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Promoting values – as West meets East

As Western training agencies increasingly promote 'democratic journalistic values' in the former communist countries, Michael Foley argues that progress will only occur if the West ceases to see in journalism a way of strengthening the marketplace and helps local experts develop their own models

It is now 17 years since the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern and South Eastern Europe and nearly 17 years since the first initiatives were put in place to train journalists and reform the media. In that time a vast amount of money has been spent on media training and development with thousands of journalists receiving some sort of training from Western journalists, trainers and educators. Today, with some exceptions, journalism throughout the region is still characterised by a lack of professionalism, little understanding of the need for accuracy, a willingness to accept bribes and a lack of understanding of the journalist's ethical role.

According to the IREX (International Research and Exchange) Country Report for Bulgaria 2001, for instance: 'Journalists avoid controversy. They don't contradict their publisher's policy and are wary of upsetting government officials for fear of being fired, sued or both. Journalists respond to events of relevance to officials rather than the general public.' The report further states: 'Accepting money or gifts for covering certain events and not covering others is often considered a normal practice in journalistic circles. As a result the dividing line between editorial and advertising is blurred and the public trust in media output is weakened.'

One of the leading academic media commentators on the region, Peter Gross has commented (1996: 43):

> ... while some progress has been made in professionalizing the field, to date the region's journalism is not of a calibre consonant with that of its Western neighbours. Their partisanship and inclinations to propagandize and their lack of professional standards and ethics are leftover traits from the pre-communist era, refined and hardened by the communist experience, its exigencies and teachings.

Why has so much activity and money failed to put in place a responsible media that can contribute to the development and strengthening of democracy? A number of observers have commented on the short-term nature of training, of the failure to follow up and the lack of understanding that trainers have for the countries and cultures they work in. According to Ekaterina Ognianova (1995: 36):

> After dozens of workshops over several years, however, the starvation for contacts and exchange of experience turned into 'weariness', according to Alexander Angelov, secretary general of the Union of Bulgarian Journalists. Evaluators of training in Eastern Central Europe attribute this to three reasons: most training sessions have been too short: they have been too theoretical and general and: they have insulted the participants by revealing the visitors' total ignorance about their countries and by preaching the ABCs of journalism to experienced professionals.

Some have acknowledged the difficulties and the limitations of media training. According to Lucida Fleeson (2005):

> As trainers we coach from the sidelines: it is the reporters and their editors who must decide whether or not to put their organisation behind a controversial story. After all, it is they who could be fired or… be visited in their offices by heavy-set bodyguards of criminal kingpins.[1]

Crucial role of development agencies

While many studies emphasise the number of academics, especially American, who have taken part in training programmes, that probably reflects the propensity for academics to write up their experiences. Most training, however, has been offered by development agencies, including those funded by USAID, the EU and others. Much of it has been vocational and skills-based and many of the trainers have been working journalists, consultants and trainers rather than educators.

The following is a list of those organisations which have been involved in media training and development and while incomplete, it does, however, gives some indication of the scale of media involvement in the former Communist countries.

Gannett Foundation; US Information Agency; American Society of Newspaper Editors; Voice of America; Charter 77; German Marshall Fund; International Federation of Newspaper Publishers; Soros Foundation; Reuters; Internews; Myers Foundation of Australia; UNESCO; Trans-Atlantic Dialogue on European Broadcasting; Center for War, Peace and the News Media; US Agency for International Development; the BBC World Service Trust; European Journalism Centre; the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe; International Research and Exchange (IREX); the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ).

The context in which journalism training has taken place has been one that has witnessed the triumph of global capitalism; the end of the Cold War; the discrediting of the New World Information and Communications Order and the dominance of the Western approach to journalism and journalism training

In its place is the Western journalistic paradigm, which is expressed in the phrase 'objective and a value-free presentation of facts'. This is usually expressed as presenting a story as 'balanced' so that competing versions/interpretations of facts are presented; information is verified as fact; information and comment is ascribed to specific named sources; views and feelings are kept out of the story and there is no underlying agenda. This, also known as the Anglo-Saxon model. This is what journalists in Eastern and South Eastern Europe have been exposed to in training schemes.

Promoting the free market

The purpose of offering training is officially to strengthen democracy, but while this could well be one reason there is also an ideological one associated with promoting the free market. As Mihal Coman, of Bucharest University, says (2000: 41): 'The mass media in post-communist countries experienced not only a forceful entry of foreign capital, but more importantly, an invasion of Western programming. By 1995 in a

number of countries, including Bulgaria, Romania and Russia, programmes bought from the West accounted for over 40 per cent of broadcast fare.[2]

That 'forceful entry of foreign capital' meant many new media organisations were established with Western money. Western interests also bought some of the former communist media. In Bulgaria, for instance, Western interests included Rupert Murdoch's News Corp, which owns bTV, as well as the German media group, Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitungsgruppe (WAZ) which owns the newspapers *24 Chasa* and *Trud*. These two newspapers account for about 80 per cent of the Bulgarian print market. Swiss and Russian commercial interests own other media outlets. This is only one example; there are similar stories from all the former communist countries.

