

Conference 2003: Professional Education

Sift, Stir and Flavour to Taste: Professional Education for the Media

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In the theme of this conference, and in many people's minds, the notions of 'industry training' and 'professional education' for journalists and other media professionals are indeed an odd couple. Yet, like all odd couples, these two ideas are not so much anathema to one another as complementary. They actually have a great deal in common. The pity of the present debate about education and training is that the complementary bits are generally available to different people rather than to everyone.

My task is to put the question into an international perspective in the hope of helping you reach a local solution. To that end, I want to address two questions:

- what does it mean to work professionally in the media? and
- how best can people learn to do that?

What does it mean to work professionally as a journalist? According to *The Guardian*'s Polly Toynbee, in an interview with *The Telegraph* in London earlier this year, it is to *paint a portrait of what life is really like*. It is crucial, she said, that readers should have this *reality* against which to test grand economic and social theories and what they suggest life *should* be like.

For her, journalism is a matter of high personal and social seriousness, and constructive goodwill. It is not a means for making mischief. It requires belief, commitment and conviction. It is about doing good and doing it well. If journalists find themselves being asked to do things that make them ashamed, Toynbee advises them to *go and do something else. Even PR is a lot more honest*.

Having worked in a number of leading British papers and in the BBC, Toynbee – like Gail Phillips and Mia Lindgren, in their splendid *Broadcast Journalism Manual* – reminds us that journalism has many forms and genres. It appears in print, on screen, on air and increasingly on-line. It covers sport and travel, lifestyle and gardening as well as news and current affairs.

How did Toynbee learn to be a journalist? Well, she was certainly not the typical "journalism graduate". Her grandfather was an eminent historian and her father a respected journalist. Yet, she speaks of "falling into journalism" after dropping out of Oxford. She's hardly Peter Sellers' "Fred Quills" who "never had a lesson in his life" but she has certainly learned on the job, rather than in a classroom.

Toynbee's view of journalism is nevertheless vastly more sophisticated than Jim Buckell's. Writing in *The Australian* last year, Buckell saw it as simply being able to write, spell and spot a good story, as well as pleasing the editor, who could determine a young journalist's future. He took absolutely no account of the social and cultural context that defines good writing and good stories if not also good spelling.

Toynbee knows that journalism has a current glamour and that *Lots of people want to be journalists*, but she observes that much of what currently passes for journalism is really lousy. We in the UK, she says, *have the worst newspaper industry in the civilised world*.

Polly Toynbee is, of course, a sample of one. Her account is anecdotal. It carries little statistical weight with the social scientists and number crunchers who control social and educational policy agendas these days. She is all too easily written off as an exception.

At the other end of the scale, David Weaver at Indiana University in the USA did extensive survey research to capture his snapshot of journalism, worldwide. In his 1998 book *The Global Journalist*, Weaver documented what journalists considered to be ethical practice. He found only two universally agreed requirements: to be quick and to protect confidential sources. Lying, cheating, stealing, false pretences, trespass, fabrication and misrepresentation were all acceptable practices, somewhere, sometimes or under certain circumstances. In terms of ethics – if we accept that speed and confidentiality are ethics – there appears to be no such thing as a universal criterion for ‘good journalism’.

Speed and confidentiality, however, are probably not really ethics. Ethics are standards by which we judge discretionary behaviour. Speed and discretion however regulate themselves. If you are slow and if you are slack with secrets, you are not likely to get many second chances to practice in the media professions.

Nevertheless, debate about professional practice – and the quality of professional education - is widespread. In the US, it extends from Ted Glasser's *Public Journalism* to the recent review of the Columbia Journalism School and the partisan nature of Fox Television. In Australia, it includes Paul Sheehan's recent *The Electronic Whorehouse*, ABC TV's weekly *Media Watch* and ABC Radio's *Media Report*. In New Zealand, there is also a *Media Watch*, but on Radio New Zealand, and occasional public debates about who may or may not call whom “a cheeky dork”. All of this debate springs from attempts to describe, to explain, to justify or to put into perspective – that is, to theorise – actual practice.

