

Personal Reflection:

Narrating identities: Journalists and the stories of others

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In July I was invited to the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change, a three-week seminar where students and faculty gather annually from all over the world at the beautiful Schloss Leopoldskron to work together to create innovative media projects, often collaborating with NGOs and non-profit media organisations. The seminar is an intense experience, which many students (and academics) describe as life-changing: bringing together over 100 students and faculty from the United States, the UK, Middle East, Africa, Far East and Europe.

But what can such an interactive and immersive environment teach us, as journalism educators? In bringing this special edition of Journalism Education to a conclusion, I wanted to reflect briefly on this question and on one of the constant themes that ran through the weeks in Salzburg – how media frames and tells the stories of migration, conflict and suffering that are dominating today’s news agenda.

One of the long-serving faculty members at the seminar series, Dr Roman Gerodimos, believes Salzburg’s success lies in its openness and the ability to break down cultural barriers:

“While the unique beauty and historical significance of the surroundings play a key role in inspiring participants to engage, imagine and create, it is the mechanics of the continuous, free, open and intensive interaction amongst students and faculty that brings down barriers and promotes intercultural understanding. The curriculum of the Academy combines media and digital literacy, journalism education, global current affairs, history and conflict, human rights, activism and civic engagement, entrepreneurship and production skills.”

One of the key factors, he says, is how the curriculum has kept evolving year after year and the amount of energy that is invested throughout the year to make sure that it incorporates and creates space for cutting-edge pedagogy.

“For the faculty, the Academy is a lab and hub of innovative practice and intellectual stimulation,” he adds. “For many students it is by far the most diverse, international and open-minded environment they will ever find themselves in. The transformative nature of this experience is reflected in the strength and longevity of the networks and relationships created during the three weeks, which create a ripple effect beyond the lifetime of the Academy”.

This year, for the 10th anniversary of the seminar series, the theme was migration: our discussions and workshops were given added resonance by the horror of the Bastille Day attack in Nice, which had taken place only days before we convened. It was a constant point of reference, as students were urged to consider how the media frame stories, how migration is represented in words and pictures, with a focus on storytelling. It started with the students’ own stories, encouraging them to embrace the concept of ‘civic imagination’ and the notion that we can only create a better world if we can first imagine what it might look like.

In quoting J.K. Rowling, Professor Henry Jenkins set the tone in his keynote, saying:

“We do not need magic to change the world. We carry all the power we need inside ourselves already. We have the power to imagine better.” (Rowling, quoted by Jenkins, 2016).

In the first few days of the seminar, a knife attack on a Munich train (attributed initially to a migrant) provided a timely reminder of the importance of thinking about how we label people and events and of the power wielded by journalists, of the imperative to tell the stories of others responsibly. I was reminded of a book I read recently, 'Voices from Chernobyl', where the author, the journalist Svetlana Alexievich, took herself out of the narrative, allowing the harrowing stories of the survivors to speak for themselves and, in doing so, relaying powerfully the sense that they had each been transformed by this disaster from 'a normal person' into a 'Chernobyl person' (Alexievich, 2006).

This provided a basis for my own talk, given in the first week of the seminar on a very warm July evening, in the atmospheric Max Reinhardt Library: the title was '*Narrating identities: Journalists and the Stories of Others*'. Putting this together, for an audience from diverse backgrounds, also encouraged me to reflect on how we, as journalism educators, teach storytelling. One of my objectives was to encourage the students (postgraduate and doctoral students) to go back to their groups having considered the importance of the interview as an immersive and empathetic experience, rather than an exercise in 'smash and grab', whereby the journalist raids the memory bank of the interviewee in search of that elusive 'soundbite'. Alexievich's (2006) immersive, 'quiet' approach, giving voice to her interviewees, has much to recommend it here. Another aim was to encourage the students to interrogate the shibboleth of objectivity, acknowledging that we now live in an 'autobiographical age' (Plummer, 2001), which affords the journalist as storyteller the opportunity to put some of him/herself into the story. Indeed, it is almost expected by social media savvy audiences, which thrive on human interest, focusing on notions of identity and belonging, as Ros Coward explains:

'Interrogating subjectivity is now part of our culture. Even though it takes many different forms, across most areas of cultural life there's an underlying preoccupation with identity. Popular culture is dominated by questions about identity and subjectivity: about how to improve, alter or come to terms with ourselves'

(Coward, 2007)

We talked about how, in conflict zones, journalists are often acutely aware of their own 'shifting shape', as described by foreign correspondent, Peter Beaumont:

'I realise too that not only is it impossible to separate myself from the stories I collect, but that it is necessary to channel those experiences through my own to try to render them in emotions and sensations that have meaning for me' (Beaumont, 2009).

Changed environments throw questions of individual identity into sharp relief, both for the journalist and for the people whose stories they tell. Autobiographical journalism, this 'shoulder to shoulder' reporting, that acknowledges the presence of ourselves, as journalists, in stories, requires us to report on others cognisant of memory, time and place. Shortly before I visited Salzburg, and in the wake of the Nice attack, I went to Marseille, to MUCEM, the museum dedicated to the history of migration. Whilst I was there, the Holocaust survivor and writer, Elie Wiesel died – he warned us that when writing the stories of others, it is important to 'think before you substitute your memories for theirs' (Wiesel, 1979: 246-7). Rather than a call for silence, this reminds us that writing for others is a collective and an individual act of recall (Coffey, 1999). The physical reality of the museum, provided much food for thought for my talk and reinforced my thinking about the role of space, time and location in storytelling; here, it is illustrated through walking the ramparts between different architectural styles, representative of bridging civilisations. The ancient port was the first contact point for people arriving by sea - nothing lies between the fort and this yawning expanse of blue, stretching to Africa. There is also a garden of migrations, highlighting the importance of appealing to all of our senses in storytelling –and how they awaken memory –the scent and taste of the herbs and spices, the taste of the salty air, the sound of the warm wind.

