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# Learning The All Important Angle: Young Reporters At South China Morning Post

*This paper reports on the findings of an ongoing study of cadet reporters at the media in Germany, Australia and Hong Kong. It concludes that regardless of the politico-cultural and linguistic contexts, qualities such as accuracy, thoroughness of research and clarity of writing remain the basics of any journalistic education. Regardless of their undergraduate field of study, as its study of cadet reporters in South China Morning Post, Hong Kong shows, the media organization has the greatest influence in shaping their journalistic values and news product.*

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This paper, based on research at Hong Kong's major English language newspaper, the *South China Morning Post*, is the third in an ongoing exploration of the induction process of cadet and/or young journalists into the newsroom. The study is premised on the fact that professional journalistic education does not stop at the college gate, but is greatly influenced by the newsroom socialisation process. Two questionnaires, one for young reporters and/or cadets and one for senior staff, attempt to chart, among others, the following areas of investigation: the most significant aspects of on the job learning, the weight of established news routines, influences on ethical decisions, and the sense of ownership of one's work.

Three issues emerge from the interviews about the rite of passage into the newsroom at the *South China Morning Post* as the major ones. They are, first, writing in a second language which, furthermore, is imbued with a different cultural tradition; second, the attitude towards journalism; and third, the noticeable high political sensitivity. However, despite the differences in political circumstances, facility with writing and newsroom routines in the three samples studied, the result of the induction process remains

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the same. The cadets or young reporters learn the way of their newspaper via their colleagues and newsroom practices. No matter what their degree of previous learning is, it is the media organization, which has the greatest influence on shaping their product.

This article, investigating the rite of passage of cadets into the newsroom of the *South China Morning Post* (the *Post*), is the third in a series which looks at the induction process at newspapers in different parts of the world. The first described *The West Australian* in Perth (Josephi 1999), the second Germany's national daily, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Josephi 2000). These two settings, though diverse, have a number of factors in common. Both papers each year take six cadets and provide them with a training program of 12 months at *The West Australian* and 18 months at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. There is also a cadet scheme at the *Post* for its mostly four cadets, which lasts two years, during the second year of which the cadet is seen as a young reporter on probation.

However, this paper is not trying to compare the merits of the various cadet schemes, nor is it primarily aimed at highlighting various journalistic traditions. Originally the research arose out of a wider study into newsroom practices and the impact of the organizational sphere on news production. This research is premised on a variant of Shoemaker & Reese's layers-of-influence model, in which the individual sphere, the organizational sphere, the contextual sphere and the societal make up the levels of impact on media content (Shoemaker & Reese 1996; Reese 2000; Esser 1998). The organizational sphere, in my model, conflates what, with Shoemaker & Reese, are two parts – routines and the managerial level. Since routines, as I have argued elsewhere, are devised by the managerial level to obtain a certain product, they can be seen, as it were, as the long arm of the news organization, and are an indivisible part in the mediation of control (Josephi forthcoming). Research into the induction of young reporters therefore not only traces the cadets' learning process but also shows the ways in which the newspaper teaches them its style and settles them into its newsroom practices.

## Literature And Methods

This paper touches on three theoretical areas, the question of comparative journalism research, the question of professional education and the importance of the organizational sphere shaping media content. However, given the diversity of the three cases studied so far, an in-depth comparative approach would go beyond the boundaries of this paper. I therefore want to confine myself to drawing on monographs and articles that have

been written specifically about Hong Kong's journalism tradition (Chan, Lee & Lee 1996), Hong Kong's journalists (Lee, Chan & Lee 1998) and journalism education in a bilingual setting (Lowe 1996). All three offer valuable data and observations, which I will use below as reference points for the outcomes of the investigation at the Post.

Researching at the major English language paper in Hong Kong invariably brings up the question of cultural difference. Yet looking at the tradition of journalism in Hong Kong, where the press was a mid to late 19th century import from America and the UK, the divide between English and Chinese papers in Hong Kong is not as great as often assumed (Chan, Lee & Lee 1996:2). Cultural difference comes in to play in as much as the *Post* is not an "absorbed and indigenized" foreign medium as are various forms of popular culture (Lee 1996). Yet neither is the *Post* an entirely foreign form of communication, though different approaches in the Hong Kong Chinese press to norms such as privacy, the reporting of deaths and the treatment of officialdom can be observed (Mak 2000).

