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Industry needs and tertiary journalism education: Views from news editors

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This research paper discusses the findings of a 2013 Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) sponsored project that canvassed the views of news editors in Perth about the "job readiness" of tertiary educated journalism graduates. Data was collected via face to face interviews with eleven news editors in Perth, Western Australia. The editors work in print, online, broadcast and television and all of them employ journalism graduates. The aim was to assess whether the five university based journalism programs in Perth provide graduates with the skillset prospective employers were seeking. Editors are uniquely placed as they employ journalism graduates as interns, or as full time employees when they complete their studies, and they know which attributes and skills will help journalism graduates to succeed. The editors, for the most part, agreed that there was a key role for universities in Perth to provide both an educational background and skills based training for people contemplating a career in journalism and early career journalists. There was, however, some disagreement as to what the ideal university based journalism program should consist of.

Introduction

It is more than 90 years since the first Australian university-based Journalism program was established with the University of Western Australia the first to offer informal lectures for journalists in 1919. The first formal courses were offered by the University of Melbourne and the University of Queensland, both in 1921. Today, 29 universities offer journalism programs, both undergraduate and postgraduate, throughout Australia, and Australian universities play an increasingly important role in the training and education of generations of Australian journalists. Despite this, there exists an often tense - sometimes even acrimonious - relationship between university-based journalism programs on the one hand, and Australia's major media companies who are the employers of choice for many journalism graduates on the other (Bacon 2004; McLean 2010).

This reached a peak in June 2012 with the publication of several critical opinion pieces in *The Australian* newspaper on the relevance of tertiary journalism courses. The editorials published in *The Australian* in response to widespread academic support of the Finkelstein report into media regulation (Stewart 2012; Windschuttle 2012). Stewart argued that journalism academics are out of touch with the realities of the newsroom and are indoctrinating students with a "jaundiced" view of the industry. Again, these

accusations were met with strident rebuttals from the academy (Price 2012; Simons 2012), highlighting tensions over whether a journalism education should reproduce or challenge existing industry norms.

In part, this research project is inspired by this tension and the apparent schism that exists between some journalists and journalism academics on the role of journalism training and education, specifically the content of tertiary journalism courses and where they should most appropriately be taught - in-house, that is by the media organisation, within a university environment, or elsewhere.

Industry expectations and demands of journalism graduates have been the focus of extensive research in Australia and overseas. In the United States, employers have consistently indicated a preference for writing and reporting skills over computer skills (Birge 2004; Dickson and Brandon 2000; Huang, et al. 2006). Fahmy (2008) asked online journalists in the US to rank the importance of 25 specific skills and found that the ability to learn, editing, reporting, spelling and research rated in the top five. A 2010 study by (Brown and Collins) found that employers still demanded traditional news skills, but also articulated an additional desire for graduates possessing conceptual knowledge in the application of multimedia.

These findings are largely mirrored in Australian studies with mainstream media employers - when asked - generally conservative about the skills and qualities they demand in journalists (Callaghan and McManus 2010). Josephi (2004) interviewed employers from four international newspapers and found a preference for graduates with strong news sense, critical thinking, confidence, curiosity and writing ability, concluding that these attributes can only be partly taught. Nankervis (2005) substantiated these findings in her analysis of Australian broadcast employers and concluded that "there appears to be little concern at any of the networks for recruits to have skills related to new technology such as desktop video editing, reporter-orientated cameras or bulletin software" (Nankervis 2005, p.111).

Meanwhile, calls for closer industry alignment are counterbalanced by concerns that it has the potential to privilege the mainstream media at a time when less graduates are finding work in the industry. With the research indicating around a third of graduates will find jobs in the mainstream media, some educators have questioned whether there is an element of fraud in journalism programs (Cullen and Callaghan 2010). Alysen (7) suggests that educators have a responsibility to train undergraduates in the traditional 'fourth estate' model of journalism while directing them to a variety of traditional and non-traditional placements, including corporate journalism. Similarly, Mensing (2010) calls for a move away from industry-driven education to a more community-orientated approach that takes advantage of new technology and citizen participation. In summary, the changing media job market is forcing educators to reconsider the function and content of a journalism degree in the twenty-first century.

