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Journalists do live in a parallel universe: A response to practitioner critiques of journalism academics

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The Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies (AJMS) is devoted to research with an applied angle in which a clear link is made between the prevalent theories and paradigms media and communication scholars work with, and the real world where media and communication activities take place. Media and journalism scholars rarely cooperate with the actors with a say in media production. The actors broadly 'resent' or discard scholarly work that theorizes and interprets their practice. In an attempt to bridge this gap, AJMS has been and will be open to submissions by both practitioners and academics. It has published many articles by practitioners, which broadly have been critical of academic writings about journalism as theory and practice (Marsh 2015, Ray 2014, Barkho 2014, Petterson 2014, Eltringham 2014). Dr. Jairo Lugo-Ocando of the University of Leeds, who himself was a reporter and editor before joining academia, comes to academia's defence. While not absolving academics of the blame for lack of cooperation, he believes journalists also bear the brunt of the failure in rendering scholarly material useful and relevant to their profession.

Key words: Academia, Journalism, Learning, Practice, Teaching, Theory,

Journalism exposes a key paradox; one that many of us who worked in the field are aware of. On the one hand there is the conviction that the newsroom is the centre of the universe, on the other the certainty that it is one of the most isolated places on earth.

In fact, it is more of an oxymoron. While the newsroom is supposedly one of the most interconnected workplaces in this planet, embedded in the structure of power with good access

to the rich and the powerful, it also appears to be very detached from reality and far away from the daily lives of most of the audiences it claims to represent.

Indeed, the newsroom can be at times a lonely place in which individual worldviews and group thinking are incapable of self-awareness and which remains impenetrable by critical self-reflection. The predominant organisational culture in which journalists operate and are trained is one which tends to reject straightforward external criticism that questions the structural role of the commercial media and the prevalent worldviews among journalists (Eldridge, 2014; Haas, 2006).

Resistance to criticism

Historically speaking, the news media resist change and criticism (Brown, 1974; Carey, 1974; Haas, 2007). This is why official efforts and civic attempts to change and improve the way journalists go about their work have mostly been ignored.

One can cite two good examples of how journalists are reluctant to change and improve their work: the first is the McBride Report (1980) produce by UNESCO, and the second is most recent, the Leveson Inquiry in the UK (2012). These efforts, which in their time enjoyed considerable support from governments, international organisations and important segments of the public, had almost no effect on the way news media organisations behave or journalists go about their work.

One should not forget, as Upton Sinclair (1919) suggested in one of the first serious critical studies of the press, that news media outlets operate within an atmosphere of power and that it would be naïve to think that most of those who own and control them would be willing to relinquish that power for the public good.

Learning from mistakes

If truth be told, to use a classic journalism cliché, journalists are the most reluctant people to listen and learn from their own mistakes (Fahmy, Shahira, and Thomas J. Johnson, 2005). We always find legitimate reasons to justify what we did and particularly what we did wrong. We

dismiss criticism under the assumption that unless you worked as a proper reporter, with a daily beat, facing the pressures of power and deadlines, you have no legitimate right whatsoever to criticise what we do.

We dismiss reports and scholarly research based on systematic and structured study of our work, because -we say- it is 'irrelevant' or presented in convoluted language and terminology that makes it 'inaccessible'. Some of us have gone on to claim that we do not have time for scholarly criticism that overlooks the pressures we face and undermine the democratic value of what we do.

Denial

All these arguments, of course, are discursive strategies of evasion coming from a profession that lives in a state of denial. A professional body that, mostly and with very few exceptions in the mainstream, went along, deeply embedded, with Bush and Blair to illegally invade Iraq in 2003 opening a Pandora's box of terrorism and political instability (Lewis, 2006; Miller, 2004; Tumber, 2004).