With regard to research into the organizational sphere shaping media content I want to mention here only briefly the studies I follow when assigning importance to the organizational structure, since I have discussed these previously, and elsewhere (Joseph 1999). They are Gaye Tuchman's *Making News* (1978), Herbert Gans's *Deciding What's News* (1979), Leon Sigal's *Reporters and Officials – the Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (1973), Philip Schlesinger's *Putting 'Reality' Together* (1978), Ericson, Baranek & Chan's *Visualizing Deviance* (1987) and Reese's "*The News Paradigm and the Ideology of Objectivity*" (1997). They all see newsroom practices as a major contributing factor in shaping the news product, curtailing the influence of the individual journalist. I adhere to this weighting of organizational influences and individual autonomy, but without perceiving it as an inherent source of conflict between the organization and the individual (Joseph 1999: 76/77).

My first study at *The West Australian* has shown that newsroom routines are seen – particularly by young journalists – as a help with the initially bewildering demands of researching, interviewing, and writing within a set time, and that they find enough free reign and challenges within the organizational constrictions to retain a satisfying sense of autonomy.

The same can be said of the cadets at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which is counted among the ten best papers in the world. The German newsroom structure does not have sub-editors, potentially giving the journalists a very high degree of autonomy. But my second study showed that much of the cadetship

was directed towards educating the cadets to the style of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Though this ensured that the young journalists familiarize themselves and accept the standards of their paper, it still left them, in their view, with much scope for creativity and autonomy.

At the *Post*, where I talked to six cadets and young reporters and four staff, I used precisely the same questionnaire as I did at *The West Australian* and the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The questions to the cadets and young reporters are aimed at finding the most important learning factors since joining the newsroom, and to what extent this is a structured learning process or whether it is learning by watching and/or imitating. Two questions are directed at ethical decisions and the next three try to gauge organizational and institutional pressure – from time constraints to potentially being issued with a certain view on people and matters. This is to find out to what extent news routines and copy treatment determine a young reporter's approach to a task. The last two questions are aimed at how the young journalists see their individual freedom and individual responsibility within the organization.

The staff was asked a matching set of questions. These involved what young reporters have to learn most, the ethical decision making process, and whether the young journalists are taught the way that suits the paper best, or what could be described as good journalistic practice anywhere. They were also asked whether views on politicians or business people were conveyed to the cadets, and how much journalism courses at university prepare the young reporters.

At this point some information on the *Post* and on Hong Kong (now SAR – Special Administrative Region) will provide a context for my more detailed discussion of the induction of the cadets. Readers familiar with this may wish to pass over this section quickly.

The *South China Morning Post* was founded in 1903 and, close to its centenary, is the oldest surviving newspaper in Hong Kong (Hutcheon, 1983:2). Its initial clientele were major shipping lines and shipping crews. In this the *Post* was little different from numerous publications that had sprung up in Hong Kong, Shanghai and other ports. The press in China was a Western import, carried mostly by missionaries in the mid 19th century, since China's own social and administrative structure only permitted official gazettes (Chan, Lee & Lee 1996:2/3).

The commercial, or business, orientation of the *Post* has lasted to this day. Though the *Post* has no mission statement as

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such, various attempts to define its editorial policy have been made over the years. Robin Hutcheon, its long-time editor, wrote in 1983, “[w]hile a newspaper’s primary role is to publish news and views, in a commercially oriented society it also serves as a daily shop window of the various retail, financial, industrial, transportation and service industries that cater to the community.” (Hutcheon 1983:2). He went on to say that the *Post* has consistently emphasized foreign news, not only because of its large expatriate readership, but also because of the demand for knowledge about major international financial and political developments.

