Article:

Locating Critiques of Normativity: Geo-Historical Perspectives

It might seem strange at first consideration that a British media historian should be expressing an opinion on the re-launch of a journal concentrating on African journalism. There is however a method to my boldness as I hope to demonstrate. In my view, any cultural practice is best considered historically if we are to grasp its full meaning; history begins with a concentration on specifics before moving on more ambitiously to explore interconnections and broader relationships. My work may be focused on Britain but most importantly than its geographical specificity, it grapples with considerations of what journalism itself has come to mean over time and how and why we may need to shift those means of understanding.

Journalism has become rather complacent in the broadly defined Western world and is only now being asked to reconsider its functions and identity in the face of significant technological and social challenges. One of the chief reasons for its present predicament is that it has rested on assumptions that have not been reconsidered over time.

In its earliest iterations journalism, depending on your point of view, either lubricated or enforced patterns of trade and political control throughout the world as technologies of communication and transport were developed from the late modern period onwards. For most of journalism's history, studies of journalism remained safely within identifiable national territories and lacked any international comparative perspective. From this insider perspective, journalism was unproblematically assessed as a facilitator of imperial patterns of communication and power.

This is the reason why many accounts of the forms and functions of journalism continue to stress its continuity with Enlightenment ideals. These loosely defined may include the linkage of journalism to democracy; the role of journalism is holding the powerful to account; the exposure of wrongdoing. To be fair, there are many occasions in many different historical and political contexts where these claims could be made. The American and French

Revolutions can be interpreted as driven by the fuel of publicity. Accounts of the development of British democracy can point to the wresting of power from parliamentary privilege by eighteenth and nineteenth century reformers; European traditions are replete with journalism's contribution to opposing fascism and in a new technological era we are often led to believe that there is a direct linkage between technological innovation within socially mediated variations of journalism and political uprisings. It would be tempting to be seduced by these narratives of journalism which highlight its nature as a creature of the Enlightenment; emanating from ideals of freedom of expression and emancipation from undemocratic modes of governance. Although there is of course an element of historical accuracy in such narratives they nevertheless sideline the fact that journalism was a particularly powerful vector of imperialism and other forms of exploitation especially in its role as a facilitator of commodity exchange. From a British perspective one need only look very close to home at the discrepancy between liberal accounts of journalism and the suppression of Irish rights over centuries. Traditional forms and employment practices within journalism cannot by themselves account for the coverage of issues of 'race' and asylum in the British press of today. Which underdog? Which watchdog? Beyond this, we need to totally reconsider the privileged position of journalism as a truth-telling discourse. In any other area of human communication, we are very aware of the limitations of such claims. Yet journalism – particularly Western journalism - holds tradition and professionalism on its side in claiming a superior commitment to truthfulness for itself.

The Impact of Empire

Over centuries, the representation of Empire had a flow-back effect on perceptions of both Britain's role in the world as well as that of the subjugated territories and their peoples. Journalism was a key and subtle force in shaping these sets of opinion and to an extent maintains a residual effect on the self-image of the British in the world. Such cultural positioning is not simply an adjunct to national identities in Britain but an essential ingredient historically sedimented within them. It is so engrained in the practices and structures of reporting on the world beyond Britain that it is difficult to overemphasize the

positional superiority implicit in the presentation of overseas news which imperialism has established. Two examples can illustrate this point. Brookes provides a thorough analysis of how cultural frames determine the reporting of Africa in the British elite press in the provocatively entitled research paper 'Suit, Tie and a Touch of Ju-Ju' published in *Discourse and Society* in 1995 while seasoned African correspondent John Ryle complemented this approach by his own observations drawn from decades of reporting from Africa when he claimed in the *Guardian* (1997) that it is no surprise that Western news media get Africa wrong since they do not understand the history or politics of the continent and do not have journalists trained in the languages spoken there. This limits both the levels of comprehension and the range of contributors since they are restricted to talking to those who speak English and have no broader range of reference.

Counter Narratives to the Enlightenment Ideal

For many, journalism is an Anglo-American construct. Schudson (2008) would go further in specifying the national antecedents of journalism and claim it as a specifically American phenomenon at source. A more critical perspective of the American dominance of the news media comes in the thesis that the USA has exploited its position as primary definer of journalism practice to create a system of global media imperialism (Boyd-Barrett, 1977; Hallin, 1993; Tunstall and Machin, 1999).

However, since the break up of the empires and colonies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and the more recent decline of the political influence of the Soviet Union on its region and its client states, it has become apparent that some of the norms of the Anglo-American model of journalism no longer fit the realities of the world today. The lack of a global enemy has meant that the Western media claims to independence and impartiality can no longer be asserted against an opposing system of authoritarian control. On the contrary, they need now to be assessed on their own merits and performance. This is a much more demanding task. Expectations of audiences at home have also changed. What do concepts such as 'objectivity'

and 'balance' really mean when covering complex events overseas for a heterogenous audience at 'home'? How should news of the Islamic world be relayed to countries with substantial Muslim populations. Increased flows of migrants have meant that it has become ever more difficult to provide the sort of distanced reporting that had become associated with the easier narratives of imperial identities (Seib, 2002).

Journalism is being interpreted increasingly in the context of a diverse, post-colonial set of traditions. Against liberal accounts of journalism as a force deployed on behalf of political freedom and against the interests of the powerful, historical accounts have begun to highlight the obvious role of journalism as a colonial product and as a weapon for subjugation. Journalism Studies is the meeting point for many debates emerging from within and outside Anglo-American critical traditions of scholarship. Historically, accounts begin with studies of the role of the colonial press in North America (Sloan and Williams, 1994) but they also span Britain's role in Ireland and the broader swathes of the British Empire. Here historians have used studies of journalism as a critical/comparative tool to explore the role of communication within the structures of power exercised across geographically dispersed peoples (Potter, 2003). Journalism has also been studies as a means of exploring the sorts of stereotype construction necessary for the subjugation of colonial peoples such as the Irish (de Nie, 2004).

