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Journalism versus Cultural Studies

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According to academics in the field of cultural studies, the belief that journalism can report the world truthfully and objectively is not only wrong but naïve. However, they claim that the incorporation of cultural studies into academic teaching allows journalists to be trained to overcome illusions of this kind and to see behind the superficialities of traditional professional practice. This paper is a critique of these claims and a response to those academics who have disputed the author's previous work on this issue. It examines eight claims about journalism made by cultural studies academics and shows them all to be seriously flawed. They are either logically incoherent, ignorant of the nature of journalism, or seek to impose a political agenda onto the curriculum.

Over the last two years, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission has investigated the nature of apartheid in that country. One thing that emerged clearly from the Commission's hearings was the failure of many white South African journalists to report accurately on the events of the apartheid era. Several journalists themselves acknowledged during questioning that their reporting had long been complicit with the political agenda of the white supremacist government and had been neither truthful nor objective. They emphasised that this had not been forced upon them by any apartheid legislation. Instead, they

had shared the ideology of the regime and had needed no prompting by the law, by the state, or even by their employers, to take the line they did.

When my paper “The poverty of media theory”, a critique of cultural studies and its influence on media education, was published in *Ecquid Novi*, the academic journal for journalism in South Africa, (Windschuttle 1997) it attracted much the same response there as it did when published in Australia. (Windschuttle 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d). Four South African academics from the field of cultural studies wrote replies to the journal, all displaying varying degrees of outrage (Tomaselli & Shepperson 1998; Strelitz & Steenveld 1998). Each used the confessions of the journalists before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as evidence that, in itself, journalism is an inadequate practice that conceals more than it reveals. Here is clear evidence, they said, that journalism does little more than recover “the superficial, the literal” and the preferred meanings manufactured via the “mundaneness” of professional practice. Moreover, the faults of these journalists were not simply mistakes but necessary consequences of the same professional practice which, they claimed, concealed the “deeper meanings” and the “symbolic associations” that lurked beneath the surface of society at the time. Hence, all four argued that my view that it is possible for journalism to report the world accurately must not only be wrong but naïve in the extreme. However, they claimed that, thanks to the “new insights” provided by cultural studies, journalists of the future can be trained to overcome the old deficiencies and ensure that the failures of the apartheid era do not recur.

Now, this was all a great revelation to me. I had been under the impression that the information I had received from the news media about the South African regime from the 1960s to the 1980s had been reasonably accurate. Indeed, so convinced had I become of the veracity of these reports and the injustices they portrayed that I spent some considerable time in my youth doing what was

possible in Australia to oppose apartheid, especially helping to disrupt the visits of the Springbok rugby team and other sporting bodies. Moreover, there must have been millions of people in the world who gained the same picture as me, else how could the political pressure that caused the international boycott of the South African economy have ever emerged, let alone been as successful as it eventually proved? Obviously, we could not have got our information from the “new insights” of cultural studies, since for most of the above period only a small number of academics had ever heard of the subject.

The truth is we were told what was happening by the news media. We saw television reports of the massacre at Sharpeville, and of dogs, truncheons and guns being used by white police against black demonstrators. Newspapers told us how the legal system in the country operated and showed us photographs of swimming beaches labelled “whites only”. We saw television interviews with liberal dissidents who denounced the regime, and we found them more credible than the interviews with its defenders. It is true that we saw very few members of the African National Congress interviewed, and to this extent the coverage was biased, but nonetheless the essential story still came through loud and clear.

All of this, I should emphasise, is quite consistent with journalists’ confessions of guilt to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The claim that journalism is a pursuit of truth and an attempt to report what really happens is not refuted by the fact that many journalists often fail to achieve these goals. It is obvious that there are good and bad journalists just as there are good and bad scientists, doctors and builders. One of the most common fallacies made by contemporary media criticism is to draw from the premise that *some* reporting is misleading and inadequate, the conclusion that *all* reporting is misleading and inadequate, or even more fallaciously, that news reporting is *inherently* misleading and inadequate.

I was more than a little surprised at the invitation to speak at the “Media Wars” conference. After Graeme Turner, Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Queensland, had declared my original paper on this subject a “paranoid fantasy” (Turner 1998), I imagined that he might be arranging for a squad of psychiatric warders to meet me at the border. In that paper, I said there were three fundamental differences between journalism and cultural studies, which rendered them educationally incompatible: 1. journalism 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; 2. journalists respect their audiences, whereas cultural studies is contemptuous of media audiences; and 3. journalism is committed to clear writing and concrete prose style, whereas cultural studies is notable for its arcane abstractions and wilful obscurantism. Thanks to this conference, I have been forced to think a little more about the issue and, in the process, I have expanded the original three objections to a total of eight. If you will bear with me, I will discuss them one at a time.