Though the expatriate community is of lesser importance since the handover, the *Post* has retained its position as one of the major English language papers in Asia. Even before the handover on 1 July 1997 the percentage of English speakers in Hong Kong was put at only 3.1%, compared to the *Post*’s 16.6% share of the newspaper market (McIntyre 1998a:39/40). Today 98% of Hong Kong’s almost 7 million people are ethnically Chinese, but the need for a “respected source of English language news about Hong Kong, China and the rest of Asia” has remained (scmp.com : Annual Report 2000). The *Post*’s circulation figures dipped after the handover, and also due to the Asian financial crisis, from 119,921 copies for July-December 1997 to 107,129 copies for the half year January to June 1999 (SCMP 1999:8). Since then, the circulation has picked up again by 1.4% for the same period in 2000 (scmp.com : Annual Report 2000).

The *Post*’s direction towards the business and financial world is underpinned by the choice of its most recent editor, Robert Keatley, who took over in August 1999. Prior to joining the *Post*, Mr. Keatley had a long career with the *Wall Street Journal* in the US and Europe, and also has previously served as the editor of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* in Hong Kong (scmp.com : Annual Report 2000). Concerning its staff, the website remains positively vague. It reads, “[t]he Group’s employees, like its readers and customers, come from all over the world. They have a unique understanding of East and West and human dimension.”

Hutcheon took a similar approach when writing about the people at the *Post*. “The editorial staff is a reflection of its international commitment, for its reporters and sub-editors are not just local people but are drawn from almost every part of the English speaking world.” He went on to say that over the years “local newspaper proprietors have helped to develop and strengthen the education of local journalists by scholarships and bursaries, and today graduates from local universities and post secondary colleges form the *backbone* of the reporting staff.” (Hutcheon 1983:156, my emphasis). Though Hutcheon clearly tried to promote local staff, the top echelon, like the editorial

section heads, are still today mostly Caucasian.

The *Post* was owned from 1987 to 1993 by Rupert Murdoch who, after acquiring *Star TV*, sold out of the *Post* and Robert Kuok Hock Nien, a Malaysian-Chinese businessman, became the controlling shareholder with a 34.9% stake in the company in September 1993. This ownership change has been interpreted as the *Post* having been “acquired in whole or in part by China-affiliated capital, or owners with close business or personal ties with the PRC or actively seeking to expand businesses other than the newspaper itself into China” (Stone 1998:160). Robert Kuok Hock Nien has large investments in China, particularly in hotels, the property and food sector. “While the *Post* did not seem to undergo an immediate or radical change in its editorial line following the change in ownership”, it has been suggested that there is a measurable decline in the number of political stories about China (Stone 1998:161).

The *Post*'s previous editor, Jonathan Fenby, clearly anticipated the guardians of the freedom of the press's reactions when asking rhetorically in an interview in April 1997: “Does a newspaper which compromises on a minor issue thereby forfeit its editorial virginity forever ... ? And what if a newspaper decides to devote less space to reporting critics of Beijing? Is it not the right of a newspaper to determine its own political line?” (HKJA 1997:48).

The situation came to a head in 2000 when the editor of the China desk, Willy Wo-lap Lam, was attacked by the owner, Robert Kuok Hock Nien, in a Letter to the Editor over inaccuracies and slants in his reporting. Mr Lam was subsequently removed from his post as China editor, and has since left the paper. The Hong Kong Journalists Association condemned the move with the words, “The HKJA notes that Mr. Lam's sudden removal from day-to-day operations comes just four months after severe public criticism from Robert Kuok Hock Nien. ... This strongly indicates that the sudden move may be linked to pressure from outside the editorial department to make the China coverage less critical” (*The Journalist*, Nov. 2000:31).

The *Post* itself reported a British parliamentary committee, which attacked the mainland over interventions in Hong Kong and specifically the encouragement of self-censorship in the media, citing the Lam case. “While criticising a newspaper's proprietor is never likely to be a good career move for a journalist, Lam was replaced by a former editor of the pro-Beijing *China Daily*,’ it said.” The article goes on to quote *Post* editor Robert Keatley who “rejected the claim of self-censorship over the Lam controversy” and who pointed to the parliamentary committee's factual error stating that Lam's replacement was “a reporter – not

an editor – with the *China Daily*, who had worked for the Hong Kong newspapers for the past seven years” (Wan & Leung 30.11.2000).

