DEBATE

WHO IS A JOURNALIST?

As part of the first-ever World Journalism Education Congress (WJEC), attracting 440 journalism and mass communication educators and professionals from 44 countries, and held in Singapore on June 26–28, 2007, panelists Alan Knight, Cherian George, and Alex Gerlis presented a lively debate on "Who Is a Journalist." Knight argued that Journalism paradigms are in transition. Bloggers are providing competition through their often eye-witness reports. Quality blogs are influencing journalism practices. Knight argued that journalists must adapt to and embrace the Internet. Gerlis proposed that when we now ask "Who Is a Journalist", the answer is no longer anyone who is employed as journalist. The answer is that potentially, anyone and everyone can be a journalist. George warns again uncritically invoking professional standards as the dividing line that separates journalists from non-journalists
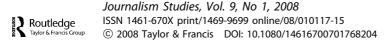
JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF BLOGGING

Alan Knight

It's said that journalists need to be trusted and should have credibility, in the public interest. But there are many reasons why journalists' credibility is undermined by public distrust. These may include:

- *Journalists' mainstream agendas, as opposed to community interests.* Chomsky called this a symbiotic relationship between the powerful and the press ... Journalists may see themselves as watch dogs but they may be seen to behave as lap dogs.
- *A touching faith in government sources.* Just after the 2004 Tsunami, a Thai newspaper quoted an official source who dismissed the waves as "not strong enough" to be called a Tsunami. It unwisely reported, "No danger odd tide will sink Phuket" (Knight, 2005).
- *Susceptibility to propaganda.* During the Iraqi invasion, mainstream media were flooded with propaganda influenced by embedding, censorship, selective news conferences and digitally altered images (Knight, 2003). Not long after, President George Bush somewhat prematurely announced victory in Iraq.
- *Corporate and careerist self-interest.* Rupert Murdoch has built a corporate empire, by trading editorial support for concessions. One might ask, why he wanted to buy the *Wall St Journal*?
- *Inaccuracies, unfairness and excluding language.* Open any newspaper, tune into television news, or turn on the radio and you can find minor errors of fact.
- *Journalism's self-referencing culture.* Journalists' virtual club often excludes outsiders including academics and the wider public.

However, the Internet allows almost anyone to become not only a media critic, but also a reporter and a producer.

Blogging

Blogging has reshaped globalised communications and in doing so has demanded that journalists re-evaluate and reform their practices. Freedom of speech threatens to become universal, empowering bloggers to articulate, advocate, prosletyse, and sometimes mis-inform, dis-inform, vilify, threaten and subvert—all of the things journalists once had pretty much to themselves. So where does this explosion of unmediated information leave journalists who previously enjoyed privileged access to mass communication?

Before the World Wide Web, Journalism was defined by mainstream news agencies, newspapers, radio and televisions stations. But the Internet has raised questions about who journalists are, what they should do, where they can report from, why they choose particular stories, and even when they report. Who should be considered journalists in an age when anyone can publish a blog? How might traditional publishers catch up when anyone can establish a practice and try to earn a living in this digitalised market of ideas?

Centering Digital Production

Australia's public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) restructured in 2007 to place its online convergence at the centre of its operations. The ABC, Australia's most complex television, radio and Internet media organisation, began operations in 1932 (ABC, 2006). Its organisation reflected the telephone network, which carried its information; centred in Sydney and radiating out to state capitals and eventually regional centres. In 2007, it operated six major radio networks, and two television networks, presenting 12,196 hours of news and current affairs a year on radio and 2479 hours on television.

While the ABC's executive offices remained at the old analogue hub in Sydney, its News production had been dispersed to the ABC's 64 newsrooms around Australia and converged on the online newsroom in Brisbane. In 2007, digital media, in particular digital journalism, moved from the periphery to the centre of ABC operations. Announcing a corporate restructure ABC Managing Director, Mark Scott said that "Digital media is now integral to everything we do". Scott said the corporate changes reflected "the shift of digital and new media from the fringe of . . . operations ten years ago to the very centre of . . . Television, Radio and News and Current Affairs output" (Scott, 2007).

The ABC re-organisation recognised that radio, television and text were no longer separate products, couched in discrete professional cultures. Rather these ABC divisions were content producers serving digital delivery systems, which might include radio, television and websites. It was a belated admission that multi-media journalism was a core practice rather than an experiment. "It is not an add-on, it is not a novelty, it is the present reality as well as the future", Mr Scott said.

