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# Competing Discourses on Journalism Education

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# COMPETING DISCOURSES OF JOURNALISM EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the lack of an agreed framework for the curriculum for journalism education. The paper reports on research into the beliefs and values underlying the two main undergraduate degree programmes in journalism in Ireland, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the concepts of journalism and journalism education on which the curricula were based. Critical discourse analysis was used in the research. The discrepancies found in the two concepts within and between different texts make clear that the problems within journalism education reflect the wider problems of lack of closure in the discourses of journalism and journalism education. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for professional journalism programmes.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This research was concerned with curriculum development in professional education for journalists. It started from the problem of the lack of an agreed framework for journalism education, which has hindered its development as a mature professional discipline in higher education in the Western world. There is a lack of agreed values and beliefs about journalism and journalism education which reflect different views of journalism and different views of journalism education. The research aimed to clarify the differences and thus help to point the way forward.

The small scale study focussed on the two main undergraduate journalism programmes in Ireland, at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and at Dublin City University (DCU). It examined the concepts of journalism and journalism education on which the curricula were based. Essentially, the study attempted to answer the question 'How do you educate a journalist?' which was broken down into the following more specific questions:

- What is journalism?
- What is the core work of the journalist?
- What does a journalist need to know in order to carry out this function?
- What theory of journalism is available /should be developed to underpin the the professional teaching of this discipline?
- What form of education is most suitable to provide this learning? Academic or professional /vocational?
- What other university subjects can contribute to journalism education?
- What is the articulation between these subjects and the core subject of journalism?

## **2. DEFINING JOURNALISM, DEFINING JOURNALISM EDUCATION:**

There are currently very different understandings of the two concepts of journalism and journalism education. To take journalism first, the basic skills of journalism are widely recognised as consisting of news gathering, news writing and news production, but on the other hand, there is no agreement as to whether journalism is simply part of the media or a distinct field of its own. This links to the debates over whether its role is that of a public service or predominantly that of a commercial enterprise. The latter view leads to journalism being straightforwardly subsumed into the general media industry whereas when viewed as a public service, it tends to be defined as a distinct field of the own.

Its public service role, regarded as that of a necessary support for democratic society, is generally acknowledged even if it is accepted that this role is not static but varies over time and place. It is associated with the claimed traditional values of neutrality, objectivity, and fairness. Its commercial role is advocated less, yet is claimed to be a more accurate reflection of how the press actually operates in today's world (Donnsbach, 2004). The traditional public service role is faced with difficult challenges from information and communication technologies, globalisation, consumerism and individualism. Added to this, the journalistic standards of objectivity and truth have been called into question by the philosophies of structuralism and post-structuralism.

There is a direct connection between these differing views and the form and structure given to journalism education. The skills will be common to all programmes, but journalism programmes and media programmes tend to be brought together for other components of the curriculum if no distinction is perceived between journalism and other areas of media practice. If the opposite view is held, journalism will be organised and run separately. Where its social, democratic role is emphasised, the commercial function of the press will tend to be neglected and the curriculum will encompass political and social theories and themes. On the contrary, where the press is viewed as a business, the curriculum will focus on the business aspects of the industry and pay little attention to those aspects associated by others with its public service role.

Educational provision for journalism also reflects views on its status, whether it is regarded as a profession, or simply a craft or trade. Journalism seems to fulfil the criteria required for a profession (Friedson, 1994) even if that route has not been fully pursued. It can be defined as an intellectual activity requiring specialised competence, autonomy and an ethical code reflecting its public service role. It would seem therefore that journalism education should reflect the educational provision for other professions.

Where it is simply regarded as a craft or trade, journalism education can and has been reduced to the acquisition of a set of skills. Where its more professional qualities are recognised, it does not usually however, follow the normal models for the professional curriculum, i.e. the knowledge-based or practice-based models (Hoyle and John, 1995), reflecting no doubt the lack of clarity and lack of agreement over journalism's status and its role. The two models normally used in journalism have been commonly though confusingly referred to as the professional model, and the integrated model. The professional model, similar to a liberal arts degree, is most commonly found in the US,

where 25% of the curriculum is given over to journalistic practice and 75% to liberal arts subjects. The integrated model, more commonly found in Europe, is where journalism is amalgamated with communications programmes, and studied in conjunction with communications theory.

