

**Online Journalism in the Arab World
Realities and Challenges**

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Educating journalists in a Globalised world:

Reaching and Teaching Globalised Media

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“Will the time come when men, irrespective of their physical dispersion over the earth, can actually hear, see, smell and touch the achievements of the human mind and the beauties of nature around the globe without having to leave their own local habitats? In such a world, what place will there be for such concepts as political isolationism, national self-sufficiency, and competitive militarism? Or will the devotees of these vestiges of a bygone age, fortified by the awe-inspiring products of science and invention that they so tragically misuse, destroy the fabric of civilisation ere the dream is realised? The race would seem to be between destructive nationalism on the one side and constructive internationalism on the other.”

(Taylor, 1997, p. 193)

INTRODUCTION

Journalists and Journalism students often work full time, operate from geographically disparate locations and travel frequently. They leave conventional education far behind them. More than half of Central Queensland University's students study at over a dozen different campuses which are thousands of kilometres apart. To meet their needs, Central Queensland University (CQU) developed unique, online journalism programs which can be accessed anywhere there is internet, allowing interactive discussion among widely disparate students, relying on data base and websites rather than text books. Courses include Radio Journalism which is taught using streaming. CQU is further engaged in research which would allow industry professionals to act as mentors for online students.

This paper considers how digital convergence of text, audio and image on the net might impact on the content, structure and delivery of journalism education. It will refer to course development at Central Queensland University where online journalism programs have been unfolding for four years.

Online Journalism and Education

Journalists increasingly bestride a world of instant information. They report, edit and produce information for networks, which reach from urban centres to remote villages. The introduction of the Internet offered journalists new methods of gathering information, multinational forms of publishing and better communications.

Faster media created a perceived need for stories to be rushed to their audiences. "When technology permits near instantaneous transmission, scooping the competition may not leave time to confirm the facts. Accuracy suffers". (Hynes 2001)

The new electronic media - Internet and online media, e-business, e-journalism, e-marketing and e-commerce - meanwhile advanced and expanded opportunities in the emerging dot com economies. Skilled workers with specialised qualifications in technical fields and in journalism benefited. But many university based journalism programs failed to keep pace. Journalism education therefore should be integrated with the media outside the classroom. (Karan 2001)

Journalists operating in this expanded environment could be expected to be multi skilled and able manipulate text, audio, television and work on web sites. Daily pressures of these demanding processes may tie journalism practitioners more tightly to daily routines, isolating them from traditional information sources, such as libraries and universities where they might enrich their stories through reflection, contextualisation and formal qualifications.

Online journalism education allows journalists to address this dilemma; to retrain and adapt to the new technologies, to learn traditional and advanced practices where-ever they might be located. In these ways journalists might avoid being information rich, while being ultimately poor in knowledge.

Journalism educators should therefore embrace e-learning techniques. Seagrave and Holt wrote that e learning was particularly appropriate for the professions. "While featuring digital environments, it is recognised that ...[e-learning]...ought to be considered in a broader multi-location, multi-modal environment supporting the journalism and education programs." (Seagrave&Holt 2003)

Deuze argued that the Internet offered journalists four new modes of publishing; hypertextuality, multimediality and interactivity. Hypertextuality allowed journalists to create documents, layered with meaning and whose credibility was underpinned by links to sources and background material. Multimediality allowed text-based stories to include photos, videos and animation. Discussion groups, forums and even blogs (web logs) allowed audience participation, which had been strictly limited in conventional media. However, increasing interactivity was undermining the "we write, you read" dogma of modern journalism having an "impact" on core journalism's values.

(Deuze 2003)

Indeed, mainstream journalists covering the 2004 Tsunami, found their ability to cover such a wide-ranging event challenged and in some cases surpassed by amateur "Bloggers" on the Internet. While major newspapers continued to provide superior analysis, their coverage of breaking news was at times inaccurate, locally focussed and heavily reliant on official sources. In contrast the Internet, designed to survive a nuclear attack, offered Bloggers a fast, decentralised communications which included eyewitness reports images and sound. (Knight 2005)