Meanwhile, Australia's oldest newspaper group, Fairfax Media, changed its name in 2006 to address changes wrought by computers and the Internet. Fairfax, which used to be called John Fairfax and Sons, published Australia's first daily newspaper in 1840. Launching a new online newspaper in 2007, Chief Executive, David Kirk, said the overwhelming fact was that our complex world was more interconnected than ever before:

> Of the 6.4 billion people on Earth, the Internet now reaches 1 billion, or 16 per cent, and is growing at 190 per cent per year. After North America, Oceania has the highest

Internet penetration of 52 per cent . . . Africa and the Middle East are growing at over 400 per cent per year.[1]

Today, developing countries have 49 per cent of the world's telephones—up from 19 per cent in 1990, and they own 30 per cent of the world's computers, up from 20 per cent 10 years ago.[2]

Dr Kirk said that the Internet would not replace newspapers but rather provide them with challenges and opportunities. Fairfax Media had engaged on a three-pronged strategy; defend and grow its existing newspapers and magazines, aggressively expand its online portfolio, and build a digital media company using broadband as a driver for growth.

More profoundly, the very connectedness of our internet sites with their audiences is driving a change in our thinking about our culture, and our need to be collaborative and connected across all the natural boundaries of print and online, of editorial and commercial, and between the geographies where we operate.[3]

Opportunities?

In April 2007, Technorati, a specialist Internet searching company, tracked its 70 millionth blog (a web log; a diary style journal, regularly updated on the web). Every day 120,000 blogs were being created, or 1.4 blogs every second of every day (Sifry, 2007). Technorati CEO David Sifry said the number of blogs in the top 100 most accessed sites had risen substantially:

During Q3 2006 there were only 12 blogs in the Top 100 most popular sites. In Q4, however, there were 22 blogs on the list—further evidence of the continuing maturation of the Blogosphere. Blogs continue to become more and more viable news and information outlets. For instance, information not shown in our data but revealed in our own user testing in Q1 2007 indicates that the audience is less and less likely to distinguish a blog from, say, nytimes.com—for a growing base of users, these are all sites for news, information, entertainment, gossip, etc. (Sifry, 2007)

Ominously, a study conducted by Johnson and Kaye in 2004 may indicate otherwise. Surveying a relatively small sample of 3747 respondents, they found that only 42.7 per cent rated online newspapers as moderately or very credible, 73.6 per cent rated blogs moderately to very credible. Only 3.5 per cent rated blogs as not at all or not very credible! (Johnson and Kaye, 2004).

Writing in the *Niemann Reports*, Jon Palfreman, said that a generation reared on video games was primed for an interactive multi-media platform life on the web:

With the web, we could be witnessing the most important development in expressive media since the advent of writing. One exciting if disruptive possibility is that under the influence of the young, the Internet will usher in a new era of interactive, audiovisual literacy. Though written words will remain critical to human communication, it's likely that they will no longer dominate in the exchange of news and information. (Palfreman, 2006)

Journalists fretted that the growth of new media might mean the abandonment of traditional core values such as independence, autonomy, objectivity and fairness. It was

easy to be offended as media barons snapped up new media assets like *MySpace* and *Youtube*. However, journalists must adapt to this new media order or perish, he said (Palfreman, 2006). According to columnist and logger, Dan Gillmor, journalists must learn that in an emerging era of multi-directional, digital communications, the audience should be an integral part of the news-making process. He called this approach, "We Media":

> Interactive technology—and the mostly young readers and viewers who use and understand it—are the catalysts. We Media augment traditional methods with new and yet-to-be invented collaboration tools ranging from email to web logs to digital video to peer-to-peer systems. But it boils down to something simple; our audience knows more than we do, and they don't have to settle for half-baked coverage when they can come into the kitchen themselves. This is not a threat. It is an opportunity. And the evolution of We Media will oblige us to adapt. (Gillmor, 2003)

Blogs and Journalism

Reportage of the 2004 Tsunami indicated how bloggers might compete with the mainstream press for coverage of an unfolding, international event. A survey of eight major Asian Pacific newspapers informed their readers about the unfolding social and economic impact of and responses to the Tsunami. There was less emphasis on education about the waves, with minimal or even negligible reports on the scientific aspects of the disaster. But there was a great deal of often prurient entertainment derived from images of the destruction, tales of suffering and even occasional reports of heroism.