### **3. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS**

As it was concerned with meaning, with beliefs and values, the research focused on language. A discourse analysis approach was used, more particularly critical discourse analysis, working close to the model established by Fairclough (2003). The starting point of CDA is that any discourse is always in conflict with other discourses, and is never fully established. Texts are sites of struggle, with traces of competing discourses and ideologies. Mills (1997) has mirrored this with regard to education: '[w]hat is studied in schools and universities is the result of struggles over whose version of events is sanctioned'. It was these struggles and conflicts over discourses within journalism education that were the focus of this analysis.

The main methodological concepts that framed the study were the notions of intertextuality, that texts are inter-linked to one another so that any one text is like an iceberg, with much underneath reflecting its linkages to other texts; and interdiscursivity, that there are intersections of different types and forms of discourse with a text and thus the hybrid text is the norm. The term 'order of discourse' was useful in denoting all the discourses that strive to establish themselves in the same domain, the competing discourses around the same topic.

The methods used for the research entailed three levels of analysis, which Fairclough refers to as that of text, discourse practice and social practice. At the level of text, the language of the short programme descriptions as published by the two institutions was analysed in great detail. The issues that arose from this analysis were then traced back to the full programme documents containing the rationale for the programmes, their context, structure and content. The third level of analysis consisted of looking at texts from the wider social context linked to the programmes: policy documents from the colleges themselves, from academic and professional organisations, from government, from international bodies such as the EU, OECD and the UN. All the data was thus confined to naturally occurring texts, official documents, most of them publicly available, which, apart from ease of access, had the advantage of authenticity and authority.

### **4. FINDINGS**

The analysis revealed discrepancies in the concepts of journalism and journalism education within and between the different texts. Sometimes journalism was understood as a distinct field of its own; at other times it was seen as part of the general media area. Likewise it was at varying times referred to as a profession or as a craft or trade. There tended to be agreement on its public service role although this was ill defined. Recognition

of journalism as a business was mainly confined to texts from management, legal and government sources. Journalism practice was sometimes equated with skills alone, at others, it included ethics and values. Little distinction was made in some cases between journalism theory and general media theory, thus risking the disengagement of journalism skills from the function of journalism, and the integration of journalism with media generally with little differentiation between journalism and other forms of media practice. On the other hand, where journalism theory was seen as distinct, it was restricted and underdeveloped so it risked not providing an adequate basis for reflective practice.

With regard to education, one of the programmes surprisingly came across in some texts as being based on quite an academic model rather than any form of vocational education. On the whole, both programmes had some elements of either knowledge-based or practice-based models of professional education but were more easily compared with the journalism models, the professional and the integrated. From the more general texts within the two educational institutions, from the professional and managerial associations and from national and international bodies, policies were overwhelmingly in favour of vocational education rather than academic. However, these texts tended not to specify any details, with the exception of some professional and international bodies which advocated the teaching of journalism within the context of its democratic role in promoting active citizenship.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The answers to the questions I had posed at the start of the research can be summarised as follows:

There was no agreement on what journalism is, whether part of media or a distinct field. Neither was there a common shared view on whether it was a trade or a profession. There was general acceptance throughout the data of its role in public life but acknowledgement of its commercial nature was found in a few sources only. In line with this, the need for a code of ethics was recognised but no agreement on how to safeguard the implementation of these.

Both programmes studied contained the three elements of practice, knowledge of content and knowledge of context, but there was considerable difference within the three elements. In the practice stream, DCU seemed to concentrate on skills alone whereas in DIT, practice was said to be centred on values and ethics. Neither programme contained a component on the business of the press.

The contextual studies in DCU were substantial but related to general media theory. DIT on the other hand, restricted itself to the history and ethics of journalism only, thus providing a rather slim theoretical foundation for critical reflection on journalism. These two pathways reflect the two options currently available to journalism programmes given the lack of agreed theoretical base to journalism.

The two programmes were essentially vocational rather than academic, yet both also had elements of general education. This could reflect, on the one hand, the need for journalists to have a good general education and on the other, the undesirability of providing a very

narrowly focussed programme for undergraduate students, either for their own sake or for the wider needs of society.

