Paper presented at WJEC 2010

Professionalisation as control: radical choices for journalism education

Cherian George
Associate Professor and Head, Journalism & Publishing
Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information
31 Nanyang Link
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore 637718

Tel: +65-97646490
Email: cherian@ntu.edu.sg

Abstract

Journalism as a course of study in universities has grown in tandem with the professionalisation of journalism, so much so that the link between education and professionalisation is widely regarded as axiomatic. This symbiotic relationship is ripe for critical review. With an increasing amount of journalism being practised outside of professional news organisations, there are pragmatic reasons for widening the scope of journalism education to include semi-professional and non-professional forms. There are also principled reasons for such a move. Inspired by Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, journalism can be properly thought of as a human right belonging to "everyone", and journalism education as something much broader than a production line for professional news workers. The need to decouple education and professionalisation is especially poignant in Singapore, where this paper is grounded. The press in Singapore is subject to authoritarian controls, including discretionary licensing of all newspapers and broadcasters. Professionalisation has been accompanied by at least two elements – commercialisation and political detachment – that make the news media more easily co-opted by the state – particularly by the kind of hegemonic, soft-authoritarian regime that is embodied by Singapore's ruling party. The early Singapore press, especially the vernacular press in Chinese, Malay and other Asian languages, were trenchantly ideological and partisan. The boundaries between the professional journalist, the public intellectual and the political activist were porous or non-existent. Impassioned, cause-driven journalists were key players in the anti-colonial nationalist movement. In the post-independence period, however, such journalism became an inconvenience and was delegitimised by the ruling party. The global standard of commercially driven and professionally detached journalism was more amenable to the hegemonic mission of the ruling party. Journalism educators needs to understand how their well-meaning investment in professionalisation can have unintended consequences.

Professionalisation as control

Journalism as a course of study in universities has developed in tandem with journalism as a profession, such that the link between education and careers is today largely unquestioned. While political science is not geared to producing politicians, for example, the value of a journalism degree is generally pegged to its success at preparing students for rewarding and socially meaningful careers in the news media. This assumption has barely changed in more than a century of formal journalism education. In 1904, when Joseph Pulitzer robustly defended his vision for a journalism college, he – like his critics – took for granted that they were discussing the training of professional journalists. They debated whether the skills, news sense, conscience and moral courage could really be taught in the classroom, and whether the business side of newspapering had any place in a journalism programme. But, there appeared to be no disagreement that the relevant comparison was with other professional schools – law, medicine and so on – that aimed to create a specialised class of practitioners. Lamenting the lack of professionalism among the journalists of his day, Pulitzer said, "He never speaks of another journalist as 'my colleague,' as the lawyer or the physician does of his professional brother."[1] A journalism school would help fix that, developing a sense of "professional pride" that would help protect journalism from both internal "black sheep" as well as powerful financial interests. Aware of the elitist connotations of such "class spirit", he argued that there was no reason to fear "class distinctions founded on moral and mental superiority – on education and knowledge", as such consciousness was required as a buffer against the "worship of wealth".[2]

A century on, debates still rage over how best – and whether at all – to teach journalism in universities. But, again, there is relatively little questioning of the assumption that journalism education should be geared towards replicating and strengthening a class of individuals who will distinguish themselves through professional careers in journalism. Major recent reviews of journalism education, whether the UNESCO-sponsored *Model Curricula*[3] or the Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education[4], are steeped in this traditional paradigm.

We are all journalists?

