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Contradiction, paradox and ambiguity

International Journalism, by Kevin Williams. London: Sage. 2011, 205 pp. ISBN 9781412 945288

THE TERM ‘international news’ is illustrative of the conflicted nature of journalism. At one and the same time it is well understood and meaningful—and anachronistic in a global era. There is a tendency in many quarters to shy away from addressing an inherent instability in journalism, and instead bemoan the demise of the foreign correspondent, the symbolic ‘man [invariably a man] in gray flannel’ (Cohen, 1963, p. 17) who determined what was worth knowing about the world: a highly-privileged élite among élites. The expiration of the legend can be posited as the demise of journalism writ large.

The contemporary condition of ‘international journalism’ is beset by complex layers of contradiction, para-



dox and ambiguity, however. Simple head-counts of journalists working overseas may say little about the survival of the species. There is no clear measure of the public appetite for ‘international news’. Are lower levels of news investment compensated for by greater peer-to-peer information flows? The challenge of trying to unpack these and other related issues in a generally under-researched area is still largely eschewed, providing both an opening and a difficulty for this textbook. How successfully the opportunity is exploited depends to a large extent on how well the difficulty is negotiated.

Given that textbooks are expected to synthesise and provide new insights into the existing literature for, and create an interest among, an uninitiated readership, a problem arises when that literature is relatively inchoate and sparse. Three further matters are raised by this volume. Firstly, it is one in a series of 'key' texts devoted to journalism studies. To what extent is a common approach shared across all the volumes and how useful might this be? Secondly, the series appears to be intended for both students and staff, many of whom are assumed to be themselves education novices. Does that somewhat idiosyncratic idea work? Finally, the text has not only an Anglo-Saxon but just an Anglo skew to it. How representative can that be of 'international journalism'?

In the most important regard, Williams prosecutes an independent argument, based essentially in a political-economy paradigm, which adds up to a topically-arranged, critical introductory survey rather than a step-by-step primer. It succeeds in meeting the requirement of the series in traversing most of the terrain of 'how journalism is studied and understood', with a specific focus on historicisation, but without lapsing into a 'cookie cutter' approach.

Recognising the 'hegemony of the Anglo-American model of journalism' (p.13), Williams also wrestles

constantly with the ambiguities of its condition in a reconstituting world. The stress he places on history leads to an expression of these in terms of dichotomies between continuity and change; conflict and consensus; optimism and pessimism. To do so, ideas such as globalisation, colonialism, feminisation, modernisation and so on, are engaged. The presumed attractiveness of the object of review (and the book) lies in the additional engagement with what the series editors call "'real life" practice' as a way of articulating theory with practice.

After setting the scene with an introduction scoping 'the changing nature of foreign correspondence', this is tackled with a consideration of international journalism and globalisation. This is not, then, a substitute course outline but, rather, an invitation to instructors to consider how they might use it as a springboard into the topic. The eight chapters (including an introduction and a conclusion) are too substantial and multiplex for straightforward weekly reading.

Williams dutifully addresses the role of the major news agencies; the past, present and foreseeable future of foreign correspondents; the relationship between journalism and soft power, and the impact of so-called new media. The 'British world', its settler newspapers and its 'imperial press system' are treated somewhat

casually, however, and notwithstanding the focus on the Anglo-American model, the influence of US foreign correspondence is largely discounted. While the beginnings of Havas, Wolff and Reuters are noted, the formation of what was to become the Associated Press is not. *The (London) Times* is afforded its earned place in the scheme of things, but not New York's or Chicago's papers. There is an argument to be made that in the 19th century the Americans established the form of foreign correspondence which lasted into the 1970s.

The biggest quibble with this book, therefore, is that it is too anchored in the nation-state of the United Kingdom. This is not just a matter of bypassing key contributions to the formation of international news made in the over-lapping spheres of the north Atlantic and the British world, although Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, key markets for modern news which carried a specific culture across physical boundaries to the furthest reaches of the globe, are barely mentioned. Contrary to the BBC's orientation of nation speaking to nation, international news has more routinely emanated from specific locations, whether they were cities, battlegrounds or scenes of disasters, and been transmitted initially to major communication centres for cascading onwards.

In the UK, that meant London, and the modern international news project began with connecting London to the rest of the UK. The status of London (an alpha++ global city), and not the UK, as a dominant then declining world power, is probably more relevant to the past, present and future of international news and foreign correspondence (Globalisation and World Cities Research Network, 2011). From the second quarter of the 19th century, London was a European, rather than British, news hub: in 2011 it was the location of more foreign correspondents than any other city except Washington DC. It is a measure of how overlooked London is in this book that it does not appear in the index.

While Williams's text will provide a useful entry into the topic of international news, it should raise a number of questions, not least among which might be why this is an area of journalism studies that it still so partially addressed?

References

- Cohen, B.C. (1963). *The press and foreign policy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
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