1. Cultural studies claims that the pursuit of truth and objectivity is impossible

One of the replies to my paper was by Julia Ravell, a lecturer in journalism at Curtin University of Technology in Perth. She said:

Journalists (and journalism educators) who still believe that their writing represents an objective “reality” are deluding themselves . . . Claims to objectivity on behalf of specific ways of seeing the world are always going to be bogus; there are no absolutely true ways of representing reality, only more or less powerful ones.

All is not lost, however, because she explains that the powerful analytical tools of cultural studies can help us see through the fog:

If future media practitioners learn the conventions of narrative and begin to ask questions about the construction of meaning in news and fic-

tion (and news as fiction) they'll never be sucked into the illusion that they are seeing "the facts as they happened" represented in the evening news. (Ravell 1998, p.2)

If you think Ms Ravell might be a lone voice from Western Australia, let me cite an east coast version of the same argument. When Professor Ann Curthoys wrote the following statement, she was head of the University of Technology, Sydney's B.A. Communications program, which is the degree under which journalism is taught there. She claims there is an "epistemological gap between many academics and many journalists":

Most academics in the humanities and social sciences, and as far as I know in the physical and natural sciences as well, now reject positivist concepts of knowledge, the notion that one can objectively know the facts. The processes of knowing, and the production of an object that is known, are seen as intertwined. Many take this even further, and argue that knowledge is entirely an effect of power, that we can no longer have any concept of truth at all. Most journalists, meanwhile, continue to talk as if none of this twentieth century philosophic critique has happened. Their mission is justified in terms of uncovering the truths that governments wish to conceal, presenting themselves as truly objective, as against the claims of others . . . It's probably good politics to see everything in black and white, and good journalism to have a strong story and to dramatise conflict, but it's not necessarily good scholarship. (Curthoys 1991, p.391)

I don't know which is the more objectionable aspect of this passage: the smug put-down of journalists as mere black and white dramatists who are embarrassingly ignorant of so-called advances in "scholarship"; or the pretentious claim to speak for the whole of twentieth century philosophy, a claim which completely ignores the mainstream of Anglo-American analytic philosophy this century, which has long regarded the view about truth expressed by Professor Curthoys as a simple fallacy, indeed, an obvious self-contradiction. If there are no truths, then the statement "There are no truths" cannot itself be true. Moreover, the claim that journalists cannot report the truth is patently absurd. In political reporting, for instance, there is plainly a great deal of opinionated

comment and rhetoric that often supports various ideological ends, but there is also a great deal of reporting of facts, that is, of objective truths which no one in his or her right mind would question, such as the fact that the Coalition won the 1998 federal election. Most people know this result only because they saw it on television or read it in the press, thanks to reports by journalists. Does anyone doubt this is an objective truth? Or maybe there are some true believers among cultural studies exponents who think Kim Beazley won, or perhaps there are some who think Gough Whitlam is still sitting in his office in old Parliament House running the country. If you deny the existence of all facts and truths then you become a genuine paranoid fantasist because you can't be certain of such well-known facts as Hitler lost the Second World War or Elvis is really dead. Even though news making is a highly selective, socially constructed and often politically biased process, the events it describes occur in a real world that is itself independent of the news making process. Journalists certainly construct news bulletins but they don't usually construct the events they write or broadcast about. These events, like who wins and loses elections, or wars, or the Melbourne Cup, are facts and truths about the world. Every day, there are countless examples of news reports that demonstrate that journalists can and do get them right.

If we are to have a sensible debate about bias and the lack of objectivity in news reporting, we first have to admit that these are deviations from the norm. Once this is acknowledged, then it may be possible to discuss how much deviation is acceptable before it becomes unprofessional or corrupt. But to be a participant in such a debate, you first have to drop the absurd notion that journalism can never tell the truth and can never be objective.

2. Cultural studies theorists are demonstrably ignorant about journalism

Very few theorists of cultural studies have ever been employed in the media. Most of them have direct experience of the industry only through its external appearances, what they see on the screen, what they read in print, and so on. This, however, has not stopped them from becoming heads of the departments or faculties within which many journalism programs in Australia are taught. In any other professional education, this would be an anomaly. It would be extraordinary to have, say, a medical sociologist who has no formal medical qualification and who has never practised medicine, appointed head of a medical school. In media education, however, it is different. For instance, the host of the “Media Wars” conference, Queensland University of Technology, has appointed Professor Stuart Cunningham, who has never had a career in the media, as head of its school of media and journalism.

One of the reasons other professional schools avoid this practice is because they have found that there is no substitute for on-the-job experience. On the job, you not only pick up things very quickly but you absorb the most elementary assumptions of the business, assumptions that are often so basic that they rarely make it into the literature about the profession because everyone in it takes them for granted. On the other hand, if what you know about an industry is largely confined to your reading about it, especially if your reading is mostly theory and academic research, there’s a good chance you’ll never get to know these basic assumptions and, as a result, you’ll make some elementary blunders.

