

Asia Pacific Media Educator

| Issue 4

Article 5

1-1998

Influences of a 'Third culture' of journalism education

K. Starck

University of Iowa, US

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Starck, K., Influences of a 'Third culture' of journalism education, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 4, 1998, 50-59.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss4/5>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Influences of A 'Third Culture' On Journalism Education

As we enter an era driven by technology and "new media," we are all searching for the journalism of the next millennium. Part of this emerging "new journalism" must have a strong intercultural dimension suited to the global forces shaping a world moving toward increased interdependence and interconnectedness. Yet intercultural journalism has barely appeared on the journalism education scene. This article describes the author's experience with the cultural dynamics of teaching journalism in China, Romania and Finland and efforts to incorporate the experience into the American journalism classroom.

Kenneth Starck

University of Iowa

It was one of those beguiling questions. So simple. So potentially revealing.

"What was the impact of the experience on your views of the U.S. press system?" asked a colleague upon my return to familiar environs after a year of teaching journalism in China.

"Well, hmm," I stumbled. "It made me, um, appreciate our (U.S.) press system a little more. But, oddly enough," I warmed to the challenge, "the experience made me more critical of the journalism we practice in this country. It could be so much better."

The question was transformative for me. And despite having what I considered at least a non-parochial view of the world, I hadn't realized until then how much of a cultural conversion I was experiencing. It wasn't exactly the lightning flash experience of Saul on the road to Damascus. But almost. What the question drove home to me was the impact intercultural experience was having on me and my outlook on journalism education.

In an age of globalization, we ought, minimally, to be encouraging our students to prepare themselves for an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. Shouldn't the same apply to teachers of journalism? Yet intercultural

journalism has barely appeared on the journalism education scene.

In this essay, I'd like to sketch my own encounters with intercultural journalism -- from trying to figure out what it is, its significance and my efforts to incorporate the idea into my classroom. Not that my experience is unique or even remarkable. It's just that I haven't reflected much on this part of my professional career. Perhaps it's a matter of being so close to the phenomenon that perspective is lost. That's what happens when you have no experience with another culture: It is next-to-impossible to understand your own culture without at least being familiar with another one.

That's what I think happened when asked about my views of the United States press system after the year in China. The same applies to the time I spent in other parts of the world, including Romania and Finland. You cannot begin to understand your own press system without knowing about at least one other one. The more general principle may be that you can't know much about any one thing unless you're acquainted with another one.

Oddly, as far as I've been able to determine, no formal research has been conducted on the topic of the influence of significant intercultural experiences on a journalism teacher's classroom behavior. Nor could College of Education colleagues point me to such literature in the field.

The kind of experience I'm talking about is not a one-night stand or today-is-Thursday-so-this-must-be Guangzhou. Gaining even a reasonable understanding of another press system, let alone the culture, requires extended and firsthand experience. We're talking at least a semester but preferably a year or so. Even then that may be just long enough to realize the complexity of matters and come away completely confused. This may be another principle: The more you know about something, the more there is to know.

So, to return to my original question: What has been the impact of significant international experiences on my teaching of journalism?

It has made me reflect more deeply -- and in different ways -- on how I teach everything, from beginning reporting to international communication problems. It has made me go back to re-examine original tenets underlying my decision to pursue an academic career. It has led me to develop a course called Intercultural Affairs Reporting. It has forced me to think about -- and to appreciate -- diversity on a number of levels. It has challenged me to promote intercultural literacy. It has enabled me to work effectively with international students and faculty -- and to value the opportunity to work with both.

Concepts such as culture and intercultural are extremely

important yet can be elusive. So let me explain what I mean by "intercultural." After exploring much of the literature on culture, I've concluded that it isn't necessary to be very pedantic. "Culture" refers to "a way of life." "Intercultural communication?" That's a little trickier. For me it means the exchange of symbols between people whose cultural perceptions and orientations are distinctly different from one another.

