Comment & Criticism

Comment and criticism allows for a shorter and topical style of academic writing. Designed to accommodate comments on recent events as well as providing for a more polemic styles of academic writing we hope you will find that some of these pieces are thought-provoking and often controversial.

They are published to allow journalism academics to give voice to major issues with only limited research in order to seek collaborators, spark debate, or produce a proposal prior to fuller research. To comment on all papers go to www.journalism-education.org

Confessions of a hackademic

Tony Harcup, University of Sheffield

Like the vast majority of my generation of hacks, I never came across names such as Galtung and Ruge during my years of gathering and crafting news. It was only when recruited by a local college to help with a new journalism training course, and after one thing led to another I ended up as a university lecturer, that I became aware of such luminaries of academe. As a 'hackademic', as none of us called it back then, I was suddenly required not only to pass on tips and techniques of the trade, but also to familiarise myself with what scholars had to say about it all.

It was whilst immersing myself in such literature that I came across repeated references to Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge whenever the topic arose of what makes news. Apparently they had produced a landmark study, coming up with 12 news values to explain why some events get covered and others don't. This seemed to be all that a surprisingly large number of academic texts had to say on the subject, beyond listing the 12 news values or factors as if they had been carved into tablets of stone and handed down from on high for the rest of us to memorise and recite in the manner of primary schoolchildren chanting their times-tables.

Discovering this academic 'discourse' about journalism was all very interesting, but not half as interesting as when my hackademic colleague Deirdre O'Neill and I did what seemed the obvious thing for journalists to do, which was to go back to the source material and start asking questions. It turned out that, not only was their research getting a bit whiskery by the dawn of the 21st century, but Galtung and Ruge (1965, pp.64-65) themselves had never made any great claims for the comprehensiveness of their study when it came to defining news. It was originally a paper presented to a Nordic Conference on Peace Research back in 1963

before being published in revised form in 1965. You wouldn't know it from many of the academic works that have cited their article on news values since, but they were more interested in preventing the next war than in analysing journalism; the only news stories they examined were those published in four Norwegian newspapers in the early 1960s concerning international events around the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus.

Having a go

It was hard not to conclude from perusing all this that some of the authors dutifully listing Galtung and Ruge's news values had never actually read their full article, but had relied on short extracts or citations in other works. Cuttings jobs are not the sole preserve of the time-poor journalist, it seems. So that was how Deirdre and I got into doing academic research: we read some of it, we asked some questions about it, we looked for some answers of our own, and we thought we would have a go. Our subsequent article (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001) has, we are told, become one of the most frequently downloaded *Journalism Studies* articles; not bad for a couple of humble hackademics, when you consider some of the stellar international names published in Professor Bob Franklin's esteemed organ. Yes, it was hard work on top of our teaching – apart from examining 1,276 news stories published in the UK press, we also tried to read everything we could lay our hands on that academics and/or journalists had ever written about news – but it was interesting. It was not research for research's sake; we felt it would be useful for students, scholars, 'practitioners', and us as lecturers.

It was also fun. Yet many journalists who teach within higher education miss out on such fun. It was to try to explore why so many hackademics don't seem to produce what is classed as academic research that I embarked upon a recent research project with support from the Association for Journalism Education. Via questionnaires and some follow-up interviews, I gathered information on the experiences and opinions of 65 journalists-turned-journalism-educators working within the university sector in the UK and Ireland. Findings included the fact that only just over a quarter of the sample had had any research published in a peer-reviewed academic journal; that fewer than one in ten had had any research submitted to the UK's Research Assessment Exercise; that many felt there were obstacles placed in the way of journalists becoming academically-recognised researchers; and yet, despite what many saw as the 'gobbledebollocks' of much academic discourse, many hackademics valued a questioning, reflective and scholarly approach to journalism education alongside the passing on of skills from one generation to the next (Harcup, 2011a; 2011b; 2012). These journalism educators, ranging from newbies to veterans, told some fascinating individual stories, and telling their tales with quotes and anecdotes forms the more journalistic part of the published research. Taken together, as a sizeable sample and considered alongside relevant literature, their responses shed enough light to help explore issues at the centre of journalism education in some depth; that's the more academic part of the research, if you like. But one hackademic was not offered the opportunity of completing the questionnaire; hence the article you are now reading, which offers some personal reflections.

No monopoly on wisdom - or churnalism

One of the key questions explored was whether there is in fact any point in conducting academic research into journalism. Unsurprisingly, I think there is, otherwise I would not have bothered. In fact, there are probably many points, but the argument perhaps boils down to what each of us feels about journalism itself. If we conceive of journalism as just another job, or merely part of the entertainment business with no particular social significance, then it is not difficult to conclude that it could function perfectly well without academic scrutiny or insight. But if we feel that (at least some) journalism has (at least potentially) an important role to play in society, then understanding a bit more about how it works must be worthwhile; and using academic research methods is one (but not the only) way of helping us achieve a deeper understanding.