Journalists faced spirited competition from amateurs, some of whom were located within sight of the Tsunami. The combination of Internet distribution and access to digital images and computerised editing allowed swift and often credible responses. While bloggers frequently lacked the journalism technique of deploying identified sources, their use of eyewitness reports, combined with the ability to cross-reference to other sites, contributed to their credibility.

Emotions, opinions and experiences were more widely shared on the Internet through web postings, discussion groups and "blogs". It was here on amateur-created, maintained and controlled, but internationally distributed sites where thousands met and talked. Websites globally provided updated information on where people could donate funds, provide support, and contact NGOs and even contact missing relatives. Conventional media, staffed by traditional journalists, would have been hard pressed to equal such efforts (Knight, 2005).

Journalism Cultures

Mainstream journalists deploy technologies embedded in a culture of ideas through which they construct the way they report, select, edit and prioritise news. These ideas reproduce and reinforce themselves in the news-making process, re-creating apparently flexible yet in practice, conformist ways for imagining the world outside the newsroom. In this largely unconscious process, called "news instinct", journalists prioritised accepted versions of events while dismissing alternate accounts as "not news". In this way, many western journalists embraced and colluded with colonial constructs of Asia, creating a self-justifying narrative of empire (Knight and Nakano, 1999). Contemporary journalists in

Hong Kong call this process when genuflecting to Beijing, the emerging superpower, and "self censorship".

Press coverage of the Hong Kong handover in 1997 illustrated how cultural and political differences framed national reporting of an international news event. Foreign correspondents, this time from Britain, the United States, Japan and China often relied on secondary sources. National agendas skewed coverage: the British were nostalgic for empire, the Americans feared communism, the Japanese were concerned about trade and the mainland Chinese were rather patriotic. By that time, it seemed no longer relevant to talk of dichotomies between western journalists and their Asian counterparts. Journalists from the United States, Taiwan and Hong Kong had more in common in practice and philosophy than those from Hong Kong and Beijing.

China

In China, blogging emerged as a clear alternative to the official or mainstream commercial press. When Li Datong's news supplement, *Freezing Point*, ceased publication after it carried critical views of official histories, he turned to the Internet. He said that the World Wide Web had created wider debates in China. Li said that China's journalists were freer than ever before while paradoxically, the press remained under Party control. He said that it was like an expanding balloon marked by a design, which also got bigger as the balloon got bigger. In an open letter distributed by the Internet that "a hundred schools" should speak out (Li Datong, cited in Cunningham, 2006).

In the United States, members of the religious sect, Falun Gong, formed a global network of programmers to by-pass government censorship and break down Chinese government firewalls. The group operated an "intelligent proxy network" which sought to guide users through the censor's walls to overseas "middlemen" servers, which in turn re-directed users to blocked websites (Garden Networks for Freedom of Information, 2006).

In Hong Kong, Free Speech activists followed up the huge, anti-Article 23 demonstrations in 2003 by creating an online newspaper, *Inmediahk.net*. Editor, Lam Oi Wan, said her group was concerned that news in Hong Kong had been constrained by commercial interests, which genuflected to mainland authorities. She hoped that her group would operate independently of government and business.

By 2006, more than 125 million mainland Chinese people were online. Third-generation mobile phones had wireless broadband access, which was expected to significantly increase interaction on the net (Tuinstra, 2006).

Hong Kong-based blogger, Roland Soong, traced interactions between the foreign press, bloggers and the Chinese media, through his website, *EastSouthWestNorth*.

Soong, a professional translator, said there was an international "historical notion" that many Chinese journalists were upset because they perceived that unless the English-language press reported on events in China, the events did not happen.

> I run a translation blog. I am putting the original Chinese blogs before foreign correspondents who read my blog. It creates a certain pressure on what they can re-write. It highlights what appears in the Chinese media but which is not reported in the western media. It may give them new story ideas. In one sense I am a one man pressure group trying to get a more balanced coverage of China so that it reflects more of what the Chinese people are seeing and reading.[4]

Quality blogs were influencing quality journalism.

Kathy Sierra

But could the blogosphere govern itself? There were downsides to freedom of speech. Take the case of Kathy Sierra, a middle-aged IT specialist who ran a blog which provided tips on how to use computers. Earlier this year, she started receiving death threats on her blog. She complained and the threats became more explicit, taking on sexual overtones. She closed her blog, and other bloggers took up the issue, including one who digitally modified an image of Kathy Sierra so that she appeared as an inflatable sex doll. This was carried out in the name of freedom of speech.

