

MIXED MESSAGES: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF JOURNALISM AS A PRACTICE

Using the tools of discourse analysis, this research identifies the competing and sometimes contradictory public discourses around the requirements for the next generation of journalists – those of journalism educators, industry accreditation bodies and of employers and journalists in the wider media landscape. Investigating and identifying the tensions in this debate, may help all the parties to reflect on how the values and aims of the professional journalist are constructed and how this may impact on potential journalists entering education and the industry.

KEYWORDS discourse analysis; journalism; journalism education; professional accreditation

Introduction

Journalism in the UK has become the subject of the news as much as its purveyor. Scandals both in the press and in television reporting such as phone hacking scandals at the *News of the World* and more recently *The Mirror*, along with the reporting around Jimmy Saville have brought to public attention some of the stresses and strains facing journalism in times of economic pressure and evolving technologies. However, these uncertain times do not seem to have dampened the enthusiasm to enter the profession with journalism and related courses still growing in number (Ramsden, 2012). Consequently, it is perhaps worth examining how journalistic values, knowledge and skills are represented to the public and to potential future journalists. With this in mind this paper examines the competing public discourses around the requirements for the next generation of journalists by those involved in the education, training and practice of journalism – discourses of academic thought, journalism educators, industry accreditation bodies and of employers and journalists in the wider media landscape. It aims to identify the various discursive constructions of journalism and to highlight any tensions between them. It is specifically concerned with this construction as it applies to the legacy media, that is, traditional news organisations with full-time permanent staff and freelancers and where a majority of British journalists are still employed (National Council for Training for Journalists, 2013)

Journalism in the UK

The definition of the role and work of the 'journalist' has variously been seen as an apprentice-based trade where workers are wage-earners engaged in white-collar work – the 'hack'; or as a creative activity autonomously carried out – the 'Hemingway'; or as a highly professionalised high-status occupation carried out by graduates - the 'correspondent'. In his overview of the job, Michael Bromley explains how journalism sits across a number of definitions: 'While, strictly speaking, neither a profession nor a craft, it has displayed many of the characteristics of both' (Bromley, 1997, p330).

The tenets of journalism ethical values and practice are also somewhat vague. Lewis remarks that 'journalism as a profession is strangely elusive about its purpose' (Lewis, 2006, p308), and as Breed noted as long ago as the 1950s (Breed, 1955) and others have concurred since, a journalist's ethics and knowledge are largely garnered from colleagues and managers. Practice and ethics are not explicitly spelt out but absorbed through socialisation. As such journalism has been more accurately characterised as a 'semi-profession' (Tunstall 1971, Tumber and Prentoulis, 2005) where practitioners are expected

to conduct themselves according to certain practices and ethics, even though the details of these practices and ethics are seldom agreed across the industry. As Örnebring points out, whilst some journalists may bear some 'antipathy' towards the idea of journalism as a profession 'most journalists would probably consider themselves professionals, or at the very least aspire to a certain level of *professionalism*' (Örnebring, 2013, p37, original italics).

What is apparent, though, is that journalism is increasingly exhibiting one characteristic of a profession in that the occupation has become a graduate one both in the UK and beyond (Deuze, 2006). Journalists in the UK are increasingly likely to hold not only undergraduate degrees but also postgraduate masters degrees (National Council for Training for Journalists, 2013). Although many of the journalists working in the UK today will have been through some kind of training, the industry still has no entry requirements. However, efforts to set standards for a curriculum have been evolving over the last few decades. There are well established initiatives for print journalists such as the NJTC qualifications and more recent industry initiatives for broadcast journalism in the form of the Broadcast Journalism Training Council, (BJTC) which accredits broadcast journalism courses according to a largely skills-based set of criteria. These bodies aim to encourage higher education to produce industry-ready graduates and to enable employers to identify suitable candidates.

Yet, some have argued universities, under increasing pressure to engage in the 'real world' and be 'industry-facing' has led to an over-emphasis on practical skills. This attitude is succinctly put by MacDonald: "In other words the purpose of media practice education must essentially be vocational...Anything, therefore, that does not fit within the codes and conventions operating within this market-orientated modality is going to be marginalized as alternative, experimental, unprofessional or in some way less valuable." (MacDonald, 2006: 136). These courses may also perpetuate myths and reinforce journalism practice rather than challenge it (Hanna and Saunders, 2007). This is reflected in the journalism industry bodies which are focused on the practical, and largely ignore the critiques of practice. These kinds of vocational courses work to socialise students into the profession (Mensing 2011) and seem increasingly designed to please certain types of large industry employers.

