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# Journalism Training and Media Development

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Paper given by

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This paper was based on the experienced gained by the School of Media at the Dublin Institute of Technology and its involvement in journalism training and later education since the mid 1990s. While this experience is mainly in eastern and south Eastern Europe and more recently the Caucasus and Central Asia, but not exclusively so, we do believe that an analysis of that experience offers lessons for media development and the strengthening of democracy in other countries, including those in Africa, if independent and professional media is understood as an integral part of good governance and democracy.

Daire's research will look beyond past experience of training in these regions and look at how new media and technology is affecting the media development industry and model in new focus regions such as Africa and the Middle East.

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It is now 17 years since the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern and South Eastern Europe and nearly 17 years since the first initiatives were put in place to train journalists and reform the media. In that time a vast amount of money has been spent on media training and development with thousands of journalists receiving some sort of training from Western journalists, trainers and educators. Today, with some exceptions, journalism throughout the region is still characterised

by a lack of professionalism, little understanding of the need for accuracy, a willingness to accept bribes and a lack of understanding of the journalist's ethical role.

Why was so much activity and money failed to put in place a responsible media that can contribute to the development and strengthening of democracy? A number of observers have commented on the short-term nature of training, of the failure to follow up and the lack of understanding that trainers have for the countries and cultures they work in. According to Ekaterina Ognianova (1995: 36):

After dozens of workshops over several years, however, the starvation for contacts and exchange of experience turned into 'weariness', according to Alexander Angelov, secretary general of the Union of Bulgarian Journalists. Evaluators of training in Eastern Central Europe attribute this to three reasons: most training sessions have been too short: they have been too theoretical and general and: they have insulted the participants by revealing the visitors' total ignorance about their countries and by preaching the ABCs of journalism to experienced professionals.

Some have acknowledged the difficulties and the limitations of media training. According to Lucida Fleeson (2005):

As trainers we coach from the sidelines: it is the reporters and their editors who must decide whether or not to put their organisation behind a controversial story. After all, it is they who could be fired or... be visited in their offices by heavy-set bodyguards of criminal kingpins.<sup>i</sup>

### **Crucial role of development agencies**

While many studies emphasise the number of academics, especially American, who have taken part in training programmes, which probably reflects the propensity for

academics to write up their experiences. Most training, however, has been offered by development agencies, including those funded by USAID, the EU and others. Much of it has been vocational and skills-based and many of the trainers have been working journalists, consultants and trainers rather than educators.

The context in which journalism training has taken place has been one that has witnessed the triumph of global capitalism; the end of the Cold War; the discrediting of the New World Information and Communications Order and the dominance of the Western approach to journalism and journalism training

In its place is the Western journalistic paradigm, which is expressed in the phrase 'objective and a value-free presentation of facts'. This is usually expressed as presenting a story as 'balanced' so that competing versions/interpretations of facts are presented; information is verified as fact; information and comment is ascribed to specific named sources; views and feelings are kept out of the story and there is no underlying agenda. This is also known as the Anglo-Saxon model. This is what journalists in Eastern and South Eastern Europe have been exposed to in training schemes.

The purpose of offering training is officially to strengthen democracy, but while this could well be one reason there is also an ideological one associated with promoting the free market. As Mihai Coman, of Bucharest University, says (2000: 41): 'The mass media in post-communist countries experienced not only a forceful entry of foreign capital, but more importantly, an invasion of Western programming. By 1995 in a number of countries, including Bulgaria, Romania and Russia, programmes bought from the West accounted for over 40 per cent of broadcast fare.'<sup>ii</sup>

That 'forceful entry of foreign capital' meant many new media organisations were established with Western money. Western interests also bought some of the former communist media. In Bulgaria, for instance, Western interests included Rupert

Murdoch's News Corp, which owns bTV, foreign financial interests own owns the newspapers *24 Chasa* and *Trud*. These two newspapers account for about 80 per cent of the Bulgarian print market. Swiss and Russian commercial interests own other media outlets. This is only one example; there are similar stories from all the former communist countries.

The trainers employed by these agencies have never tried to find or develop a journalistic voice from within the countries they are working in because they are charged with promoting Western journalistic practices. Even if they wanted to, however, they could not, because they are unqualified to do so. They rarely speak the local language and have little understanding of local journalism or its history. They often have little knowledge of the political situation within which the people they are training work. Some trainers have offered advice, which, if taken, could put journalists in danger, such as dealing with police, security forces or criminals as if it was Western Europe or the US.

When Michael was working on a training programme for a US agency some years ago in Belarus, he was told that the journalists were to be trained in the ways of the *New York Times*. There is anecdotal evidence of diplomatic interference in training schemes, to ensure particular outcomes and some trainers have been moved or not had their contract renewed when they came too close to local journalists or journalists organisations.