A radically different normative vision has been proposed by John Hartley in his essay, "Journalism as a Human Right".[5] Hartley notes that Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone" has the right to "seek, receive and impart information and ideas". For practical reasons, journalists have exercised this right on behalf of the public: "our freedom to impart is exercised by them on everyone's behalf (in the public interest)".[6] The result is what might be called "representative journalism": "Like representative politics, this has become an increasingly professionalized, corporatized, and specialized occupation, and increasingly remote from the common life and lay population it represents." Hartley notes how professional journalism has evolved a "strong culture of separation between insiders and outsiders", with insiders being those who work in formal newsrooms. "Journalism education likewise, means training for jobs in existing newsroom organizations. Few if any journalism schools educate for journalism as a human right," he adds. "The result of this is that journalism research and education have become part of a *restrictive practice.* They are designed to keep outsiders *out* of journalism."[7]

It could be argued that such an approach was born out of necessity. Just as it is practically impossible for everyone to be actively engaged in politics on a daily basis – even if all have a right to do so – it has been equally unrealistic to expect everyone to be directly involved in seeking and imparting all the information that is needed for collective self-determination. Better to delegate the job to accountable individuals with the skills and time to do so on people's behalf, than to imagine that everyone can do it – and leave it undone.

Now, however, new technologies may be transcending some of the practical limitations that had made societies abandon "journalism as a human right" in favour of "representative journalism". Hartley asks us to ponder the possibility that journalism as we know it may be only a "transitional form", filling the gap before the technical means surfaced to turn everyone into journalists. But, this is probably placing too much hope on technology. While new media have certainly lowered the barriers for communicating to the public, journalists require more than the power to "impart" what they believe. They must also be able to exercise the Article 19 right to "seek" information and ideas. An individual citizen at her computer may have the

ability to reach an audience as large as that of a newspaper or a television station, but she will not be an effective journalist if she cannot pry information out of unwilling sources and if she has no time to do any research because it is not her paid job.

In the 1920s, Walter Lippmann dismissed the "sovereign and omnicompetent citizen" as an unattainable ideal.[8] His doubts about the average citizen's willingness and ability to attend to public affairs are surely no less valid today, since the complexity of the issues one is required to grasp for democratic self-governance has grown at least as rapidly as the technologies enabling people to gather and process information. The public will always need the help of professional journalists.

Ripe for review

While we should be wary of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, there are good reasons for a radical broadening of journalism education to make it less focused on reinforcing professional insider norms and more on journalism as a human right. First, there is the empirical fact that a significant amount of what looks like journalism is being practised outside of professional news organisations. Public and private sector institutions produce their own content, some of which is modeled on journalism. Civil society organisations and non-profits are doing the same. Individuals and small groups are adding to the mix through citizen journalism. In the past, all such efforts would have been dismissed by the profession as belonging in the category of public relations or propaganda, and unworthy of being called "journalism". More recently, however, the profession's thought leaders have been prepared to accept that journalism could come from non-traditional sources. In this vein, Geneva Overholser's 2006 report, *A Manifesto For Change*, says that the challenge is to identify and support high quality journal*ism*, not necessarily journal*ists*.[9] Similarly, in their 2009 report, *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*, Leonard Downie and Michael Schudson acknowledge the broadening ranks of news gatherers, which now include "not only newsroom staffers, but freelancers, university faculty members, students, and citizens armed with smart phones". They add, "Even government agencies and activists groups are playing a role. Altogether, they are creating a greater variety of independent reporting missions and even different definitions of news." The challenge is to promote "independent, original, credible reporting, whether or not it is popular or profitable, and regardless of the medium in which it appears".[10]

Second, it is hardly the case that most news organisations are single-mindedly focused on the public interest or what Downie and Schudson call "accountability journalism". Many of the positions that newspapers and broadcasters fill with journalism graduates are not what the founders and supporters of journalism schools envisaged. These include jobs in soft lifestyle sections and supplements intended mainly as advertising vehicles, and in content-repurposing for newspapers' online sites. Thus, job placement figures that are eagerly collated by universities may fail to take into account the quality and social value of the positions secured by journalism graduates.