The founder of Wikipedia, Jimmy Wales, responded by creating a Wiki, which sought to create a code of behaviour for bloggers. This was derided by some bloggers as a move towards censorship. Given the opaqueness of the web, it was hard to judge their motives. They could just as easily have been seasoned libertarians or angry children sitting on pillows before their parents' computers.

However, the dispute revealed the fault line between bloggers and those who might be called journalists. Bloggers needed no

- Sources to buttress their stories. Indeed facts seemed from a foreign country as opinion larded with vitriol, abuse and mendacity appeared to rule the blogosphere.
- By-lines to identify authors. In Australia as elsewhere, Wiki scanner revealed that government staffers were anonymously editing out unfavourable mentions of their employers.
- Ethics to frame their activities. *Ohmynews* and even *Youtube* have recommended codes of behaviour but participants lack the training and means to enforce such codes in most instances.

Journalists in contrast could have

- Established codes of conduct which can be supervised by journalists associations affiliated with the International Federation of Journalists.
- Codes of practice defined by employers who can appoint, train and promote journalists.
- Salaries, which if nothing else encourage continuity.
- A professional culture stressing accuracy, fairness and perhaps balance.

Change

Journalism paradigms are in transition. Private media's financial base, which underpins journalism, will continue to shift ground. The advertising revenue which supports sites such as *Nytimes.com* may be diminished, with some industry commentators claiming that revenues will cross over within two decades. This process has already begun as corporations investing in newspapers cut costs or seek to package news and opinion as fictional entertainment, e.g. Fox News.

Commercial Network television revenues can also be expected to be reduced as broadband use expands and portals such as *Joost* offer high-quality digital video downloads. Why wait for the local free to air station to broadcast the latest US sitcom, crime drama or reality show, when the material can be accessed at source?

The old style exclusive, international news order is already dead, even in mainland China where the government strenuously and unsuccessfully attempts to enforce official accounts of international events. It has been effectively replaced by blended and multi-sourced information, which collectively contributes to the new global media environment.

Individual websites, such as blogs, which may offer previously unrepresented opinion, already attract much larger audiences than some conventional columnists.

The Internet allows the creation of multi-layered reports, which are embedded with images, video and animation. Accuracy has become a key issue as diligent consumers compare journalists' analysis with their sources original words. Authenticated websites which aggregate these reports, such as the BBC, *New York Times* and the ABC (Australia) are recording rapidly rising page views.

As a result, public-funded broadcasters which have been under pressure for a decade may have a new lease on life, if they are able to adapt. High-content programs which may have a low audience on radio or television can accumulate huge global audiences. In 2006, ABC Online reached an average of 2.02 million people per month from within Australia, and ABC Online's audience reach increased by 20 per cent from 2005 to 2006, nearly three times the rate of growth in Internet uptake (7 per cent) (Cook, 2007).

It may be that governments will re-consider the worth of public broadcasters delivering information and therefore influence to wider audiences. This in turn may mitigate politicians' past claims of public-sector broadcasting elitism.

However, to compete with blogs, public broadcasters will have to offer branded packages of quality information. To retain credibility such mainstream packages must promise fairness, accuracy and identifiable sources.

''New'' Journalists

Journalists were once defined by where they worked; in newspapers, or radio and television stations. The Internet promises everyone can be a publisher. But not everyone has the skills or training to be a journalist; defined by their professional practices and codes of ethics. Such journalists will continue to authorise information, providing signposts for discerning audiences.

So who in the future should be called a journalist? Anyone applying professional practices within recognised codes of ethics will be differentiated from most bloggers as well as our friends at Fox News. What will they be doing? Seeking to create non-fiction, buttressed by transparent sources . . . News. Where will we find them? Anywhere there's a computer with an Internet link. When will they file their stories? 24/7. Why do we need them? Good governance, whether it be democratic or authoritarian, demands quality information on which decisions are grounded. Journalists should be trained to produce fair and accurate stories about their communities, and if journalism educators make ethics and professional practices the core of their courses, journalists should still be the best equipped to deliver such information. If they do so, journalists will adapt to the Internet, in the same ways they embraced the telephone, the telegraph and the printing press.

The future of journalism might then be a little more secure.

NOTES

1. ''Business Leadership in Changing Times'', a speech by David Kirk delivered at the Hilton Hotel, Brisbane, 3 July 2007.
2. See Note 1.
3. See Note 1.
4. Interview with Roland Soong, Hong Kong Foreign Correspondents Club, 5 March 2006.