That is not to say that academic research exists on a higher plane than journalism. Academics certainly do not have a monopoly on wisdom, and much journalistic practice involves a depth of intellectual activity alongside a rough but effective form of 'peer review' that perhaps deserves a bit more respect than it often receives. Likewise, journalists do not have a monopoly on churnalism, with many academics churning out references to the likes of Galtung and Ruge's news values and even churning out - without checking - the canard that the *Guardian*'s Nick Davies coined the word 'churnalism'. He did not, nor did he even claim to, yet countless scholars mistakenly tell us that he did, often in the same breath with which they ridicule journalists for failing to research stories properly. For the record, the word was coined by Waseem Zakir, but that's another story (Harcup, 2008; Slattery, 2011). Scholars have been known to share the parochialism of some journalists too. Pick up books by many American 'j-school' professors, turn to the index or bibliography and look for mention of a world beyond the United States; you'll have found a rare gem if there are more than a handful of such references.

Yet, despite this fallibility of scholars, to dismiss academic research into journalism in its entirety would surely be to put on an elephant-sized pair of blinkers. Happily, hardly any of the sample took this 'anti' view in principle, notwithstanding much scepticism about the relevance, approach, style, tone, findings and all-round usefulness of some of the actual research they had come across (Harcup, 2011c). Indeed, the creation of the new AJE Journal is a reflection of a willingness to embrace research on the part of many hackademics. As one of my old schoolteachers puts it, echoing the ideas of influential educationalist Paulo Freire (1972): 'I have never taught without learning, and believe that there can be no true teaching without learning' (Searle, 1998, p.3). There can be constant interplay between teaching and research, and the day we think we've got nothing more to learn is probably the day we should stop trying to teach.

'It's not astrophysics'

When it comes to learning about and researching journalism, to what extent is it an advantage to have worked as a journalist? At a common sense level it must be an advantage, because of our familiarity with, and access to, newsrooms, their occupants, their argot, and their routines. But we have been advised by Antonio Gramsci (1971, p.423) – a journalist *and* an intellectual, no less – that we should question what seems to be common sense. Certainly I feel a background in journalism has been nothing but an advantage in my research, but not everyone feels the same; after all, a little distance can provide perspective. There is, however, one rather mundane but deeply felt way in which years spent working in journalism have disadvantaged many working in universities: late entry has sometimes left them lagging behind other colleagues in terms of promotion, at the same time as practitioner experience has landed them with heavy teaching and feedback loads that seemingly leave little time for anything else.

Chief among the obstacles that many hackademics feel placed in the way of their becoming academic researchers is this shortage of time, but others feel this is something of an excuse. I suspect there is a bit of both going on, because with all the time in the world some are just not going to do it, while some with no time still manage to make more. Yes, some of us have high teaching and assessment loads; yes, there are never enough hours in the day; yes, some of our institutions don't always get what it is we do. But this study forced me to read research published beyond my usual purview in journals such as *Studies in Higher Education*, *Journal of Professional Nursing*, and *Higher Education Quarterly*. Guess what: we are not alone in feeling overworked and undervalued. Tensions exist within other vocational or 'applied' disciplines, and even many academics teaching traditional academic subjects complain that the only time they now have for research is at the weekend, at night, or in the hours before dawn. As a trade unionist, I do think some very unreasonable demands are being placed on journalists-turned-journalism-educators; but there's a bit of me that thinks that, if we're really that keen on doing something, we won't let such obstacles prevent us. At least, those of us without small kids or other caring responsibilities won't. JFDI, as they say; up to a point, anyway.

It might help if, upon appointment, hackademics were offered some kind of beginners' guide both to university-speak and to academic research methods. As journalists, we should be good at asking questions and finding things out, but as strangers in a strange land it would still be useful if at least some of the known unknowns were pointed out to us by somebody who knows. I was lucky, I suppose, that my being approached to do some teaching coincided with embarking on a part-time MA. I became a mature student out of interest rather than with any thoughts of a different career, and the course was not even in journalism, but it did introduce me to the delights of exploring issues at length complete with literature reviews, proper referencing and all that. To that extent it helped demystify the research process. It seems perverse for higher education institutions to expect staff to be able immediately to conduct academic research without offering any such education into how it's done; nonetheless, one of the hackademics insisted that, 'curiosity should suffice – it's not astrophysics'. Harsh? Maybe, maybe not. Certainly, just taking (or making) the time to read some of the relevant journals would soon provide some clues as to how it's done, and on top of that there's always the old journalistic standby: ask.

Peer review

Many hackademics *have* had a go and submitted research to academic journals, with a range of results. Whilst some have gone on to become frequently published researchers, others have been knocked back, disillusioned or demoralised by the response of the anonymous peer reviewers used by such journals. My own experience of having work peer reviewed has certainly been mixed. Sometimes comments have been insightful, learned and useful, resulting in a process of rewrites and resubmissions that, although perhaps irritating at first, resulted in some significant improvements to the quality of the finished work. At other times it has felt as if reviewers may have been badly chosen or just having a bad day, dismissing months of hard

labour with a few cursory lines of invective. Strangely, the worst experience was of a peer reviewer who was wholly positive about an article; so positive that he pasted more than a thousand words of it, uncredited and unedited, into a book he was 'writing' at the time (*Private Eye*, 2001). Welcome to the world of academic rigour.