The content studies on both programmes included politics, economics and law as might be expected. Both also provided for the study of a second language. This can be seen as part of the general educational provision of these courses, and also reflects the disciplines available in these two non-traditional institutions which do not include the full range of liberal arts or humanities subjects.

The final question on the articulation between these subjects and the core subject of journalism reveals the curriculum models used. The lack of integration between the content modules and journalism practice in DCU revealed the programme to be similar to the knowledge-based professional curriculum. The DIT programme exemplified the practice-based model and shows the weakness of this curriculum approach with regard to theory. As has been said, both courses were in fact closer to the specific journalistic models and reflected the weakness of these. The professional model to which DIT's programme was similar, has a weak theoretical base; the integrated model, with which DCU's programme can be compared, emphasises general media theory to the neglect of the specific function of journalism. Both weaknesses stem from the lack of an adequate theoretical base. If a more adequate theory were available, it is likely these forms of journalism curricula would be replaced by forms more comparable to general models of professional education.

## **6. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The overall aim of the research was to examine the concepts of journalism and journalism education with the aim of providing some clarification on how a journalist should be educated. It remains to consider what implications for practice can be drawn from the research findings.

With regard to journalism, there was agreement on the skills needed and widespread recognition of its public role. From the latter, one can argue that journalism needs to be distinguished from the media in general and from other media practices. It does not need professional status to protect its role. Linking journalism to democracy and human rights in public policy and legislation is a better option. This may seem idealistic and far from everyday practice within much of the press which is mainly concerned with the more mundane function of making a profit. Yet providing independent, accurate and adequate information is always journalism's most important function as is seen at times or in areas of the world when the press is not fulfilling this mandate. The current state of journalism gives rise for concern. Hargreaves (2003) has argued that journalists themselves are to blame to a considerable extent and that they need 'to re-absorb the values of democracy' in their own conduct in order to function properly. Education has a serious contribution to make in this regard by ensuring that a number of well qualified entrants have a critical understanding of the important role journalism plays in society.

Journalism education therefore must go beyond the mastery of skills and the knowledge of values and standards. It must also provide graduates with a theoretical understanding of

the notion of journalism itself in order to allow critical reflection on journalistic values, ethics and routines.

There is currently a multi-tiered system of journalism education in place with programmes at sub-degree, degree and post-graduate degree level. This reflects the variety within journalism work and the different levels at which it is practised. All programmes at all levels should include a firm understanding of journalistic values and a certain appreciation of the idea of journalism on which they are based.

I would argue that undergraduate degrees which have been the focus of this research should follow the normal models of professional education programmes as the best preparation for work in the area of journalism. They should contain the three components of practice, context and content, or, in other words, practice, theory and knowledge. There should be a mandatory core with journalistic skills, study of the concept of journalism in the context component and politics, economics and law in the content component. Within and between the three elements students could then be offered choices to match their individual needs, interest and talents. In this way, a number of different models of undergraduate programmes can validly coexist.

Theory is therefore crucial in any journalism programme. The lack of focus on theory until recently has not only been a problem for the delivery of the theoretical component of journalism programmes but has hindered the development of journalism education more generally. By theory, I mean the ideas, suppositions, abstract concept or concepts of journalism that stand behind its practice. All practice has a basis in theory as practice is a social construction that can only be properly understood by seeking to find the beliefs that lie behind it. Journalism needs to be studied as a field of its own, as a form of practice with a specific function in society, in order to gain an understanding of its essential nature. A start can be made by looking at the theorising of other forms of practice which has been defined as consisting of four dimensions: the intentions of the practitioner, the interpretation of the activity by others and the historical and political context (Kemmis, 1998). Intuitively this approach is sympathetic to the concerns of journalism. The emphasis thrown on the intentions and interpretations of the activity highlights journalism's role and its relationship with the public. Similarly, the importance of the historical and political context of journalism practice is widely recognised and is in tune with the culture of journalism.

Building up the field of journalism along these lines faces a particular problem in the resistance to the very notion of theory and the resistance to academic research by many journalism lecturers. The argument has been that the same research and analytic skills are used in journalism as in academia and should be recognised as such. The difference is, however, that journalism practice, even at the highest level, does not advance our understanding and conception of journalism in the same way as academic research does. It is vital for this reason that research leading to the development of theory is pursued.

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