Lack of interactivity was a concern for media critics long before the term "interactive" became an inflated buzzword in age of the Internet. (Schultz 1999) In the wake of the Tsunami, the net's interactivity allowed amateur Bloggers to enable the feedback and information which international aid agencies claimed mainstream media had been unable or unwilling to provide. The Norwegian based Phuket Disaster Forum established web based discussion lists where those seeking relatives or friends could post messages seeking information. By January 7, "I'm looking for..." had posted 1556 messages. The "I'm ok..." list had 359 posts. The site drew on the hive intelligence of the web, with contributors volunteering a plethora of further related links. (Phuket Disaster Forum 2005)

Blogging however remained an amateur activity. At its best, it displayed enthusiasm, diversity and often-rapid responses. It also lacked fact checking, consistency, and sustainability. While journalism education encouraged professional journalists to seek the truth, Bloggers were only thought to do so.

Mark Deuze said that the convergence process (the merging for text, audio, television and other media) was felt "throughout the field of journalism education worldwide". Any "new" converged news operation also took on the well-established roles, rituals, and cultures of doing things, as well as the entrenched ways in which many publics consumed their news. According to Deuze, multi media journalism schools should:

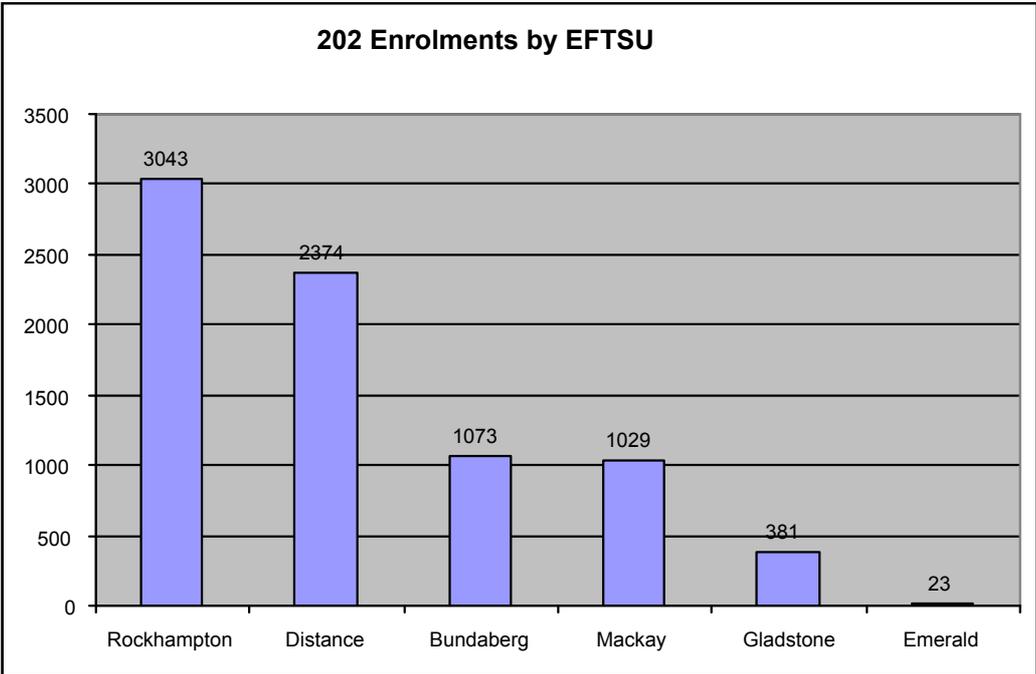
- Think twice about technologies and techniques as the fundamental principles for their converged curricula;
- Focus explicitly on understanding the logic of multimedia (recombining insights from all levels of media organisations; including its publics);
- Allow for convergence to be contested by students, educators, industry partners, and other stakeholders within their school, program or course -because it will be in practice and this will give people a sense of agency in the process;
- Instil a criticality into all aspects of teaching/thinking multimedia;
- Perhaps focus more on the quality of interaction between journalists, educators, and journalism students from (formerly) distinct sequences (radio, television, newspapers, magazines, newswire, online, but also public relations, marketing and strategic communication) as somewhere down the line in their careers, they might be expected not to view each others as competitors anymore, but as colleagues.