It was this same professional body that overall, and again with few honourable exceptions, was unable and unwilling to challenge bankers and financial markets in the run up to the crisis of 2008 (Schiffrin, 2011; Starkman, 2014). It is the same professional body that has never understood the challenges faced by its own industry in light of globalisation, digital technology and de-politicisation of society (Chyi, H. I., Lewis, S. and Zheng, N., 2012), something that has inexorably led to audience fragmentation and a decline in ratings, sales and income across the sector.

So for us to try preach to academic researchers that their work is worthless unless it is made accessible and relevant to us journalists or unless it has an immediate and direct impact on our daily practice is nothing less than arrogance and a dire statement on the degree of disconnection between the newsroom and the real world.

Widening gap

Overall, the gap between journalists and academia needs to be acknowledged for what it really is: a flawed anomaly that rarely happens in other fields of social science knowledge.

For instance, institutions such as the Political Studies Association in the UK have continuously served as forums where politicians, activists, civil servants and officials of all sorts share ideas and discussions with academic researchers about their work. This also happens with the British Sociological Association, the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Statistical Society with regards to social services, NGOs, charities and government offices who not only read the work of academics but commission them to carry out research that allows self-reflection and improvement from each one of these organisations and institutions.

Instead, journalism as a professional body seems reluctant to engage in such forums despite numerous invitations to do so from organisations such as ICA, MECCSA, ECREA and many others. The common experience of many academics is that they struggle to get news people to spend a couple of hours with them, not to say a whole day in a particular event. Reasons given are: the incompatibility of the long sessions with the prerogatives, dynamics and pressures within the newsroom to deliver on the deadline; the fact that the research being discussed has little relevance for journalism practice; and, of course, the fact that the academic work is unreadable.

So, are we really saying that academics in politics, sociology, human geography and statistics somehow have been able to unlock a special and magical formula that allows practitioners of other discipline to engage? Are we really suggesting that media and journalism studies have not produced work that is somehow relevant to what we do?

Not for a minute do I think this is what my colleagues XXXX XXXX seem to be suggesting in their articles published in the Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies. One such article in AJMS's last issue carried the title *Journalism's practitioners and the academy: must they eternally live in different universes?* (XXXXX). I think that the author is genuinely asking for a dialogue that is evidently absent. I agree with this and other similar authors in many of the points they are making.

However, where I depart and take my own position is in not reinforcing this false perception that most if not all academic research into journalism is somehow irrelevant or useless,

> *I cannot recall a single academic paper issuing from 'pure' media scholars that I found relevant or useful to the work I did or that resulted in me changing my practice in any way (Marsh 2015, 196).*

> *It is not only practitioners who feel alienated by such writing. Media, journalism and communication students are rarely happy with the language of the academic texts they are forced to read as part of their curriculum. (Barkho 214, 272)*

> *But we all have to remember – academics and practitioners – it is the taxpayers who pay for a lot of the research; therefore, the public have the right to know whether they will eventually get something in return for their money. (Pettersson 214, 50)*

> *The way scholars write is a direct offence to the craft skills of journalists. It goes against everything they believe and everything they teach their staff. They see their own job as achieving clarity and regard academics as delivering obfuscation – over-long papers, windy, jargon, cloudy meaning, invented language. (Ray 2014, 128)*

I do recognise that it is tempting to make these types of assertions. I myself, first as a reporter and subsequently as news editor, never found any academic paper relevant to my own practice. However, contrary to some of my colleagues, I have come to recognise in hindsight that it was more to do with my own prejudices and reluctance to accept criticism against my self-constructed pedestal as paladin of justice.

Long way to go

The fact that many mainstream journalists are still embracing uncritically liberal values such as 'objectivity' and 'balance' as universal paradigms of truth indicates the long path that we still need to transit. To be sure, and as John Steel (2014) says, since most calls for reforming journalism happen within the confines of neoliberalism, it will be naïve to suggest that they would address the fundamental reasons as to why the profession has failed society so far.