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WHO IS A JOURNALIST?

Alex Gerlis

In June 2007 I was a panellist in the "Who Is a Journalist" session at the World Journalism Education Conference (WJEC) in Singapore. I also wrote a piece on that subject for the BBC College of Journalism's internal blog:

> My main argument will be that with the advent of "citizen journalism", UGC [user-generated content] and blogs, it is now more important than ever for the role of the professional journalist to be properly defined. This means that journalism will have to move from its traditional image as a "trade" to become more of a profession. Training and higher professional standards will become increasingly important as we have to strive harder to distinguish ourselves from the new competition out there and work harder to be trusted.

My blog provoked a series of responses. "So, if journalism becomes a profession who keeps the register of entrants and who strikes the unprofessional ones off?", one person commented. "You'd be happy", it was assumed, "for 'unprofessional' journalists to be struck off and prevented from expressing their views? Now, where did they used to do that???" "It IS very worrying", commented another person, "when people suggest it should be an exclusive profession with entry exams, councils to decide who can and who can't be a member—all, presumably, intended to exclude some people".

It is gratifying to get any response to anything you write, but I was slightly uncomfortable at being cast in the role of an advocate for registering journalists—and then for them being "struck-off". Nothing could be more calculated to stop a debate on journalism before it starts than invoking the spectre of approved registers of journalists. All that I was trying to say was that professional—that is, paid—journalists now need to differentiate themselves from "amateur" journalists and a key element of that is ensuring proper ethical standards are maintained.

There are good reasons why this is now an imperative. Not that many years ago, a discussion on "who is a journalist" would have been fairly straightforward. Journalists worked for newspapers and—certainly in the United Kingdom—had served apprentice-ships on local papers before being allowed to work on nationals. "Apprenticeship" was the operative word. As Andrew Marr (2004) has observed, newspaper journalism in the United Kingdom arose out of the need of printers to fill their publications. Platforms needed to be filled. Then as now, content was king.

As new forms of media emerged, such as radio and then television, so journalists were employed in them. Up until relatively recently, then, it was possible to identify people who were professional journalists and those who may be "posing" as a journalist. Anyone not employed in some area of the media, or a bona fide freelance, was probably a fantasist, unduly influenced by *All the Presidents Men*. After all, these aspiring "journalists" had no access, technical or editorial, to the media.

But those certainties have now disappeared. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) estimate that there are some 600,000 professional journalists worldwide, but that figure excludes the many journalists who are not members of unions affiliated to

the IFJ. Then let us try and factor into the equation everyone else who now has access to the media, many of whom would wish to describe themselves as journalists.

There are approximately 75 million blogs[1] worldwide, though that figure is clearly subject to massive fluctuation. The vast majority of bloggers are not even marginally involved in any form of journalism and for many of those who do see themselves as being so, their *raison d'être* is to be a counter to mainstream journalism. Then we need to look at the 17+ per cent of the world's population with access to the Internet[2] and the fact that 44 per cent of them—500,000,000 people—create online content. Again, having access to the Internet and even creating online content does not make someone a journalist, even if it does give them increased potential to be one.

It is nonetheless reasonable to assume that a percentage of those 500,000,000 produce some form of citizen journalism and that means that for every professional—or paid journalist—in the world, there are going to be many more amateur or citizen journalists. These are people who would define themselves as being part of the broader journalism process. They have access to media platforms and are used by professional journalists as sources. For many people, they will be an acceptable and even preferable alternative to the mainstream media. They can no longer be dismissed as fantasy journalists and they need to be included in any current definition of Who Is a Journalist.

I accept that these are broad assumptions, but I think that they make the point. When we now ask "Who Is a Journalist", the answer is no longer anyone who is employed as journalist. The answer is that potentially, anyone and everyone can be a journalist.

Added to this is the fact that what we imagine are clear distinctions between professional and amateur journalists are confused by a growing grey area between the two. Citizen journalists do not work in isolation. They are increasingly becoming a valuable source for the mainstream media. At the WJEC Rebecca MacKinnon[3] said that 90 per cent of Chinese-based foreign correspondents that she surveyed followed blogs on a regular basis and that some, especially those published in English, are emerging as credible sources, certainly more trusted than Chinese State Television.

This is also true of BBC journalists covering parts of the world where the media is restricted. Blogs in those countries will be monitored over a period of perhaps months to assess their reliability and accuracy before being used as a source.