Even putting such a – hopefully rare – horror story to one side, peer review as a system clearly has some weaknesses. I have now done enough reviewing myself to know that, even though we might think of ourselves as social 'scientists', there's a whole lot of subjectivity going on. How could there not be? When interviewed, journal editors said they were well aware of the imperfections of peer review, but that it remained the least worst way of assessing submissions (Harcup, 2011a: 45). The more of us hackademics who get involved in submitting articles, and then being asked to do some peer reviewing ourselves, the more we can broaden the pool of reviewers and thereby open up journals to a wider range of perspectives and styles. If this means declaring that a clever article is unpublishable because it is written in impenetrable gobbledebollocks, then so be it.

'Careful, discriminating criticism'

Not every journalist recruited by every university to teach journalism is necessarily keen on becoming an academic researcher, and there are many ways in which hackademics can be inspirational and reflective educational practitioners without ever contemplating a content analysis or a semi-structured research interview. But we could all benefit from reading more (critically) than we do because, as one of the respondents said, it's good for our brains. And if a few more of us then get stuck in to using some of the methodological tools at our disposal to enquire into our trade, there might be some positive spin-off benefits not just for journalism but also for the way research is conducted and communicated. If there is one thing that we ought to be able to contribute it is surely being able to write about complex matters in a clear and understandable way. So let's be confident enough not to ape the worst conventions of academe; the launch of this journal may be able to assist in that.

More than 100 years ago a professor at the University of Chicago was extolling the benefits of bringing journalists into the academy:

> The sum of the whole matter…is to bring practical newspaper men into the lecture and seminar room, not for mere general addresses on the importance of the press to civilization, but for careful, discriminating criticism and concrete suggestion… All efforts which the universities may make in the direction of journalistic training of a definite, practical sort will be futile until they succeed in securing the regular, compensated services of men recognised as leaders in their profession, representing its best achievements and its highest ideals and aims. (Vincent, 1905, p.31)

Without wishing to appear too grand, that's us; even better, we're not all men. But, on the basis of my own experiences and observations in and around the hackademy, I believe that alongside the careful criticism and concrete suggestions, a bit more openness, humility, mutual respect and inquisitiveness on the part of all of us involved – journalists, academics, hackademics – would not go amiss.

Of course, all such talk of devoting time and energy to research may sound unrealistic in an epoch of deepening cuts and increasing marketisation of higher education. But if *we* are not prepared to defend the value of striving for knowledge and understanding, even whilst contributing to vocationally-oriented courses, who will? In any event, conditions do not remain unchanged forever. I was reminded of this recently when listening to the venerable Professor Galtung himself speak in Yorkshire – not about journalism, as it happens, although he did praise WikiLeaks as 'a gift to humanity', but about his favourite subject of world peace - and he quoted a Chinese saying: 'Wisdom is to put your ear to the ground and hear the sound of the counterforce.'

Perhaps wisdom is also to know that we don't know everything. Research is just one way of trying to know a little more. What's not to like?

References

Freire, Paulo (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Galtung, Johan and Mari Ruge (1965) 'The structure of foreign news: the presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers', *Journal of International Peace Research* 1, pp.64-91.

Gramsci, Antonio (1971) *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Harcup, Tony (2008) 'Reporters need to ask what they're not being told', *Press Gazette*, 18 February, http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=1&storycode=40268   [accessed 11

March 2011].

Harcup, Tony (2011a) 'Hackademics at the chalkface: to what extent have journalism teachers become journalism researchers?', *Journalism Practice* 5(1), pp.34-50.

Harcup, Tony (2011b) 'Research and reflection: supporting journalism educators in becoming scholars', *Journalism Practice* 5(2), pp.161-176.

Harcup, Tony (2012) 'Questioning the "bleeding obvious": what's the point of researching journalism?' *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 13 (1), pp.21-37

Harcup, Tony and Deirdre O'Neill (2001) 'What is news? Galtung and Ruge revisited', *Journalism Studies*, 2(2), pp.261-280.

Private Eye (2001) 'High principals', *Private Eye* No 1032, 13 July, p11.

Searle, Chris (1998) *None But Our Words: critical literacy in classroom and community*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Slattery, Jon (2011) 'So who came up with the word churnalism?', Jon Slattery's Blog, 24 February, http://jonslattery.blogspot.com/2011/02/so-who-came-up-with-word-churnalism.html [accessed 11 March 2011].

Vincent, George (1905) 'A laboratory experiment in journalism', *American Journal of Sociology* 11(3), pp297-311.

Acknowledgement

Contact Tony Harcup on t.harcup@sheffield.ac.uk