

Gen Y Journalists

Abstract

Will the advent of new media draw generation y journalists away from traditional practices to seek new and exciting ventures in online and multimedia fields or will they maintain the professional values of the past and retain interest in print, television and radio journalism?

This research centres on an examination of generation y journalists and the effect new media and other modern technologies have on their potential career paths in the media industry; with special focus on where these future reporters, broadcasters and commentators see themselves in this ever-changing, global business.

Researched through online surveys and focus group methodology, this study shines light on the unpredictable intentions of Australia's next crop of young journalists; what was uncovered may surprise you. Do avid new media consumers make quality new media producers? Do they wish to be online producers at all?

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Topic

Universities are flooded with talented young students born post 1978 champing at the bit to take on the profession of journalism. These technologically savvy students fit into the, now widely recognised category, of Generation y.

But what impact will this new generation have on the journalistic profession? In what journalistic field will they make their mark and did new media developments entice their career choice?

This research centres on an examination of generation y journalists and the effect new media and other modern technologies have on their potential career paths in the media industry; with special focus on where these future reporters, broadcasters and commentators see themselves in this ever-changing, global business.

Upon investigation there appeared to be a distinct lack of specific material relating to this or associated questions. Only one study conducted in China in 2000 found “an early love for writing as the main reason for journalists to choose journalism” (Wu, 2000, p.59). However, “the dominant motivation for both Chinese journalists and students turned out to be their desire for a chance to tap their various abilities and potentials” (Wu, 2000, p.59).

It appears that no research as yet has been conducted on the effects new media may bring to journalism career advancements. This project undertook to discover what this notion means for young Australian journalists and what their futures may hold.

Will the advent of new media draw generation y journalists away from traditional practices to seek new and exciting ventures in online and multimedia fields or will they maintain the professional values of the past and retain interest in print, television and radio journalism?

1.2 Generation Y

“Each generation is a new people” (de Tocqueville, Hunter, 2006, p1). Generation y is no different. “They are mature in a way no other generation has been, and will find ways to get what they want and do what needs to be done” (Sheahan, 2005, p7). They are a generation with street smarts, they know how the world operates and they understand their place in it (Sheahan).

“Defined as those born between 1978 and 1994” (Sheahan, 2005, p3), generation y are “harnessing the power of the information technology revolution in ways that leave their elders speechless” (Mackay, 2007, p6). They are immersed in media and information content as they have grown up in such an environment.

They have learnt many lessons from parents and others regarding work-life balance and personal contentment. They have witnessed workaholism first hand and have often been the subject of its effects. As a result, the notion of living to work has been pushed aside and replaced with the concept of working to live. While they do crave material possessions, aim to travel when ever possible and understand the need to earn such opportunities, they still seem to possess a greater appreciation for balance and good health. Where once their parents would have accepted that extra shift at work or taken on greater responsibilities for that little extra in the pay packet, generation y are far more likely to pass over such opportunities in favour of fun, friends and some good quality down time. Older people may see this as the next generation of young Australians simply determined to avoid hard work, commitment or an attitudinal break-down, but these work traits are consistent with generation y across the board. “This is a generation marrying later (if at all), having children later (if at all), buying a house later (if at all) and settling into the idea of a career path later (if at all)” (Mackay, 2007, p97).

Generation y’s commitment to education however is far superior to any generation that came before them. They have increased demand for institutional learning, apprenticeships and created a whole new class of entrepreneur. It is once they leave such institutions and embark on professional lives that the divide begins to widen.

When once a ‘steady job for life’ was the primary objective post graduation, generation y graduates are hell bent on capitalising on their skills and knowledge to avoid any such thing. In the workplace they have evolved and are simply a product of their time. Their parents endured an economy and labour market far removed from that of modern day Australia. These

millennial workers use the instability of recent labour market trends to their advantage. “Gone are the days when stable employment was regarded as one of the twin pillars of a stable society (the other being stable family life)” (Mackay, 2007, p61). Now young people see their professional lives more like a jigsaw than a straight line. They switch effortlessly between part-time and full-time employment, return to further their education in droves and relish the opportunity, or challenge, to move from job to job.