However, media educators at Higher Education level expect students to learn more than shorthand and how to switch on a camera. If that was all that was expected a training college would be a more appropriate setting. Instead academics and 'hackademics' have long argued against a programme which merely reproduces iterations of past practice but rather promotes learning that seeks to challenge and critique previous practice and ideas in order to produce a more engaged and thoughtful potential journalist. As Skinner et al (2001) argue:

...the journalism curriculum must not only equip students with a particular skill set and broad social knowledge, but must also show students how journalism participates in the production and circulation of meaning. (Skinner et al, 2001: 341)

De Burgh emphasises that journalism education's role is not to churn out employees but to educate citizens who will engage and contribute 'to the intellectual and cultural life of society' (de Burgh 2003: 98).

Neither is it clear cut that the move to a more industry facing curriculum will make industry happy. Research shows some employers have expressed a desire to take on people who can 'think' and be trained on the job, rather than be vocationally trained but lacking the breadth of knowledge and critical thinking which comes from academic learning (Thornham and O'Sullivan, 2004) . Employers have said they 'do not care a fig' about skill and training, preferring to select people with the right 'personal qualities' (de Burgh, 2003:109). Recent research by Lily Canter (2015) into the value of accreditation to employers shows a very mixed bag of skills and qualities which they see as important. Half of the employers interviewed said they would employ someone with no training whilst the other half said they would not.

The debate about what should be taught to journalism students is often carried out behind the closed doors of university departments and employers/accreditation boards. But it is also being played out in public, to the next generation of students (and their parents) as well as the wider public in both formal statements such as the university websites and in more informal pronouncements by practicing journalists. This investigation will look at how these debates are discursively framed by industry and educators and what messages the next generation of would-be journalists are confronted with when choosing a career path. It also aims to identify the tensions between these discourses.

Methodology:

In order to investigate the types of discursive themes present in the public domain around the needs of the next generation of journalists I have drawn on a number of sets of data. It is important to note at the outset that due to the small scale nature of this research it was decided to concentrate on television journalism rather than print, online or radio journalism. That said, other types of journalism are touched upon in the course of this piece of work.

The data sets are as follow:

1. Education: The Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) website and the websites of 27 'Journalism' degree courses accredited by the BJTC were examined. The BJTC is an accreditation body supported by a number of industry employers such as BBC, ITN, BskyB, Channel 4, Associated Press and Thomson Reuters. It is funded through support from these employers and from running an accreditation service to universities and colleges. The home page of each course and the course outline were analysed as these are the first messages the students see and lays out the core message the university is trying to convey to potential students. The courses can be viewed on the BJTC website (BJTC, 2015a)(1).
2. Employers: The websites of 9 major broadcast journalism employers' trainee and graduate schemes websites were examined. These included Press Association, BBC, Thomson Reuters, Associated Press, Sky News, ITV News, Channel 4, Bloomberg, and Al Jazeera. Both written and visual texts were examined.
3. Journalists in the Media: A Nexus search of national and trade press discussion of journalism education was carried out over a period of one year. This proved to yield little in the way of data in the trade or national press, therefore a more anecdotal, impressionistic analysis based on a number of cases the researcher came across in the wider media were included in the following analysis. As discussed below, the results of this, although not systematic, are reflected in other parts of the data examined.

Methodology of analysis

The data were examined using a framework of discourse analysis. The aim here was not to identify the 'truth' of the matter – that is, what you *actually* need to be a journalist or which party espouses the 'correct' answer about what is needed, but rather to discover what has been termed the 'interpretive repertoire' being played out in the various pronouncements (Potter and Wetherell, 1987)

Potter and Wetherell describe the 'interpretive repertoire' as 'a lexicon or register of terms and metaphors drawn upon to characterise and evaluate actions and events' (Potter and Wetherell 1987:138). It looks at the body of discourse and uses a grounded method of identifying patterns of language use rather than imposing the researcher's pre-existing bias. As Taylor puts it I approached the data with a 'certain blind faith, with a confidence that there is something there but no certainty about what' (Taylor, 2003, p38).