Two US university journalism teachers, Richard Shafer and Eric Freedman, wrote of their experience as Fulbright scholars in the post-Soviet Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan. They were in Uzbekistan to teach 'democratic journalism' and stated that the posting was 'probably related in a minor way to complex factors of foreign relations, historical circumstances and positioning in the world economy' (2003: 43).<sup>iii</sup> The two professors were aware of the ambiguity of their position, but nevertheless found a good reason to continue to teach 'democratic journalism':

Of course, as Americans we adhered to the basic assumption that all people yearn for individual liberties that are fundamental to our belief system. This belief system includes open access to information through a relatively unfettered press system (ibid).<sup>iv</sup>

The conventions of international journalism, they maintain, are essentially the same and are primarily based on the British and American models.<sup>v</sup> In stating this position they consciously reject any alternative view, including that of John C Merrill, whom they cite. Merrill said the insistence that the media everywhere conform to Western 'capitalistic and pluralistic' media structures was 'of course, not only an arrogant and ethnocentric one but also betrays a stultified, intellectual view of reality. Cultures are different; the values that shore up such cultures are different. Stages of national development are different, Citizens expectations are different' (cited ibid).<sup>vi</sup>

There are other problems associated with the training and vocational model that has been the major one in Eastern and South Eastern Europe since collapse of communism. It has encouraged some of the brightest and best to go abroad; since they believe they have been trained up to something called 'Western standards'.

Sadly, many students said they plan to work abroad and want to develop Western media skills, not to apply them to Uzbekistan but to allow them to work in Europe, Japan or the United States (ibid: 94).<sup>vii</sup>

Other journalists, some having availed of scholarship schemes to do journalism MA's in the US, believe they are too highly trained to work as journalists for low pay and seek donor money to offer yet more training, or work in Western-financed media centres or media development centres, whose sole function is to access Western donor funding and offer Anglo-Saxon or Western journalism training.

Vocational training can also give a spurious authority to media output. Eastern and South Eastern has many radio stations, television stations, magazines and newspapers with very high production values that disguise bad journalism. Another problem is the number of journalists who can be trained.

In spite of considerable support from Western countries to develop journalism education and short-term vocational training, most of the new journalists receive knowledge necessary to do the job in the newsroom on the job training (Coman op cit: 44).<sup>viii</sup>

### **Anglo-Saxon model now outdated**

There is also the issue of what is taught. When journalism trainers talk of democratic journalism, Western standards or the Anglo Saxon model it is increasingly the case that no one knows what they mean anymore. If journalists in Eastern Europe are being taught to separate fact from opinion, or to listen to C.P. Scott's dictum that facts are sacred but comment is free, then who will teach that, as increasingly that is not the model adopted in Western countries, where tabloid newspapers scream opinion and Fox News has abandoned any pretence as impartiality.

Then there is the tension between the US and much of Europe, where the US journalism school model is as foreign in France as it is in Ukraine or Bulgaria. The ideal, pushed mainly, but not exclusively by US agencies, is in trouble itself because it hardly exists. More recent developments, including the phone hacking in the UK and the revelations of the Levenson Inquiry, must have done to undermine the basics of journalism training and development and the view that there is a constant standard called a western standard. It is something described by Colin Sparks of the University of Westminster as a cross between the *New York Times* and the *BBC*, in other words, something that does not exist.

There is, however, a new model emerging, one that is aware of the limitations of the pure training model; that of working with the universities in the region. There is a long tradition of journalism education in universities going back to the formation of the School of Journalism at Moscow State University in 1947. These universities have been dismissed by Western media development agencies as being unreconstructed Stalinism at worst or at best offering an out of date model that is incapable of reform.

There have been some contacts, through the already mentioned Fulbright programme and EU-funded university exchange and links programmes. Most of these are through already existing university programmes rather than media programmes. A number of these links are also with western style private universities, such as the American University in Bulgaria, where teaching is done through English, with little regards to Bulgaria's own media or education traditions.

### **Promoting a proper partnership**

Universities are publicly funded bodies that are repositories of culture. They also inform the culture and interpret it. If journalism is about certain values, of truth, accuracy, verification and also involved in story telling and informing public opinion, the inculcation of those values should take place within an intellectual context that will allow a new journalistic voice to emerge within the parameters of those values. Western journalism schools can provide one side of the partnership, teaching skills, curriculum development and contacts, universities as public trustees can ensure the specific cultural relevance of international initiatives with journalism education acting as part of a broader process of educational and cultural exchange.

There is still a place for international funding for short courses in new skills or to upgrade skills. If, however, something new is to emerge that reflects Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia or any other country, then it can only come about by the west ceasing to see in journalism a way of strengthening the marketplace and instead



work within the culture to strengthen democracy and ensure that people have ways of hearing stories that are relevant to them and told in a way they understand.

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