To be sure, the same criticism practitioners make on the pages of AJMS against academic work for not having any impact on practice can be turn around to ask if journalism has made us a better, more just and equal society. Similar arguments about public funding and people asking for their money's worth to academia can be also easily re-directed to institutions such as the BBC and its very flawed coverage of many aspects of public life or lack of impact in changing policy.

Moreover, the 'lack of impact' argument, based on the assertion of 'useful' and 'accessible' research, is in itself very problematic. This because the idea of 'pure media research' as too abstract or too theoretical represents not only a naïve dismissal of the importance of critical

thinking in our lives but also because it is a very unsophisticated way of trying to keep journalism depoliticised and de-contextualised from social practice.

The fact remains that the academic field of media studies has become indispensable to any full understanding of the organisation of modern life, the play of power and the dynamics of change (Murdock, G. and Golding, P., 2015, p. 41).

Scholarly work on the history of commercial journalism, to cite a case, is by all means particularly relevant to journalism practice. The plethora of research in this area shows that modern journalism is a by-product of the Enlightenment project and that it played an important role in legitimising the British Empire and slavery in Africa in the XIX century. Drawing on this historical knowledge could allow us to question the causes that mainstream journalism is currently supporting under similar flags and assumptions.

It is from this research that we can draw important lessons of how journalism fell for the false promises of brining democracy to Vietnam in the 1970s and to Afghanistan and Iraq more recently. It is from it that I came myself to understand why I accepted so uncritically the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 1990s in Latin America (Lugo-Ocando, 2014, p. 9) and how I had failed in my own duty of defending those left behind.

Social responsibility

Yes, academics do need to understand that they too have a responsibility for the public engagement and it should never be about researching to score points in the academic career.

Yes, it is also true that academics working in this field have failed in many cases to articulate more vehemently their case, and that the academic study of journalism as a whole ‘resembles in many ways a failed adoption’ (Zelizer, 1998).

However, journalists should not hang to this as to excuse their lack of engagement with what is by far the only available and credible body of work concerning practice.

Journalists should also understand that academics have been working hard to improve journalism, not to undermine it. It is in the pages of journal articles and academics books that we can find the most vehement, articulated and substantiated defence for journalism and its undeniable role in society. Even if at times seems obscure and convoluted.

We need to read criticism these pages not as an attack on journalism -even if it at times seems harsh and demolishing- but as a valid and healthy exercise of democratic engagement and committed debate with one of the most important social practices of our times. The work of Justin Lewis, Andrew Williams and Bob Franklin (2008), just to name one example, sheds light on the deterioration and decline of quality of journalism in the UK and why journalism needs more and not less support from society as a whole. It is in my eyes one of the best defences ever written for journalism as a public service.

Can academics help?

If well it is these works that reminds us that the mainstream media systems and journalistic practices continue to be a megaphone for the rich and the powerful (Curran, James, and Jean Seaton, 2009; Entman, 2004; Franklin, 1997), it is also these findings that highlight the need to improve newsrooms' practices and our relation to power.

It would be of course naïve to think that all these works have been dismissed by journalists over the years just because of the style in which they were written. The fact remains that seminal pieces of research such as those produced by late Stuart Hall et al on racism (2013 [1978]) or those authored by Philip Schlesinger and Howard Tumber's (1994) on crime reporting remind largely ignored by many practitioners.

Even very useful and accessible guides to improve the reporting of poverty, produced by a group of academics and commissioned by Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010), are set aside to continue with the systematic stigmatization of large segments of society as 'scroungers'. This despite the fact that these works were commissioned to be written in very accessible way for the public and for none specialists audiences.

Indeed, we are right to point out that most of the research and knowledge about media and journalism does not seem to permeate into the newsroom. Not at least in the same way that academia seems to collaborate with other fields of knowledge and social practices such as politics, social policy and justice.

An honourable exception to this is perhaps the work carried out between the London of School of Economics and the Guardian analysing the 2015 London riots (Lewis, P., Newburn, T., Taylor, M., Mcgillivray, C., Greenhill, A., Frayman, H., & Proctor, R., 2011). This type of initiatives reminds us, as sporadic as it might be, that despite assumptions and prejudices from both sides, there are good things happening between journalism and academia.

