

Educating the Public: Partnerships Between International Journalists and Educators

I. Summary of Presentation Topic/Theme

A key component of Title VI grants to National Resource Centres is outreach to the wider national, regional, or local community. One of the many ways in which this objective is met is through outreach to the media. Given that media is a primary means through which Americans acquire information about international affairs, a crucial aspect of educating the public on global issues is through ensuring quality international reporting.

Both journalists and educators have a role to play in creating a more globally competent citizenry. Unfortunately, American news media are largely inadequate in their reporting of international affairs as compared to their global counterparts. The panel focused on what educators could do to improve the quality and interest in reporting on international affairs in the US, and thereby promote a more informed and globally aware citizenry. In particular, the panel discussed how those involved in international education could better serve the needs of journalists and how journalists could make better use of IEPS programs.

The panellists proposed that regional studies centers work with journalists to further the goal of more informed and nuanced reporting on international affairs in two main ways: (1) through the formation of partnerships between journalists and scholars at universities and (2) by providing students of journalism better training in covering international affairs. The diverse backgrounds of the panellists, all of whom do work in some way related to international journalism, provided many angles from which to understand the relationship (and chasms) between academia and the media and the ways in which effective partnerships between the two could be developed.

The panel's moderator, Shiva Balaghi, offered insights into overcoming the challenges of creating working partnerships between media and scholars based on her experience managing media outreach for New York University's Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies. She conveyed the challenges of working with media from the standpoint of an academic institution and the possibilities for bridging the cultural chasms between the worlds of journalism and academia.

Through his work at the International Center for Journalists, Patrick Bulter was well situated to offer strategies for how best to train American journalists to report on international affairs.

Meg Gaydosik drew upon her many years of experience in media and media development, both domestically and internationally, to emphasize ways that journalism training could be improved and the types of partnerships that should be created to take advantage of existing resources.

Wesley Pippert reflected on his experience as a correspondent in the Middle East to suggest that journalists ought to be better prepared for their foreign assignments through greater emphasis on international experience and country-specific training during journalism education and training.

Janet Steele, a professor of Journalism at George Washington University's School of Media and Public Affairs, teaches courses on media in the developing world. As a doctoral student, she benefited from Department of Education grants to study abroad, and currently imparts the knowledge she acquired through those opportunities to her students. She believes that there needs to be more outreach to students who are not in traditional area studies programs, such as those studying journalism.

II. Summary of Follow-up Discussions

The challenges to those working to promote international news coverage in the US are considerable. Though global issues have profound impact on the US, American media have been cutting funding for global news. For example, the Boston Globe has closed all its international bureaux. Why is this happening?

While all the panellists agreed that US media do a poor job at covering global news, it is not clear if this is because Americans have shown that they have little interest in global news, or if Americans are not interested in world news because it is not widely available. Either way, the majority of Americans receive their news through local media and say that they are most interested in local news. Therefore, Patrick Butler suggested that the most effective way for educators to inject a more global perspective in news coverage is by focusing on the local impact of global issues. If journalists can publish stories that highlight the local implications of global issues in local papers they will be able to change the way American newspapers see the news hole by demonstrating that such stories are important to their readers. Meg Gaydorsik also pointed out that although studies find that Americans say they are most interested in local news, they may actually be saying that they are simply interested in news that relates to them. Hence framing global issues in terms of their local impact may be a useful strategy to raise popular awareness of world news.

Many of the panellists stressed that journalism schools need to place more emphasis on language acquisition. According to Meg Gaydorsik, US journalism students are not exposed to the rest of the world as much as foreign students are. She suggested that it should be mandatory for students of journalism to be sent abroad in their third or fourth years of study, preferably to work in a news room. Wesley Pippert agreed but added that it is not enough to merely go abroad; journalists need to be prepared with thorough knowledge of the regions to which they are sent. He criticized the current "parachute situation" in journalism, whereby a reporter is sent to a country for a brief period and quickly flown back out. Often reporters from the local desk are sent to Iraq and Afghanistan because they are perceived as aggressive and having strong journalism skills, but they often lack sufficient knowledge of those regions.

NYU has developed a joint master's degree in journalism and near eastern studies, which addresses concerns of insufficient regional knowledge on the part of journalists. Students in this degree program use IEPS programs to study abroad. These students sometimes express frustration at the cultural chasm between the two programs, but according to Shiva Balaghi, learning to manage these differences is an important part of their career development because it is the reality of journalism.

While academics have much expertise to offer journalists, it can be difficult to bridge the cultural rift between the fast paced world of journalism and academia. The Kevorkian Center found a solution to these problems in a partnership with the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), a Washington-based non-profit. Together they created MiddleEastDesk.org, an online gateway for journalists to informed analysis and commentary on important Middle East issues. Middle East Desk offers brief country backgrounds, and easily accessible contact information for experts who study those countries and who are available to speak to the media. The one-thousand journalists who make up Middle East Desk's contact database receive weekly updates with recommendations of experts to interview on "hot" stories in the news. On the Web site, there are also suggestions of stories that might be covered pertaining to each country, under a section called "Datebook." The project responds to journalists' need for quick and reliable information.

