



BUNGEE - ORLANDO TOWERS, SOWETO: from the series *Life under Democracy* - Dale Yudelman

# CRITICAL REALISM

in journalism's **future tense**

By Marc Caldwell

Media theory has a long pedigree in academia, though its status as “a fast-growing field within the communication discipline” (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2009: 4) may be due to its institutional linkage with journalism training programmes. Journalism education has had a hard time in becoming academically respectable.

**“Academics have long whispered that journalism programmes are too professional: just trade school. Journalists have long grumbled that some of them are too academic – filled with useless ‘theory’” (Stephens 2000: 63).**

One usually interprets these views in terms of the much-mentioned theory/practice divide in journalism education and training, where ‘theory’ is seen to consist of an anti-realist, relativist ontology and postmodern, interpretive and constructionist epistemology, whereas ‘practice’ embraces a realist ontology and possibly a correspondence theory of knowledge. By ‘theory’ what is usually meant is cultural theory, or cultural studies; but there is no shortage of alternative perspectives with well-researched applications in journalism. For instance, it is well worth following Hirst’s applications of political economy (Hirst and Harrison 2007). Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus is used by a number of scholars (Hirst 2010; Hummel et al 2012; Schultz 2007). But what should be done with constructionism?

More than a decade has passed since the Australian historian Keith Windschuttle led a campaign in the late 1990s against the dominance of postmodern cultural theory in departments of journalism studies in that country. The contagion was dubbed the “Media Wars”, and in many respects that metaphor was apt. Zelizer’s (2009: 34) description of “journalism educators separated from journalism scholars, humanistic journalism scholars separated from scholars trained in the social sciences” alludes to a mutual distrust between practitioners and theorists in the field.

Journalism’s dominant theory and its practice seem not to mix. As Wright (2011: 156) puts it: “Journalism studies lacks a meta-theoretical structure which would enable those working in the field to embrace the critical advantages of constructivism [sic] – the dominant ontology in much theoretical work about journalism – and the commitment to realism inherent in most practical work about journalism.” However, there is an emergent paradigm in the philosophy of science that does just the job – critical realism – and a few scholars argue that it promises a better fit between journalism theory and its practice (Lau 2004; Wright 2011).

### *Practice in search of theory*

How to balance theory and practice in journalism education and training has been an issue for the subject since defeated Confederate General Robert E. Lee proposed including it in Washington College’s calendar in 1868. “Believing an intelligent press played an instrumental role in contributing to an informed, responsible citizenry” (Sloan 1990: 3), Lee, as president

of the college, proposed a scholarship for students wanting a career in journalism. Lee’s experiment was intended “to promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes in the several pursuits and professions of life” (Dickson 2009: 4). The programme was tried for a decade, but was discontinued on grounds that it was unpopular with both students and industry. Newspaper editors considered the course “inherently absurd ... [for] practical journalists, who had worked their own way upward by diligent application, knew the impossibility of learning the lessons of journalism within the walls of a collegiate institution” (Sloan 1990: 3).

“Journalism education begins, for all practical purposes, when Joseph Pulitzer pressed many dollars into the somewhat reluctant hands of Columbia University” (Carey 1978: 848). The university accepted his two-million dollar endowment in 1892, but only opened the journalism school in 1912. Up until the 1920s, it was commonly believed the most reporters needed was a basic liberal arts degree. Now, basic courses in news reporting were being established in some American colleges, “to regain some of the lost prestige suffered during the era of yellow journalism” (Dickson 2009: 9). Of journalism research, this was generally limited to law and press history, but branched into positivist social theory in the 1940s.

None of this means journalism had acquired respectability in the academy. One reformer in American education, Abraham Flexner, said journalism education was “on a par with university faculties of cookery and clothing” (Dickson 2009: 26). Carey describes the field’s standing in Columbia in 1957 as an illegitimate waif living a cap-in-hand existence of one not having been properly introduced.

“Such a program of study was held, self-righteously and without much justification, in low regard on the campus. Those rare occasions when one gathered with colleagues from the rest of the campus, particularly with those from English and other humanities, were encounters of withering, palpable contempt” (Carey 2000: 13).