Moving towards a convergent journalism curriculum

US universities have been exploring issues around the changing media industry and its impact of journalism education since the mid 1990s. A 2005 study reported that 60 percent of US journalism schools were preparing students to work across multimedia platforms (Castaneda, et al. 2005) and a current online multimedia survey (Lin 2012) is documenting curriculum innovation in convergent journalism education across the U.S.

US Journalism schools have integrated convergent journalism in varying degrees, from one or two subjects, to a full-scale overhaul of journalism programs (Lowrey, et al. 2005). In 2002 Indiana's Ball State University adopted convergent journalism into their program with a view of where the industry would be in five to 10 years time. At the same time, the University of Southern California adopted a converged curriculum only to drop it a year later (Birge 2006). A recent study found little consensus among US journalism educators about how a journalism curriculum should look beyond agreement on teaching the basic fundamentals of reporting and writing (Blom and Davenport 2012).

Birge (2006) interviewed employers who worried that multimedia courses were displacing other skills, like writing and researching; concerns echoed by Usher (2009), Bhuiyan (2010) and Loo (2010). A number of studies have emphasised that basic reporting skills remain paramount to employers (Pierce and Miller 2007). Similarly Aumente (2007) urges that innovation be guided by careful experimentation to avoid courses being driven by new media "fads" rather than industry demand. Other concerns cited include a lack of resources and insufficient expertise among journalism educators (Stewart 2007) and competing demands for teaching resources (Auman and Lillie 2008).

Despite concerns, most educators and employers are tentatively supportive of moves towards a more converged curriculum. A landmark study found consensus among educators and news professionals on the need to address media convergence in university courses while continuing to emphasise traditional journalism skills and critical thinking (Huang, et al. 2006). Jarvis (2007) views convergent journalism as a way of enhancing students' storytelling ability. It also presents new opportunities for educators to develop graduates' proficiency in writing, editing and publishing (Hodgson and Wong 2011) and to equip students with skills in an entrepreneurial-driven industry (Hunter and Nel 2011).

Australian research into convergent curriculum innovation has been lighter on the ground. The 2008 State of News Print Media Report found that 63 percent of journalism courses were offering dedicated online or convergent journalism courses (Martin 2008, p 15). A qualitative survey of free-to-air news networks found that news managers valued "news hungry" journalists over technologically-driven ones (Nankervis 2005). This preference was echoed in a 2011 study which surveyed third-year students, working television journalists, and senior managers and found "pre-digital" skills like news sense, critical thinking and ethical sensitivity were consistently rated as more important across the three groups of participants (Nankervis 2011).

Researchers have looked at how the global financial crisis is reshaping the media industry and argued that journalism education should reflect a shift away from mainstream journalism, to freelancing and entrepreneurial journalism (Outing 2009; Quinn 2010). Callaghan explores these changes in her overview of an experimental convergent subject at Edith Cowan University (Callaghan 2009). Koutsoukous and Biggins (2010) discuss the challenges of redesigning the curriculum in line with industry changes at the University of Newcastle, and Duffield (2011) describes the processes involved in implementing a convergent media subject at the Queensland University of Technology.

A number of studies have examined how undergraduates use digital technology, such as mobiles phones, the Internet and social media, and suggested ways these tools can be integrated into journalism curricula (Bethell 2010; Hirst and Treadwell 2011; Hubbard, et al. 2011; Koutsoukos and Biggins 2010; Rollins 2010; Schwartz 2008). Specific case studies look at the implementation of skills in blogging (Chung, et al. 2007) and podcasting (Huntsberger and Stavitsky 2006) or the introduction of convergent concepts in a newsroom setting (Lewis 2009). The consensus among most researchers seems to be that convergent skills have their place in journalism curricula but should be pegged to industry demands and adopted without compromising basic journalism competencies.