Let me illustrate this thesis in the recent writings of John Hartley, former Professor of Media Studies at Edith Cowan University, Perth, and currently head of journalism and cultural studies at the University of Wales at Cardiff. His paper “Journalism and modernity”, which is extracted from his book *Popular Reality: Jour-*

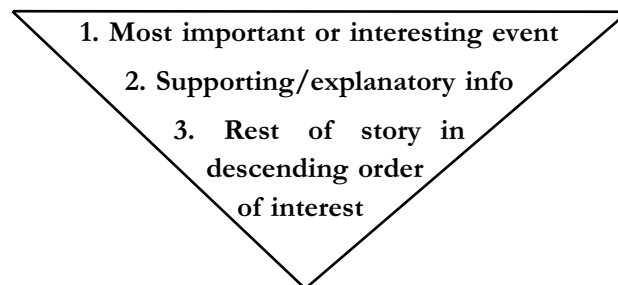
nalism, Modernity, Popular Culture, offers several examples of such blunders to choose from, but I will confine myself to just two.

The first occurs when Hartley says journalism renders the world into a “corporate narrative” (Hartley 1995, p.27). The term “corporate” as used here can either mean “produced by a corporation or an organisation”, in which case it is only stating the obvious, or else it could mean “reflecting the views of the corporation, or of the corporate world”, in which case it is simply an inaccurate and gratuitous sneer. However, what I want to focus on is his use of the term “narrative”. This is a description also used by Julia Ravell who assures us that “news is similar to other forms of realist narrative” and that news is a “conservative form of narrative” (Ravell 1998, p.1, p.2). Now, a narrative is a story you tell from beginning to end. Its structure is chronological, and can be rendered in a diagram something like this:

1st Event 2nd Event 3rd Event 4th Event 5th Event etc

Not all narratives, of course, are as linear as this. Some have several parallel stories, some of which eventually converge. But what they all have in common is an underlying chronological structure.

However, as any first year cadet journalist could tell you, and as all the elementary textbooks of news reporting have insisted for at least 50 years, the structure of a news story is anything but a narrative. The structure is normally expressed in a diagram by an inverted triangle.



A news story begins not with the event that happened first but with the most important or interesting event, no matter when it occurred in the overall sequence of events. In many cases, the lead sentence is not confined to one event but is a summary of all that the story is about. It is followed by two or three sentences filling out or explaining the detail of the lead, and then the rest of the story follows, not in any narrative sequence but in descending order of importance or interest. Sometimes there might be a brief chronological sequence reported down in the tail of the story but, just as often, not even this minimalist kind of narrative gets used. It is true that some feature stories in print journalism begin with a little anecdote that might have a narrative structure, but it is rare for the rest of the story to follow suit. In other words, to say that journalism has a narrative structure is to display one's ignorance of what journalists actually do.

Where, then, does Hartley's idea come from? He doesn't cite any reference about the use of the term, so we will have to guess. The most likely source is the claim by French literary theorists that the writing of the modernist period, that is, the novels and other forms of prose written since the eighteenth century, constitute a form of realist narrative (Gennette 1980; Rimmon-Kenan 1983; Prince 1988). While this theory might have some relevance to the novels of Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad and their peers, who certainly wrote narratives, it is a mistake to generalise it to all modern writing. This is the mistake that Hartley has made. He has deferred to French theorists rather than investigate the subject matter for himself.

A similar kind of problem in the same article occurs when Hartley describes the profession of journalism in the following terms: "It aspires to the professional status of *architects* while actually turning out *real estate agents* — petty-bourgeois, self-employed, white collar workers with no commitment to professionalisation." Again, the notion that journalists are mostly self-employed indi-

cates someone with very little grasp of the profession he so confidently disparages. The great majority of journalists in Australia are not self-employed but are employees of corporations. Some 66 per cent are employed by publishers, 17 per cent by television stations, and 12 per cent by radio stations (Henningham 1998; Australian Journalists' Association 1991). It is true that the 1990s saw the emergence of a sizeable group of freelancers, who are paid on a piecework basis, according to the number of words that they get published, but they remain a small minority of those who earn their living from the business.

So where could Hartley's idea that journalists are a group of self-employees come from? Again, despite his imperious assertion in the same article that "academics must always cite their sources; journalists never do", (Hartley 1995, p.26) this particular piece of misinformation is not given any source at all, so we'll have to guess again. The giveaway lies in the first adjective in the description "petty-bourgeois, self-employed white collar workers". The first person to describe journalists as petty-bourgeois was the Marxist theorist, Nicos Poulantzas, one of the acolytes of the French Communist Party guru, Louis Althusser. In his book *Political Power and Social Classes* (1973), Poulantzas regurgitated Althusser's claim that the press, radio and television are ideological apparatuses of the capitalist state and that those who work for the media are therefore members of the class that supports this state. This meant that journalists couldn't be classified as workers or proletarians, so Poulantzas declared them to be petty-bourgeois, a term previously reserved for shopkeepers and self-employed tradesmen. Of course, this was all theoretical nonsense when Poulantzas wrote it in the 1970s and, in the hands of Hartley in the 1990s, it hasn't improved with age. What it again demonstrates is his deference to the dictates of French theory instead of an examination of the empirical research.