The Lam case, however, is a very good indication of the high sensitivity and close scrutiny with which press moves are watched since the handover. To an outsider, the voices of vigilance over press freedom seem louder in Hong Kong than most other places – also among the young journalists and the press itself. With the Hong Kong press having been strongly partisan, especially in the lead up to the handover, the young journalists seem very aware of the political affiliations of their paper and, by extension, attuned to the nature and danger of self-censorship.

In the face of recent widely reported outbursts by President Jiang Zemin against the Hong Kong media, the *Post* commented variously in its editorials on the Chinese president’s demands for a more “socially responsible” media attitude. “Newspapers have occasionally caused outrage with stories considered to breach good taste. But these papers also boast the largest circulation; if enough people stopped buying them, no doubt that would be the most effective restraint. In this developing society, dissent and argument are part of a continuous debate, adding to stability rather than threatening it. Constructive criticism is far healthier than unthinking praise” (*SCMP* editorial, 21.12.2000).

The editorial’s last paragraph quoted above is also a direct finger pointing to the two Chinese tabloid dailies, the *Oriental Daily News* and the *Apple Daily*, which command an estimated 80% of the print market (HKJA 2000:17). *The Apple Daily*, founded in 1995 by maverick businessman Jimmy Lai, according to the young journalists, “revolutionized” the Hong Kong newspaper scene by bringing what seems a decidedly Western tabloid style to the Chinese print market. Whereas previously large entertainment section and graphic descriptions of assaults and deaths – whether by accident or suicide – were unusual, now the paparazzi style stalking of afflicted families or entertainers has become common.

Given the complex political context within which the *Post* operates, so different from the current Australian and German situations, one might expect this to impact significantly on the induction process of young journalists.

### **Cadetship structure**

The cadetship was instituted during the time News Ltd owned the *Post*. Tina Leung, who administers the program, calls it “quite famous in the industry here”. (Leung 2000) An advertisement is placed in the middle of the year, asking for applications from all walks of life, and a portfolio. This usually

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generates a response of well over 200 applications, which is narrowed down to twenty, who are invited for interviews and tests. Leung says that those coming from journalism school have an advantage in the selection process, but that the company equally considers graduates from other fields. In the first round, the applicants are separately interviewed by Leung and the managing editor for their general knowledge and common sense, and are also given facts from which to write a news story, testing their writing skills and news sense. At this stage the company, importantly, can find out how sincere the candidates are about entering the field, “because some apply simply because they are bored or expect journalism to be something glamorous” (Leung 2000).

Leung’s remark has to be seen in the context that, though journalism courses enjoy great popularity in Hong Kong, journalism is not considered a highly desirable career (Chu 2000; H. Parry 2000). This is also borne out in the data on Hong Kong journalists collated by Chan, Lee and Lee, which shows that 55% of journalists have worked no longer than two years at their present organization (Chan, Lee & Lee, 1996: 28). Once the field is narrowed down to ten, the editor, the managing editor and Ms Leung form a panel to interview the finalists and decide together, who the successful four to six applicants are.

In their first year the cadets learn T-line shorthand, spend two mornings a week with the cadet counsellor and do a rotation of five or six desks: news, political, business, features, and – if they speak Mandarin – the China desk, and the on-line division. The time spent on each desk varies between eight to ten weeks. In consultation with the cadets and the section editors, it is then decided where they should spend all of their second year. After this, as a rule, the cadets are taken on by the *Post*. By then, Leung says, “they are quite specialized. Their skills and knowledge really grow in the second year” (Leung 2000).

Faced with the same questionnaire used in my previous studies, the young reporters’ answers were quite varied, whereas the staff concurred in many points.

## Young reporters

Six young reporters from different intakes were interviewed. Two had only been cadets for two and a half months (intake 2000), two for a year longer (intake 1999), and one reporter each was from the intake of 1998 and 1997. All were from Hong Kong Chinese families, however, their educational path had taken differing routes. Two had done their A levels in England and subsequently read economics and politics and international

relations at English universities. The other four had either studied journalism or held a postgraduate degree in journalism. One had her BA in Journalism from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, another hers from HKBU. One had a BA in English Literature from HK University and a Master in Journalism from Sheffield University (UK) and one had studied Economics at the University of Essex (UK) and subsequently done a postgraduate diploma in Broadcast Journalism, also in the UK.