When I visited Columbia three years ago, they were discussing whether or not to build their courses around content. Wall Street had questioned whether ‘general reporters’ could adequately cover the financial markets. Perhaps, politics, police, finance, health, science, education, the environment and so on each required a separate course of study and experience.

That debate echoes through this year's wrangle over the journalism program at Columbia. The program has always been strongly grounded in practice. Students staff the school's news agency. They provide on-line services to the media industries. Yet, the university's president Lee Bollinger makes no bones about his preference for education over training and teaching over on-the-job learning:

journalists today (need) to have a high level of knowledge about the subject they are reporting and communicating... At its best, journalism mediates between... expertise and general knowledge. To do that well - to write for the present and to weave in broader meaning - is remarkably difficult. A necessary element is substantive knowledge, the kind of knowledge you cannot just pick up in the course of doing a story...

A number of working journalists and columnists, such as Robert Samuelson in *The Washington Post*, took exception. Bollinger, said Samuelson, was only adding to the manifold woes of today's media: *(His) vision amounts to snob journalism: ...by an elite for an elite... These are bad ideas that (will)... reduce journalism's relevance, raise public mistrust and... worsen journalism's central problem: loss of audience.*

Samuelson believes that journalism (and, by extension, other media practice) is best learned in the “real world”: *an aspiring reporter needs a job, preferably for an exacting editor. You try to be accurate, clear, quick, perceptive and engaging. These are not abstract skills learned in a classroom.*

For him, journalism schools are necessary evils. *They provide basic training... that most papers and broadcast stations won't. But... universities are sheltered places... (and their) politics don't reflect national politics...*

Both argue for what they see as better journalism, and their views of democracy are implicit in their views of media practice. One would give the public what they need; the other what they want.

Ten years ago, when UNESCO commissioned me to review its worldwide Communication Program, one of my terms of reference was to devise a concept of professional education that would bridge the gap between academic education in communication – which was widely seen to be so abstract as to be useless – and industry training, which was generally seen to be bereft of ideas.

In researching that report, I visited press institutes and broadcasting development centres as well as universities in a number of countries, waded through piles of meeting minutes and other reports, and referred also to the academic literature on professionalism generally; and media, communication and curriculum in particular.

Some of you will doubtless find some of this a load of hot waffle, but I suggest that we need to come to terms with it, wherever we stand on this pedagogical divide. Be they newspaper journalists or broadcasters, screenwriters or copywriters, film-makers or photographers, PR practitioners or political media advisers, web designers or whatever, what sort of education do prospective media people require? Should it be based in the academic humanities? Should it be a branch of the social sciences as it is at Stanford? Should it be limited to technical skills? Do media practitioners actually need something altogether different? Indeed, do they really need any formal, specialist education at all?

Much of the argument at Columbia turns on whether media practice, including journalism, is actually a profession – as Bollinger claims – or, as Samuelson argues, *a job, a craft, often a passion*

Samuelson complains that American society sends more and more of its young people to university, presumably to engage with the big ideas of their time. But, he says: *On the evidence, that's not happening.*

He produces no such evidence. He also ignores the rise in formal education for doctors and lawyers and engineers over the past century. And, despite his earlier objection to “abstract skills” learned in the classroom, he seems ultimately to argue for a better education for media practitioners.

High levels of craft, skill and passion are not, after all, impediments to professionalism, quite the contrary. Skill, expertise and commitment are generally expected of all professions, as is a high level of public trust. Where the media differ from fields such as medicine, law and engineering is in things like self-employment and the registration and licensing of practitioners. Otherwise, as Israel Scheffler and Gilbert Ryle observed nearly 40 years ago, like doctors, lawyers and engineers, media practitioners continually have to

Confront and make strategic judgements about individual cases which they have never confronted before and for which there are no exhaustive rules dictating the decision to be made.