3. Most cultural studies academics are graduates in English literature and don't understand research

Hartley's penchant for theory over investigation is an occupational characteristic shared by most academics in cultural studies. Part of the reason for this is that most of them have trained in English literary criticism and have a very low level of research skills. While journalism is admittedly a very broad church that includes essays, thought pieces, columns and commentaries that can be produced without straying very far from a computer screen, the great volume of journalism, especially daily reporting for print and broadcasting, involves research. Journalists go places, witness events, listen to speeches, conduct interviews and discover documents. English literary criticism rarely gets involved with any of these things, as some critics themselves have at times been candid enough to admit. For instance, the Sydney critic John Docker has recorded how, after newly qualifying with a BA Honours and an MA in English Literature, he realised how ill-equipped he was to pursue his interests in cultural history because he lacked the one thing his English professors had neglected to teach, "that is, methods of research". He had to rely on his girlfriend.

As an historian, she was puzzled and pained by my lack of even the most rudimentary skills at research, and had almost to take me by the hand and show me around Mitchell Library (Docker 1984, p.13).

After paring away all the literary theory that is so fashionable today and trying to see what skills a degree in English literature actually provides, you find they come down to (a) philology and hermeneutics, that is, the close scrutiny and analysis of texts, and (b) literary aesthetics, the assessment of the artistic value of the work at hand. This is all a long way not only from journalism but also from almost every other occupation in the information industries, which also have a substantial research component. In terms of vocational usefulness for media employment, English literary skills

may come in handy for book reviews, film and drama reviews and some commentaries in the arts pages. But this material constitutes only a very small proportion of the mainstream content of contemporary newspapers, magazines, television and radio news, current affairs and infotainment programs, not to mention documentary film-making, public relations, advertising and all the other information providing and manipulating businesses in the contemporary economy, almost all of which require research as well as writing and production skills.

This is another reason why the current dominance of media education by people whose backgrounds are in literary criticism and cultural studies should be a matter of concern. Until I read his reply to my original article, I did not know that Graeme Turner has been the author of that section of the Australian Research Council and Academy of the Humanities Discipline Review which dealt with Media and Communication Studies. We really should be asking questions about how people, whose own academic background is of such marginal relevance, come to occupy positions of this kind. Because media and communication studies have a strong vocational component, because Turner's own academic background is applicable to such a very small area of employment in the media and communication industries, because he has never himself had a career in any of these industries, and because his own field has such a poor track record in training people for one of the mainstream industry requirements, that of research, the fact that he had this job might be his gain but, to most educators in the field, it is their loss.

4. Cultural studies fosters bad writing and unintelligible expression

Anyone who wants to make their career in the media and information industries has to be a good communicator. Given that the secondary education system now does such a poor job of teaching

English expression and correct usage, it is incumbent on the tertiary system to engage in remedial work if it is to do a proper job of making its graduates employable. But what do we find characterises cultural studies? The very opposite. My original paper gave an example of the turgid, unintelligible and ungrammatical prose of Stuart Hall, one of the gurus of the English cultural studies movement. This time let me offer a contender from Australia:

If cultural studies is to avoid becoming just another type of fetishised scholarship about fetishised differences among things, then it has to trace the connections between the experiences it finds in everyday life, in popular culture, in the rhythm of events as they appear in experience, back to fresh imagining of process, becoming, totality. The discovery, forced into critical consciousness by Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Gilles Deleuze, that totality is invariably bad totality, that historicism is invariably false historicism, does not give us licence to abandon imagining the whole and speculating on its future tendencies. It enjoins us rather to attempt to create a fresh art of writing speculatively about what lies beyond the routine boundaries forced upon us by the academic division of labour, by the self-evident correctness of uncritical moralisms, by the banality of the relentless accumulation in our archives of the reified facticity of difference.

This is from the preface of a book by an author who lectures in media studies at an Australian university and is from the section trying to explain to the uninitiated reader what cultural studies is all about. I realise I'm not a reliable guide to the impact it is likely to have on your average undergraduate but, for me, this combination of neologisms, name dropping, and meaningless abstractions piled upon one another to form equally meaningless sentences, helps glide the mind towards oblivion, and before long induces a cata-tonic stupor. It is from *Virtual Geography: Living with Global Media Events* (1994), by McKenzie Wark of Macquarie University, Sydney.