Marseille also provided a case study for the talk – it is France's third city where, due to secularism (*laïcité*), there is no census on religion, but one-third of the its population (according to a recent survey) is Muslim, making Islam the biggest minority religion. The report, published in 2014, shows that between 2009-2012, the number of Spanish, Portuguese and Italian immigrants in Marseille doubled. It is a city where we can ask some interesting questions, for example, about what lies behind the overt manifestations of civic pride and community. Tricolors adorn tenement blocks in the suburbs (*banlieues*) and in the heart of the old port; but do those who have sought sanctuary there 'feel French'? There are issues of identity – many French (including the taxi drivers) choose to live in Aix en Provence, thirty minutes away from the 'melting pot' of the city, with its love of football and fierce patriotism.

As journalists, we can ask what lies beneath, as we seek to tell the stories of individuals that make up a community like this, or any other. However, whilst seeking to understand, we must avoid generalisations: after the Nice attack, that city's social housing was under the spotlight and very quickly suspicion sets

in (you only had to read some of the quotes and profiles that journalists selected to describe Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel from neighbours who reported how he ‘eyed up their daughters’ in the suburb where he lived). It is very easy for all Tunisian – born Frenchmen to become branded in the same way and for all ‘bi-nationals’ to become a new focus of attention. So the journalist’s role and responsibility is to avoid inspiring prejudice or evoking fear – the narrative of fear readily used by the far right - and to seek to ask questions.

One journalist who had covered the Paris attacks, the Mail Online’s Jake Wallis Simons, explained to me how many Syrians living in Paris felt guilty for what happened. A former BBC colleague, Kevin Marsh has given talks to journalism students urging them to consider the ways in which the mainstream French media has reported the fallout of the Paris attacks. He asks – “how do we give voice to the voiceless?” One answer is to avoid reporting that is ‘top down’ – an example of this is illustrated by news reports that start in Paris and drive over the bridge to the *banlieues* as if to spectate on another universe, a strange and foreign place – but they are part of the city, with the majority of the inhabitants being second or third generation French citizens: “Whole generations of marginalised French Muslims from north and west Africa grew up in the *banlieues*, but mainstream France never cared for their perspectives on anything ... if you lived in the *banlieues*, you were voiceless and mostly invisible” (Marsh, 2016). This sort of superiority and distance in journalistic storytelling is to be avoided at all costs, a point reinforced by journalist George Packer, writing in *The New Yorker*:

“The highway that encircles Paris is known as the Périphérique. Entering or leaving the suburbs is often called “crossing the Périphérique,” as if it were a frontier. Banlieue residents joke that going into Paris requires a visa and a vaccination card. Mehdi Meklat, a young writer at Bondy Blog, which reports on the banlieues, told me, “There are two parallel worlds.” He called the dynamic between Paris and the suburbs “schizophrenic” (Packer, 2015).

Immersive storytelling, that embraces as many voices as possible indicates a way ahead for journalists, writing for others: journalist and photographer, Ivan Sigal describes this process as ‘getting inside people’s lives’ and being ‘non dramatic’ (Sigal, 2016). The late Marie Colvin, killed in the Syrian city of Homs in 2012, always felt that the journalist had to be there, to stay, in order to be authentic, to do the job properly: “I feel strongly that we have to include these stories of the suffering of civilians to get the point across” (Colvin, 2012). Of course, she paid the ultimate price for her commitment to her craft. Long form storytelling is perhaps better suited to this ‘slow’ journalism that calls into question the shibboleth of objectivity – where there is more space and word count to accommodate a fuller picture.

I hope that the students sitting in the library at Salzburg, with the view of the sun setting over the mountains through the window, were encouraged to reflect on how, in telling the stories of others, we share some of ourselves as journalists and as human beings – and how, this most human activity requires compassion and understanding, as well as curiosity. I left them with a story that a BBC foreign correspondent shared with me, from his experience of reporting in the Balkans in the ‘90s, to illustrate the importance of empathy above all:

“One morning I watched the procession of men and women emerge from a forest. They’d been driven from their homes two days earlier and had fled with what they could carry. Most were on foot. Some were crammed into the backs of ancient farm vehicles drawn by donkeys. There were perhaps 40,000 of them. Their hometown had fallen to a Serb advance that had come without warning. Among them, one man seemed close to collapse. He stopped to speak to us. ‘The whole town has fled,’ he said. He’d become separated from his wife in the long trek to safety, and was now worried that she hadn’t made it. His pale, almost translucently white skin was stretched across the bones of his face like parchment. His forehead was livid blue from a fall. And I asked him how old he was. He said he was 80. ‘May I ask,’ I said finally, ‘are you a Croat or a Muslim?’ The memory of it shames me even now as I hear in my mind his answer echo down the years: ‘I am,’ he said, ‘a musician.’” (BBC foreign correspondent, quoted in Fowler-Watt, 2013).

Perhaps above all, the current challenges around reporting migration present us with an opportunity to pursue good journalism and a journalism pedagogy that places at its heart that most human attribute: emotional intelligence, so that journalists of the future seek to tell the stories of others with compassion, empathy and, above all, humility.

You can see the final project produced by the students of the Salzburg Academy here:
<http://www.salzburgglobal.org/topics/article/move-media-migration-the-civic-imagination.html>

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