This type of analysis has been taken up to look at the discourse of a range of issues around employment from an employers' and employees' perspectives, ranging from career choice, (Moir, 1993) to gender and employment opportunities (Wetherell et al, 1987), and gender inequalities in media employment (Gill, 1993). It has also been used in looking at configurations of race and racism and other social issues (Wetherell and Potter, 1992, Foster 2009). As well as analysing the spoken word in research interviews, it has been used to look at formal written texts (Edley 1993) and in formal spoken texts such as television broadcasts (Potter 1996). Using a framework of interpretive repertoire is useful in highlighting the constructions of 'common sense' notions, and the inconsistencies between and within different accounts. By looking at these repertoires it is hoped to gain a more nuanced understanding of the tensions between accounts and what this may mean for would-be journalists and journalism educators.

A close and repeated reading of the data led to the identification of a number of 'interpretive repertoires around the needs of journalists and journalism. The repertoires discussed are not exhaustive but perhaps the most relevant for those directly involved in the teaching and employment of journalists. They also map onto previously identified discourses around the job of the journalist.

Findings

The various sources examined yielded a number of competing discursive constructions of what it takes to be a journalist. The three main discursive repertoires identified and discussed below consist of *Training*, *Vocation*, and *Critical Thinking*.

Training

The first construction of what is needed to become a journalist was centred round a lexicon of training and skills for employability. This construction was evident, not surprisingly, in the accreditation body and the university course material, but also in some of the employers' material.

This version of journalism is of an education delivered by professional current or former practitioners in state-of-the-art facilities. Within this repertoire the future is bright and 'cutting-edge' for the 21st century. This literature emphasises that courses are endorsed by industry and are industry-facing. It took the form of an overwhelming emphasis on skills learnt from experts as the following exemplify. The BJTC sets the tone:

Our accreditation criteria reflect the rapidly changing world of journalism, in broadcast and digital multi media. We seek to ensure that the professional training provided is based on direct practical engagement... relevant to the operational demands of the industry, thus ensuring the highest levels of employability. (BJTC, 2015b)

Various journalism courses take up the theme:

As a student on one of the longest established journalism courses in the country, you'll learn the essential skills to make it in the challenging and rewarding world of the professional journalist - a career that can give you privileged access to some of the world's most incredible people, the best kept secrets, and awe inspiring tales of love, loss and heroism. Taught by working journalists and accredited by the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC), which represents employers such as the BBC, ITN and Sky, you'll have the opportunity to work across print, online, TV and radio in our fully equipped facilities.

The following course description is a typical example which includes a combination of themes which appear across the sample; a bright shiny future; industry-facing course; taught by professionals.

A Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) accredited course that produced the Journalist of the Year and Best Documentary in its first year of membership. Our course has been described as “cutting edge” and one which could “revolutionise the way the next generation of journalists gather and distribute news”. Taught by experts in their field, supported by numerous industry professionals, the course is designed with the future profession as its focus; giving you the knowledge and expertise to be a 21st Century journalist and media professional.

This repertoire of ‘professional’ and cutting edge offers a narrative of learning from experienced past practitioners in order to ‘revolutionise’ the future and foregrounds a repetition of past practice.

Vocation

In contrast the second construction characterises journalism as a vocation, something you are born to do rather than learn. This theme is strongly evoked by some of the employers’ material, especially through use of trainee testimony and can exist alongside the discourse of training. It is also evident in the wider public discourse of journalists. The discourse centres on inner emotional qualities such as righteous anger, determination, passion and raw talent, rather than externally learnt skills.

Some employers’ material tends to discursively frame journalistic potentiality as something you *are* and this is rhetorically set in contrast to something you have *learnt*. Formal learning is repeatedly set as secondary to the vocational bent of journalism candidates. For example the BBC Journalism Trainee Scheme (JTS) web page states:

Serious contenders for the JTS are avid followers of news. They regularly read the local and national newspapers, watch television and listen to radio news. They have an excellent grasp of the role of social media in journalism. More than anything else, they are fascinated by story-telling – both the stories themselves and the processes that bring them to life.