5. Cultural studies politicises media education

Although by now you might think that I am rather down on cultural studies, let me offer a little praise. Academics in cultural studies were some of the first to take popular culture seriously. Actually the musicologists and anthropologists who studied folk culture beat them to it by about a century, but, nonetheless, ever since Richard Hoggart's book *The Uses of Literacy* in 1958, they have put the study of the content of the popular print and broadcast media onto the academic agenda. This was at a time when traditional English criticism had an elitist attitude to this material and dismissed it as low-grade trash unworthy of scholarly attention. However, the motive for studying media content has never been disinterested scholarship. It has always had just as much a political as an academic agenda. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the agenda was to convert students to one of the varieties of Marxism that were then in vogue: either the German Marxism of the Frankfurt School, the Italian Marxism of Antonio Gramsci, the French Marxism of Louis Althusser, or, most commonly, a barely digestible goulash of all three. At the same time, the various identity group liberation movements of feminists, gays, indigenes and ethnics arose on campus, and cultural studies became a prominent ally of these as well. Marxism went somewhat out of favour in cultural studies and the academic world at large after 1989, but identity group politics has continued loud and strong.

There are at least four distinct kinds of political roles that adherents of cultural studies attempt to play. The first is to take examples of media content, deconstruct them for their ideological messages, and thus show how the media have various political influences. For a long time, this approach painted the media in almost uniformly black terms: the news trivialised women, was biased against trade unions, disliked homosexuals, was prejudiced against ethnics, and supported the police instead of those innocent gangs of youths who hang out at shopping malls. In some cases, the media are ac-

cused of generating social divisions. According to Philip Bell, the foundation Professor of Communications at the University of New South Wales,

What ethnic labels do in the media is logically identical to their role as pseudo-scientific explanations: they postulate ethnicity as a cause of real or expected inter-group conflict . . . Thus “race” seems always, inevitably, to have been a problem, a threat, or a natural cause of social conflict. In these ways the “commonsense” about race/ethnicity which the media circulate can be deeply ideological. (Bell 1987, p.35)

In other cases, the media are accused of being agents of social control that define the boundaries between acceptable and deviant behaviour. In 1994 when he was head of the media school at the University of Technology, Sydney, Professor Andrew Jakubowicz wrote:

The most significant use of non-Anglo Australians (in the media) was to mark boundaries. Non Anglo Australians were included as contrast with the “normal” . . . these “non-normals” were included (in media texts) either as exotic accessories to the physical backdrop, for example in food advertisements, as tourist attractions, or as threats to boundaries . . . boat people, for example . . . While the litany of class, gender, race and ethnicity may sound out of date to some proponents of the post-modern age, we conclude that these elements remain central to the issue of inequality. (Jakubowicz et al 1994, p.54, p.196)

Jakubowicz is quite right on two counts here. These critiques of class, gender, race and ethnicity, upon which he has built his career, certainly amount to a litany — they are much more like a prayer of supplication than disinterested scholarship — and they are certainly out of date. One of the most overt interventions by the media in the political process of recent years has been in the debate over Pauline Hanson, and the Mabo and Wik judgements of the High Court. However, instead of supporting racist attitudes, as they should have done were the theses of Bell and Jakubowicz at all accurate, some of the most influential of the media — notably, the broadsheet press and the ABC — were conspicuous for their condemnation of Hanson and their support for the Aborigines. In

other words, those academics who have complained most about the media's creation of ethnic stereotypes are themselves guilty of labelling all the media with the one, inaccurate anti-ethnic stereotype.

The methodology used by cultural studies theorists to reach conclusions like this is best described as self-fulfilling. To study the media this way, all you need do is select a few choice examples that confirm your thesis, subject them to close textual analysis, draw the obvious political conclusions and then sprinkle the whole effort with a French theoretical gloss. Not all analyses of this kind, it should be emphasised, are negative about the media. Some argue that different audiences engage in "negotiated and oppositional readings of media texts". Hence, there are some analyses that claim that television crime dramas support working class and youth values (Fiske & Hartley 1978), and others that reckon they "empower" working women (Brown 1990; Clarke 1990). I even read a recent analysis of Broadway musical comedies which claims that, instead of endorsing, as they appear to do, the most romantic kind of heterosexuality, they actually have a gay subtext which is profoundly subversive of the values at the surface level of the text (Trask 1998; Miller 1998). Frankly, using a cultural studies analysis, you can draw any conclusion that takes your fancy. There are no standards, no tests for accuracy, no means of deciding whether the analysis is right or wrong, or whether it is good, bad or indifferent.

The second political role that cultural studies academics want to play is that of policy formation. While the Labor Party was in power in Canberra, they thought that they could develop communications policies that a social democratic government would be willing to introduce. They set up a journal called *Culture and Policy* and three Brisbane universities got funding to establish the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy. In 1992 Stuart Cunningham wrote the book *Framing Culture: Criticism and Policy in Australia*, which, the cover blurb tells us, "brings together cultural

studies and policy studies in a lively and innovative way". Let us look at an example. In his discussion of advertising, Cunningham argues the industry needs to be reformed. He dutifully toes the feminist line by saying that sexism in advertising still needs to be critiqued. He then tells us who is most likely to accomplish these reforms:

The best model of practical reformism in relation to advertising is the modern consumer movement (which gives a quite different, empowering meaning to the term consumerism), represented in Australia by the longstanding work of the Australian Consumers' Association. (Cunningham 1992, p.102)

In other words, the sexism and the other imagined sins of the advertising industry are most likely to succumb, not to legislation like trade practices acts or anti-competition laws, but to the reforming might of the publishers of *Choice* magazine.

