THE NEO-COLONIALISM OF JOURNALISM EDUCATION

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Visit any university in China and the Middle East and you will find staff and programmes bought in from universities across the developed (especially Anglo-Saxon) world. For the rapidly expanding education sectors of the Bric countries and their fellows, by far the easiest thing to do is to bring in ready-made programmes and qualifications from the increasingly cash-starved universities of the first world. The added cachet this gives of a foreign (and still, despite everything, often perceived as 'better') qualification just brings more students to the doors, and more money for both the university and the parent institution back home in Perth, or Manchester.

What seems like a win-win situation for all, is never as simple as it sounds. As these programmes expand from the more technical, engineering, medicine and accounting, to the more subjective and socially-constrained subjects like media and journalism practice, problems are thrown into relief. This hasn't stopped the universities and their paymasters, however, and the neo-colonialism of education continues, regardless (Baty 2009; Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2009; Universities UK 2009).

In 2009, a colleague, Caroline Hawtin, and I set out to research the ethical dimensions of these international journalism and media programmes, and how lecturers negotiate the minefield of teaching Anglo-Saxon-style journalism in the non-Anglo-Saxon world. By examining curricula and course materials, and conducting interviews with teaching staff at 14 of these foreign programmes in the Middle East and China, we hoped to elucidate the specific problems facing journalism lecturers in these contexts, and to start a debate about what, exactly, we are hoping to accomplish.

The study was presented at the World Journalism Education Congress in Grahamstown in July last year, and published in the *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator* in winter 2010. Overall, we found some common frustrations for staff teaching in these programmes, and some common issues across the regions studied.

For staff based in the home countries in the study (the UK, Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand), the frustrations were largely the function of the additional workload and the reluctance of their parent university to accept that delivering the same programme thousands of miles away in a completely foreign culture was not as simple as they thought.

Programmes were mostly the product of the business or internationalisation divisions of the universities concerned, with little consideration for the concerns of the journalism departments and their staff. More than one programme leader described coming into their office one day to discover that they were now responsible for arranging the delivery of their carefully-constructed and -managed local journalism programme at a university in a country they had never visited, and had no specific knowledge of.

In the case of many of the nationally-accredited programmes in the UK, Australia and New Zealand, this included modules on media law and shorthand. There are journalism schools in China gamely teaching Teeline shorthand to Chinese students in order that they pass the UK's National Council for the Training of Journalists' required 80-words-per-minute, despite the fact that the NCTJ does not accredit programmes delivered outside of the UK, and that shorthand routinely defeats all but the most diligent and determined of UK journalism students. What it must be like for Chinese students, one cannot imagine.

Most of the staff interviewed had difficulty in adapting their course to the new local context. Aside from having to, as one interviewee put it, "teach myself a crash-course in Arabian media law", there was often reluctance on the part of the host university to accept an altered course. The selling point for most of these universities was that their students would be receiving exactly the same course as studied in London/Toronto/Chicago/Wellington/Sydney, with no variation.

Any attempt to localise the content was met with bafflement on the part of the parent university administrators and advisers who expected the journalism schools to simply pack up and deliver the content exactly the same as at home, and resentment on the part of the host university's staff who felt that they were being short-changed and deprived of what they had paid for – the EXACT same programme.

Some problems proved insurmountable. At least one programme in the Middle East now has students and staff role-playing English common-law courtrooms so that students can complete the mandatory component on court-reporting, a journalistic function that, while fundamental to the freedom of the press in a democracy, is completely denied to journalists in most of the Middle East and in China. Aside from the potential for farce, this raises serious questions for the staff teaching these programmes – what is the point of teaching this?

For staff teaching on these programmes in the host country (all but one of whom had no prior connection with, or experience of, the host country), this forms the crux of the issue with these programmes. Who are we teaching, and why? Journalism education is a reflexive process, and one that has a close relationship with the industry and society our graduates work in.

Teaching journalism in an environment and culture with which one is unfamiliar is a challenge, and any good journalism teacher would respond to that challenge by learning as much as they could about the context. In the process of the research, however, it became apparent that neither the university administrators in the host country, nor (in many cases) the staff at the parent institution cared particularly about the students' expectations or future careers, and any attempts to customise content or consider the future employability of the students were either explicitly suppressed or politely ignored until they went away.

Part of this problem stems from the overt commercialisation of these programmes, and this is by no means limited to foreign franchises. As universities in the developed world become more and more commercialised, journalism and media programmes come under increasing pressure. These programmes are far more popular than the industry can support, and we routinely graduate more students than there are places willing to hire them (Luckhurst 2009).

IF ONE TEACHES **THE TRADITIONAL FOURTH ESTATE JOURNALISM** OF THE ANGLO-SAXON WORLD, COMPLETE WITH ITS **WATCHDOG FUNCTION** AND **OPPOSITIONAL ATTITUDE** TO **POWER**, ONE RUNS THE RISK OF **EXPOSING STUDENTS** TO SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES, FROM AN **INABILITY TO FUNCTION** WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THEIR ENVIRONMENT, TO **IMPRISONMENT AND WORSE.**

However, in foreign programmes although there may be places for these students to work, the limited nature of the programmes provided creates a serious ethical dilemma for the staff concerned. If one teaches the traditional fourth estate journalism of the Anglo-Saxon world, complete with its watchdog function and oppositional attitude to power, one runs the risk of exposing students to serious consequences, from an inability to function within the framework of their environment, to imprisonment and worse.

If, on the other hand, you simply accept the constraints of the environment and teach the kind of practice that is appropriate for it (complete with the acceptance of bribes, rampant plagiarism and routine "what a wonderful thing the ruler did today for the glory and benefit of his people" stories), you're not teaching what you were trained to do. And, for all of the staff included in the research, this was an uncomfortable compromise, at best.

This is not to say that these programmes are failures, but that they present a specific kind of problem for those involved in them. All of the staff interviewed believed that what they were doing was benefiting the students, and that the programme was making some kind of a difference to media freedom within that country (and those of us who have taught in the Middle East have been watching the events of the last six months: as we see our former students agitating for change and freedom we cannot help but feel some sense of pride for the small role we may have played in that).

All of the teaching staff had thought long and hard about what they were doing, and why, and how to negotiate the delicate balance between cultural sensitivity, preservation of one's job, and the broader ethical considerations and practices of both journalism and teaching – something we should all be doing, regardless of where we are, and who we are teaching.

References

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