Essentially for this generation, it is an ownership, or control issue. “It’s a response to the values of a new generation who are more interested in flexibility and transience than stability and permanence” (Mackay, 2007, p16). These are well educated, worldly, information saturated young people who desire jobs that afford them the space and opportunity to control their employment, on their terms; when should they be in the office, when could they work from home and how hard they should work on any given day.

The underlying issue throughout the literature is purpose. Purpose, or implicit meaning, is the undercurrent that drives these young people. Yes, they do desire many of life’s material wonders, but they also place great value on making a difference. “It sounds obvious, but generation y wants their jobs to have purpose. They need to feel as though it actually makes a difference and contributes in some way” (Sheahan, 2005, p93). Now although there were many differences and anomalies along the way, it is this notion of purpose that appears to have brought generation y people to journalism.

1.3 New Media

“When a new technological medium enters the world, we tend to think the world of it. We identify it with the world, and imagine it brings the different parts of the world together like never before” (Kyong Chun & Keenan, 2006, p.277).

The dynamic and fluid nature of new media and its many undefinable parts has kept authorities hopping since its inception. There are a range of explanations and hypothesis but there is a lack of one specific definition. For the purposes of this research new media is defined as such: Inclusive of the full gamut of content and production capacities, new media is “an interactive medium or form of distribution as independent as the information it relays” (Kyong Chun & Keenan, 2006, p1).

When analysing new media, Manovich (2001) and others discuss a range of technologies from DVD's through to software production and computer games. However, in the context of this research, new media is viewed through the prism of multimedia news production and convergent journalism.

For some 25 years the interactivity of information production and distribution technologies and journalism has been steadily influencing news production. In more recent times this concept has emerged as convergent journalism. Such a practice is defined as "being flexible enough to provide news and information to anyone and everyone, anytime and all the time, anywhere and often everywhere without abandoning key journalistic values" (Kolodzy, 2006, preface).

As Loader (2007) and colleagues highlight, new media and content driven technology is reshaping the information accessed by society and the integration of this with an increasingly educated, global generation creates an almost undefinable dynamic.

1.4 The Relationship

The way in which generation y generally engages with the wide variety of information and its sources today is astonishing. Gone are the days of waiting for their daily newspaper as most generation y individuals have already sourced their news updates online or via their mobile phone. The key point to note though, is how the next generation of news and information producers view their role in this whole process and how, if at all, do they see their careers intersecting with new media technologies?

Such an area of research was pursued due to a distinct lack of material or prior studies regarding the role and influence new media and associated technologies were having on the next generation of Australian journalists. While researchers may have investigated new media as a concept and even hypothesised as to its affects on young people as consumers, little has been done regarding the convergence of news production, new media technologies and generation y journalists.

Much is made of generation y and their reliance on and connectedness to online and new media content and consumption (Loader, 2008); however upon closer examination there seemed to be some differences when this notion is applied specifically to generation y as journalists. It now appears that the previously held view of generation y and new media might not be quite so prevalent among their journalism peers.

2 Research Methodologies

To ascertain the position of generation y journalists and their intentions for future careers in the media industry, two tried and tested research methodologies were employed.

In an attempt to obtain comprehensive and uncompromised data, a qualitative instrument (focus group) and a quantitative instrument (online survey) form the base of this project.

2.1 Online Survey

The advent of the internet as an instrument for research collaboration has brought about great change in all fields that in one way or another conduct research.

When once a paper survey needed to be physically sent to participants, filled in, sent back and the data manually entered into a system, the internet and online technology can now essentially complete this task with the click of a mouse (Selm & Jankowski, 2006). This point, coupled with budgetary and time constraints, meant an online survey was the logical choice for this project.

Given this research is centred on generation y and new media, another obvious advantage was that "using the internet for survey purposes among young people may lead to higher response rates as compared to paper-and-pencil surveys (Selm & Jankowski, 2006, p. 437). This was further evidenced by the near 50% survey replies received.

While some technical issues do arise when one evaluates the use of online surveys, such as computer use among potential survey recipients, the overwhelming evidence suggests online surveys are a valuable and effective method for collecting data.

Among others, Selm and Jankowski (2006) outline that the advantages of online surveys may include, but are not exclusive to:

- Possibility of point-and-click responses
- Provision of structured responses
- Use of an electronic medium for data transfer and collation
- Provision of visual presentation of the questions permitting review
- Flexible time constraints for respondents

- Employment of adaptive questions to reduce the number and complexity of questions presented to users.