It is reasonable, therefore, to proceed to consider the education of prospective media practitioners as though they are aspiring professionals.

Education, however, does not exclude training. Training replicates existing knowledge and that is necessary when it comes to learning how to use equipment and computer software and so on, but it is never sufficient. Like photocopying, the repeated replication of existing knowledge leads to degeneration. It is also insufficient for dealing with the unknown. Education, on the other hand, enables people to create new knowledge with which to address new and unknown situations. It is what enables people to go where none has gone before and do what none has ever done before. And the media depend absolutely on creativity and innovation to their survival and prosperity.

Here, we have something to learn from sporting coaches. World champions, by definition, run faster, jump further, swim more swiftly than anyone else – including their coaches. Yet, they could not do so without their coaches. Nor do they learn to do what they do by sitting in classrooms – they learn to run and jump and swim and so on by running, jumping, swimming, or whatever, with their coaches there to analyse their performances and suggest how to improve them. As teachers, who want to be professional educators, we do not have to be the stars that our students will emulate. When I was Deputy Director of the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in the 1980s, I saw all too often that stars can dazzle rather than illuminate and enlighten students. The trick is to start with the student's performance, describe it, explain it, put it in perspective – as I said a few minutes ago, theorise it - and help them devise better, more capable, ways of doing things.

I find the notion of capability particularly helpful. Capability takes us beyond the haggles over knowledge and skill (often expressed as theory and practice) that beset the arguments about education and training. Ryle and Scheffler describe three kinds of knowledge: knowing *that* (or *propositional knowledge*),

knowing *how* (or *procedural knowledge* – some would call it *skill*) and *being capable*. Capability requires knowledge and skill but also requires certain personal qualities. We all know people who know what to do and how to do it but don't actually do it. They lack the imagination, the initiative, the ingenuity, the persistence, the worldly wisdom – the cunning? – to overcome or avoid the obstacles or the lack of permission that might prevent them delivering the goods. And that surely is the final test of professional education in this field. Does it enable people to deliver the goods? Just as the media stand or fall by their ability to communicate with their publics, so media practitioners succeed or fail according to their capability.

The arts of media practice require us to master three kinds of knowledge.

- We need a body of professional knowledge, including production skills. Above all else, we must be able express ourselves clearly and cogently in our chosen medium – be it words or sounds or pictures or the various combinations of them embodied in various media forms.
- We need a body of contextual knowledge – the industrial, legal, political, social and cultural milieux in which we will work. And
- We need to know something about something else – the subject matter that we will report or analyse, comment upon or dramatise.

Which brings us, at last to questions of how best people will learn these things.

It is tempting to seek to formulate highly detailed and specific course plans but, as I have said, media practices are arts not technologies. This is the domain of recipes and sketches rather than blueprints. At best, we can list the ingredients, suggest how to mix and prepare them, and propose the most enticing ways to present the finished product.

We know that people can only learn media practice by doing it. Equally, we know that doing does not guarantee learning. Moreover, we know that certain things are counterproductive. Film producers, for instance, have to muster and manage the funding and resources to produce their films. Students, whatever the brilliance of their vision, will not learn to do that if they are guaranteed a budget. Journalists and broadcasters must learn to work to deadlines. They will not learn that art unless it is required by their course. And so on.

One last thought that I would like to leave with you is the notion of “reflective practice”. Donald Schon writes extensively about the need for reflection on and in practice among professionals, and ways of helping people learn how to do it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have only had time to sketch the outline of this topic but, hopefully, I have set some thoughts – if not an all-in brawl - rolling. I am indebted to Lawrence Stenhouse for the image of curriculum as recipe. I would also like to thank you for this evening's dinner, which reinforces my point. Just imagine how different it would have been had we been served only the raw ingredients and asked to make of them what we could. Roland Barthes reminded us years ago that *Writing in pleasure does not guarantee reading in pleasure*.

The same is true for teaching and learning and, even more so, for professional education and professional practice. I wish you well in your pursuit of better curricula.

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