(Deuze 2004)

CQU

Central Queensland University (CQU) is Australia’s most geographically disparate and ethnically diverse, regionally based university. It operates over ten Australian campuses and four overseas franchises. Almost fifty percent of CQU’s 18000 students were in 2002, foreign, fee-paying visitors, drawn from the Asian Pacific region. These students were primarily located in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and the Gold Coast. International students received external courses and programs delivered by locally hired tutors. Courses were conceived, created, administered, moderated and examined from Rockhampton.

By 2002, 38 percent of domestic students were located in Rockhampton with lesser populations in Mackay, Bundaberg, Gladstone and Emerald. Eighty five percent of CQU academics and administrative staff and all but two of the professors continued to be employed at Rockhampton. All Deans and most senior management were also located in Rockhampton.



Queensland regional campuses were initially conceived as feeder operations; offering first year only. The second phase of evolution began in 1995 when some full programs were commenced. Currently there is a mix of programs which can be completed entirely on-campus; those where certain specialisations need supplementation with ISL or other delivery; and a lesser number of programs which are limited to first-year.

In practice, this has meant that domestic students frequently had to transfer to Rockhampton to enrol in advanced programs or complete their programs. In some programs, they are able to enrol externally. Neither alternative was entirely satisfactory for the students involved.

In its Strategic Plan, CQU sought to apply new distance teaching methods to draw together these diverse and in some cases divergent strands, and re-affirm its regional base, which remained couched in Queensland government legislation.

Our vision is to be:

A unified university

Acknowledged universally as a leader in flexible teaching and learning and well focused research

Acknowledged as contributing strongly to the sustainable development of the communities and regions in which we operate.

(CQU's Draft Strategic Plan, 2003).

CQU JOURNALISM

CQU began teaching journalism, more than a decade ago. Courses were located in Rockhampton and delivered by conventional face-to-face lectures and tutorials. Journalism was offered within a Bachelor of Communications program, which also featured cultural studies, communications theory and film studies. The appointment of a Chair of Journalism and Media Studies in 1998 allowed the creation of a plan to develop journalism teaching and learning at CQU.

Brendan Nelson, the Australian Minister for Education, recognised that regionally based universities such as CQU had special responsibilities to rural communities. In “Our universities: backing Australia’s future”, he said that it was neither desirable nor necessary for all universities to be the same. “A more diverse system will be achieved by institutions forging distinct missions within the overall system and through greater collaboration between individual universities and other education providers, industry, business, regions and communities,” Dr Nelson said. (Nelson 2002)

So how diverse courses including journalism might, be delivered to disparate domestic and international campuses?

CQU journalism has developed an evolving program to place journalism within CQU's strategic objectives, aiming to offer journalism to CQU's communities, by using internet delivered resources, courses (units) and programs (degrees).

The elements of this plan were as follows:

Course Rewrites

Courses were re-written to reflect recent industry experience and contemporary practices. *Principles of Journalism*, which had been offered to international students, was eliminated after it was discovered to contain parochial and borderline racist material. New courses, such as *Reporting Asia Pacific*, were created to inform students of Asian regional issues, using online Asian newspapers as sources.

Appointments

New academic staff were required to have both professional experience and academic qualifications. Staff with Masters qualifications was encouraged to upgrade to a Doctorate. Unqualified permanent staff were retired or re-deployed. Unskilled casual tutors were replaced with working journalists.

Journalism Centre

Exploiting an urban renewal project in central Rockhampton, journalism was relocated to a former magistrates court, which was renovated to include an electronic newsroom, a digitised broadcast training studio and a tutorial room. Academic staff offices opened onto student work areas. The court building was a short walk to the local commercial and community radio station, the ABC and Rockhampton's *The*

Morning Bulletin. The new centre provided a focus for the introduction of digitised equipment and allowed the abandonment of most analogue production systems.

eJournalism

The term eJournalism was adopted to reflect the industry wide tendency for text, audio, and television journalism to converge on the Internet. New courses including *Online Investigative Journalism* were created to emphasise the importance of computer skills to contemporary, advanced journalism techniques.

A specialist librarian from University of Queensland, Belinda Weaver, was engaged to locate and select online resources such as certified web sites and create specialist lists appropriate to the courses.

