

Issues in journalism education

Answering the critics: Another look at educational initiatives to improve reporting of Indigenous and cross-cultural issues

Penny O'Donnell

Abstract

Educational efforts to teach new generations of Australian journalism students how to report Indigenous and cross-cultural issues have been condemned by two recent academic assessments (Hartley & McKee, 2000; Deuze, 2001). Serious criticism of this kind from high-profile international scholars needs to be considered carefully and, where necessary, contested. This paper questions the effectiveness of the assessment strategies adopted by these critics. It argues that a different picture of the state of play in this area emerges from consideration of change factors in Australian journalism education, notably the growing interest in the past decade in educational innovation.

Introduction

Australian journalism does not have a strong track record in reporting on Indigenous Australians or ethnic communities (Henningham, 1986; Jakubowicz et al, 1994; Meadows, 2001). Demands for better representation are more common than praise for accurate or incisive reporting, although there has been some praise (Hurst, 1990). Back at the start of the 1990s, two national reports on racist violence (RCIADIC, 1991; HREOC, 1991) and one on media coverage of Indigenous issues (ATSIC, 1993) recommended improving student preparation for reporting Indigenous and cultural diversity issues.

It is important to note that “racism”, “racist violence” and “media racism” are complex issues that resist simple definition (Hollinsworth, 1998). In this article, racism is understood as a mode of social exclusion that typically

involves denying minorities access to status and power because of perceived physical or “cultural” traits (Jackson cited in Hollinsworth, 1998, p. 3). The term “race relations issues” refers to those topics in the news that raise questions about the status and power of Indigenous or non-Anglo-Celtic Australians.

The reports mentioned above found journalists had little contact with Indigenous Australians or ethnic communities. The media was, however, identified as the major source of public information about events and issues involving these communities. Violence, harassment and discrimination were seen as by-products of racial stereotyping in the media. In turn, the stereotypes were seen as by-products of institutionalised work routines rather than individual prejudice. Suggested reform initiatives included a curriculum component on Aboriginal affairs, specific units of study dedicated to reporting Aboriginal affairs, cultural awareness training and the involvement of people of Aboriginal and non-English speaking backgrounds in curricula development and teaching (RCIADIC, 1991; HREOC, 1991).

This discussion of developments over the past decade in educational initiatives for better reporting of Indigenous and cross-cultural issues is informed by 10 years of teaching experience in this area, and based on a critical analysis of the Australian journalism education literature. This literature consists of books and journal articles, curriculum packages and guidelines for professional practice.

The departure point for the analysis is a pair of recent negative assessments of these kinds of educational efforts (Hartley & McKee, 2000; Deuze, 2001). In both cases the assessments were made on the basis of field surveys. Cultural studies scholars John Hartley & Alan McKee studied the regulatory, educational and professional-ideological climate in which Indigenous issues were reported in the mid-1990s. Their survey was part of a bigger project that responded to the media-related recommendations of the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) by exploring those habits and assumptions of industrial newsmaking that had been deemed problematic for Indigenous people. More recently, as part of cross-national research into journalism education curriculum development, Dutch journalism educator Mark Deuze looked at the place of multiculturalism issues in journalism programs as they appeared on university websites in the United States, the Netherlands and Australia. Deuze is interested in the international exchange of approaches to, ideas about and awareness of these issues.

Both these assessments address teaching and learning issues. There is considerable talk about what journalism students should or should not be doing in class. However, neither Hartley & McKee nor Deuze demonstrate much familiarity with what goes on in journalism classrooms in Australia today or, more broadly, with the history and peculiar dynamics of the Australian journalism education field that shape and constrain classroom activities.

I argue that there is more happening in the area of educational initiatives to improve reporting of Indigenous and cross-cultural issues than the critics let on. This is not the same as saying they are wrong or, on the other hand, that anti-racist cross-cultural education is a well-established feature of all Australian journalism programs. It is not. Rather, I am arguing for a more effective assessment strategy, that is, one that enables journalism educators to better understand the way ahead by considering the factors that encourage change in Australian journalism education. Anti-racist cross-cultural education does not just happen. It requires committed academics, willing students, adequate resources and a favourable institutional environment. Each of these factors will be considered in turn following a brief summary of the critics’ assessments.