What was taught until about the mid-1960s was an unsystematic transmission of the accumulated folk wisdom of a rough-hewn craft clinging to Siebert *et al.* (1956) and barely more than news writing manuals. Journalism’s subject matter was considered not academic enough unless it was authorised by any of the traditional disciplines; thus the field’s discomfort “in the overstuffed chairs of the faculty commons upholstered for professors of the liberal arts and the traditional disciplines of theology, law and medicine” (Carey 2000: 16). Journalism was not treated “as a textual system in

---

Journalism’s subject matter was considered not academic enough unless it was authorised by any of the traditional disciplines



its own right,” but as a “*terra nullius* of epistemology, deemed by anyone who wanders by to be an uninhabited territory of knowledge, fit to be colonized by anyone who’s interested” (Hartley 1996: 39).

### ***Practice against theory***

This colonisation of journalism studies underlay what appeared to be a revolt of practitioners against their theorist overlords in departments of journalism in Australian universities in the late 1990s. The complaint was that a disproportionate number of senior academic posts went to cultural studies scholars despite few of these having had any actual journalism experience (Windschuttle 1997: 3-4; 1998a: 9-10; 1998b: 72-73). Hartley had noted earlier that “(m)edia production itself is still downplayed as it always has been, on the wrong side of the ... divide between ‘academic’ and ‘practical’ subjects, suited to vocational students and unpublished tutors” (Hartley 1992: 24).

But therein lay the gist of the matter. A daylong ‘Media Wars’ seminar held at the Queensland University of Technology in 1998 heard Windschuttle complain that the relativist epistemology of cultural studies made it an inappropriate foundation for journalism education. He repeated his claim that the empirical methods and realist values of journalism “are undermined, contradicted and frequently regarded as naive by the proponents of media theory ... the body of theory that accompanies the academic domain called ‘cultural studies’” (Windschuttle 1997: 5).

“It is important to understand that the popularity of media studies with students owes nothing to cultural studies.... a largely incomprehensible and odious gauntlet they must run in order to be allowed to do what they really came to the institution for, to study media practice” (Windschuttle 1997: 15-16). Windschuttle called for journalism training to be severed from cultural studies, and to “return to what is believed to be the ‘Holy Trinity’ of journalism education: an empirical method and

‘realist’ worldview; an ethical orientation to audiences and the ‘public interest’; and a commitment to clear writing” (Flew and Sternberg 1999: 9). He describes the fundamental differences between the two fields this way:

“(i) [J]ournalism has an empirical methodology and has a realist view of the world, whereas cultural studies is a form of linguistic idealism whose principal methodology is textual analysis; (ii) journalists respect their audiences, whereas cultural studies is contemptuous of media audiences; and (iii) journalism is committed to clear writing and concrete prose style, whereas cultural studies is notable for its arcane abstractions and willful obscurantism” (Windschuttle 1999: 12).

A pillar of Windschuttle’s argument is his claim that journalism is committed to a *realist* worldview by “reporting the truth about what occurs in the world” (Windschuttle 1997: 4; 1998a: 61).

“Journalists go out into society, make observations about what is done and what is said, and report them as accurately as they can. They have to provide evidence to verify and corroborate their claims and they have to attribute their sources. Journalism, in other words, upholds a realist view of the world and an empirical methodology” (Windschuttle 1998a: 61).

---

On the other hand, any practice has its inherent understanding; just as 'doing theory' in an academic setting is itself a site of practice.

### Critical realism

Were Windschuttle's accusations completely unfounded he would have found neither an audience nor a following. Even one of Windschuttle's harshest critics found himself admitting at the time:

"It is with faint damnation that I find myself praising Windschuttle. While I acknowledge that some media theory is good for journalism students, I question the usefulness and validity of much that the postmodernists believe in" (Hirst 1998: 84).

The risk of simply hiving off the culturalist portion of journalism studies ran the risk of sending the field back to its historical impoverishment; but keeping the status quo meant living with a paradox between relativism and realism. Critical realism, which draws famously on Bhaskar's work among others (Archer et al 1998), offers a way out of this dilemma. It assumes a realist ontology and an eclectic realist and interpretivist epistemology. That is, critical realism assumes an "independent objective reality" while at the same time "asserting the constructedness of human knowledge about the nature of that reality" (Wright 2011: 159). A key feature is the reflexive interplay between human agency and structure; and as such, its resemblance to Giddens' structuration theory is well-noted (Archer 1998; Jessop 2005).