The trainers employed by these agencies have never tried to find or develop a journalistic voice from within the countries they are working in because they are charged with promoting Western journalistic practices. Even if they wanted to, however, they could not, because they are unqualified to do so. They rarely speak the local language and have little understanding of local journalism or its history. They often have little knowledge of the political situation within which the people they are training work. Some trainers have offered advice, which, if taken, could put journalists in danger, such as dealing with police, security forces or criminals as if it was Western Europe or the US.

This author, while working on a training programme for a US agency some years ago in Belarus was told that the journalists were to be trained in the ways of the *New York Times*. There is anecdotal evidence of diplomatic interference in training schemes, to ensure particular outcomes and some trainers have been moved or not had their contract renewed when they came too close to local journalists or journalists organisations.

Teaching 'democratic journalism'

Two US university journalism teachers, Richard Shafer and Eric Freedman, wrote of their experience as Fulbright scholars in the post-Soviet Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan. They were in Uzbekistan to teach 'democratic journalism' and stated that the posting was 'probably related in a minor way to complex factors of foreign relations, historical

circumstances and positioning in the world economy'(2003: 43).[3] The two professors were aware of the ambiguity of their position, but nevertheless found a good reason to continue to teach 'democratic journalism':

> Of course, as Americans we adhered to the basic assumption that all people yearn for individual liberties that are fundamental to our belief system. This belief system includes open access to information through a relatively unfettered press system (ibid).[4]

The conventions of international journalism, they maintain, are essentially the same and are primarily based on the British and American models.[5] In stating this position they consciously reject any alternative view, including that of John C Merrill, whom they cite. Merrill said the insistence that the media everywhere conform to Western 'capitalistic and pluralistic' media structures was 'of course, not only an arrogant and ethnocentric one but also betrays a stultified, intellectual view of reality. Cultures are different; the values that shore up such cultures are different. Stages of national development are different, Citizens expectations are different' (cited ibid).[6]

There are other problems associated with the training and vocational model that has been the major one in Eastern and South Eastern Europe since collapse of communism. It has encouraged some of the brightest and best to go abroad, since they believe they have been trained up to something called 'Western standards'.

> Sadly, many students said they plan to work abroad and want to develop Western media skills, not to apply them to Uzbekistan but to allow them to work in Europe, Japan or the United States (ibid: 94).[7]

Other journalists, some having availed of scholarship schemes to do journalism MAs in the US, believe they are too highly trained to work as journalists for low pay and seek donor money to offer yet more training, or work in Western-financed media centres or

media development centres, whose sole function is to access Western donor funding and offer Anglo-Saxon or Western journalism training.

Vocational training can also give a spurious authority to media output. Eastern and South Eastern has many radio stations, television stations, magazines and newspapers with very high production values that disguise bad journalism. Another problem is the number of journalists who can be trained.

> In spite of considerable support from Western countries to develop journalism education and short-term vocational training, most of the new journalists receive knowledge necessary to do the job in the newsroom on the job training (Coman op cit: 44).[8]

Anglo-Saxon model now outdated

There is also the issue of what is taught. When journalism trainers talk of democratic journalism, Western standards or the Anglo Saxon model it is increasingly the case that no one knows what they mean anymore. If journalists in Eastern Europe are being taught to separate fact from opinion, or to listen to C.P. Scott's dictum that facts are sacred but comment is free, then who will teach that, as increasingly that is not the model adopted in Western countries, where tabloid newspapers scream opinion and Fox News has abandoned any pretence as impartiality. Then there is the tension between the US and much of Europe, where the US journalism school model is as foreign in France as it is in Ukraine or Bulgaria. The ideal, pushed mainly, but not exclusively by US agencies, is in trouble itself because it hardly exists.

There is, however, a new model emerging, one that is aware of the limitations of the pure training model; that of working with the universities in the region. There is a long tradition of journalism education in universities going back to the formation of the School of Journalism at Moscow State University in 1947. These universities have been dismissed by Western media development agencies as being unreconstructed Stalinism at worst or at best offering an out of date model that is incapable of reform.

There have been some contacts, through the already mentioned Fulbright programme and EU-funded university exchange and links programmes. Most of these are through already existing university programmes rather than media programmes. A number of these links are also with western style private universities, such as the American University in Bulgaria, where teaching is done through English, with little regards to Bulgaria's own media or education traditions.

One of the first indications that there could be a change of attitude was the project launched in 2004, under the EU's Phare programme, called Technical Assistance for Improving the Professional Standards of Journalism, Bulgaria. The project's general aim was to strengthen the independence of the media through improving professional standards in Bulgarian journalism, and by extension Bulgaria's democracy as part of lead up process to EU membership. The participants were the BBC World Service Trust; the Media Development Centre Sofia; International Federation of Journalists, the University of Leipzig and the Dublin Institute of Technology.