The critics’ perspective: Elusive ethics and marginal multiculturalism

In their book *The Indigenous public sphere* (2000), Hartley & McKee criticise the widespread use of the MEAA Journalists’ Code of Ethics as a professional guideline for teaching journalism students to report on Indigenous issues. They argue that this non-discriminatory approach (Clause 2, no “unnecessary emphasis”) generates an unproductive concern among students over when “race” becomes relevant to a story (2000, p. 327) and, among educators, a counter-productive “indifference” to the need to integrate “Aboriginal affairs” into journalism teaching. They are more enthusiastic about training approaches that teach the history of race relations in Australia and introduce protocols and guidelines for working with Aboriginal communities.

Hartley & McKee (2000) suggest the inertia of educators and journalists is the biggest problem in getting better coverage of Indigenous issues in the Australian media. They argue that existing coverage is a by-product of “the generic imperatives of hard news”. In other words, conventional news values produce news that is limited in focus because of the editorial preference for, say, conflict or controversy. But, according to these authors, this coverage is not racist because the same news values apply to everyone (2000, p. 275). From this perspective, different ways of reporting Indigenous issues can only emerge by employing different news values. In Hartley & McKee’s view, “journalism has to work out what kind of stories it is going to tell about Indigenous people” (2000, p. 339).

This argument has some merit. It moves away from media racism theories that irritate journalists because they disregard their capacity for independent editorial judgement (Temple, 1990; McKnight, 1997). It also introduces a welcome complexity into thinking about the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, moving away from outworn stereotypes of “us” and a romanticised or victimised “them” (Waterford, 1993).

A major weakness of the assessment is that it spends far too little time addressing what can be termed “educational climate change”, that is, the nature

and scope of what can be achieved in an Australian journalism curriculum or classroom. Hartley & McKee (2000) do not discuss the process of educational reform, although they do indicate a model program that teaches journalism “with Aboriginality up front” (2000, p. 339), that is, the Associate Diploma of Applied Science (Broadcasting and Journalism) at Batchelor College in Darwin. While it is likely that this program challenges “indifference” and teaches students to adapt conventional journalism techniques to suit Indigenous peoples’ ways of communicating (2000, p. 339), there is no evidence that other Australian journalism programs are in a position to adopt this best practice model. On the contrary, because of Australian journalism’s marginal academic legitimacy, curriculum design is said to be “highly contingent and institution-specific” (Turner, 1999, p. 1) and journalism educators are typically unconventional academics who focus a lot of energy on teaching (Hartley, 1995; Henningham, 1999; O’Donnell, 2002).

Hartley (1995) is well-known for his critique of journalism education’s vocational training orientation. It seems reasonable, therefore, to ask: Why judge the work of these educators on the basis of deviation from an ideal curriculum model (2000, pp. 326-328) or adoption of what is deemed an inappropriate theoretical approach (2000, pp. 331-332)? Why not pay more attention to what journalism educators identify as curriculum priorities and teaching and learning strategies that are viable in this context? Journalism educators cited in Hartley & McKee (2000) mention three approaches: mainstreaming Aboriginal issues in core journalism subjects (2000, p. 326), community-building through source strategies (2000, p. 328) and student-directed learning about Aboriginality and coverage of Aboriginal issues (2000, p. 326). These approaches do not emerge from research endeavour or conform to the RCIADIC recommendations, but they do merit more than cursory treatment because they are indicators not of inertia, but of educational reform. They remind us not to underestimate teaching activities or their capacity to open up new ways of thinking about journalism training and journalism (Sheridan Burns, 2002).

The second assessment is presented in an article published by *AsiaPacific Media Educator*. Deuze (2001) criticises the marginal place of multiculturalism in undergraduate journalism curricula. He says this means Australian journalism graduates – like their counterparts in the Netherlands and the United States – may well start work in a newsroom “without ever having to think actively about inter-cultural communication, cross-cultural reporting or multicultural journalism” (2001, p. 144).

Deuze found that only two journalism programs in the three countries included a multicultural requirement aimed at providing students with inter-cultural communication skills (University of Oregon, Pennsylvania State University) (2001, pp. 134-135). In addition, the University of Wollongong’s Graduate School of Journalism was the only institution offering a course entitled “multicultural journalism” (see White & Blackall, 1997). For the rest,

Deuze found multiculturalism was an adjunct rather than a core component of journalism curricula: he concluded that students were likely to be taught conventional journalism practices before taking courses that addressed stereotypes and misrepresentations of ethnic communities (2001, p. 144). Deuze questions both the learning sequence and the narrow focus on representation issues:

In other words, students are predominantly trained in a traditional and ideological mode of thought about journalism, to which multiculturalism is subsequent, even though it can be argued that the concept does indeed challenge some or all of the core values intrinsic to what Hallin calls the high modernist project that is journalism (Hallin, 1992). (2001, p. 144)

Deuze proposes an alternative model of multicultural journalism education that aims to equip professionals with cross-cultural competence at three levels: professional knowledge of other cultures (awareness, resources), strategies for representing diversity (sources, story ideas, portrayal) and perceived social responsibilities (reporting for a multicultural democracy) (2001, p. 128).