And then there are areas where the distinction is even more blurred. The shooting at Virginia Tech in April 2007 was barely over before mainstream journalists were posting on *MySpace* and other social networks in an attempt to find eyewitnesses. This was criticised by some as "digital door stepping", which to me sounds strange coming from advocates of open media. I would have thought that the verification of sources emerging through social networks is more of an issue of concern.

The argument of whether there is such a thing as citizen journalism is long past. The advent of it along with blogging has help democratise the media and has certainly widened the media's range of sources and the speed at which we can reach them. It has helped turn journalism from a lecture to a conversation and there can be little doubt that what some have perceived as an arrogance of the mainstream media has now been tempered by a recognition that they have to acknowledge their audience with something more substantial than a letters page.

What is needed now is a much clearer understanding by professional journalists of how their role differs from that of bloggers and citizen journalists—the amateur journalists. In this context, amateur is used to help differentiate between professional

and amateur journalists. It is not meant in a derisory way. This means that professional journalists do need to take stock of their profession. We need to recognise that journalism has moved on significantly from when it was an adjunct of the printing trade and something of an exclusive club. Unless we do this, then the distinction between professional and amateur journalist will soon become so blurred that the craft of journalism will become diluted.

I would argue that there are three main areas which professional journalists need to look to in an effort to ensure that journalism does not become diluted. The first is the maintenance of professional standards, the second the need to find a proper accommodation with the amateur journalists and the third is the area of journalism training and education. The first two are related. It would, I recognise, be naive in the extreme to assume that all journalists work to the same high standards. Notwithstanding that, I would argue that there should be an increased focus for all professional journalists to adhere to professional standards and ethics. This would include the paramount important of accuracy; the requirement to verify material; to differentiate between fact and opinion; to protect sources; to have a clear understanding of media law and to avoid being the mouthpieces—covert or openly—of governments and interest groups.

Bloggers and citizen journalists do not, by and large, operate to those same requirements. There will be some who will be every bit as ethical and professional in their approach as suggested above, but for most blogging is about expressing a certain range of opinions or perspectives and citizen journalists tend to be people who were in the right place at the right time and had the speed of mind and ability to pass on their material.

Related to professional standards and ethics is the need to find an accommodation with the emerging forms of media, be they blogs or citizen journalism. This will mean a building of relationships and the mainstream media developing an expertise in under-standing how to both use and work with these new areas. At the BBC we have a major training programme on UGC. The starting point is that we have long moved on from the debate about whether UGC is a good or bad thing. The course is about understanding the different and varied forms of UGC. The key learning point of the course is to hammer home that what then matters is not to dismiss it, on the one hand, but not to embrace it uncritically, on the other. Checking and verification are at the cornerstone of good journalism and they are absolute requirements when journalists work with UGC.

Journalism education and training is the third area that needs to be looked at more carefully. At present, in the United Kingdom there is nothing stopping someone joining a newspaper or a broadcasting organisation with no qualifications and becoming a journalist overnight. There will, of course, be other reasons—many of them very valid ones—why that person has got the job and do not forget that most new recruits will have had some form of journalism education and will receive training in their new jobs. But if professional journalists want to be differentiated from citizen journalists, in their varying forms, then it must be recognised that various responsibilities and expectations come with that. Why should lawyers, doctors, teachers and a whole raft of other professionals have to meet certain professional criteria, including continuous professional development, but journalists are somehow exempt from this?

Certain areas of training should be compulsory, including media law and ethics. At the BBC, there has been a significant culture change in recent years in this regard. We have, for instance, moved from a position where legal training was a voluntary activity, undertaken by a relatively small number of enthusiastic, ambitious or even worried

participants to one where more than 9000 BBC journalists have been on a mandatory legal training programme. We are about to begin a similar one on ethics. The difference is stark and fairly obvious. A voluntary course, no matter how good, will do well to get 20 per cent of a target group attending. Inevitably, those most needing the training are the least likely to volunteer to go on a course ("I'm don't need to go, I went on a legal training course 20 years ago"). The same course, made compulsory, will get the entire target group through, with no diminution in the effectiveness of the training. Pre- and post-course evaluation for our recent (mandatory) legal training programme showed a doubling of levels of both knowledge and confidence in media law.

I am not saying that come what may, professional journalism is good, amateur journalism is bad. On the contrary. A good blogger or citizen journalist will be preferable to a shoddy or unethical professional journalist. The onus is on news organisations to ensure a culture and training so that journalists always work to the highest professional standards.

