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Soul-searching at the cross-roads of journalism education

Kaarle Nordenstreng

The terrain of journalism education in the light of basic developments around media and journalism today is reviewed in the following article. It also offers a perspective on contemporary higher education reform in Europe. Its conclusions include both general points and one concrete proposal.

With regard to the general development of the media I wish to highlight three prospects. Firstly, I subscribe to the *growing importance of media* in all areas of life, not only in industrialized but increasingly also in developing countries. Media seem to be capturing more and more power; media-related matters including media education are becoming more and more decisive.

This does not necessarily mean that there is more money for communication education as we know all too well. Nevertheless, media seem to be an aspect of history whose importance is growing. Where this power lies and whom it benefits are another matter. Suffice to state that media constitute a kind of sunrise industry in world history.

Secondly, due to technological developments, the *boundaries are dissolving between different media* and between media and the rest of culture, economy and other aspects of society. The structures of media are changing, too, and this is happening not only within the media and editorial offices, but also throughout the whole

media ownership system with its vertical and horizontal structures. The term typically used for this development is *convergence*.

Let me make here a footnote which I find indicative of the potential for change in media structures, based on what I heard from an American media consultant. She had visited the Globo Corporation right after the Sydney Olympics and was presented with a corporate dilemma. Altogether 50 newspapers and radio-tv stations owned by the company throughout Latin America had sent their reporters to cover the games, each operating separately and suffering from lack of resources, while this could have been done jointly by perhaps only 20 reporters with technical support and a highly qualified processing team at Latin American headquarters, feeding the individual outlets.

This had led the corporate strategists to a thought experiment by turning around the present system of independently operating units under local barons called editors and publishers, replacing it with a centralized structure under one big unit commanded by a single media 'tsar'. The suggestion was that this would have been better both in terms of economic cost and performance quality.

The thought experiment has not yet been implemented, but it shows us what potentially can be done by these huge conglomerates to change the media structures – and not necessarily to the detriment of quality. Better quality and greater diversity could be achieved through a centralized structure and management, while the existence of numerous independent units in a formally free marketplace does not necessarily guarantee diversity. This reasoning has always been part and parcel of public service broadcasting philosophy.

Thirdly, the information and communication technology – or 'Nokia syndrome' as I might say coming from the birthplace of that company – becomes so central an element of life that it *no longer appears as a big issue*. According to futurologists, for example, in Japan, ICT will be less sexy in 20 years just as electricity has become over the last 100 years. It becomes so important, so salient that it ceases to be special. We will no longer have distinct ICT companies as we do today, because ICT will per-

vade (post-)industrial life. The digital revolution in media is a passing stage in world history: this page will soon be turned. Of course technology is crucial and has its impact, but it will not retain its present-day distinction and appeal.

Journalism as a profession

Firstly, professionalism has been increasing over the past 50 years. More skills and greater competence are both needed and guaranteed in journalistic production. A new mindset seems to be entering into the journalistic professional world with an increasingly multimedia approach. So far we have been monomedia oriented with newspapers, radio, television, etc. each in its own pigeonhole, but this way of thinking will become increasingly outdated and replaced by the *multimedia mindset*. This does not only mean mastering the skills of various media but is a fundamentally different paradigm of working and thinking.

Secondly, professionalism not only brings about good for journalism as it is typically understood but also gives rise to serious *problems for democracy*. The more competent and powerful you are as a professional, the more you become a prisoner of your own professional thinking at risk of alienation from so-called ordinary people. It is the dilemma of elitism and alienation from social realities, which is not good for democracy – something I call the 'fortress journalism syndrome'.

Part of this process is the development whereby journalism becomes less overtly political. I happen to believe that journalism remains equally political if not more political, but the nature of the politics is different; it is more invisible and insidious. In any case nowadays most of the message content of mainstream media is non-news by nature. Much of this non-news represents tabloid journalism and the kind of dumbing-down material, which is clearly in contradiction with the historical view of journalism as part of democracy and enlightenment.

On the other hand, much of this non-news material is made up of serious background stories and feature articles which do continue to serve the democratic cause. Moreover, industri-

ally produced news is not necessarily conducive to democracy. It is often beset by the same dilemma as smooth professionalism: it alienates the audience and creates an illusion of factual coverage of the world, while in reality you are surrounded by another form of ideology.