Asked what they learned once they entered the newsroom, those with little previous experience in journalism all answered, “how to write a news story”. This was expanded into, “how to gather information, how to generate a story, how to interview people and, once writing the story, how to angle it.” Those with journalism degrees were familiar with this process but not yet with “the real life of being a journalist.” They found the level of accuracy demanded of them the most challenging aspect. The former student from the Chinese University of HK felt that she had been equipped with much theory but little practical knowledge, bearing out the direction of that university’s journalism course (Chan, Lee & Lee 1996:58).

Though some were more familiar than others with writing stories on entering the *Post*, they all mentioned the need to get the news angle right. The emphasis on this aspect was so strong that impromptu secondary questions were asked to find out why news angle should be of such vital concern. One of the reasons is the *Post*’s strict adherence to concisely written articles. If this standard is not met by the story, even though having passed the scrutiny of the desk’s deputy editor and editor, it still runs the risk of getting spiked by the back bench.

Language difficulties play into this attempt of getting the right news angle, as all young journalists work in their second language. Some degree of cultural difference also comes into it, as Hong Kong Chinese journalists, compared to their Western counterparts, are seen as “conservative in their writing style” and not daring to “try ... interpretative reporting” (Mak 2000:3). One of the new cadets said, “Sometimes senior journalists tell me how to get the news angle to make a story rather than just citing some official language and some official information.” He could see the importance of cutting through the PR and official language, because “we’re working for the public interest.”

In trying to get their lead paragraph right, many take their guidance from the senior colleagues’ writing and this way internalise the house style. “They tell you not to write too long for a lead and they remind you not to overquote people.” Senior colleagues are generally the greatest source of help, also when it comes to interviewing, which is seen as “a delicate art” – and no

more so than at the China desk. Interviewing evasive mainland officials requires a very good grounding in facts and background knowledge, though quite often the upshot is a 'no comment'.

Following the primacy of getting the news angle right, the major constraint felt by the young reporters is the required writing style, length of story, and the competition for getting stories into the paper with people "fighting over limited space". Timelines are not a difficulty because the *Post* goes to press late, at 11.30pm for the Macau and subscription sales and at 1.30am for the street sales.

There is no constraint felt in terms of how they should view people. Though the political line of the paper is obvious to the young journalists – "One of the reasons we like to talk to the pro-democracy camp is because this paper likes them" – this is not a matter of concern. The question whether he/she would like to write a pro-Beijing camp story brought an instant and emphatic, "No". Similarly in the business section it was not seen as an imposition to have to write stories from the shareholders point of view, i.e. providing the information needed to judge the soundness of the stock.

Indeed, the young journalists at the *Post* volunteered much more than those interviewed in previous studies to talk about company matters, such as the Lam affair. They also dared to be critical of aspects of the company, be it the back-bench driven style of the organization or its preference for articles that are in line with the paper's image as an 'establishment paper'. The very openness with which these issues were discussed made evident how few constraints the *Post* places on its young reporters in the wider political sense. But this also points to the fact that political awareness, again in the wider sense, is currently a given in Hong Kong.

As in the other studies, ethical questions were not a source of difficulty or friction. The young journalists were more likely, in their answer, to move on to the Chinese tabloid press in Hong Kong. In particular, the paparazzi-style approach introduced by the *Apple Daily*, and its implications for privacy, were brought up. But this was not seen as having any impact at the *Post*. The young reporters felt little difficulty fitting into the newsroom and, depending whether they had a journalism degree, agreed that they learned more from watching and imitating colleagues than the structured cadet course. Those without a journalism degree rated the importance and usefulness of the lessons much higher, but not as high as the learning from colleagues.