We have recently seen concerted attempts to draw on the observations of historians within the contemporary world and to go beyond the passive acceptance of Western predominance and influence and to attempt to de-westernize studies of journalism in the world today. Voltmer (2011) tries to expand our currently limited engagement with the concept of news and the public sphere that has been cocooned for too long within Western and even more narrowly Western European constrictions. Hackett and Zhao (2005) have highlighted this in their study which draws upon the variety of political struggles across the globe to demonstrate that not only is the concept of democracy a less than universally accepted aspiration but that in media

terms, reaching the levels of participation in public life which is demanded by different peoples in differing circumstances is far from a uniform set of expectations. Both democracy and the role of the news media in the democratic process mean different things for different cultures. Each state has its own particular set of circumstances under which people and politicians struggle for improved access to or to retain control of the levers of power. Within the ethics of journalism, there is an increasing awareness that one size does not fit all. Work by Ward and Wasserman (2010) on this issue demonstrates the range of differing demands and expectations across geo-political spaces and a tentative set of conclusions emerge that it is as much in the respect for different traditions as in the search for common goals, that success and indeed solidarity for journalists may lie. Of particular note is the emergence of China as an area of burgeoning scholarship and academic scrutiny. This work is appreciative of China's own historical traditions of public communication, its engagement with colonial influences from East and West and how its contemporary journalism fits within the contrasting demands of these contours as well as more global paradigms as it seeks to develop its own engagement with state control of journalism.

The fruits of such scholarship include global discussions of journalism education. In this context, a range of national organisations came together in common cause to establish the World Journalism Education Congress 2007 in Singapore, 2010 in South Africa and 2013 in Belgium. It appears clear that within a broad-based understanding of what purposes and ideals journalism should aspire to, there exist different models and traditions as well as different ideas of how best to map an education onto these differing views of journalism across the globe.

Global Norms, Divergent Practices?
There was a time when comparisons conducted on the context and aspirations of journalists' roles tended to be national in orientation. Early examples were predominantly focused on the well-developed self-reflection of the American journalist. Johnston, Slawski and Bowman (1976). This early

tendency has developed into identifying what features of journalism may be universal? Randall has provided a provocative and eloquent plea for general aspirations for all journalists in his book *The Universal Journalist* but just how transferable and adaptable are journalism's core ideals and principles? Are the ideals of journalism such as 'objectivity' and 'freedom of expression' western ideals or do they have regional variants which combine to form a globalized understanding of communicative ethics? Cross-cultural, cross-national research is taking place into the implications of a more globalized markets for journalism. Zhu, Weaver, Lo, Chen and Wu (1997) and Weaver (1998) combine to provide a wide-ranging assessment of the diversity of approaches to the roles and expectations of journalists. This work continues to progress with more challenging and complex assessments such as Skjerdal's (2011) exploration of the ambivalence of an Ethiopian online community's identification somewhere between journalist and activist and Allan and Thorsen's (2010) evidence of diverse practices from a wide range of geo-politically diverse countries such as Brazil, China, India, Iran, Iraq, Kenya and Vietnam.

Are journalism's ideals merely Western traditions within a media-colonization or do they contain elements of universality that can be taught across cultures and differing political conditions? Journalism may be geographically a global enterprise but it lacks much in the way of cultural global coherence. It may be opening up geo-political markets for large media conglomerates and thereby discussions of difference and similarity but cultural convergence is nowhere in sight. Global journalism research helps us to appreciate, at best, the micro and the macro levels of journalistic practice. Global products produced by increasingly global organisations with integrated hierarchies of production have been able to deploy new technologies to extend their reach, penetration and profitability. At the same time, Indymedia-style developments show how the same technology can be used to extend alternative views of the world to larger and more diffuse audiences to great political effect.

In the context of the argument above, studies of African journalism have a vital role to play in reassessing the roles and normative assumptions that underpin much journalistic practice and much critical debate about journalism. A key contribution to this task is to reconsider the function of history in this process in de-colonising African journalism studies as Mano (2009) exhorts us when he looks to the discipline of African history to further that project while Banda (2007) had already argued that without African-centric approaches we risk continuing in a dependence on Western paradigms of learning and publishing meaning that scholarly work by African academics remains often subjected to an inorganic peer review process that is often informed by Western epistemic-ontological biases. The Journal of African Media Studies and Ecquid Novi: The Journal of African Journalism Studies have made.

A modest pragmatism?

We need to talk further about renewing and refining definitions and beyond this we need to contextualize how explorations of journalism past, present and future need to be rooted in the sorts of serious questioning of normativity that are posed by contemporary challenges to the idea of journalism (Steel, 2009). At the heart of this lie many universalistic assumptions underpinning Western journalism's core concepts, theories and practices. Beyond such probing, it is not only journalism but also its political accomplice, globalization, which needs to be reconsidered; the local within the global; defined on many levels from the post-colonial metropolis, to the village and back to the subaltern continent; from the suppressed national expression of identity to various forms of regional marginalization. Perhaps this is to replace one set of ideals with another or perhaps it is, more modestly, to set in motion an ambition to more carefully scrutinize our present articulations of journalistic ideals in order to reach a more acceptable range of pragmatism.

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