Although the scheme is “not for complete beginners” there “are no academic entry criteria to apply for the JTS. We think talent, potential and determination count for more than an academic background” (BBC, 2015).

The BBC website comes with a video about an open day event for people thinking of applying to the scheme. This again constructs the pathway as more open to people who born with natural qualities to make them a journalist.

We are looking for what we call vocational journalists. These are people who see themselves as journalists, have some evidence to show that’s what they want to do, that’s what they are. (BBC staff member featured in training video, 2015)

The emphasis throughout the video is that the scheme is ‘open to all’ and that a candidate should ‘stay true to yourself’. The video contains a quote from one attendee saying:

I think it was the fact that it was truly open to everybody, you didn’t have to be a degree student or have experience in the industry. As they call it, it was like a vocational journalist, you know? (BBC, 2015)

Trainees’ testimony is often used on the websites reiterating their ‘natural’ talent and passion (cf. Oates, 2015). A trainee on the Channel 4 scheme is cited on the Channel 4 websites describing herself as:

I've been known to be gutsy, a perfectionist and not afraid to say what I think. I like pushing boundaries and it seems to come naturally; breaking the mould without actually realising there is one. (Baker, 2015)

Reuters' graduate scheme outlines requirements as follows:

Reuters is keen to have interns from varied backgrounds. While a strong academic record could be an advantage, it's not a must. A successful candidate will have insatiable curiosity and a demonstrable passion for news (Reuters 2015)

Individual journalists and editors also exhibit this discourse of vocation. Alex Thomson of Channel 4 news (Thomson, 2015) blogged in outrage when a fellow journalist suggested journalism was not an ideal choice of career as it does not pay well (Salmon, 2015). Thomson responded with:

... People should become doctors because they want to cure sick other people. People should want to be journalists because of anger. And when I see anger I give real encouragement. And guess what - they actually do pay you a bit, enough, to go out and expose wrongdoing, and that feeling is a hell of a lot better than money or drugs or anything else for that matter. So that's why you should do journalism and that ain't going away no matter how the different platforms of media delivery are being invented... That alone should motivate journalists of any age - the anger to damn well try and do something about it. (Thompson, 2015)

Roy Greenslade, the journalist and professor championed Thompson's view, in a piece in *The Guardian* ending with, "Great stuff, Alex. That's the passion we need to instil into wannabe journalists. So I plan to read his uplifting piece to my City University MA students on Monday" (Greenslade, 2015).

In some of the writing about the requirements for a would-be journalist *any* mention of prior education is specifically discouraged. For example, in a series of blogs the Spectator editor Fraser Nelson (2014a, 2014b) repeatedly stated that those applying for jobs with the Spectator should not include educational information because "It's just not a factor in journalism" (Nelson, 2014a). This echoes a long-standing discourse of industry professionals that you cannot teach journalism exemplified by former *Sun* editor Kelvin Mackenzie in 2011 when he proclaimed: 'No amount of academic debate is going to give you news sense, even if you have a PhD. It's a knack and you've either got it or you haven't' (MacKenzie, 2011).

It is also worth noting that course descriptions are almost entirely devoid of any discussion about what kind of person you are. The rhetoric is very inclusive, emphasising that you can learn to be a journalist from other journalists, which contrasts sharply with the discourse of vocation discussed above where journalism is innate to some people.

The missing link? Critical thinking

A rather more muted discourse of reflection and critique is evident in the journalism course descriptors. In some cases the 'academic' aspect of courses is defined and confined to law, regulation and ethics. In others this area is defined as skills. A wider contextualisation and reflection on practice issues is largely absent.

Some course descriptions avoid any mention of academic, reflective content, apart from mentioning there will be 'some lectures'. Others do embrace the academic or critical content in a wider context than law and ethics. At some point quite early in the course descriptors there is usually a nod towards the critical, as the following examples show:

[the course] combines practical training...with a solid academic base

The course is academically challenging and is underpinned by a wide range of practical skills.

Details of how and what is meant by this is less clear. Much time is spent on explaining how students will gain skills in terms of the equipment and professional practice. Explanation of how you will become a 'reflective practitioner' is less well defined. One course explains how 'you will engage in intellectual debate about the communications industry during lectures and seminars as well as learning hands on broadcasting skills in the excellent facilities provided in our radio and TV studios, editing rooms and media suites'.