This level of innocence is bad enough, but the main problem with Cunningham's attempt to use cultural studies to generate policy is this: if the leading academic authorities of cultural studies are as remote from the industry as they demonstrate in the statements I have quoted above, if their attitude towards the industry is such an ill-gotten combination of ignorance about its functions and arrogance towards those who produce and consume its services, then the prospect of deducing useful government policy from their theories is less than zero.

The third political role in which cultural studies is currently involved is the revival of Marxism. In the university environment, Marxism is a lot like Rasputin. They shot him but he walked away. They tried to drown him in a frozen lake but his head popped up through the ice. They fed him arsenic and he asked for a second helping. No matter how much its reputation sinks, no matter that it stands exposed as having the worst record for mass homicide in human history, Marxism still attracts adherents among intellectually-inclined adolescents and their teachers. In particular, the ideas of the Frankfurt School Marxist, Jurgen Habermas, are currently

being taught in media theory and cultural studies courses. His notion of “the public sphere” has inspired a book of essays by academics from the University of Technology, Sydney (Wilson, 1989), and the latest edition of the Australian media theory journal, *Media International Australia*, has devoted a symposium to the concept. Here is a summary of Habermas’s views from the UTS volume. The mass media, it is claimed,

have increasingly given up even the pretence of providing the information and discussion necessary for an informed readership. Where the role of the media is determined by the requirements of advertising, as became increasingly the case in the nineteenth century, its concerns became consumption not discourse, and manipulation rather than free discussion between equals . . . The concern of the major bourgeois media became not only that of profit maximisation, but also that of excluding or subordinating voices. The competition between political ideas is won or lost through the exercise of power, concealment and subterfuge, not rational debate. (Poole 1989, pp.15-16)

I should emphasise that the author of this summary does not entirely agree with all the views of Habermas expressed here, nor do several other of the book’s contributors, who prefer a more postmodernist analysis. But the question worth asking is why anyone at the end of the twentieth century would bother discussing the Habermas version of Marxism at all? His critique is barely more sophisticated than the kind of doctrinaire denunciation of the evil capitalist media made by Humphrey McQueen in *Australia’s Media Monopolies*, a Maoist variety of Marxist media analysis, published in the 1970s. Why are academic media theorists still subjecting their students to such an intellectually and politically discredited theory, which sheds absolutely no light on the way the media operate? The only possible answer is that they must think there is still something in it. Otherwise, why discuss the “public sphere” with reference to Habermas at all? They must still believe at least part of his story: either that the media are “bourgeois” institutions, or that they exclude oppositional voices, or that they are against rational debate, or that their modus operandi is concealment and subterfuge, or that

they commit some other dreadful offence against the workers of the world.

The fourth political role for cultural studies academics is to quite openly advocate the use of the education system for the political indoctrination of students. They believe that all institutions and relationships are already politicised and so this gives them the right to inject their own politics into the education process. The politics they support, it should be noted, are all on the Left. They range from the Australian Labor Party brand of social democracy to the hairiest kind of fantasies about overthrowing the current forces of “social domination”. The first kind is represented by Professor Stuart Cunningham:

Those who contribute to the education of tomorrow’s journalists, media commentators, public relations consultants, film and media production personnel, educators, policy analysts and public servants have a significant opportunity to participate in the formation of grounded social democratic ideals and practices. (Cunningham 1992, pp.173-4)

Not liberal ideals, mind you, not conservative ideals, nor the ideals and practices of any other political position — only those of social democrats. At the farthest end of the political spectrum are cultural studies theorists who believe that most of the media should be treated as a political enemy and that their job in the university is to turn out people who, if they get employed, will become subversives who can challenge the values of the present repressive regime. If you think I’m exaggerating, let me quote once more the always candid Julia Ravell:

Cultural studies theories offer future journalists alternative models of conceptualising the media which go beyond unreflexive notions of truth and objectivity to understandings of more complex networks of capital, power and information. This historically based knowledge encourages them to contest *from within* those structures of social domination which determine the “real”, the “natural” and the “normal”. Critical teaching informed by cross-disciplinary cultural studies theories enables students to analyse how the media produces identities, role models and ideals . . . how it defines situations, sets agendas and *filters out oppositional ideas*; and

how it sets limits and boundaries beyond which discussion is discouraged. (Ravell 1998: 2, my emphases)

Call me old fashioned, but I think it is unethical for teachers to use the education system to try to force their political views onto students, especially in a system funded by a public that does not share those teachers' radicalism.