He makes eight recommendations, drawn from existing program initiatives, for developing a more multicultural curriculum structure and content in journalism. This kind of forward thinking and sharing of ideas, and the implied shift from diagnosing problems to working at solutions, makes Deuze’s negative assessment more palatable, if not persuasive.

There is a frustrating silence in this second assessment on the issue of graduate profiles and employment outcomes. Deuze makes no connection between graduates’ cross-cultural reporting skills and their employability or, thinking more long-term, their capacity to make a difference to news coverage or newsroom work routines. While he may well be right in arguing that multicultural journalism education prepares students for “the realities of diversity ... in news, the workplace and society” (2001, p. 140), there is no evidence to suggest that Australian newsrooms recognise the need for, or recruit, journalists with cross-cultural reporting skills. The point here is not that the work demands of industry are paramount but, rather, that “quick fixes” are unlikely and education initiatives that aim to reform professional practice need to be more in tune with and responsive to industry dynamics.

What the critics missed: Four factors that make anti-racist, cross-cultural education work

It is important to remember there are no blueprints for change when it comes to introducing anti-racist cross-cultural perspectives into tertiary education. A 1989 study found it easier to identify change factors than successful models of multicultural education (Holton & Hedrick cited in Richards, 1993, p. 85). Developments in Australian journalism education in the 1990s are dis-

cussed in the rest of this paper with reference to four change factors: academic interest, student diversity, resource support and explicit priorities.

Who cares? Academic interest

Until the 1990s boom in student demand for journalism courses (Putnis et al, 2002), there were only around 40 journalism educators working in Australian universities and 39 of these were said to be of Anglo-Celtic background (Stuart, 1996, p. 265). Government support for multiculturalism and Reconciliation had provided significant impetus for educational initiatives to promote tolerance and harmonious community relations (Jakubowicz, 1992; Meadows, 2001) but in journalism, cultural awareness was seen as something of a specialist concern. Stuart (1996) notes there were few incentives in the 1980s for commercial news media to increase diversity in employment or to publish the views of minorities. Meadows (1990) indicates that it was Aboriginal people rather than the Australian Journalists' Association or the Australian Press Council who called for better reporting of race relations in the early 1990s. Richards (1993) reports the first Australian attempt to develop an undergraduate cross-cultural journalism curriculum and notes the lack of practical textbooks to support the task.

Two-thirds of Australia's 38 universities now offer journalism programs (DEWR, 2003). The number of Australian journalism academics has more than doubled since 1987 (Patching, 1997) and, irrespective of cultural background, there has been a sharp rise in those who teach, research and publish on cross-cultural issues. The Australian journalism research index (Dobinson & Sakai, 2002) provides evidence of the increased volume and range of work being done. Listings in the index alert us to new pressures for cultural change in journalism, notably public dissatisfaction with coverage of political events like Mabo, the rise of Pauline Hanson's One Nation and the asylum seekers (Blood & Lee, 1997; Bullimore, 1999; Stockwell & Scott, 2001). The list itself reminds us that Australian journalism educators are developing a research capability that would have been unthinkable in the vocational-training environment of the 1980s. While their research productivity should not be over-stated (Henningham, 1999), journalism educators are now producing their own intellectual frameworks (Hippocrates, 1999; Meadows & Ewart, 2001; Stockwell & Scott, 2001), pedagogical approaches (Lawe Davies et al, 1998), classroom materials (Boreland & Smith, 1996; Stockwell & Scott, 2000; Castillo & Hirst, 2001) and dialogues with the news industry in the area of reporting Indigenous and cross-cultural issues (Romano, 2001; Ewart, 2002). This is an important step forward, one that suggests that reporting Indigenous and cross-cultural issues has become a more mainstream concern among journalism educators.

