

Hot topics, future directions

The first World Journalism Education Congress was held in Singapore in June. As an acknowledgement of the success of the event, the first section of this issue of Australian Journalism Review is given over to discussions during a congress session – entitled Hot Topics, Future Directions – which focused on directions in journalism research

Back to basics

Kaarle Nordenstreng

Journalism and media studies suffer from a novelty disease. Theories and textbooks must be new; they get easily stigmatised as outdated if they are not from the present millennium. Our field wants to live up with the changing times and to be (post)modern. This is a form of “presentism” which views everything in the light of contemporary events, understanding that the present is unique and by definition better than the past.

While we should naturally be sensitive to the present, it is fatally wrong to overlook the past. Innovation and creativity do not necessarily mean novelty; they imply that something substantially new is introduced to what has been brought by the past. Not anything new but substantially new. And substance invites us to thoroughly know and understand the past.

Hence my suggestion for a hot topic is the history of ideas. This might sound strange coming from the country of Nokia (the Finnish company started over a century ago in Tampere), but here is indeed a lesson: ICTs should not be allowed to capture our attention away from the concepts and values behind the gadgetry. In fact, we should be wary of such a “Nokia syndrome”.

Take, for example, the notion of freedom which is typically taken for granted. If we go back to John Milton’s *Areopagitica* (1644) and John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859), it becomes clear that neither of them advocated the doctrine whereby there must be a free marketplace of ideas which itself ensures that truth will prevail. This doctrine was shaped only in 20th century United States, first in the legal and political debates between the two World Wars and finally during the Cold War in the 1950s. It is a myth to take the doctrine of a free marketplace of ideas and the related idea of a self-correcting truth as part and parcel of original liberalism.

I have discussed this and two other myths about press freedom at greater length in an article entitled “Myths about press freedom”, published in the English-language journal *Brazilian Journalism Research* (Vol 3, No 1, 2007 – available at <http://www.unb.br/ojsdpp/index.php>). Here it is enough to make the point that we should remain vigilant not only towards the new developments of the day but also to the legacy of the past. A critical approach is needed not to dismiss the past – paving the way to glorify the present – but rather to re-examine the concepts and paradigms which serve as carriers of our thinking.

So let’s not rush after the fashions of the day; let’s instead go back to basics. My hot road towards the future is a cool look at the back.

[Editor’s note: In the paper “Myths about press freedom”, Nordenstreng argues that the concept of press freedom should not be elevated beyond critical assessment and debate, and that it is important to liberate the notion from its ideological baggage. He argues that, although freedom of thought, expression and the media should be cherished as vital elements in the lives of individuals and societies, advocates of press freedom tend to mystify the notion of freedom and stigmatise others questioning the absolutist nature of (press) freedom. In particular, Nordenstreng argues that three popular beliefs related to press freedom are myths which serve ideological positions and are harmful to democracy. Briefly, these myths are that the idea of a free marketplace of ideas with a self-righting truth belongs to original liberalism; that UNESCO’s primary mission is to promote freedom of information; and that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides legal safeguards for the media.]

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New directions

Dane S. Claussen

To approach the subject of “hot topics, new directions” in mass communication or media studies research, one must first assess what is not new, and therefore not hot. For instance, we don’t need more studies on how media violence affects children. More than 3000 such studies have been conducted on this since the 1950s, and, at least in the United States, because of the First Amendment essentially no resulting actions have been taken. It is not the fault of researchers that when Senator John McCain first ran for president, and was asked by a University of Southern California student if studies should be conducted on media violence, McCain responded as if none had ever been done. As another example, in the US we don’t need more studies documenting racism or sexism in news or other mass media content, either today or historically. One could spend an entire career documenting racism or sexism in US media, and more studies wouldn’t tell us anything we don’t already know. What would be striking would be a history of media content that wasn’t sexist or racist, not that I would suggest such a project at the risk of defending either racism or sexism.

Let me lay out something of an agenda, in no particular order, of research and/or teaching issues that are hot, at least because they are necessary and under-researched:

- We know little about journalists’ psychology. The book by Renita Coleman and Lee Wilkins, *The moral media: how journalists reason about ethics*, is helpful, in addition to one 1997 article based on Australian research in *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, “The journalist’s personality: an exploratory study”, and one 2005 article in *Asian Journal of Communication* by A. M. Zakaria Khan, “The influence of personality traits on journalists’ work behaviour: an exploratory study examining a Bangladeshi sample”.
- We know very little about the relationship between journalism students, journalism education, and knowledge of and support for democracy, both by themselves and as compared with other students and other citizens.