Survey results of news editors in Perth

The only universities in Western Australia that teach journalism are based in Perth. These include Edith Cowan University, Curtin University, Murdoch University, Notre Dame and the University of Western Australia. Therefore, the author conducted face-to-face interviews with 11 news editors in Perth in their respective newsrooms. The list of interviewees (Table 1) were selected on the basis that they are the ones who hire journalism graduates to work in their respective media organisations.

Table 1: List of interviewees

	Interviewee	Position	Organisation
Broadcast	David Stacey	Director of News	Channel 9, Perth
	Howard Gretton	Director of News	Channel 7, Perth
	Adrian Beattie	News Director	Channel 10, Perth
	Rod Tiley	News Director	6PR & 96fm
	Kim Jordan	News editor	INeterABC, Perth
Print	Bob Cronin	Group Editor-in-Chief	*The West Australian*
	Brett McCarthy	Editor	*The West Australian*
	Anthony DeCeglie	News Editor	*The Sunday Times*
	Greg Thompson	Editor-in-Chief	Community Newspapers Group (17 Metropolitan community newspapers in Perth)
	Matt Zis	News Editor	Community Newspaper Group
Online	Allen Newton	Editor-in-Chief	WAtoday.com.au

During the interview, the editors were presented with a questionnaire that contained 25 questions about industry needs and tertiary journalism programs. All eleven interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees represent a cross-section of media outlets in Perth with the editors working for at least one of the following platforms: television, radio, print and online.

For purposes of brevity, and because of answer overlap, this research paper focuses on just 10 questions that deal primarily with the content of programs, whether universities are the best place to train journalists, and on the relationship between industry and the academy. It does not dwell on the question of program accreditation, or of the best balance between theory and practice in program design. The main thrust of the survey was to discover whether university-based journalism programs in Perth provide graduates with the skill-set prospective employers were seeking.

Responses to the questions were graded using Likert's Scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The Likert Scale, named after its developer the sociologist Likert, is a scale that is designed to measure underlying attitudes or opinions. In this paper the author chose the worded rather than numerical (1-5) format, and acknowledges that the responses indicate general rather than fully reflected in depth views.

This first section (Tables 2-5) provides an overview of how the news editors view university-based journalism programs in Perth.

Table 2: Do you think universities are the best place to teach journalism?

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	0
Neutral	2
Agree	5

Strongly agree	4

Of the questions in the survey, this was the one we believed had the greatest potential to generate debate. In drafting the questionnaire, it was believed there was likely to be a divide between respondents who had university degrees and those who had grown up through the school of hard knocks - the full cadet program. Interestingly, however, the responses did not contain the range of views we had anticipated, with most editors acknowledging that universities had an important role to play in the training of journalists, although a number were qualified, suggesting that a partnership between university and industry might be the best approach. One such editor argued:

> I think that universities do play an important role, particularly now. Whether that means we end up with the best journalists, I'm not really sure. You know, you may get as good a result out of a kid who comes to us at 17 straight from school and we train them from there, as happened in the dim dark past.

This support for in-house training appeared consistently in responses, even among those who supported university-based training. Although one respondent suggested that this should not be at the cost of a university education, which helped the individuals to mature before being exposed to the realities of life in a newsroom where they would be expected to tackle stories that 'could be damaging to a young person'.

A number of editors suggested that the training of journalists should be a partnership between the universities and industry, rather than the existing model in which the initial training is conducted within the academy and then the successful applicants for traineeships are polished on the job. At least three editors expressed a preference for a working model whereby you could do a cadetship and study at the same time. In one editor's view:

> I know the world's moved on, but my belief is that the best place to train future journalists is within the industry with universities in some sort of partnership. I think if you could work out some sort of a cadetship/apprenticeship system embedded within the journalism course - that's a real way forward.