NOTES

1. Source: Technorati.
2. Source: Nielsen. The actual figure in May 2007 was 1,133,408,284.
3. University of Hong Kong and www.globalvoicesonline.org.

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VALUE-DRIVEN JOURNALISM

Cherian George

If you visit the website of the Singapore Press Club (www.pressclub.org.sg), you'll find the question, "Are bloggers journalists?", posted as a discussion topic. The first response is from the president of the press club, a mainstream newspaper executive with decades of experience, and it's an unequivocal "no". As a result, no blogger, even if he were to achieve the standards that Alan Knight is calling for, would qualify for regular membership of the press club. On the other hand, the driver or secretary of the press club president would be eligible for regular membership, simply by virtue of being an employee of a large news organization.

In such ways, prevailing definitions of what a journalist is privilege large commercial organizations, even at the expense of common sense. I prefer more inclusive, minimalist

definitions. Let me give it a shot. We could perhaps say that a journalist is one who applies his or her powers of observation, investigation and enterprise to provide the public with intelligence and commentary about current affairs.[1] Such a definition would say something about the content of journalism, how it's done and whom it's for. So, it's not an empty definition, but not too restrictive either.

More restrictive definitions just don't stand up to historical scrutiny. That hasn't stopped them being bandied about. Ironically, the mainstream press that is the main beneficiary of press freedom has rarely recognized the fact that the idea of press freedom was born out of a ferment that the mainstream press in its current form did not contribute to, since it did not yet exist. Objectivity, balance or journalism as a full-time profession came later. Press freedom as an ideal emerged in Europe and the United States to protect the "bloggers" of the time: the partisans, the ideologues, the lone pamphleteers, who had no professional training, no codes of ethics and so on. Yet, today's professional journalists claim press freedom and in the same breath reject the very breed of communicators that gave it birth.

I would further argue that narrow definitions of journalism play into the hands of authoritarian states. The conventional wisdom is that Western-style professional journalism, shaped by the notion of professional disinterest, contributes to the advancement of freedom and democracy. My own view, drawn from the experience of Singapore, runs counter to that. In Singapore, the idea of professional disinterest has been actively promoted by the state as part of a strategy of neutering the press and keeping it in a subordinate position. The Singapore case is interesting as perhaps the pre-eminent example of successful authoritarian control of the press, in that the state has managed to tame the press using declining levels of overt repression, to such an extent that many senior editors of national newspapers would deny that they are victims of government control.

The Singapore model rejects the modern liberal democratic ideal of the press as the Fourth Estate, but, interestingly, embraces the way modern journalism is organized. It endorses the Western business model of the press over more troublesome traditional genres from the past. Fifty to a hundred years ago, the Singapore media landscape included a vibrant, partisan, ideologically-driven, morally-engaged press. In the Chinese-language segment of the Singapore media, for example, newspapers from the late 19th century and through the first half of the 20th century were typically ideological vehicles for their proprietors, many of whom were already wealthy and interested in publishing mainly for influence and prestige, not profit. We find the same phenomenon in Singapore's Malay-language journalism. Journalism in the Malay world, which includes Singapore's neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia, sees little distinction between the journalist, the writer, the poet, the activist and the public intellectual. There are still vestiges of this in Indonesia's vibrant democracy, where luminaries in newspaper publishing such as Goenawan Mohammed are simultaneously literary figures and intellectuals. The other important tributary into Singapore journalism is from India: Bengali journalism, for example—just like its Malay variant—was traditionally seen as a politically engaged intellectual pursuit, not as a profession that tries its best to stay disinterested. Mahatma Gandhi was, in addition to being the iconic political activist of the 20th century, a newspaper publisher in both South Africa and India.

If you were to go back in time and tell these Asian writers that they would have to be disinterested and objective and reject advocacy or partisanship if they wanted to be

considered "journalists", they would probably reply, you can keep the label, thank you very much. And, if indeed this pantheon of Asian newspaper persons were to be excised from the institutional memories of modern journalism, we would be poorer for it. We would be denying ourselves a rich source of inspiration, and what social movement scholars call a repertoire of contention, in journalism's supposed mission to speak truth to power.