So non-news is not simply bad for democracy and news is not necessarily good for democracy. The relations are more complicated, but the point is that changing journalism and media are delicately related to problems of democracy – and those problems are serious indeed.

Thirdly, there is the question about the *end of journalism* in this time of digital abundance and overkill: Doesn't live coverage and online news render the gatekeepers and storytellers called journalists obsolete? My answer is: No. Processing raw materials and packaging them into user-friendly forms demands more, rather than less, journalistic input and therefore journalism is needed more than ever. This is not just the wishful thinking of educators and experts; it has also been shown by empirical studies demonstrating public demand for predigested material in this ever more complicated world.

Despite the popularity of tabloid materials and various kinds of reality television, there is a thirst for information, including objective information not only in matters of conflict and terrorism but also in matters of economy, ecology and so on. And this thirst is not only satisfied by the digitally facilitated supply of information with countless new sources, online and other. What people need for their worldview is not just encyclopaedic material but also overviews and comment – both objective from trusted sources and opinionated from stimulating sources. This is journalism in its purest form and there is no reason to believe that it has had its day.

Diversification of skills

Summarising the developments of both media and the journalistic profession, we can say that while there is no end in sight for journalism, future journalists will work typically in a *multi-media environment* – including conglomerates governed by a 'tsar' instead of conventional editors and publishers. Converging digital

media structures lead to diversification of journalistic skills propelling the profession into different directions.

One of these directions is online information seekers and processors in a corporate centre serving several media simultaneously, while another trend is to have specialists at each media end to edit the products for local users. This development will not do away with the need for profound knowledge of various areas of life and society; on the contrary, there is a growing need for substantial competence boosting serious and 'elite' journalism.

Then there is the well-known trend towards *tabloidization*, whereby serious news and information are accompanied by human interest and entertainment material, leading to 'infotainment'. Also, fact and fiction are mixed against the conventional wisdom of journalism, leading to 'faction'. These are challenges to be taken seriously, but I think it is very short-sighted to use them as arguments to declare a doomsday for journalism.

Consequently, my overall thesis is that the so-called Information Society will not render journalism obsolete, but it poses challenges and creates uncertainties. Some call them 'cyber revolutions' while others take them as normal evolution, and in both camps there are those who approach them with enthusiasm and optimism as well as those whose approach is pessimism or cynicism. The real roots of the challenge go deeper than the mere technical surface of digitalization. Unfortunately the academic and political field is short of analytical understanding about what is really going on.

After these prospects it is logical to reflect on journalism ethics, media performance and the tasks which media are supposed to fulfil in society – in short, the *normative roles of media*. This area of professional debate and scholarship has not been buried under new technologies and globalisation. Quite the reverse, it has been revived with projects which are effectively rewriting the outdated 'four theories of the press'.

One such project divides the paradigmatic thinking into four leading ideas which dominated certain stages of history: corporatist (the search for public wisdom, 500 BC – 1500 AD),

libertarian (the search for personal freedom, 1500-1800), social responsibility (the growth of popular democracies, 1800-1960), and citizen's participation (the rise of postmodern cultures, 1960-2000). Each of them is alive and well and feeds contemporary media ideologies – not least the old corporatist thinking which typically dominates professionalism in 'fortress journalism' with a rigid modernist paradigm in the guise of 'independent media' and 'objective journalism'.

The project also introduces four ways of defining the role of the media in relation to socio-political power: cooperation, surveillance, facilitation and radical challenge. My point here is, firstly, to note the irony of these kinds of philosophical reflections gaining popularity in the digital era. In other words, the Nokia syndrome, instead of killing is stimulating the cause of back to basics. Secondly, it is this level of basic theorising, instead of ICT fever, that will help to dispel the confusions referred to above.

Perspectives on higher education in Europe

All university people in Europe today speak about 'Bologna'. This site of Europe's oldest university has become a buzzword for the latest reform of higher education in this part of the world due to a document signed in June 1999 by 29 Ministers of Education from various European countries: the Bologna Declaration. It confirmed an initiative taken one year earlier in the Sorbonne by the Ministers of Education of France, Germany, Italy and the UK.