6. Cultural studies is idealist and anti-humanist

The idealism and anti-humanism of cultural studies were two of its aspects I discussed in my original paper and I'm raising them again because both were rather vehemently denied by Graeme Turner. When I said that cultural studies believes that "the world should be conceived as a 'text'" and that "individual human beings are unimportant in shaping the world" (1998a, p.13), Turner replied that "nobody believes anything as crude and stupid as this" (Turner 1998). Well, unfortunately, this is not true. Apart from the leading figures of the French structuralist and poststructuralist movement, French historians such as Fernand Braudel and the entire *Annales* school, the Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University Quentin Skinner, the German hermeneutic theorist Hans-George Gadamer, not to mention the German philosopher Martin Heidegger and all the post-war French Heideggerians including Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, there are at least two people giving papers at the "Media Wars" conference whose recent writings quite clearly endorse one or other of them.

The first is John Hartley who has written that "journalism is the poor relation of discourse in theoretical writing" because "it has attracted no Foucault to analyse its power relations" (Hartley 1995, p.29). Now, if someone wants to endorse Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, that is, the claim that all forms of systematic knowledge, such as academic disciplines, are political, then there is a certain amount of essential baggage that comes in its train. In par-

ticular, you have to accept Foucault's anti-humanism, because it constitutes the intellectual framework within which the notion of power/knowledge was conceived. In the same way, you can't endorse Marx's concept of revolution without accepting that it was conceived within a framework which held that class struggle was the dynamic of history. Foucault's anti-humanism maintains that the individual is not a free agent who has a free will driven by his conscious mind. Instead, the individual is an instrument of "discourse", that is, someone shaped by the prevailing language, ideology and culture, which determine the content of his unconscious mind and frame his actions. So the notion of power/knowledge, which Hartley says is needed to analyse journalism, is committed to the view that it is language and culture, not the conscious free will of individual human beings, that shape the social world.

The second person whose writings support one of these crude and stupid beliefs is Graeme Turner himself. If you write, as he does in his textbook *The Media in Australia*, that "language does not describe reality, it actually *constitutes* it" (Turner 1993, p.219; Turner 1997, p.311, his italics), or as he wrote in another work "what language does is to construct, not label, reality for us" (Turner 1988, p.43), you commit yourself to certain logical conclusions that you cannot avoid. One of these is the ontology known as idealism, the view that things exist only as objects of perception, or, in the cultural studies version, as objects of conceptual and linguistic lenses of our own making. Within this linguistic idealism, the proposition that "the world should be conceived as a 'text'" logically follows, whether Turner wants it to or not. The only way he can avoid being committed to it is to drop the claim that language constitutes reality. So far, he appears most reluctant to do this. The original statement appeared in his book in 1993 and was repeated verbatim in the second edition, as recently as 1997. If he really believes it is crude and stupid to say that the world should be conceived as a text, why does he keep repeating its essential premise, that language

constitutes reality? Until he renounces this proposition, no one should take his denials seriously.

While I'm on this point, I might mention another part of Turner's reply. Against my claim that textual analysis had become the principal methodology of media analysis under the cultural studies regime, he replied: "Despite what Windschuttle says, the dominant mode of media studies in Australia is media history, not textual analysis." (Turner 1998) This came as rather a surprise so I thought I'd better check it out in Turner and Cunningham's own book. I looked up the table of contents in both editions of *The Media in Australia* but couldn't find any chapter on media history. Meanwhile, Part Four of both editions, which takes up one sixth of the whole book, is devoted to "Media Texts and Messages" and is entirely about textual analysis. I then looked up the index of the first edition under "H", but could find no entry for "history". The only index entry to even mention the word was "media analysis, history of", that is, a history of the *textual analysis* of the media. The 1997 edition, similarly, has no index entry for "history". Under "media", one of the sub-categories is "history", which refers to only one paragraph on one page in the whole book. There are a few more paragraphs related to each entry of "advertising, history", "film, history" and "radio, history". Meanwhile, "media analysis" and "text analysis, media" refer to a total of 52 pages in the same edition. In other words, media history is such a "dominant mode" within media studies that Turner's own textbook, published only last year, barely touches upon it.

7. Journalism exists to serve its audiences; cultural studies is contemptuous of media audiences

I don't at this stage have anything to add to what I said on this topic in the first paper. Journalists, I noted, are beholden primarily

to their audiences. Their ethical obligations are to their readers, listeners and viewers rather than to employers, advertisers or the state. Journalists cannot function properly without considering the needs of the “readers over their shoulder” in terms of the kind of stories their audiences want to see and in terms of the information their audiences need to make stories intelligible and interesting. On the other hand, cultural studies academics argue that audiences are either (a) mindless robots, or (b) fictional constructs that exist solely in discourse. In all the replies to my original paper, no respondent disputed any of my claims about the contempt in which media audiences are held by cultural studies academics.

8. Cultural studies theorists think anyone can do journalism

To most consumers of the media, journalism seems easy. Print journalism is a no-frills kind of prose that makes a virtue of being uncomplicated. Broadcast journalism often seems no more difficult than having a personal conversation. Because they are unaware how much skill and technique goes into making journalism *seem* easy, industry outsiders often think anyone can do it, without any experience or training at all. It is true that, until some time in the 1980s, the majority of journalists employed in Australia never received any formal training. They learned on the job. Nonetheless, there was a lot of learning to do and, if my own experience is any guide, for the first two years of their career, most cadet journalists were not much good for anything but the simplest tasks.