Discussions about journalism standards frequently turned to the belief that the quality of individual programs was directly linked to the quality of the lecturers and/or tutors. Programs that could boast input from working journalists, or had recently appointed industry practitioners to teaching positions were lauded, whereas those that were seen to be staffed by people with no, little, or dated industry experience were given the thumbs down. Those that employed staff with recent industry experience were seen as being abreast industry's needs, whereas those that did not have high profile industry practitioners were regarded as too theory-based. A number of respondents who linked the strength of programs with the industry experience of teaching staff also recognised that the quality of individual journalism programs varied over time.

But not everyone was convinced. One editor saw the role of the university as helping students to acquire a broad education rather than a particular focus on journalism. Another stated that:

> Universities can train bright young minds to be inquisitive to understand their world and their environment, that's what university I think is there for. But to teach them to be 'on the road journalists' - I'm not sure that universities have to play that role as many graduates look back on their first 12 months in the newsroom and go gee - I learned a lot in that role and it was very different to what I envisaged it to be.

There is still the occasional view that many academics would struggle to be employed by a news

organisation:

> I wouldn't get a job at a university because I don't even have a first degree. I left about two thirds of the way through, but you know with all humility, I'd probably be a better journalism teacher than a lot of the people who've got doctorates or masters degrees and are teaching now.

Overall, there was agreement that Universities play a role in the education and training of future journalists and a journalism degree was seen as an important step in the journey to employment and a career in the industry. One editor summed it up by saying:

> The person with the journalism degree usually has a better chance of getting the job, not necessarily because we're giving them preference but because they have a body of work usually behind them.

Table 3: How would you describe your relationship with journalism educators

Non-existent	0
Distant	3
Improving	4
Cooperative	4

Despite the popular belief that the relationship between the academy and employers is tenuous, the evidence from these face-to-face interviews suggests a generally healthy, co-operative working relationship. However this statement needs to be qualified, because the relationship tends to exist at a personal level, with individual lecturers and industry representatives forging and maintaining links. These relationships also tend to be geographically situated, with staff from individual media organisations tending to work more closely with staff from a nearby institution, rather than those from further away, including other states. Such relationships were based on a number of factors, including previous work relationships, friendships, and individual initiative. Often the relationship was an historic one - based upon a request from the university to establish a formal internship arrangement, or an invitation from a media organisation to host interns. These relationships (both personal and institutional) are important from another perspective. But generally speaking the attitude towards journalism education - and the role of universities - is at least encouraging, if not entirely positive.

Table 4: Has journalism education improved in the last 10 - 15 years?

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	0
Neutral	0
Agree	2
Strongly agree	9

The majority of editors clearly believed that the quality of university-based journalism education in Perth had improved in recent years, without stressing the timeline. A constant theme among the editors was that universities provide the initial training which is then value-added by the employers.

Table 5: Do you think there are too many journalism courses?

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	2
Neutral	4
Agree	3
Strongly agree	2

Generally, the feeling among the editors was that there were probably too many tertiary journalism courses, especially as the five universities in Perth (Edith Cowan, Murdoch, Curtin, Notre Dame and UWA) teach the subject with a varying numbers of units, courses and awards. The editors, for the most part, could understand why journalism was a popular course in terms of acquiring important writing and communication skills, but they indicated that graduates should be told that it was both a highly competitive industry with a diminishing employment market.

> I think here in Perth, we're probably a bit crowed to tell you the truth, I'd like to see three of the universities doing it, and I think at the moment we're at least four if not five. I guess to some extent it's a bit like medicine - you can have too many universities doing the programs and with limited opportunities. Don't forget in the media, we're not adding journalist jobs in this business, we're cutting them down. So but the opportunities that are being offered to these kids are becoming fewer and far between, so maybe skinny them down a bit I think.

Editors' views on the content of tertiary journalism courses - (Tables 6 - 10)

The majority of editors felt that they could not talk knowledgeably about the quality of the tertiary journalism programs in Perth, although they were willing to talk about individual programs they had been associated with (either as students themselves, as part-time lecturers and sessional tutors, or having employed graduates from that/or those institutions).