Integrating these concepts naturally and meaningfully into one's thought processes takes some practice and deliberation. Samovar, Porter and Stefani, in their popular textbook, *Communication Between Cultures*, help to untangle these webs of meaning (1998: 22-54). For them culture is the "deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, actions, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and artifacts acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving" (1998:36). As I say, a "way of life."

My students also find helpful the seven characteristics of culture these authors say most directly relate to communication, namely, culture is learned, transmitted from one generation to the next, based on symbols, dynamic, integrated, ethnocentric and adaptive (1998: 37-48).

Finally, let me call on these authors for their definition of intercultural communication: "communication between people whose cultural perceptions and symbol systems are distinct enough to alter the communication event" (1998:48). Also instructive are related terms which designate other forms of intercultural communication: interracial, interethnic and intracultural (sometimes "subculture," a term giving way to the less pejorative "co-culture" (1998:48-49).

Next, let me explain how diversity has figured in my thinking.

Extended stints teaching in other countries have made me more conscious of not only welcoming but also encouraging diversity. Not just in the obvious ways of skin color and religious beliefs but in terms of ideas and different ways of doing things. In the classroom, this means exploring alternative approaches, searching for different means, re-examining long-accepted beliefs and, possibly, re-assessing goals. What's the difference between "illegal aliens" and "undocumented workers?" Why do the people of this country tolerate controls that would be anathema in our system?

My Chinese students listened intently to my comments about press freedom. Their main purpose in the course was to learn Western techniques of journalistic reporting and writing. Such a seemingly straightforward objective still required some

context, a cultural -- or systemic, if you please -- context.

"In the United States," I was pontificating, "the government cannot tell journalists what to print. This is part of the hard-won and continuing struggle to maintain press freedom,"

"What freedom?" came the question from the back of the room. I was pleased at the question--any question--because it had not been easy to create an environment that encouraged class participation.

"Could you tell me a little more about what you mean?" I responded.

"I don't think the press (in the United States) is completely free," said the student who one day would work for China's news agency Xinhua. "Doesn't advertising have some influence?"

Point well taken. The discussion went on to probe the need for financial support for any press system, the possible implications of such support and, finally, the relationship between government and press in the context of an overall social-political-economic system.

I don't think it is possible to fully understand--and appreciate or critically evaluate--our own system if we have nothing to compare it to. That applies not only to media but also education, law and other cultural creations. What this means is trying to understand how these creations came about historically and how they fit into the nation's social, political and economic fabric.

Another obvious yet sometimes overlooked way to get intercultural perspectives in the classroom is to call on international students and foreign-born faculty. They can add to the variety of viewpoints, often transforming the nature of the discourse.

Now, let me turn to intercultural literacy.

Significant experience with another culture and another press system affects a person's worldview. The world becomes larger and richer. We teach literacy -- verbal and visual. Why not intercultural literacy?

In a lecture in my United States classroom, a French journalism professor looked out the window one morning on an early spring day. He had worked as a journalist and later as a communication specialist in the developing nations of Africa.

"Consider those flowers," he said, pointing. Look at those blossoms. Look at those colors. Wouldn't it be a shame if they all looked the same?"

The ability to appreciate other cultures marked a turning point in human civilization. Such an ability does not manifest itself as a result of a gene. Like all cultural traits, it is learned. Or not learned, as the case may be. Learning suggests education, and education has a particular role in developing intercultural

literacy. One of our goals as journalism educators ought to be to produce interculturally competent journalists. Easier said than done. But at least we ought to be reasonably clear about the direction.

Taylor (1989) pointed the way for me a few years ago when he told a group of journalism educators that interculturally literate journalists understand that:

- most, if not all, truths are perceptions of truth viewed through the prism of culture;
- a journalist's effectiveness as an information gatherer is enhanced through intercultural communication competence, verbal as well as non-verbal;
- the perception of what constitutes "news," as well as gauging the importance of "news" is culturally determined; and
- interpretations and perceptions of journalists are culture bound which means that errors of interpretation and perception are inevitable without sensitivity to and knowledge about cultural differences.