My intent here is not to glorify that earlier form of Asian journalism; I only want to establish it as a historical fact. It was probably the case that some of that journalism was unhealthy for the nation-building projects that Singapore and other post-colonial states were forced to engage in suddenly from the middle of the last century. This was partly why Lee Kuan Yew, who led Singapore into independence, took strong action against them. Many of these non-English-language newspapers had a vision of Singapore that was not particularly "Singaporean". They were diaspora media fixated on the struggles of their ancestral homelands, or championing the narrow communal interests of immigrant communities in ways that sometimes strayed into chauvinism.

Regardless of whether Lee's ruling People's Action Party (PAP) Government was justified in cracking down on the media, what is most interesting for the present discussion is what the PAP chose to replace it with. Instead of opting for the Chinese communist model of a nationalized press and turning the press into the official propaganda mouthpiece of the ruling party, the PAP embraced the Western business model of a profit-driven press and the Western professional model of disinterest—at least in a twisted form.

The PAP's main instrument was the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act of 1974 (NPPA). The NPPA required newspapers to be run by publicly listed companies with highly spread-out ownership. It thus outlawed newspaper ownership by press barons or families—who, being human, might be tempted to exploit the ideological potential of the press even at the expense of turning in a profit. In the United States, there is growing professional and scholarly interest in the question of whether family-owned newspapers are more passionate about defending democracy than publicly listed corporations. Lee Kuan Yew appears to have understood this three decades earlier. He counter-intuitively gave more power to the stock market. Requiring newspapers to be owned by thousands of anonymous shareholders reduces the owners to their lowest common denominator—their desire for higher financial returns—and removes political impulses from the equation. Thus, the idiosyncratic publishers who populated Singapore's news media landscape in its more "Asian" era were replaced by the clinically rational corporations of today, modeled on Western corporate media.

Within newsrooms, there has been a similar long-term shift towards delegitimizing values-driven journalism. Worldwide, this has been framed by the mainstream as indicative of professional development. I have a different interpretation, drawn from my own professional experience. For 10 years, I worked as a reporter and an editor at *The Straits Times*, Singapore's largest and most profitable newspaper. Right now, in addition to being an academic, I moonlight as the editor and publisher of *What's Up*, a monthly current affairs newspaper for children. It has a not insignificant circulation of more than 25,000, but remains a tiny family-owned business with exactly two full-time employees.

Despite being basically the same person as I was 10 years ago, I've found that I practise journalism quite differently in *What's Up* compared with my days at *The Straits Times*. At *What's Up*, we explicitly stand for "values-driven journalism". Among the values

we openly espouse on our website, www.newsforkids.com.sg, are multiculturalism, environmental stewardship and social responsibility through democratic participation. We encourage our small pool of writers to be led by their passions and their values in their work. At *The Straits Times*, in contrast—like most big newspapers—journalists are expected to leave their biases at home when they come to work.

I suspect that the difference in approach is mainly due to organizational imperatives—and very little to do with normative factors. In a tiny set-up like *What's Up*, it is quite feasible for me as the editor to allow values and causes into the editorial process without losing control of operation. If one were to run *The Straits Times* like that, there would be chaos. A news organization with scores or hundreds of reporters and editors, or more than a thousand like the BBC, cannot possibly let them all be led by their values. Any manager would be nervous—and rightly so—by the prospect of workers who felt that their personal values had a legitimate place at the core of their work. This is not because the gatekeepers lack personal values themselves, but because they know that dealing with such workers would be a management nightmare.

That's not to say that reporters can write anything they feel like in *What's Up*, but that, being a small monthly, we have plenty of time to negotiate our way through each disagreement, even if the editor's view ultimately prevails. In contrast, large news organizations with a daily output require a certain standardization of inputs to ensure an efficient flow of copy. Some aspects of professionalism may be little more than this: a bureaucratic necessity for efficient operation of large-scale commercial news enterprises.

I am not suggesting that we abandon this model. I only ask that we avoid uncritically invoking professional standards as the dividing line that separates journalists from non-journalists. Journalism in Singapore and elsewhere in the world needs to have both—professionalism constrained by disinterest and industry-wide codes, as well as idiosyncratic morally engaged amateurism. Historically and normatively, both deserve a place at the table that we call journalism. Many self-righteous though well-meaning mainstream professionals want to protect the sanctity of journalism against insurgents trying to align their work with their own particular agendas. What the professionals may be unwittingly protecting, however, are rather prosaic industrial and commercial imperatives; in particular, the imperative to alienate the journalist and publisher from their own work.

NOTE

1.   The methodological part of this definition is borrowed from Stephens (1997, p. 221).

REFERENCE

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