What about demand? Students and diversity

A second vital change factor is the readiness of students to participate in educational initiatives to improve reporting of Indigenous and cross-cultural issues. There are indications that the allure of a glamorous life, rather than dreams of changing the world, motivates many students to choose a journalism career (Alysen & Oakham, 1996; GCCA, 2001). However, interest in and understanding of the need for cross-cultural education is said to be enhanced when people are routinely in contact with the issues (RCIADIC, 1991; HREOC, 1991; ATSIC, 1993).

There is no way of telling how culturally diverse journalism classrooms are today. What we do know is that the most notable change in Australia's student body in the 1990s was the close to threefold increase in the number of overseas students. In 2000, there were around 96,000 overseas students from 200 countries (DETYA cited in Putnis et al, 2002). A recent survey found one out of every seven media and communication studies students came from overseas (Putnis et al, 2002). Full-fee paying overseas students have become a vital external source of university revenue in a tight fiscal environment. Thus, for example, an overseas student enrolled in an undergraduate journalism degree now pays at least \$8500 per year in course fees, compared with a local student facing an annual Higher Education Contribution Scheme levy of around \$3600 (DEST, 2003). At the same time, the introduction of user-pays principles into higher education has brought new pressures to reform curricula, pedagogies and teaching and learning resources so they better address the cultural diversity of the classroom.

Some responses to these pressures can be found in the journalism education literature. Talk about the cultural framing of news reporting is more common (Starck, 1994; Meadows, 2000), Western news values are subject to more critical appraisal (Loo, 1994; Romano & Hippocrates, 2001) and the list of core journalism skills is being rewritten to include cross-cultural competence (Stockwell & Scott, 2000).

This is a turnaround from the early days of internationalisation, when the prospect of a changing student demographic was met with some alarm. A 1987 national journalism education forum heard both calls for students to receive "a crash course on the world" (Duncan, 1988, p. 102) and worries about teaching Western news values and reporting practices to full-fee paying students from "Asian" countries with no free press tradition (Apps, 1988, p. 117).

Where does the money come from? Resource support

In the past, the funding of innovative teaching and research about cross-cultural issues in Australian journalism has often come from government agencies. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs funded the curriculum package *Community relations in media education* (CRIME) (Boreland &

Smith, 1996); while the Department of Employment, Education and Training financed another national curriculum package, *The Media and Indigenous Australians Project* (Lawe Davies et al, 1998). DIMA's *Living in harmony* program was responsible for a professional reference, *The all-media guide to fair and cross-cultural reporting* (Stockwell & Scott, 2000), and the Community Relations Commission for a Multicultural NSW funded the multicultural training manual *Journalism: Look both ways. Western Sydney and the media* (Castillo & Hirst, 2001).

Government funding of this kind naturally raises concerns about political agenda-setting, despite periodic protestations from bureaucrats about respect for the editorial independence of the media (Eggerking & Plater, 1992, p. 160). Until recently, innovators have been caught in a Catch-22 situation. The news industry does not, on the whole, financially support journalism education or treat it as a valuable investment (Macdonald, 1988). On the contrary, industry scepticism towards professional education dates back nearly 100 years to the first tertiary course set up in 1919 at the University of Western Australia (Coleman, 1992). It is sustained by a belief that journalists "are born not made" (Schultz, 1994), an industrial relations history that favoured cadetships over other forms of professional training (Stuart, 1996) and a lack of "proof" that journalism graduates make the best recruits (Alysen, 1999; O'Donnell, 1999). For their part, journalism educators have been reluctant public critics of the news media (Henningham, 1999), and there is no Australian equivalent of the prestigious US journalism watchdog journal, the *Columbia Journalism Review*. On the contrary, educators expend considerable energy trying to convince industry that study and research can improve journalism (Ricketson, 2001).

In this context, the 1998 public journalism project represents something of a milestone. Funded under the Australian Research Council's Strategic Partnerships with Industry Research and Training scheme, it brought together journalism educators at Queensland University of Technology, editors and journalists at *The Courier-Mail* (a Brisbane newspaper owned by News Ltd), Australians for Reconciliation and the Ethnic Communities Council (www.publicjournalism.qut.edu.au). In the project, a theoretical journalism reform model was applied at the hard edge of industry reform, in a daily newspaper's coverage of Reconciliation and immigration issues. Although the resulting news stories received mixed reviews (Reynolds, 1998; Ewart, 2002), the project itself demonstrated that "creative collaboration" between the academy and industry is possible (Romano, 2001). Added bonuses were the project's origins in a reform agenda driven by journalists (Lloyd & Hippocrates, 1997) and the achievement of independent funding support.