Bologna was followed by another meeting of Ministers of Education in Prague in 2001, now attended by 32 ministers who adopted a joint communiqué. A further ministerial conference on higher education in Europe was held in Berlin in 2003, attended by 33 European ministers, including Russia, leading to another communiqué. Next were follow-up meetings in Bergen (2005) and London (2007), with the next scheduled in Leuven (2009). (See <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/>).

This reform seeks to replace the different systems of higher education in European countries by a common 'European Higher

Education Area' (EHEA) and to create both a competitive and attractive market for academic studies in Europe compared to the USA. What is called for is both a rejuvenation of the often outdated academic systems – as happened in France in 1968 – and also a push for the typically independent academia to serve more directly the needs of the European labour market. The reform is already underway and is to be completed before 2010.

A central idea is to establish a Europe-wide system of comparable degrees, with the first degree (Bachelor) no less than 3 years and the second degree (Master's) ideally a further 2 years, followed eventually by a doctoral degree in 4 more years. Thus the basic model: 3 + 2 + 4 years. The Master's degree is expected to be reached after 5 but at least 4 years of studies. Measured with a common European Credit Transfer System (ECTS points), the first degree is 180 points and the second degree 120 points, altogether 300 points.

The first degree cycle (BA) is supposed to equip the student with basic competence for the labour market, but more specialised academic skills will be given by the second cycle (MA). The policy target for example in my own country, Finland, is for 75% of the BAs to continue to MA. This is quite different from the US system where only a minority of some 15% continue their studies to Master's level. It remains to be seen whether European economies are able to achieve that ambitious target.

Regarding studies in communication, media and journalism, the reform proceeds in both BA and MA levels. In many countries (such as mine) this does not mean revolutionary changes, because a two-level degree system has already been in place. But in other countries (such as Spain) it will fundamentally shake up the old system. In any case the reform gives a welcome boost for journalism education to review its curricula.

Conclusions for journalism education

How to characterise and label these developments? Two keywords are obvious: opportunities and threats – the last two elements familiar to SWOT analysis. And there is a clear contradiction between these perspectives.

Media and journalism is indeed a field of contradictions and paradoxes – the other two keywords. Developments especially relating to media technologies are full of contradictions, but so also are the general socio-political and cultural developments in the world.

Accordingly, there are no longer clear black and white answers, but more and more questions, challenges, and reasoning ‘on the one hand, on the other hand’. Saying this doesn’t mean that I have turned liberal from being an old radical. On the contrary, I think that a true radical today is a kind of dialectic; we have reverted to the old dialectics.

What actions should we take? Firstly, an obvious conclusion is that we need to promote networking between journalism educators. There are thousands of colleagues and institutions that should be supported by the synergy of contacts and cooperation, both in analysis and action. This work has been started by the Global Network for Professional Education in Journalism and Media (<http://www.journet.org/>) and continued by the World Journalism Education Congress (<http://www.amic-wjec.org/>).

Secondly, I have a specific proposal: to begin preparing a Unesco Recommendation for journalism education. Such universal instruments have been made for a number of areas, but not for the field of media and journalism. Initiated by JourNet and drafted together with all professional and academic circles, a Unesco Recommendation could become an important instrument in promoting and implementing the objectives of JourNet. ■

Based on a presentation given at the First JourNet International Conference on Professional Education for the Media, Newcastle, Australia, 16-19 February 2004.

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CBC’s Little Mosque on the Prairie: Just a ‘Little Masquerade’?

Aliaa Dakroury

A Muslim-Canadian, who advocates for, and believes strongly in, the human right to communicate and the capabilities of the media to enforce a democratic and free public sphere, argues that in Little Mosque on the Prairie the CBC has created a bridge between differences among Canadians. It has naturalized the ‘other’ by showing that these individuals of another culture are still human despite their difference. Most importantly, it shows that a public broadcaster can, and should, risk acting as the democratic means of social communication and discussion.

‘What’s the charge... flying while Muslim?’¹

‘Our present age is slowly learning to respect others and is gradually realizing that, for mankind as a whole, our wealth derives from our diversity and not from any artificially imposed unity.’²

With the exotic drumming of oriental music behind her, a female voice opened CBC’s *Little Mosque on the Prairie* sitcom, with ‘*ah ya Layli*’ – ‘What a night!’ and ‘*ya habibi*’ – ‘Oh my love!’, Arabic expressions heard by many Canadians when entering a Shawarma restaurant or riding in a

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