Journalism education is not what it used to be. Today’s classroom is too diverse — too multicultural, multilingual, multiparty and multimedia — for straightforward lessons on what makes ‘good journalism’. Convergence and citizen journalism require contemporary journalists to be more swift, nimble, intuitive and daring than their predecessors; my argument is that we also need to be more global.

Finding out about good reporting used to mean studying the stories of Walkley winners, and learning the kind of individual and team courage and creativity that attracts prizes for excellence in Australian journalism. Not any more.

Defining excellence is harder when your students come from Brazil, China, Denmark, Korea, Lebanon, Singapore, United Kingdom, USA and Australia. International awards and prizes for journalism are one resource offering cosmopolitan benchmarks (see list on Journalists @ Your Service) but, at the same time, they provide a wildly different picture of what journalists are expected to do in the world today. At this level, the best news reporting aims to maintain political dialogue in the Middle East, contribute to a better understanding of the information society in Africa, end ethnic divisions in South East Europe, raise awareness of human rights and developing countries, combat racism and discrimination, expose corruption, promote tolerance or galvanize social change. It makes you wonder what happens on a slow news day!

The point here is that current debates about the future of journalism could well extend to canvas ways that journalists can make better international connections and join forces to learn from each other. A peep inside today’s journalism classroom reveals this is no easy task.

The toughest part of talking about journalism to students from around the world is to find a common starting point from which to assess worldwide media performance. Stereotypes are universal. The textbooks recommend internationalism as the best antidote for the innate ‘cultural myopia’ that sees us all judge foreign news by our own homegrown standards.

Yet, books on global journalism do not have much to say about diversity in journalistic practices, much less advice on how to put prejudice in its proper context when reporting news in the age of the ‘war on terrorism’. Instead, much of the literature trumpets libertarian free press models, excuses the foibles and excesses of Western journalists, and dismisses all other types of news as propaganda, misguided or just plain bad. The ‘West is best’ message comes across clear and strong and, coupled with high-profile examples like Watergate, proves highly persuasive to some students, as it will to many journalists.

This picture does not ring true for other students. They are looking for more out of journalism than this ‘one-size-fits-all’ mentality, with its false division between ‘us’ and ‘them’. While ideological disagreement is an important point of contention, ignorance is the main classroom complaint. How do they know about our journalism, these students ask, when they don’t speak our language? Frustration, rather than anger, seems to fuel this perspective but there are also hints of more hardheaded thinking: ‘In the past, there was silence between us’, one student tells me, ‘now journalists are shouting at each other. Shouting is better than silence’.

With this kind of cacophony on the rise in global media, the big challenge for journalism educators is not just to teach journalism students to speak up and write well but also to listen to others and find ways to negotiate points of view that are unfamiliar, objectionable or hostile.

This is complex work. My attempts to get students to listen to each other are best described as a ‘work-in-progress’, but I’ll share with you three of my strategies.

First, we investigate the ‘shouting’ using specific examples of news coverage: New Matilda’s piece on China’s repression of online dissidents, an Al-Jazeera article on ‘Fitna’ (a right-wing Dutch politician’s film criticising the Quran), or the anti-CNN.com website set up by Chinese university graduate Jin Rao in the days after the riots in Tibet (and the anti-anti-CNN site that soon followed). These are not the most conventional...
news sources but they take us directly to tough questions that make tempers flare: In what ways could the Internet democratise China? Should Dutch television defend free speech and broadcast media content designed to outrage the country’s Muslim minority? Was CNN’s coverage of the riots in Tibet inaccurate and sloppy? The answers are rarely straightforward and it is hard to sidestep blame-games and get to the issues that matter.

Take, for example, the anti-CNN website. Denounced by some as a propaganda stunt, Rao’s site makes specific allegations of bias and lies, using cropped and uncropped photos as well as disputed camera shots, captions and commentary passing itself off as news copy. In response, CNN did not make the obvious point that restricted access hampered foreign reporters; instead, it categorically denied any distortion in its coverage of events. Yet, if you go to Rebecca MacKinnon’s blog on the Tibet information war, 

Reconversation, you’ll find evidence that CNN was caught out on its photo cropping. A former CNN journalist turned Hong Kong-based journalism educator, MacKinnon concludes, “In the end, you shouldn’t trust any information source—Western or Chinese, professional or amateur, digital or analog—until and unless they have earned your trust”.

How do journalists earn public trust? Transparency and accountability are key concepts here. The second strategy to encourage listening to different points of view is to test out well-known news ‘brands’ and see how they rate on those two counts. We look for what news organisations tell the public to expect from journalists, using a ‘click test’ (how many clicks counts. We look for what news organisations tell the public to expect from journalists, using a ‘click test’ (how many clicks do they take to find a code of ethics or an editorial policy?). The results are fascinating.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, The New York Times, and the London Guardian offer comprehensive editorial policies but they are accessible only by downloading very large files. The People’s Daily (English version) has nothing on editorial policy but provides a copy of the Chinese Constitution within three clicks (!). Mexico’s prestigious newspaper La Reforma demands a subscription from anyone who wants to know more ‘About Us’. CNN is different again; its codes of conduct are found offsite on the Corporate Governance site of parent company, Time Warner.

By way of contrast, Al-Jazeera offers the most direct access to a code of ethics with a global message that we’ve found so far. It says: “Treat our audiences with due respect and address every issue or story with due attention to present a clear, factual and accurate picture while giving full consideration to the feelings of victims of crime, war, persecution and disaster, their relatives and our viewers, and to individual privacy and public decorum’. Yes, you read correctly, these journalists will respect people’s feelings! Rhetorical flourish aside, this code offers a powerful message to estranged audiences looking for alternatives to the warmongering that has crept into international news since 2001. It also codifies new public expectations of journalists.

Why is it that so much is expected of journalists in the world today? The answer to that question depends, of course, on what you think journalists do. So, our third listening strategy has been to talk about what makes news important in different societies.

That discussion came alive in the hands of one classroom visitor, editor-in-chief of Indonesia’s national newswweekly magazine Tempo, Mr Bambang Harymurti. He described press freedom as his personal jihad, arguing journalism is at the front line of democratisation processes because it is the people’s best resource against authoritarian rule. But, one student asked, how do journalists overcome their fear of freedom? Practice, came the reply. What if we cannot lose our fear, the student insisted? It was a genuine appeal for help, from one professional to another. There is no easy way to gain confidence, Harymurti told him. Right now, Indonesia has the third chance in its modern history to win democracy. We would be foolish not to try.

In some parts of the world, journalism is losing public appeal, struggling to adapt to digital technology and obsessed with making money.

Yet, other stories about journalism emerge when we take a broader, global view. There is more to it than making content. Authentic and meaningful information connects people with each other by making connections for them. Journalists connect soaring global food prices to biofuel subsidies, and riots in Haiti, Cameroon, Indonesia and Egypt. Journalists connect governments to farmers’ unfilled demands for fertiliser, seeds and animal feed. Without journalism, their misery would be silent as well as senseless. The internationalisation of journalism education provides a timely reminder that the oldest and best form of social networking is, in fact, journalism. There’s a lesson in that for all of us.

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