Third, the customers for journalism education – students themselves – do not all take jobs as news workers. Some may be unable to secure a job in journalism, due to limited vacancies. Others realise, after interning at news organisations, that the business is not what they had hoped it would be. There are also some who pursue a journalism degree not for its instrumental value as a stepping stone to a career in the news media, but as an intrinsically interesting liberal arts programme. Among the graduates who do not join news organisations are some who will apply their journalistic skills training in non-journalistic communication fields such as public relations. Others may venture into citizen journalism or other entrepreneurial media activity. For yet another group, journalism is left behind on graduation, the value of one's training surfacing, if at all, in the graduate's ability to think critically and express ideas clearly.

Professionalism and authoritarian control

The orthodox orientation of journalism education may be particularly problematic in "soft authoritarian" societies where professionalisation may unwittingly serve the interests of power. Singapore provides an interesting case study. The press in Singapore is subject to authoritarian controls, including discretionary licensing of all newspapers and broadcasters. At first sight, the liberal notion of professionalism as described by Hallin and Mancini[11] – with its emphasis on autonomy in editorial decision making, and norms that link horizontally across the profession – can act as a bulwark against authoritarian governments' impulse to control the media.

On the other hand, professionalisation has been accompanied by at least two elements that make the news media more easily co-opted by the state – particularly by

the kind of hegemonic, soft-authoritarian regime that is embodied by Singapore's ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP). The first of these elements is commercialisation. In the absence of strong public service media, the health of the profession – in terms of its ability to offer rewarding careers – is equated with its profitability. While the history of the press provides many tales of financially strong newspapers standing up to government, a political economy perspective suggests that profit-seeking news organisations have a vested interest in protecting the status quo in societies where the state is pro-business. Singapore's neoliberal regime is one such context, where profitability blunts the profession's cutting edge.

The clearest indication that newspaper profitability suited the PAP's hegemonic purpose was the press law it introduced in 1974. The new Newspaper and Printing Presses Act sanctified the public listed company as the only permissible ownership structure for daily newspapers. Newspapers could no longer be controlled by individuals or families. By spreading ownership thinly across the stock market, shareholders' personal motivations would be reduced to their lowest common denominator: the increasing of shareholder value. Company directors had a fiduciary duty to protect shareholders' interest, ahead of political principles. As long as the PAP continued its pro-business policies, there would be a confluence between the PAP's political interests and newspaper companies' business interests.[12]

A second problem with professionalisation is its association with political detachment. The early Singapore press, especially the vernacular press in Chinese, Malay and other Asian languages, were trenchantly ideological and partisan.[13] Impassioned, cause-driven journalists and their readers were key players in the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the first half of the 20th century. Hardly a marginal phenomenon, its diverse practitioners staked their claims in the middle of the public square, helping to embolden and empower Singapore's various ethnic communities. Many were not yet restrained by the mantle of objective disinterest that professional journalists were in the process of adopting under the influence of the liberal model. Instead, they were simultaneously activists, public intellectuals and journalists.

After self-rule in 1959 and independence in 1965, the same fervour was directed at PAP policies. The PAP's development strategy was to build an independent republic on multinational investments, multiculturalism, bureaucratic rationality and strong government – and with a resolve that had no place for the ideological diversity that journalism had been a vehicle for. The PAP used its

significant discretionary and arbitrary powers – inherited from the British colonialists – to force compliance by closing down recalcitrant newspapers and detaining journalists without trial. It was mainly through its battles with the Chinese-language press that it realised that willful proprietors could be difficult to tame, leading to its unique 1974 press law that delegated ideological management to the stock market.

The PAP understood that it did not have to adopt the communist-style propaganda model. The global gold standard of professionally detached journalism was sufficiently amenable to the hegemonic mission of the ruling party. In a political environment lacking in pluralism and dominated by establishment voices, the routines of objectivity helped turn the press into an echo chamber. Alternative forms of journalism were forcibly marginalised. These included radical traditions within the vernacular press – a historical phenomenon generally ignored by most discussions about Asian journalism. According to the PAP, Chinese-language and Malay-language journalism in Singapore embodies the respect for authority and the premium on social harmony emphasised in "Asian values".[14] Such ahistorical claims are made mainly with a view to chiding the English-language press, and by extension the Western media. In fact, as noted above, the non-English press in Singapore had a strong tradition of adversarial journalism. For most of the 20th century, until the PAP fully entrenched itself as a hegemonic regime, it was not uncommon for vernacular newspapers to express radical critiques of prevailing power centres.