Despite the clear directives on writing style and the fight for limited copy space, the young reporters, with one exception, rated their autonomy and individual responsibility for their stories

as fairly high to high. Their judgement was clearly influenced by seeing their work situation at the *Post* in comparison with the conditions at Chinese HK papers, which they knew from hearsay (for example, half the reporters on the political desk came from the Chinese papers). There the staff is predominantly young, frequently undertrained and their stories often appear without a by-line. Publishing under their by-line gave the young journalists a sense of ownership, and during the period of research all had stories published – though not every day – including those who were in the early stages of their cadetship. In fact, the article quoted earlier, regarding the *Post*'s editor's comments on the paper's possible susceptibility to pressure by its owner and Beijing, was co-written by one of the young journalists interviewed.

## Staff

The interviews with the staff (news editor Simon Parry, night editor of the *Sunday Post* and former cadet counsellor Stan James, cadet counsellor Hazel Parry and editorial administration manager Tina Leung) presented a fairly congruent picture. They all agreed that due to the variety of experience the young reporters come in, their needs are different. Especially with those who have no background in journalism, one has to start with the basics. "What you teach them is what is news, what is a news story, and why. In Hong Kong you are generally dealing with people for whom English is a second language. So obviously the basic writing skills have to be polished and taught. It would be very different in a place where they write in their first language" (James 2000).

The emphasis on writing is clearly borne out of the fact that English is not their mother tongue. Barry Lowe has outlined teaching strategies in "*Language and Context: Some Problems of Teaching Journalism in Second Language*" in Hong Kong, and much of what he had to say in his introductory remarks was repeated by the staff of the *Post* (Lowe 1996:77).

Just as Lowe tried to introduce his students to the courts the news editor mentioned the courts as the "area where they have most difficulty, ... because accuracy is so paramount in court reporting and there are legal constraints as well. It is quite difficult for a new reporter who has never been to a court before to listen to a morning's sitting and know how to boil down into a story. Whereas elsewhere you get a press release, which attempts to give you a story in a certain way" (S. Parry 2000). With a young court reporter having recently made a potentially costly mistake "through carelessness", even more attention is paid at the *Post* to court reporting, libel and defamation laws. This also includes balancing stories. "In the training phase you have to make them

aware what the consequences of writing a story are. That if you write a story accusing someone of something, it is important to get to the bottom, to get other opinions” (James 2000).

Asked whether they give their cadets what would be good journalistic training anywhere or whether it is weighted towards the *South China Morning Post*, Simon Parry saw it a bit of both. “We try very much to encourage them to write a simple, adjective free style, very direct and with a very simple straightforward structure. That would equip them to work on any regular newspaper in the English speaking world.” Stan James, on the other hand, when teaching the cadets “would take a section of the newspaper and they would produce it, they would write stories in the way they were written in this paper.” James, who had trained people at various newspapers, including in his native South Africa where English also was a second language for most, concluded that “ultimately we’re looking to employ people and they need to know this paper. But, at the same time, I make them aware that every newspaper is different.” Hazel Parry shared James’ attitude.

While the legal side presents problems, the ethical side does not. This can be explained by the young journalists and the *Post*’s ethical values being similar, but also with the firm guidance the cadets initially get. When “they are sent on a story, we try to give them clear instructions on what we want from the story. When we send them out to a delicate situation we try to make very clear how we want them to approach it. What we expect them to do and what we don’t expect them to do” (S. Parry 2000). Questioned further on the often mentioned importance of news angle, Parry thought that cadets generally can be unsure what line to take. When the cadets come back, “we’d discuss it with them and decide from which angle to approach. But not really from an ethical or political point of view, simply from a story point of view ... it can make the difference between the story being two paragraphs on page four or being placed on page one.”

Some of the close guidance given to cadets, also in developing their news sense, was explained by Hazel Parry as resulting from “a much more casual attitude [by] some of them.” This comes from journalism not being considered highly, because the pay is not high. Hazel Parry, over the years, has seen several cadets withdrawing from the cadetship, at times because they had found “a nice government job”. Parental pressure also urges the cadets away from what is perceived as an insecure future. Parry related one incident where a female cadet was dropping out to take a position at the Customs Office. “This 21, 22 year old [said to me] ‘You know, with this job I’ll get my pension’”, and the other cadets were jealous that she was going to a well paid job (H. Parry 2000). Tina Leung’s earlier mentioned test of the sincerity of

applicants falls into this same category, as do the figures which show a young and highly mobile workforce in journalism in Hong Kong (Chan, Lee & Lee 1996:28).