Cultures, of course, constantly change, and, there's always the possibility of one dominating, maybe even obliterating, another. But as the French journalism professor explained metaphorically, lose a culture and you lose a species of flower. We are all slightly diminished at the loss of beauty.

Now let me turn to the impact of interculturalism on my teaching. First, it forced me to develop a philosophy of education, specifically journalism education. What is it that I--a former journalist--was trying to achieve by teaching others about journalism? To get a job. That was the initial rationale. But that doesn't carry you--or students--very far at a time when everyone seems to be undergoing never-ending professional rehabilitation.

Surely we should be equipping students with not only the skills to compete for the first job but for a life-long professional career. That's a little different as well as a little daunting. For me, as a professor in the classroom, the basic question was: Whom do I serve? The profession? Society? Students?

The answer has to be all three. But when push comes to shove, which constituency is most important? For me that has become an easy question though I suspect many would disagree. First and foremost, I serve the student. This is part of my cultural bias toward education and the individual, namely, that the goal is to assist students to develop their talents and skills to the fullest. The second most important constituent is society.

Of course, the industry looks to journalism education for a trained, comparatively inexpensive labor supply and other services. As an educator, I must be sensitive to professional

interests. But uppermost in my mind is the larger mission of providing opportunities for the maximum development of individual intellect and talent and inculcating a sense of the ideal.

Cardinal John Henry Newman (1976: 154) put it eloquently when he spoke about the practical ends of education:

If then a practical end must be assigned to a University course, I say it is that of training good members of society. Its art is the art of social life, and its end is fitness for the world.

Journalism education has its own goals--recognizing news; collecting, synthesizing, analyzing and presenting information accurately and completely; understanding the role of journalism in society; etc.--and these professional goals are not incompatible with society's goals.

Now, let me tell you about that Intercultural Affairs Reporting course. I knew some of our students in the United States encountered the notion of culture in anthropology and a few interpersonal communication courses. But it became clear that little had been done to fuse cultural understanding and the journalistic process. After all, it's only in their application that ideas become real.

It finally occurred to me--and maybe it's been obvious to others--that reporting about other cultures requires skills and knowledge different from those required for other kinds of reporting. Context and meaning have to be "lifted" from one culture and "re-presented" in a way that the audience of another culture can understand the message within the framework of its own context and meaning. So why not a course titled Intercultural Affairs Reporting? I wasn't interested in a purely conceptual course but one that would conjoin the substantive content and the journalistic mode of expression.

Objectives were straightforward, even simple:

- to develop and extend reporting/writing skills;
- to sharpen critical abilities; and
- to expand intercultural horizons.

From the most recent syllabus: "The course seeks to achieve these goals by focusing the journalistic process on a topic area referred to as 'intercultural affairs reporting.' ('Culture' in this context is to be interpreted in an anthropological sense as a 'way of life.')

The course will provide opportunities to carry out journalistic research and writing in the realm of intercultural affairs. Assignments with strong cross-cultural (especially international but also co-cultural) themes will be encouraged and will be construed to accommodate a broad range of interests."

Course materials include a good book about culture. I've used Edward Hall's classic *Beyond Culture*, which, though

published in 1976, is still useful. More recently I've used the Samovar, Porter and Stefani text. I've also used one of the few journalism-oriented books in this area, John Maxwell Hamilton's *Main Street America and The Third World* (1988). The book has become dated and consists mainly of articles that reflect intercultural themes. Since this is an advanced-level course, I also include at least one good book on writing, and the best I've found is *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser (1994).

But the class doesn't rely much on textbooks. It is, after all, a reporting and writing laboratory. The format is that of a workshop. We discuss story ideas, prepare articles and critique the work in class. All the while we pay close attention to the intercultural aspects of the articles, from the idea to the language usage.

Fueling class discussions are examples of intercultural affairs journalism from the daily press, magazines and other media. Some are excellent, but there's also an ample supply of poor examples. The poor examples exhibit stereotyping, bias or prejudice -- unconscious or otherwise, lack of contextual understanding, etc.

