how to write news but also how liberal journalism's constructions of "common sense" realities as "established facts" are a form of ideology that acts to smooth over social ambiguities and contradictions; why certain

narratives are authorised as news while others aren't; and how "news", like literary realism, can be a conservative form of narrative.

Journalists, like realist fiction writers, make sense of social events by constructing a version of reality in which random events are assigned meanings specific to our culture. Thus, claims to objectivity on behalf of specific ways of seeing the world are always going to be bogus; there are no absolutely true ways of representing reality, only more or less powerful ones, and because of its role in governing what "we" know and how "we" are to think about particular issues, the media is one of the most powerful institutions in modern society.

Of course, not all contemporary journalism educators are as startlingly uninformed as Keith Windschuttle. For example, Lani Guerke and Martin Hirst (1996, p.120) recommend that journalists should be equipped with "a set of less tangible skills and knowledge in critical thinking, deep learning [and] analysis". I would like to take this proposition one step further to problematise as untenable their liberal humanist distinction between "the bare facts" and "interpreted facts" (Guerke and Hirst, p.118). Guerke, Hirst and others realise the shortcomings of exclusively skills-based university journalism courses.

There are also a number of 'cultural studies' that can be usefully employed in journalism. Critics such as Edward Epstein, Jock Young and Stuart Hall have destabilised boundaries between fact and fiction by documenting the ideological implications of media discourse through various rubrics including the "amplification effect" in which the media determines, rather than reflects realities.

Hall and the Birmingham School brand of cultural studies offer merely one angle on the consensus-forming roles of media institutions; cultural studies theories with literary rather than sociological underpinning point to the generic parameters of the media's over-simplified truths drawn from forms such as the epic, romance, adventure. Writing and reading journalism in terms of language use, narrative and genre foregrounds the role of socio-cultural conventions in communications.

News, "hard" or otherwise, doesn't exist within a generic vacuum with only its own traditions to draw from, as Windschuttle and other proponents of liberalism contend. Its narratives are heteroglossic and hybrid as well as partial - in the dual sense of being interested and piecemeal. News products do not add up to Truth, as Windschuttle would have it, rather, they are a series of social truths or "chains of meaning" (Hall 1997 p.160) expressed within ideologies which work by transforming sometimes conflicting discourses and which often may not add up to anything

coherent at all.

Liberal journalism teaches students to deride "theory" as irrelevant to practice and to see themselves as transparent mediators of unambiguous signs allowing information and ideology which passes itself off as Knowledge. In this way Journalism, as a university discipline, is a "terra nullius of epistemology" (Hartley, 1996). Students are penalised by false oppositions between "doing" and "thinking". Theory and practice are inseparable, even in production-centred courses; hostility to theory is counter-productive to educating sceptical, ethical and self-reflexive media practitioners.

Journalism education needs alternative models of conceptualising the media which won't deter students from contesting from within those structures of domination which determine the "real", the "natural" and the "normal". Critical pedagogy informed by cross-disciplinary cultural studies theories enables students to analyse how the media produces identities, role models and ideals; how they create new forms of discourse and experience; how they define situations, set agenda and filter out oppositional ideas; and how they set limits and boundaries beyond which political discourse isn't allowed (Kellner, 1990 p18).

If contemporary global order is "a structure of flows, a decentred set of economies of signs in space" (Lash and Urry 1987 p.280) then there is a strong argument for educating journalists in theories of mediation, narrative, genre and consumption as well as the more traditional concentration on the journalist as (heroic) producer. ■

REFERENCES:

- Baudrillard**, Jean (1988), *The Ecstasy of Communication*, translated by Bernard & Caroline Schutze, edited by Slyvere Lotringer [sic], Brooklyn, New York, Autonomedia.
- Boorstin**, Daniel J. (1971, 1961). *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America*, New York: Atheneum.
- Davis**, Mark (1997), *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism*, St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Friere**, Paulo (1973), *Educaton for a Critical Consciousness*, New York, Seabury.
- Guerke**, Lani & **Hirst**, Martin (1996) "Across the genres: how journalism is changing in the 1990s", *Australain Journalism Review*, 18 (1).
- Hall**, Stuart (1997), "Racist ideologies and the media," in *The Media Studies Reader*, Tim O'Sullivan and Yvonne Jewkes (eds) New York, St. Martin's Press.
- Hartley**, John (1996), *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity and the Public Sphere*, London: Arnold.

- Kellner, Douglas** (1990), *Television and the Crisis of Democracy*, Oxford, Westview Press.
- Lash, Scott & Urry, John** (1987), *The End of Organized Capitalism*, Cambridge, England, Polity Press,.
- Lumby, Catharine** (1997), *Bad Girls: The Media, Sex and Feminism in the '90s*, St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen and Unwin.
- White, Sally** (1997), *Reporting in Australia*, Melbourne: Macmillan.

JULIA RAVELL, PhD teaches journalism at Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. Email: rravellj@cc.curtin.edu.au