Cultural studies theorists are among those industry outsiders who believe journalism is easy and that anyone can do it. John Hartley claims that media employers “can and do hire people with no training at all and put them straight into the most prominent positions”. He adds:

In a market where years of experience can be outbid by a squirt of hairspray, it is not learning but looks, not the cerebral but celebrity, that mark the winners, and celebrity smiling is not something that can easily be taught in universities or be regulated by professional associations; journalism is one of the “smiling professions”, whose aspirants may be better advised to spend more on orthodontics than on books. (Hartley 1995, p.24)

Of course, had Hartley ever been employed on a newspaper or a television station, he would never have entertained any of this. He would have known that much of what appears to be the work of celebrities, such as actors and sports stars, is actually done behind the scenes by journalists. He would have witnessed the fact that most newspaper columns attributed to sporting celebrities are actually written by the sub-editors either from rough notes supplied by the columnist or a telephone call. He would have seen the producers of television programs writing the stand-up and voice-over scripts to be read aloud by celebrity presenters. In other words, without the fundamentals being handled by the real professionals, non-journalists, no matter how broad their smiles, would never get into print or onto the air.

Journalism and cultural studies: terms for a compromise

At this stage, I should make some distinctions within media education so that it is clear what are the objects of my criticisms and what are not. Most of the practical training of journalists that goes on in higher education is done by former practitioners. The curriculum is well-developed and most of the teaching in this country is of a high standard. It is well attuned to industry needs and its graduates have a good success rate in gaining employment. Some practical journalism courses are independent of any other courses but most are taught within degrees where up to half the course can comprise media theory. Not all media theory derives from cultural

studies. There is a body of literature on the political economy of the media, on the occupational sociology of media organisations and on various types of analysis of media content. The quality of these three kinds of material is uneven but, for the most part, they provide a useful adjunct to the teaching of journalism. For example, there is a newly-published book, edited by Myles Breen, called *Journalism: Theory and Practice* (1998), which is a collection of essays written largely by members of the Journalism Education Association. Most of these articles throw genuine light onto aspects of the profession and either inform, or are constructively critical of, journalistic practice. This is what good academic work related to a profession should be.

Cultural studies is different. It engages in media theory but, as I have indicated above, it is diametrically opposed to journalism and to similar forms of media practice in terms of its methodology, its understanding, its language and its operating assumptions. This puts constructive or useful criticism of media practice somewhat beyond its reach.

Now, although there is some support for the views expressed in this paper among those academics teaching journalism practice, their acceptance is certainly not universal. The most common attitude is probably that of tolerance. Cultural studies exists, so most journalism educators think they should engage in some form of compromise. In fact, one of the respondents to my original paper, Stuart Cunningham, described not what exists now but what the majority of journalism educators would *prefer* the position to be when he said:

Just as there is no singular focus of media studies on textual analysis, there is also no single methodology. Political economy, institutional analysis and policy studies have all coexisted with semiotics, structuralism and ideology theories . . . Journalism educators . . . often strongly endorse the need for their students to be exposed to the broad range of ideas and concepts found in liberal arts education. (Cunningham 1998)

With this in mind, let me propose the terms of a compromise. One thing that all reasonable people should agree on is that, if you are engaging in professional and vocational education, you should not have a body of theory commenting on that profession that contradicts it in both content and in method, and which at the same time takes the lion's share of senior academic appointments. So, I would propose that journalism education seriously thinks about coming to terms with cultural studies and regarding it as an acceptable theoretical adjunct, on the condition that cultural studies makes some reciprocal compromises itself. From the evidence presented in this paper, there would appear to be seven of these compromises that are the most pressing:

1. Cultural studies should drop all reliance on French structuralist and poststructuralist theory, and give up Frankfurt Marxism as well.

2. It should acknowledge that it is possible for journalists to report objective truths and facts.

3. It should stop trying to use media education as a political crusade on behalf of feminists, gays, indigenes and ethnics, or as a recruiting ground for any political party.

4. It should express itself in intelligible English prose.

5. It should adopt a policy of constructive criticism of media practice and drop its attempts at deconstructivist exposés.

6. It should prefer academic appointments, especially of chairs and heads of schools, to go to people who have industry experience rather than to theorists who have none.

7. It should reduce the influence of literary critics on the curriculum and elevate that of people with genuine research skills.

These terms, it would seem to me, are the minimum necessary if cultural studies is to acknowledge and support the integrity of journalism education. So, what are the chances that these recommendations might be adopted? Given the mindset of those theorists now

entrenched within media studies, I'd say they are rather slim. In fact, to be realistic, they are sheer wishful thinking, a set of proposals that have no hope of being realised, either now or in the foreseeable future, under the prevailing academic hierarchy.

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