We pay close attention to Walter Lippmann's famous discussion of stereotypes (1922: 54-55), in which he wrote: "For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see." What happens much too often when it comes to intercultural observation is that we've been programmed to make up our minds before we have the experience.

An example: On February 20 shortly after Tara Lipinski won the gold medal in women's figure skating at the Winter Olympics in Nagano, Japan, MSNBC's News Alert service on the Internet flashed this headline on the screens of its close to one million subscribers: "American beats out Kwan." Nancy Kwan, of course, is as American as anyone born in Torrance, California.

What meaning did the headline convey? What was the writer of the headline thinking? How was this person thinking? What was the reaction of the Asian-American community? As you might surmise, all this provided grist for a vigorous class discussion. By the way, MSNBC apologized, and several newspapers wrote articles about the gaffe.

From time to time we publish articles produced by the class under the title "*Dateline: Iowa, The World.*" The latest edition can be found at: <http://www.uiowa.edu/~intercul/dateline.htm>.

The goal of our class is to recognize and help eradicate impediments to intercultural communication. Naturally, we'll never completely succeed, but that shouldn't stop us from trying. The first step is to acknowledge that prejudice, bias and ethnocentrism begin within ourselves. We don't deal so much

with politics and class--that is to say, power--but such factors cannot be ignored, as noted, for example by Langton (1993) with respect to the Aboriginal people of Australia. Langton's work itself suggests that intercultural communication best takes place when there is a meaningful dialogue between cultures. The emphasis in our intercultural reporting class is on cultivating intercultural awareness and sensitivity in order to contribute toward understanding, tolerance and mutual respect.

In summary then, as we enter an era seemingly driven endlessly by technology and "new media," we are all searching for the journalism of the next millennium. Part of this emerging "new journalism" must have a strong intercultural dimension suited to the global forces shaping a world moving toward increased interdependence and interconnectedness.

Galtung and Vincent (1992: 244-245) point to a new journalism directed toward the global and the human. It must be, they write, ". . . void of visible and invisible repression, and reflective of its social communication abilities. Above all, it must be responsive to human concerns and responsible to norms of decency and objectivity."

To help me understand where we may be heading globally, I've found the concept of "the third culture" to be useful (see Casmir 1993, and Useem and Donoghue 1963). The term describes a phenomenon in which a person's cultural orientation undergoes change as a result of interacting with another person's culture. From these interactions, the "third culture" emerges in bridging fashion. The process is one of continual re-emergence. In today's world the third culture is in a constant state of formation and re-formation. ■

REFERENCES

- Casmir, F. L. (1993). "Third-culture building: a paradigm shift for international and intercultural communication," in S. A. Deetz (ed.), *Communication Yearbook* (Vol. 16, pp. 407-428). Sage, Newbury Park, CA.
- Galtung, J. and Vincent, R. C. (1992). *Global Glasnost: Toward a New World Information and Communication Order?* Hampton Press, Cresskill, N.J.
- Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*. Anchor, NY.
- Hamilton, J. M. (1988, rev ed). *Main Street America and The Third World*. Seven Locks Press: Cabin John, MD.
- Langton, M. (1993). *Well, I heard it on the radio and I saw it on the television*. North Sydney, Australian Film Commission.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. The Free Press, New York.
- Newman, J. H. (1976). *The Idea of a University*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.

- Samovar, L. A., Porter, R. E. and Stefani, L. A.** (1998, 3rd ed). *Communication Between Cultures*. Wadsworth, Belmont, CA.
- Taylor, O. L.** (1989). *The Education of Journalists and Mass Communications for the 21st Century: A Cultural Perspective*, " paper presented at annual convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. Washington, D.C.: 10-13, Aug.
- Useem, J. and R. and Donoghue, J.** (1963). "Men in the middle of the third culture: the roles of American and non-Western people in cross-cultural administration," *Human Organization* (Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 169-179).
- Zinsser, W.** (1994, 5th ed). *On Writing Well*. Harper & Row: New York.

*KENNETH STARCK, PhD., is Professor at the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Iowa, Iowa City, USA.
Email: kenneth-starck@uiowa.edu*