Many of the questions to the panellists came from staff at regional studies centers across the country interested in learning about how to implement media outreach programs. One member of the audience asked how graduate research assistants working on Middle East Desk gather their information for the Datebook section of the Web site if not from the media itself. Shiva Balaghi explained that graduate student assistants use their foreign language skills to uncover stories that are either not reported or underreported in US media.

An audience member from a Latin American studies program wanted to know what Latin Americanists could do in the face of low interest in that region, particularly compared to the kind of press interest in the Middle East in recent years. The panellists explained that newspapers have pulled reporters from Latin America in order to cover the Middle East. Wesley Pippert explained that in the media there is a considerable focus on profit margins and therefore when there are lay-offs the first casualties are overseas bureaux. In order to combat such a trend, one needs to encourage reporters to approach the news with a wider outlook by demonstrating the many dimensions of global news.

An audience member from the African studies program at the University of Illinois described how her program had partnered with journalism schools to host three workshops on the media, but that for the most part the people who attended were from regional studies programs. Shiva Balaghi said that usually journalists do not like workshops, which tend to be time consuming. She suggested that regional studies centers might try instead to host panels that include both academics and journalists. The Kevorkian Center has hosted such events in the past at which journalists spoke in a more

scholarly tone and academics used language that was more accessible. Such events can form the basis for future partnerships. Summer group tours focused on international issues and combining regional studies and journalism students are also a good way to use IEPS programs to encourage networking at an early stage.

One audience member asked if the panellists had any tips to offer for training faculty to talk to journalists. Wesley Pippert emphasized the importance of speaking with clarity when talking to journalists. Shiva Balaghi spoke to the importance of knowing faculty well both in terms of their specific areas of expertise and those who enjoy being interviewed by the media as opposed to those prefer not to be. Bayann Hamid, the panel's rapporteur and media coordinator at MERIP, suggested that it is important to tell faculty to be specific and to keep in mind a particular point that they wish to get across so that they will not feel they are misquoted or that the journalist did not grasp their main argument. Meg Gaydorsik suggested that academics be given some sort of training or that they create media briefers with no more than three bullet points. Wesley Pippert recommended that journalists be viewed as a conduit between faculty and the people. Faculty need to learn how to present their research in a way that is palatable to journalists, but making sure that the basic truth is not lost in the process.

Some audience members expressed frustration with how journalists will often simplify issues in a way that misrepresents the issues and strips them of nuance. Patrick Butler encouraged the audience not to give up after the interview if they feel they have been misrepresented. Instead, they ought to contact the newspaper through a letter to the editor or a submission to the op-ed page.

III. Best Practices

The following programs or strategies were highlighted by the panellists as best practices for partnerships between educators and international journalists:

(1) Web-based gateways for journalist to access information on experts available for interviews on particular issues is a useful way to respond to journalists' need for quick, reliable, and accessible information. Providing journalists with a brief quotation that the experts have given on a particular issue in the news makes it easier for journalists to decide if those experts would make for an appropriate interview. An example of such a program is Middle East Desk.

(2) Regional studies centers should take advantage of potential partnerships between foundations and non-profit organization that do work with similar objectives (e.g. ICFJ, Ethics and Excellence in Journalism, Soros Foundation, Knight Foundation).

(3) Joint degrees in journalism and regional studies are a good way to ensure that journalists will have adequate knowledge of global issues and will be well prepared for foreign assignments. NYU's joint MA degree in journalism and Near Eastern studies

gives students the regional knowledge and the journalism training they require to impart informed views to the public.

(4) Provide faculty interested in doing media interviews with basic tips for doing media interviews.

(5) Do not give up if a news piece for which a faculty member was interviewed is unsatisfactory. Contact the paper and let them know what was wrong with their coverage. An important first step in media outreach is establishing access.

The following were recommended as best practices for journalism schools:

(1) Encourage journalism students to explore the linkages between global politics and local news. ICFJ sends its journalists abroad to explore these linkages. ICFJ has found that focusing on local media, where most Americans get their news, is the best outreach strategy.

(2) Require journalism students to travel abroad, preferably to work in a news room. Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies has an international reporting project that gives American journalists the opportunity to go abroad. The Pulitzer Center also gives US journalists the possibility to go overseas to do reporting.

(3) Make foreign language acquisition a mandatory component of journalism programs.

IV. Recommendations for Future Directions

In addition to the strategies listed under section III. Best Practices, the panellists had some suggestions for media outreach strategies that have not been used.

Meg Gaydorsik suggested that Fulbright recipients could be used as a resource for the local media. In addition to promoting their faculty, regional studies centers could put local media outlets in touch with their Fulbright students who are abroad as well as foreign students who are studying at their institutions who may have intimate knowledge of particular regional issues in the news.

In addition to focusing on ways in which to highlight the local impact of international news, media outreach programs should pay attention to more than just the mainstream media. Web-based reporting is on the rise. In addition, more attention should be given to the new trend of citizen journalists – people who are not trained as journalists, but who do high quality reporting.