

dealers, mercenaries, prostitutes, gem smugglers and freelance journalists.

Thornton paints a sympathetic picture of humanity against a backdrop of not only the tyranny of the Rangoon generals but also the Thai exploitation of the thousands of stateless people in the border refugee camps and illegal workers. But he is ruthless in his dissection of the aid and media flotsam.

Describing Mae Sot as a town 'full of rivalry as well as bribes', he says questions about who's who and who's doing what can be decidedly risky. The annual pre-Christmas coolness draws an influx of newcomers and opportunists into the local cafés:

Like kids trying to outscare each other, they all relay their best worst horror stories. Voices whisper and brag about decapitation, stolen camp funds, spies, extortion, gambling, guns, drugs, sex, corruption—bigger shadows to throw against the wall. (p. 114)

Thornton laments the Western media's fixation on Aung San Suu Kyi as the main news hook for reporting Burma while largely ignoring the Karen struggle: 'Her story can be simply told—in media shorthand—as Beauty and the Beast.'

As for the huge, unregulated aid

industry worth billions of dollars each year: 'Self-interest and self-preservation drives NGOs as their humanistic ideals are pragmatically pushed aside. ... Disillusioned local staff label the workshops "rubber-stamping exercises" to push unpalatable political policies' (p. 115).

One leading Karen advocate described aid consultants as 'like vampires sucking our blood ... I used to think [aid reports] would do something, but it's just another way of burying us' (p. 118). — DR DAVID ROBIE is director of the Pacific Media Centre.

Reference

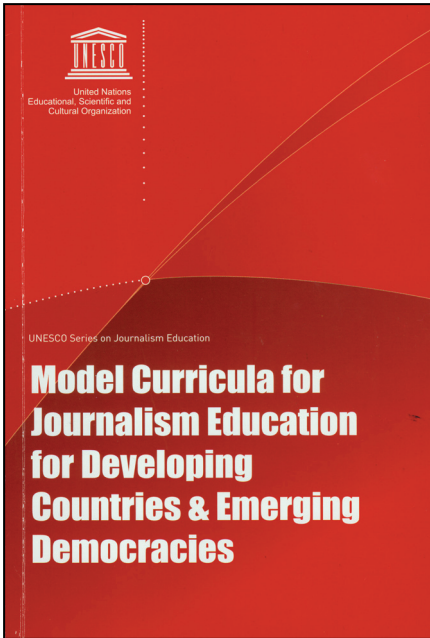
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'Model' a balanced approach

Model Curricula for Journalism Education for Developing Countries and Emerging Democracies.

Paris: UNESCO Series on Journalism Education, 2007, 148 pp.

WHAT should journalism schools teach? This remains a vexing question the world over, including the Pacific. A century after the first journalism school began in the United States in 1902, a clear formula for journalism education has yet to be defined.



The issue remains contentious—it pitches the media industry against journalism schools and academics against each other. Differences among staff within the same institutions are common.

In the Pacific, journalism schools were established as recently as 1975 (at the University of Papua New Guinea). But even in countries that resemble a dot on the world map, debate has raged on.

The issues are the same—which is better, on-the-job or university training, and what is the right balance of practical skills and theoretical/liberal arts education.

Like counterparts elsewhere,

Pacific journalism schools struggled to find acceptance. They were looked down on by the academe, and condemned by the industry.

The University of the South Pacific journalism school's founding coordinator, Murray Masterton, endured snobbish academics who said journalism had no place in a university. And the former publisher of *Islands Business*, the late Robert Keith-Reid, famously dismissed journalism lecturers and students as 'academic anaemics'.

Debate over a critical issue such as journalism education is good and healthy, although it has sometimes bordered on the surreal. For instance, some scholars of Pacific media believe news companies are charitable organisations. They imagine Pacific media owners will send reporters on all-expenses paid assignments for weeks on end to get stories. For them, 'deadline' is a dirty word.

The reality on the ground is that most Pacific island newsrooms are perpetually short-staffed and lack resources. Many are struggling to survive in a highly competitive market.

The Pacific journalist is a generalist. Survival, progression and remuneration depend on story count. For many, English is a second, third or fourth language.

Nevertheless, the UNESCO model journalism curricula designed

for journalism schools in developing countries has the hallmarks of a sensible, practical and workable approach. The proposed curricula is a generic model that can be adapted according to each country's specific needs, say the authors.

The curricula is at three levels: a university bachelor's degree (three years and four years); a two-year master's degree (for students with and students without a journalism background); and a two-year diploma programme.

Launched in Singapore at the inaugural World Journalism Education Congress in July 2007, the document was prepared after year-long consultations with university faculties, journalist training organisations, newspaper industries and journalism education associations.

A team of four UNESCO experts commissioned for the initial development of the curricula solicited responses to their first draft from 20 senior journalism educators deemed to have considerable experience working in developing countries and emerging democracies.

The curricula strives for a 'strong core educational structure with a balance between the practical and the academic'. Many schools, including USP, favour this approach.

Once Pacific graduates enter the

newsroom, they will be required to write news stories according to tight deadlines, not a thesis. If they fail in news writing, they will not survive a newsroom probation.

The drafters of the UNESCO curricula appear to be aware of these challenges: 'We restrict these curricula to the education of students to practise journalism, as distinct from preparing students for the academic study of the way people and organisations communicate through the mass media' (p. 7).

For those who can recall deposed Fiji Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase's stinging assessment of Fiji journalists, the emphasis on the basics will be much appreciated. Qarase described reporters as 'uncertain interviewers, poor verbal communicators having problems with accuracy, and short on knowledge of current affairs. The result is that coverage sometimes compromises the ideals of a free press.'

Teaching how to write clearly and coherently, using narrative, descriptive, and analytical methods, remains the biggest challenge in this part of the world.—*SHAILENDRA SINGH is divisional head of journalism at the University of the South Pacific.*