Discussions about journalism standards frequently turned to the belief that the quality of individual programs was directly linked to the quality of the lecturers or tutors. Those that employed staff with recent industry experience were seen as being abreast industry's needs, whereas those that did not have high profile industry practitioners were regarded as too theory-based. A number of editors linked the strength of programs with the industry experience of teaching staff and they also acknowledged that the quality of individual journalism programs varied over time.

The majority of editors agreed on two areas of weakness: (1) spelling, grammar and syntax; and (2) the development of general knowledge. Both were linked to the apparent ambivalence of would-be journalists to read newspapers or magazines (either in hard copy or online), watch television or listen to radio news bulletins. A number of respondents said this was particularly noticeable among applicants for traineeships, who performed woefully in the current affairs quizzes that are an essential weeding tool in cadet recruitment these days, and, even if they managed to get through this part of the recruitment process to be offered an interview, often failed when asked to comment on stories published or broadcast by that and other organisations in the few days leading up to the interview. While the gripes about grammar, spelling and syntax were widespread, a number conceded that this should not be attributed to the journalism programs, but rather to failings in the broader education system.

While the majority of editors clearly felt that more time could be devoted to the development of writing

skills, their responses to the breakdown between news and feature writing was divided. Responses to this question tended to depend on the media organisation and background of the respondent. Those working for news-based organisations tended to indicate that they would like more news gathering and writing skills, while those working for magazines favoured more emphasis on feature-writing.

Another area of concern was an inability among journalism graduates to detect what was newsworthy and how do dig deeper to uncover the real story. One editor described it in this way:

> The other thing that can be a weakness is not really knowing how to go about getting stories or where to look for stories or chasing stories if they're handed to them. Now we know they aren't going to suddenly walk in and say I'm going to get a Walkley award winning story. But I think their 'news sense' can be underdeveloped in some of the students that we see coming out of university

Table 6: Should there be a greater focus on the convergent aspects of journalism?

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	0
Neutral	0
Agree	2
Strongly agree	9

The editors said they were aware of the introduction of 'convergent' and 'online' courses as a response to the changes taking place within journalism, and the development of computer labs to accommodate these changes. Most, however, were unable to talk about the content of new subjects, or outcomes such as the development of websites, program specific blogs or radio and television programs. They overwhelmingly supported the need for graduates to be multi-skilled, with the majority supporting the need for them to be able to work across the various media platforms

Table 7: Do you think journalism graduates are well-trained in technology?

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	0
Neutral	0
Agree	1
Strongly agree	10

There was overwhelming agreement that the journalism graduates they employ had acquired competent digital technology skills. One editor echoed a common sentiment when he said:

> I certainly think since I was at university in the late 80s I think that the practical side of things has improved dramatically. I see the students now really know how to handle a camera, they really know their technical things, especially the modern technologies that have developed. They come out pretty good and, in fact, probably better than some of the practicing journalists that are out there.

Table 8: Should Journalism education programs teach shorthand

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	4
Neutral	1
Agree	4
Strongly agree	2

There was a divided response on the use of shorthand and it reflected in part a mini referendum on the value of shorthand to journalists in the new technological age. Interestingly, the division was not between those who had been required to study shorthand during their cadetships and those who had not. A number of those who had shorthand said they rarely used it and questioned its value in a modern newsroom. This editor reflected a common response.

> We train graduates in short hand, but I do wonder beyond that how useful it is as a skill. We also use it as a benchmark in part of our obligations to new journalists to train them, and we like to see how enthusiastic they are and how keenly they embrace it. So I wouldn't say its something that university needs to incorporate.

Table 9: Should journalism programs include an introduction to PR?

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	0
Neutral	2
Agree	7
Strongly agree	2

This question was potentially problematic, given the traditional attitudes of journalists to public relations and marketing as 'the dark arts'. However, the responses were quite surprising, with a significant number of respondents indicating support for the suggestion that students be offered an introduction to Public Relations subject. Drilling down into the responses, the reason for this was not because many graduates would ultimately find jobs in PR or marketing, but rather one of self interest: if you teach them PR, they'll know when they're being manipulated by someone who is in PR, or working for a member of parliament. According to one editor:

> I suppose an introduction to PR would be helpful, or an understanding. If you understand what it's about, it can't hurt, because they're bombarded with it once they get here.