Three issues emerge from the interviews about the rite of passage into the newsroom at the *South China Morning Post* as the major ones. They are, first, writing in a second language which, furthermore, is imbued with a different cultural tradition; second, the attitude towards journalism; and third, the noticeably high political sensitivity.

Writing in a second language for a readership for whom English is mostly a second language is a central aspect in training the cadets, and beyond that, in the treatment of copy. The “repair” mechanisms in place (Reese 1997:422) – as indicated by the interviews – are directed towards obtaining good, sharp journalism, and not toward gaining an ideological hold on the copy. The *South China Morning Post* sees its editorial independence as an asset which, in earlier years, saw it voted as Hong Kong’s most trustworthy paper (Chan, Lee & Lee 1996: 40). Cultural difference comes into it in that the young reporters have to be pushed towards a more interpretative way of angling their stories.

Equally significant is the attitude towards journalism. Chan, Lee and Lee’s 1991 figures draw a vivid picture of a young, highly mobile workforce (Chan, Lee & Lee 1996:82/3). The interviews back up this picture. The ‘oldest’ of the young reporters was the only one left from his intake of 1997. The back-bench driven approach to copy treatment can therefore be partly seen as a reaction to this frequently changing and somewhat inexperienced workforce.

The youth of Hong Kong’s journalists was also put into the limelight by recent angry remarks of President Jiang Zemin, who criticized questions by the Hong Kong media as “naïve” and “simple”. Interestingly, the *Post*’s transcript of Jiang Zemin’s ‘lecture’ does not contain the words with which he was reported in the *New York Times*. “‘You are very familiar with Western ways, but you are too young,’ said the president, Jiang Zemin, after he was pressured on whether Beijing had endorsed a second term for Hong Kong’s chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa.” (Landler, *NYT*, 29.10.2000). Only when a similar incident occurred on the occasion of the first anniversary of the Macau handover, did the *Post* write in its editorial, “There can be few places in the world that are unaware of President Jiang Zemin’s opinion of the Hong Kong media. His exasperation against what he considers to be the ‘naivety’ and ‘simplistic’ questions of its young [!] reporters made headlines around the world.” (*SCMP* editorial, 21.12.2000, my

## Discussion Of Findings

emphasis). Though the issue between President Jiang Zemin and the Hong Kong media is ultimately one of control and influence, the Chinese President clearly used one of the weaker points of the Hong Kong media as his point of attack.

The third major issue is the fear for Hong Kong's freedom of expression and the dangers of increasing self-censorship. The young journalists showed considerable awareness of this concern, encouraging the view that they will keep up the vigilance. They want to fulfil their role of working for the public interest, and this is in line with their paper who rebuffed President Jiang Zemin with the words, "... journalists working for respectable newspapers of all political shades would say that a vital part of their job is to act as a public watchdog towards officialdom – to criticise when it is warranted, and to support when they feel that is justified." (*SCMP* editorial, 21.12.2000)

## Conclusion

My research at the *South China Morning Post* found that, notwithstanding the complex political context and writing at a foreign language paper, the fundamentals of professional education in journalism – whether in the newsroom or at journalism school – stayed unchanged. Qualities such as accuracy, thoroughness of research and clarity of writing remain the basics of any journalistic education, even if the emphases differ. My three studies show that in Australia the stress is on "to report and reveal" (Williams 2000:19), in Germany it is on how to inform and offer a well argued comment (Josephi 2000), and in Hong Kong it is how to inform and how to provide an assessment of this information.

However, despite the differences in political circumstances, facility with writing and newsroom routines in the three samples studied, the result of the induction process remains the same. The cadets or young reporters learn the way of their newspaper via their colleagues and newsroom practices. No matter what their degree of previous learning is, the media organization has the greatest influence on shaping their product, and journalistic traditions will continue to be handed on this way.

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