How does it happen? Explicit priorities

David Hollinsworth (1998, p. 309) indicates that the best way to "de-emo-

tionalise" and normalise actions for equity, including anti-racist cross-cultural education, is to make them an integral part of an organisation's work through policies and codes of practice. Perhaps the nearest the Australia journalism education field as a whole has come to adopting a cross-cultural education benchmark is the Journalism Education Association's 1997 endorsement of *The Media and Indigenous Australians Project*.

A vote of confidence is not as weighty as a policy or a code of practice. Cynics may choose to dismiss it as a gesture to political correctness. Nevertheless, this endorsement was important because MIAP was educationally innovative in three ways. First, it introduced an Indigenous focus across teaching in all core journalism skills and, in so doing, moved consideration of cultural issues into the mainstream of journalism teaching. Second, it made the case for adopting more student-centred or "deep learning" approaches in journalism education, using the pedagogy known as problem-based learning (Sheridan Burns, 1997). Third, it took the view that teaching students to develop independent editorial judgement, rather than training them to emulate workplace practice, was the best strategy for achieving a more equitable representation of Indigenous issues (Sheridan Burns & Scott, 2000).

It is by thinking about the 1997 endorsement as a vote of confidence in educational innovation that its significance becomes more apparent. In my view, there is a sea change under way in Australian journalism education. By 2001, three new models of professional education had emerged to compete with the traditional model of industry-oriented vocational skills training, and independent news judgment was a central feature of each of them (O'Donnell, 2002). The conventional graduate profile of an expert news writer with a liberal arts education has been somewhat displaced and there are myriad new profiles (Pearson & Johnstone, 1998). Today, in addition to possessing news production skills, a job-ready graduate may well be a socially responsible problem-solver (Meadows, 1997), a reflective practitioner (Pearson, 1999; Sheridan Burns, 2002) or a public intellectual committed to core journalistic principles such as the public right to know (Bacon, 1999).

Let me be clear. I am not suggesting MIAP precipitated this sea change in journalism education. Other factors are responsible for that, including uncertain employment outcomes (Patching, 1996), the rapidly changing news environment (Pearson, 1999) and educators' interest in pursuing excellence in teaching (Henningham, 1999). I am arguing that by supporting new approaches to teaching and learning at the hard edge of journalism education (reporting Indigenous issues), the JEA acknowledged, however tacitly, that the traditional industry-oriented professional education model had lost its sway and it was time to move on. This can be interpreted as a welcome sign of growing academic autonomy (O'Donnell, 2002). And, as the relationship between academic autonomy and journalistic autonomy becomes clearer, it seems to me Australian journalism educators will be in a better position to facilitate learning experiences that promote diversity, responsiveness and accountability in journalism.

This argument is borne out, in part, by Schultz's (1999) reminder that independent news judgment is a core journalistic value because the quest for editorial independence has been the defining feature of journalism since it began. Independence is a complex pursuit and it is impossible to do justice to Schultz's argument here. But it repays attention because she links changes in the nature and scope of this quest to changing notions of excellence in journalism and different occupational profiles and skill sets. So, in the early struggles by commercial newspaper enterprises for an independent place in Australia's liberal democratic political system, journalists needed technical skills like shorthand and methods of objective reporting to support claims to non-partisan reporting (1999, p. 267). Today, according to Schultz, the more common scenario sees the "content producers" (journalists and editors) struggling to report news in the public interest against the intense commercial demands of the media corporations they work for (1999, p. 263). In this context, journalists need a broad range of intellectual skills, including independent news judgment, if they are to effectively assert responsibility for and engage public interest in their editorial decisions.

In conclusion, we can add that journalism needs educators who are attuned to these new challenges and able to provide educational responses to them. In my view, Australian journalism is more fortunate in this respect than the critics of journalism education might suggest. The peculiar characteristics and dynamics of the Australian journalism education field are foregrounded in this analysis. By exploring four important change factors, it provides a different, more optimistic, picture of the current state of play in teaching students to report Indigenous and cross-cultural issues. However, it does not provide an alibi for complacency. Given that the pressures for cultural change in journalism are increasing, as indicated above, journalism educators are likely to be the target of further negative assessments unless we move to systematically document, evaluate and report on our activities in this area.

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Author

Penny O'Donnell is a senior lecturer in the Department of Writing, Journalism & Social Inquiry at the University of Technology, Sydney. Email: Penny.ODonnell@uts.edu.au.