Research exploring the relevance of critical realism to journalism practices and institutions remains in its infancy (Lau 2004), yet reference to just three of eight key assumptions in Sayer (1992: 5) ought to indicate how both constructionist and realist elements in journalism education may cohere, and give journalism graduates a rigorous enough framework in which to think about their practice.

The world exists independently of our knowledge of it.

[...]

Our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory-laden. Concepts of truth and falsity fail to provide a coherent view of the relationship between knowledge and its object. Nevertheless knowledge is not immune to empirical check and its effectiveness in informing and explaining successful material practice is not mere accident.

[...]

Social science must be critical of its object. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena we have to evaluate them critically

Kant's well-known adage holds that practice without theory is blind, whereas theory without practice is sterile. This may apply to journalism practice's historical aversion to 'useless theory'. On the other hand, any practice has its inherent understanding; just as 'doing theory' in an academic setting is itself a site of practice. Critical realism promises to enhance journalism's theoretical and practical components in ways that make them more mutually coherent.

### References

- Archer, M.** 1998. Realism and morphogenesis, in Archer, M et al (eds), *Critical realism: essential readings*. London: Routledge.
- Carey, J.** 2000. Some personal notes on US journalism education. *Journalism* 1(1).
- Dickson, T.** 2009. *Mass media education in transition: preparing for the 21st century*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Flew, T and Sternberg, J.** 1999. Media wars: media studies and journalism education. *Media International Australia*, 90.
- Hartley, J.** 1992. *The politics of pictures: the creation of the public in the age of popular media*. London: Routledge.
- Hartley, J.** 1996. *Popular reality: journalism, modernity and popular culture*. London: Arnold.

- Hirst, M.** 1998. Looking out from terra nullius: journalism, modernity and the 'vacant lot'. *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 4: 84-89. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss4/9>
- Hirst, M.** 2010. Journalism education "down under": a tale of two paradigms. *Journalism Studies* 11(1): 83-98.
- Hirst, M.** and Harrison, J. 2007. *Communication and new media: broadcast to narrowcast*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Hummel, R, Kirchhoff, S, and Prandner, D.** 2012. "We used to be queens and now we are slaves": Working conditions and career strategies in the journalistic field. *Journalism Practice* 6(5-6): 722-731.
- Jessop, B.** 2005. Critical realism and the strategic-relational approach. *New Formations* 56: 40-53.
- Lau, R.** 2004a. Critical realism and news production. *Media, Culture and Society* 26(5): 693-711.
- Lau, R.** 2004b. Habitus and the practical logic of practice: an interpretation. *Sociology* 38(2): 269-387.
- Sayer, A.** 1992. *Method in social science: a realist approach* (2nd edition). London: Routledge.
- Schultz, I.** 2007. The journalistic gut feeling: journalistic doxa, news habitus and orthodox news values. *Journalism Practice* 1(2): 190-207.
- Sloan, D.** 1990. *Makers of the media mind: journalism educators and their ideas*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Stephens, M.** 2000. A J-school manifesto. *Columbia Journalism Review* Sep-Oct.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, K and Hanitzsch, T.** 2009. Introduction: on why and how we should do journalism studies. In Wahl-Jorgensen, K and Hanitzsch, T (eds). *The handbook of journalism studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Windschuttle, K.** 1997. The poverty of media theory. *Ecquid Novi* 18(1).
- Windschuttle, K.** 1998a. The poverty of media theory. *Quadrant* 42(3).
- Windschuttle, K.** 1998b. Cultural studies in journalism: obscurantism equals profundity? *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 4.
- Windschuttle, K.** 1999. Cultural studies versus journalism. *Quadrant* 43(3).
- Wright, K.** 2011. Reality without scare quotes: developing the case for critical realism in journalism research. *Journalism Studies* 12(2): 156-171.
- Zelizer, B.** 2009. Journalism and the academy. In Wahl-Jorgensen, K and Hanitzsch, T (eds). *The handbook of journalism studies*. New York: Routledge.

Marc Caldwell is associate-professor in communication at the University of Fort Hare. He was formerly a senior lecturer at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and at the former Natal Technikon.