The Internet was to become a source for references, an object of research, a mode of communication and way of delivering courses. The theme coincided with the activities of the host faculty, which brought journalism and media studies together with Information Technology and Information Systems (Informatics).

eJournalism.au.com

A website was created in 1999 to provide information on staff, courses, program and equipment. The 150-page site was progressively expanded to include resource indexes, information on student activities and research material. (<http://www.ejournalism.au.com>)

Industry Involvement

Local newspaper and television editors became involved in regular reviews of course material. Their staff were employed as specialist tutors in broadcasting, newspaper production, reporting, feature writing and

photography. Work experience was incorporated through informal links with tutors and specific, project oriented courses (Communications Project). The current Editor of *the Rockhampton Morning Bulletin*, John Schlach, a regular first year journalism tutor, enrolled in a research program (Master of Communications) created to help industry professional achieve academic qualifications.

Research

A refereed scholarly journal, eJournalist, was created to encourage publications, and in doing so, attract federal research revenue. The journal was established online, to allow the easy dispersal of information to a geographically disparate staff and students. Rockhampton based researchers were encouraged to attend regular research work shops which provided practical support for developing research projects. Advanced researchers were invited to attend Australian Research Council grant development sessions.

New programs

The new eJournalism program was launched in 2002. The Journalism program, which could be completed externally, included compulsory introductory multimedia courses to provide basic web construction skills. The degree was transdisciplinary, requiring a double major in journalism, but allowing sub majors in courses in other faculties, including indigenous studies , human movement (sport), geography (environment), business, information technology and multimedia.

Articulation

CQU reached an articulation agreement with the private distance education provider, the Australian College of Journalism. The arrangement allowed College students to extend their journalism studies beyond the Certificates and Diplomas offered by the College itself. In return, the College promoted CQU programs in advertising.

Online Delivery

CQU journalism, working with the university's multi media team, in 2001 developed a website template which allowed most journalism courses to be progressively offered in *Flex* (external) mode. The online offerings immediately took journalism beyond the Rockhampton base, doubling enrolments in some courses. The highly structured, interactive, Internet resourced courses facilitated the employment of industry-based tutors in other regional centres.

Radio Journalism

The teaching of Radio Journalism was re-conceptualised so that it might be uniquely delivered on-line. In traditional courses, radio students were seen as working in a newsroom within a radio station. However, CQU saw the students as roving reporters. Like contemporary foreign correspondents, radio students recorded their interviews with portable recorders and edited their material on their lap tops, using downloaded freeware. Stories were logged by email, using streamed radio programs as examples of good practice. Completed items were logged on a dat base so that students might create short news programs for assessment.

To summarise, CQU uses the internet to research, deliver, develop and demonstrate multi media journalism. The internet's reach and flexibility allows professional education to be tailored to the needs of practitioners, who do not need to attend a central location to progress their learning.

DISCUSSION

Many Arab journalists learned their profession on-the-job, often in western media organisations. Such learning while imparting current skills, is framed by the political, cultural and social assumptions of the employer and limited by the daily demands of journalism. While many journalists succeed in these environments, others mimic bad practices and have less productive careers. On-the-job learning does not usually address future best practices.

Journalism education meanwhile can prepare journalists for the newsroom while acting as a pivot for specialist study and research and media. It encourages reflective, better quality journalism by bringing academics who create courses, together with trained industry practitioners who deliver them. Online media education, which deploys *Australian* experience offers the following opportunities:

- Interactive learning based on contemporary industry experience
- Multimedia journalism skills developed in a multimedia context
- Program delivery to wherever fast modem and broadband is available
- Globalised access to selected data-bases rather than reliance on conventional libraries
- Course material written in news agency style English which can be readily translated as required
- The ability to train Arab industry practitioners to provide on site mentoring
- The facility to offer gender specific learning groups.
- The use of easily up-dated teaching materials
- Programs which are not couched in colonial assumptions
- Internationally recognised Australian accreditation

Learning in traditional classrooms might be seen as a one-way, downward process. Such teaching can permeate western teaching for international students, where it assumed western notions of superiority are handed down to post colonial recipients.

However, western paradigms may cease to dominate education and communications where new technologies are empowering the previously voiceless. Learning through the internet, is multi-modal with students developing ideas, skills and knowledge with tutors and course coordinators. Such education would allow the exchange of local, Arab and international experience.

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