Lack of collaboration

If we, practitioners and former practitioners are more open to accommodate self-criticism and listen more carefully to what the academy has to say about us, then there is a wealth of knowledge to be learned. It is that research that would have allowed some news editor and reporters avoid, for example, their support for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 or at least to provide a more critical coverage of the war. It could have also helped them understand better the relationship between reporters and their sources (Manning, 2001), which in some circumstances such as the sub-prime mortgage market crisis got too close and complacent (Manning, 2013).

However, journalists have consistently dismissed whole chunks of research carried out by academics notwithstanding its constancy and great deal of evidence. Despite all the lessons we could have learned from the Glasgow Media Group's work on the systematic bias of organisations such as the BBC and CNN in conflicts such as Palestine and Israel or in Northern Ireland (Philo, 2014) active journalists are still too ready to go embedded with the status quo to the next battle.

It is this same professional body that remains largely uncritical of corporations and their power and influence over democratic institutions. This partly because it has ignored extensive works on the damage that corporate public relations have done and continue to inflict onto journalistic ethics and credibility (Miller, D., & Dinan, W., 2007).

One might suggest that resistance to academic critique goes with journalism's broader tendency to resist critique as a whole and perhaps somehow understandable in light of the daily barrage of attacks that journalism suffers on a daily basis from many other sectors. In the case of journalism practice resistance to academic critique is probably due to the perception that academics are "evaluating" rather than interpreting the social reality of journalism.

This insularity is sometimes seen as a product of its feeling threatened economically (Conboy & Eldridge, 2014) or in terms of its authority, and provokes a need to reassert its place at the centre of the universe.

If truth is to be told, once more, journalists do not engage with academia because they live in a different universe; one where self-criticism is not part of the equation nor is it permitted to go too deep into critical self-reflection of practices.

Yes, we might agree, that many academics tend to write too convoluted for our taste and produce a lot of work that we find hard to fit in our own worldview or urgent need to produce news within the tight schedule of a deadline.

Yes, that particular research piece on Harry Potter and childhood aspirations of self-image (Whitehurst, 2012) or the other one about Buffy the Vampire (Blowers, L. C., Loxton, N. J., Grady-Flesser, M., Occhipinti, S., & Dawe, S., 2003; Greenwood, Dara N., and Paula R. Pietromonaco, 2004; Owen, 1999) and the role of media in anorexia among young people might seem to us at times irrelevant.

And, yes we might even parade these type of works every time we want to discredit academia as waste of tax-payers' money.

But we should know better than to repeat the *Daily Mail*'s anti-intellectual clichés (Blanchet, 2013) and to use them as cheap shots against academia only because we have failed to engage with it.

I do agree with my colleague XXXX who points out to the fact that there is a growing number of academy/practitioner institutions/organisations who do manage to cross the divide. This signals somehow that the aim of bringing the universes closer is not an idle one.

Having said that, 'hackademics' (Errigo, 2004; Harcup, 2011) are only a small part of the solution. Overall and more broadly, we need to stop seeing journalism solely as a profession and understand it instead for what it is, a social practice (Reese, 2010; Schudson, 2001) deeply embedded across the whole of society.

Once we realise this, we will understand that there are far more important matters at stake in our debates about journalism. To do that there are questions that practitioners need to ask themselves.

Why have we failed to engage with proper academic research and debate as other fields of knowledge have done? Why have we remained isolated in our newsrooms when the rest of the social science and arts and humanities universe has collaborated so effectively with academia to improve understanding and practice?

Unless we answer these questions more honestly, without recurring to discursive decoys that distract and are overall unhelpful, journalism and academia will be condemned to live in parallel universes. One of them is expanding and growing all the time and linking with the rest of society; the other is shrinking while trying to encapsulate and isolate journalism practice in a space and time that never was.

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