Elsewhere, erasing journalism's historical diversity from the collective memory has helped to bolster the professions' sense of identity. In the Singaporean context, this amnesia has another effect, allowing the state to frame its fraught relations with journalism in Asian-versus-Western terms – terms that do not pose a significant threat to its authority, since Singapore's political and economic relations with the West are fundamentally stable and positive. The PAP's criticism of Western-style democracy and press freedom has always been contained within a firm realpolitik sense of the United States' indispensability as a guarantor of economic and military stability. For the US, in turn, Singapore is a major hub in the capitalist order – one of the world's main financial centres, ports, and multinational outposts – and as a base for its naval fleet.

Resolving the tension

There is thus a tension between journalism as profession and journalism as human right. It is a tension that journalism education finds itself caught in. In 2009, for example, when the author organised a capacity-building workshop for would-be citizen journalists, he was prohibited by his university from using his university affiliation or any university resources. Had the same workshop been run for professional reporters instead of bloggers, there would have been no such objection. It was an eloquent and all-too-powerful statement of the preference in some quarters to keep journalism education exclusive rather than inclusive, and conservative rather than progressive.

While the tension may be felt most acutely in authoritarian societies, it is not foreign to liberal democracies. In her survey of debates surrounding journalism education in North America, Isabel Macdonald criticises the assumption that journalism schools can best address the crisis in the profession by uplifting the professional journalistic values of their students.[15] This approach, she notes, neglects critical analysis of the structural problems – especially ownership – that dictate journalists' working conditions. While these reformers, starting with Pulitzer, recognised the commercial pressures being placed on journalism, they placed the onus on individual journalists to save the profession through a commitment to higher standards and values. They ignore professionals' requirement for real autonomy and independence.

> In the wake of neoliberal restructuring, corporate convergence and newsroom layoffs and funding cuts, journalists are working under greater stress with fewer resources, and advertising and marketing priorities are increasingly affecting their employers' goals and the mandate of journalists' work. In this situation, the forces undermining newsroom employees' capacity to maintain their autonomy and independence as creators is not primarily abstract ethics and professional values, but rather time and resources, and, ultimately, the decisions their employers have made to prioritize profits.[16]

Unfortunately, Macdonald stops short of suggesting what a more critical journalism education curriculum would look like, recommending this as an area for

future research. To advance the debate, I suggest three modest ways in which educators could embrace journalism as a human right.

First, educators could broaden the scope of all journalism courses to include relevant genres beyond the core professional, commercial models. UNESCO's model syllabus for a basic reporting and writing course reflects the limitations of the prevailing orthodoxy. Geared towards journalism as a profession, it recommends that the Week 2 lecture emphasises "the importance of trained, committed journalists to serve as a bridge between the government and the people".[17] Assignments focus on newspapers, magazines and broadcast news. There is no mention of citizen journalism or alternative media. A "journalism as a human right" approach would not diminish the importance of professional journalism, but would situate it within a diverse field that includes various forms of what James Curran has called "civic media".[18] The bedrock principles would be public service and commitment to truth and ethics in communicating current affairs. Beyond these, courses should recognise the diversity in norms and standards, such as with regards to objectivity and news values. An openness to non-professional forms may even help strengthen students' appreciation of professional standards – and not just because professional journalism often looks good when compared with the work of amateurs. Well-run civic media often arrive at similar norms as professional journalism, even if from a different direction. For example, Wikipedia's "Neutral Point Of View" policy for its contributors is as sophisticated and detailed a statement on objectivity as one could find in any journalism textbook.[19]