The use of words such as intellectual is extremely rare. It is almost as if the courses are embarrassed to admit to this activity, glossing over this aspect in one sentence or a couple of words. More often this opening line is the only occasion when this aspect of the course is mentioned with the discourse quickly shifting to an emphasis on practical skills, the work placements, the professional experience and details of up-to-date technical facilities. Descriptions of skills training is very specific and detailed compared to the rather vague statements about becoming a 'reflective practitioner' if referred to at all. At other times the academic activity is termed as 'traditional' and separate from the main core of the course.

Discussion

The three themes discussed above point to a wide range of discursive constructions of what is required to be successful in one's career in journalism, and highlight some tensions in discussions.

There is a tension between the first theme of 'training' which stresses the facility to learn how to become a journalist in contrast to the second theme of 'vocation' which implies a journalist is born rather than made. This second discourse constructs journalism as something you are 'born' to do and that journalism itself is a product of common sense and of *natural* choices and practices. Therefore the practice of journalism itself becomes constructed as immutable.

Further, the first construction of training is predicated on learning from past journalists who know how to *do* journalism. (There is also the seeming tension between the twin assertions of experienced *past* practitioners and cutting edge revolutionising *future* practice which is glossed over and worthy of future examination). This too like the 'vocation' discourse frames journalism practice as an inevitability – in training you learn these processes from 'natural' journalists and you will know how reiterate them and will become a journalist.

Both constructions contain knowledge and understanding of journalism within the realm of journalism itself, either as a natural activity born of natural talent or learnt from those with experience and natural talent. The persistence of this discourse of 'natural' journalism has implications for journalism educators. If journalism is a natural, common sense activity how are journalism educators (who are not wedded to the industry) to challenge existing practice if journalism is a 'natural' 'common sense' activity?

This brings in sharp focus the muted tones within the discourse of journalism practice – that of the critique. Students reading many of the course specifications would be forgiven for thinking that what they need to succeed is lots of training in skills. The discourse around intellectual reflection on the profession is implied as being of lesser importance compared to the acquisition of skills. There is a blurring of 'professional education' and 'training' (Deuze, 2006:19) whereby the training is foregrounded at the expense of critical thinking. In other words, the value of intellectual debate plays a poor second fiddle to the importance and value of being trained in skills. This perhaps maps onto the discourse of some employers interviewed by Lily Cantor who could not see any added value to having a degree compared to non-university training courses, with little importance placed on critical thinking or research skills (Canter 2015).

This down-playing of critical engagement across the range of discourses around what it takes to be a journalist is intriguing. Although there has been a good deal of hang-wringing in the light of the Leveson Inquiry and other scandals, discursively all is goodness

and light in the realm of journalism training and journalism employment. This is deeply worrying for all those concerned about the ethical and social aspects of journalism, and importantly, it is one of concern to those directly teaching journalism. Journalism educators' discourse is one of striving to encourage critical thinking of journalism but this has to battle against a narrative of almost evangelical optimism about the profession.

Obviously university courses are in competition to attract students and the course websites are marketing tools. However, from an educationalist and perhaps employers' position it is worth considering what kind of message the potential student take from this? Is it that skills are enough? And do we want the next generation of students to be the sort that are attracted to courses that do *not* emphasise the importance of thinking, reflecting and analysing? And for students looking out at the 'real world' the discourse of employers and journalists is that the key requirement for a proto-journalist is not what you *know* but who you *are*, rendering education unnecessary.

Although extremely small scale, this investigation hopes to provide food for thought regarding the discursive portrayal of journalism's future. More work is needed to unpick the various strands of the competing interpretive repertoires of what it takes to be a journalist. As stated earlier, this investigation is not to identify the 'true' or correct discourse to nurture future journalists. Neither is it to advocate that we all – educators, employers, practitioners - speak with one voice. Rather it is to understand the different emphasis placed on the needs of future journalist by the various interested parties and to consider if and how they may be aligned and what the consequences of these mixed messages might be in terms of understand for new recruits to the industry and to the public at large.

NOTES

1. Due to time and space restrictions analysis was limited to undergraduate courses only, specifically called *Journalism*, *Broadcast Journalism* and *Multimedia Journalism*. Masters courses and other undergraduate journalism courses such Sports Journalism were excluded

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