Table 10: Would you prefer to see journalism graduates develop generalist skills?

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	2
Neutral	2
Agree	7
Strongly agree	0

I think there was a definite preference on the part of the editors to opt for generalist rather than specialist skills, although they were open to employ someone with a politics or science degree if they had talent and showed a genuine interest and passion for the job. While there were a variety of responses, these two responses summarised the general tone and content of this debate.

> We want them to be pretty good all rounders. What I would like to see the universities do is encourage their students to broaden their knowledge but at the same time don't forget about the basics - story telling, writing, grammar, spelling, accuracy. I do see a weakness in basic skills.

> Well generalist but also specialist. I think specialist skills would be writing and honing those audio and video editing skills, but I think writing is important, I think you can't teach someone how to actually go out and do the business.

Factors that influence employment prospects

A journalism degree appears to offer candidates for traineeships an advantage when it comes to applying for positions, not withstanding the criticisms identified above. However respondents differed as to the nature of the qualifications they preferred. While some indicated a preference for a full three-year qualification, others pointed to the advantages offered by a degree in another discipline, and the add-on of a graduate diploma or a Masters degree. All agreed that a tertiary journalism qualification provided the building blocks employers were looking for, although many were not willing to conclude that all graduates they saw were job-ready.

Table 11: Does your organisation employ more graduates with a journalism degree?

Strongly disagree	0
Disagree	1
Neutral	1
Agree	2
Strongly agree	7

However, a tertiary qualification appeared to be only one of the boxes applicants had to be able to tick if they were to proceed to interview stage. A number of respondents said that they did not necessarily distinguish between applicants on the basis of their grades. They were interested in the subjects studied - and therefore the potential skill set the successful candidate would bring to the newsroom - and the individual's portfolio, but they were also looking for the 'x factor' that would set the candidate who was passionate about pursuing a career in journalism apart from someone who was simply interested in such a career. Perhaps for this reason the respondents - and the awards they worked under-reserved the right of employers to employ people without university-based qualifications. That is, they retained the right to preserve the old cadetship model under which a passion for journalism was the element that saw candidates succeed. Significantly, the editors also supported the retention of this model and the need for flexibility when choosing between candidates.

While the majority of successful applicants tend to have journalism degrees, prospective employers say they are always on the look-out for people who can offer something different. Examples cited by some editors include a trainee with a degree in medicine who could add a professional dimension to a health round, another with a PhD in mathematics who added to the newsroom's capacity to interpret statistics,

budgets and opinion poll results, science graduates, and people with degrees in business or finance, all bringing forensic skills to the workplace.

Conclusion

The journalism and media industry in Perth have undergone major structural change due to the introduction of new digital technologies. This rapid, fast-paced change is notable in many industries but it is acute in the media sector, and therefore demands a particularly responsive and adaptable curriculum for journalism education. It was interesting to note despite a limited knowledge of the tertiary journalism programs in Perth, and the fact that that there is a significant variation in the range or quality of programs on offer, the editors agreed that there was a key role for universities in providing both an educational background and skills-based training for people contemplating a career in journalism and early career journalists. In part this discussion boiled down to a debate about whether university-based degrees should be generalist in nature, or journalistic; theory-oriented or practical in nature? There was agreement, however, that industry and universities need to work more closely, with a belief that industry could have broader input into program design and revitalisation.

Recommendations

While individual universities have good working relationships with industry, these are often individual and not institutional relationships. It is proposed, therefore, that the Journalism Education Association of Australia (JEAA) should establish a working party comprising senior industry people, journalism educators, and representatives of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) to produce a comprehensive strategy for co-operation and interaction between the academy and industry across the lifecycle of journalism careers, including initial training and ongoing career development. Also, a resource website that outlines the diversity of tertiary journalism courses on offer throughout Australia would help editors to understand what topics are taught at individual universities. The website would encourage feedback from editors on evolving industry needs and developments.

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