Second, all practical journalism courses could include an element of what has been called "pro-am" collaboration. Even if – or especially if – students are headed for fulltime journalism jobs in the news media, they should be taught to avoid treating non-professionals merely as audiences and sources, but also as potential collaborators who can be empowered to play a significant, albeit amateur, role in the conversation. The professional journalists' skills are still highly relevant, but are rechanneled in pro-am collaborations towards serving as a kind of curator and facilitator. Where once students in a social affairs reporting class may have filed stories about issues facing an immigrant comunity, instructors could now require students to also set up a website where members of the community can add their own videos. Students would be graded both on their ability to turn out their own articles meeting the standards of

traditional news media, but also on their skill in facilitating the community's right to impart information and ideas independently.

Third, larger schools could broaden their search for permanent, visiting and adjunct faculty beyond the usual pool of professional journalists with many years of news media experience. If journalism is recognised as a human right owed to all, journalism schools should include teachers and role models who subscribe to this perspective while remaining outside of the profession. They could include respected public intellectuals who have used journalism masterfully, but without necessarily having ever depended on journalism for an income. Of course, such individuals from outside the profession could be potentially disruptive and the idea is bound to be resisted by many current journalism faculty. Yet, it is precisely because they would challenge assumptions that non-conventional faculty would be an asset to journalism schools at a time when journalism itself is undergoing structural change.

Such modifications to journalism education should not and need not diminish schools' commitment to producing professionals for the news media industry. It is, however, well within journalism schools' means to expand their scope and help realise the vision of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by putting the means of journalism in the hands of more citizens.

Notes

1. Pulitzer, Joseph. "The College of Journalism." *North American Review* 178.570 (1904): 650.

2. *Ibid., 651.*

3. UNESCO. *Model Curricula for Journalism Education for Developing Countries & Emerging Democracies.* Unesco Series on Journalism Education. Paris, France: UNESCO, 2007.

4. Donsbach, Wolfgang, and Tom Fiedler. *Journalism School Curriculum Enrichment: A Midterm Report of the Carnegie-Knight Initiative on the Future of Journalism Education*. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2008.

5. Hartley, John. "Journalism as a Human Right: The Cultural Approach to Journalism." *Global Journalism Research: Theories, Methods, Findings, Future*. Eds. Martiin Loffelholz and David Weaker. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2008. 39-51.

6. *Ibid.*, 43

7. *Ibid.*

8. Lippmann, Walter. *The Phantom Public*. Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925.

9. Overholser, Geneva. *On Behalf of Journalism: A Manifesto for Change*. Annenberg Foundation Trust at Sunnylands; Annenberg Public Policy Center, University of Pennsylvania, 2006.

10. Downie Jr., Leonard, and Michael Schudson. *The Reconstruction of American Journalism*. New York: Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, 2009.

11. Hallin, Daniel C., and Paolo Mancini. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

12. George, Cherian. "No News Here: Media in Subordination." *Impressions of the Goh Chok Tong Years in Singapore*. Eds. Bridget Welsh, et al. Singapore: NUS Press, 2009. 444-50

13. George, Cherian. "History Spiked: Hegemony and the Denial of Media Diversity." *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore*. Eds. Michael Barr and Carl Trocki. Singapore: NUS Press, 2008. 269-85.

14. Lee, Kuan Yew. "Managing the Media." *From Third World to First. The Singapore Story: 1965-2000*. Singapore: Times Media, 2000. 212-25.

15. Macdonald, Isabel. "Teaching Journalists to Save the Profession: A Critical Assessment of Recent Debates on the Future of Us and Canadian Journalism Education." *Journalism Studies* 7.5 (2006): 745-64.

16. *Ibid.*, 755

17. UNESCO. *Model Curricula*: 63

18. Curran, James. "Rethinking Media and Democracy." *Mass Media and Society*. Eds. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch. London, UK: Arnold, 2000. 120-54.

19. Wikipedia. "Neutral Point of View". Accessed 29 May 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Npov>.