It was an ambitious project that hoped by its end to have established a system of self regulation, including a code of practice and a complaints commission, to have offered and delivered training to 300 mid-career journalists; to have put in place human resource strategies for media organisation and also to have modernised the teaching and curriculum at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communications (FJMC) at Sofia University. The latter was very much an add-on, as media projects did not usually include universities.

The first degree programme in journalism at Sofia University was established in the academic year 1952/3, only five years after the establishment of the first degree programme in the USSR, at Moscow State University in 1947. Journalism was made a separate department within the Faculty of Slavic Studies in 1968 and remained so until 1974, when a separate faculty of journalism was established. It was re-named the Faculty of Journalism and Mass communications in 1991.

While there have been major changes at the FJMC since the collapse of communism the structures and even the syllabus that exists today owes much to the type of curriculum developed in the Soviet Union since the Second World War. Its role was to produce journalists who conformed to a model described thus by Colin Sparks (1998: 43):

> Journalism did not make the same claims to objectivity and fairness which, it is said, characterize the Western media, and in particular those of the USA. On the contrary, the function of journalists was to explain and to educate and to help by their writing to win support for the construction of the new socialist world.[9]

Sofia University's focus on the theoretical

Sofia University offers a five-year programme leading to an MA degree. The programme remains highly theoretical with a minimum of journalism practice. The necessary equipment necessary to deliver a modern programme was also a problem when the project team evaluated the faculty at the start of the project, and remains so. There was little computer equipment, television cameras, sound equipment and no portable recording equipment at all. It did have a highly educated academic staff, some who had practical skills, but no modern syllabus to teach.

Over a two-year period the project organised seminars in curriculum modernisation, introduced lecturers to modern equipment, organised seminars in London at which journalism educators and trainers gave practical advice. Conferences were organised and staff travelled to journalism schools all over western Europe to research curriculum development.

There were problems. Some academic staff were understandably suspicious; local media organisation questioned the point of the exercise; some of those within the project itself were unused to dealing with academic institutions and preferred to concentrate on the training elements which made far more administrative demands anyway. The fact that there was no budget for equipment meant that some important areas, such as web journalism, could not even be considered.

Finally, a report was written with a number of recommendations, most of which came from the academic staff themselves. The recommendations included:

- a long-term strategy of curriculum modernisation;
- a move towards a 50/50 theory and practice model to be implemented when there are sufficient resources available;
- work towards implementing the Bologna process and quality assurance criteria;
- reform and culling of outdated curricula;
- staff training fundamental to a modern curriculum;
- implementing continuous assessment within three years;
- foreign languages an integral part of the programme;
- student newspapers and broadcasting required; student newsroom as teaching space;
- address shortage of equipment;
- improve links with industry.

There is little doubt that the outcome of the Bulgarian project was to some extent aspirational. It needed major funding to allow the academic staff to fully implement the recommendations contained in the project's final report on curriculum modernisation. Staff have subsequently modernised individual syllabuses, an association for Bulgarian journalism educators has been established and many staff have been exposed to different curriculum models, to new learning and teaching methodologies. The faculty was also given help towards implementing the changes necessary to conform to the Bologna process.

So are there lessons from the Bulgarian experience that would suggest an alternative to the training model to professionalize and strengthen journalism in the transitional democracies of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe? Increasingly journalism schools in western Europe are seeking to produce the reflective practitioner, the young journalist

who can argue for a better way because they are well trained and educated. They have absorbed the current way of doing things but are in a position to suggest alternatives, they have been trained to be critical and ask questions, not just of the political or economic system, but of their own profession also. Critically aware journalists are desperately needed in transitional democracies and only universities can produce them. Eastern European universities can operate in partnership with their western European counterparts because there are academic traditions of exchanges, conferences and other links in place already. The university can educate large numbers of young journalists, who will eventually be the majority of at least a sizeable minority of journalists in a particular country.

Promoting a proper partnership

Universities are publicly funded bodies, that are repositories of culture. They also inform the culture and interpret it. If journalism is about certain values, of truth, accuracy, verification and also involved in story telling and informing public opinion, the inculcation of those values should take place within an intellectual context that will allow a new journalistic voice to emerge within the parameters of those values. Western journalism schools can provide one side of the partnership, teaching skills, curriculum development and contacts, universities as public trustees can ensure the specific cultural relevance of international initiatives with journalism education acting as part of a broader process of educational and cultural exchange.

There is still a place for international funding for short courses in new skills or to upgrade skills. If, however, something new is to emerge that reflects Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia or any other country, then it can only come about by the west ceasing to see in journalism a way of strengthening the marketplace and instead work within the culture to strengthen democracy and ensure that people have ways of hearing stories that are relevant to them and told in a way they understand.

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