It is also important to note the security and validity of the data collected in online surveys. The technology used in this instance, www.freeonlinesurveys.com, is password protected to the creator of the survey, questions can not be re-answered by participants and any recipient who has previously partaken in the survey will not be permitted to access the survey again due to security measures built into the software.

To capitalise on this technology the current survey was crafted based on the questionnaire principles espoused by De Vaus (2002). The structure and wording of questions for surveys can mean the difference between quality data collection and material that is essentially skewed or misleading, either intentionally or unintentionally.

The two main types of questioning employed for this survey were binary (choice between one of two or more fixed alternatives) and multiple-choice (De Vaus, 2002, p.104). According to De Vaus, providing a variety of questioning formats alleviates the possibility of inadvertently leading respondents away from the actual question at hand and ensures a comprehensive collection of data. De Vaus also provides a detailed questionnaire checklist (p.118) to assist researchers to create and distribute sound, effective surveys.

As will become apparent in the *Data* section below, this quantitative method of data collection yielded valuable information and offered a quality complement to the focus group.

2.2 Focus Group

Since the 1920's focus groups have been utilized as a central tool for conducting marketing research. By the 1970's their capacity to contribute to academia through theoretical and applied processes took shape (Iorio, 2004).

“Focus groups are small structured groups with selected participants, normally led by a moderator. They are set up in order to explore specific topics, and individuals' views and experiences through group interaction” (Litosseliti, 2005, p.1).

They “typically consist of between six and ten participants” (Litosseliti, 2005, p.3) and “are designed for discovery and to answer the how and why questions” of research (Iorio, 2004, p.78).

By occupying the middle ground between participant observation and in-depth interviewing (Litosseliti, 2005), the focus group in this project played a vital complementary role in relation to the online survey. The social dynamic of such a collective group facilitated quite open and free flowing discussion and provided much needed qualitative information. As will be outlined below, the online survey collated valuable data on a quantitative basis, and this data was supported and further elaborated upon through the focus group.

Litosseliti (2003) believes further value for the utilisation of focus groups includes:

- Discovering new information and consolidating old knowledge (as was evidenced in this instance by the correlation between the group and the online survey data)
- Obtaining a number of different perspectives on the same topic, in participants' own words
- Gaining information on participants' views, attitudes, beliefs, responses, motivations and perceptions on a topic
- Brainstorming and generating ideas
- Gaining insights into the ways in which individuals are influenced by others in a group situation
- Exploring controversial issues and complex or sensitive topics

Of particular note when conducting a focus group is the manner in which the group or meeting is administered. It is imperative for the efficacy of data collected and the overall outcome of the any research involving focus groups that certain criteria are met before, during and after the group's meeting.

Iorio (2004) discusses the need to ensure a few key points are met. These include, but are not limited to:

- Comprehensive consultation must be undertaken to ensure a wide cross section, or sample, of participants is secured. Every effort must be made to involve a sample of people that best represents the demographic being investigated.

- All information regarding the group's topic and administrative matters must be made available to all participants prior to the first meeting.
- A detailed consent form must be provided to participants so as not to create any confusion over the meetings procedures or the re-use of content for future reporting.
- An independent group moderator is the most effective mechanism to manage and facilitate the meeting so as not to in any way influence or skew discussions and deliberations.

These criteria provide a sound and ethical approach to ensure the effectiveness and validity of focus groups. Each and every point outlined above was adhered to throughout this particular research project. Participants were selected based on specific criteria, namely third year undergraduate or postgraduate QUT journalism students. Consultation with student colleagues and faculty administrators and teachers ensured a representative group was brought together. The group was recorded using audio recording equipment and all parties were privy to that fact prior to the gathering. An independent moderator, Ms Kylie Sawley, of *ASSIST Psychological & Counselling Services* was brought in to facilitate the group. Ms Sawley has years of experience conducting and facilitating group sessions and her contribution certainly kept the group on topic.

Overall, a focus group, when administered correctly, can contribute a great deal to research outcomes. In this instance, the group offerings were insightful and afforded the further development of interesting material regarding generation y journalists and their future career intentions.

3 Data, Interpretations and Conclusion

3.1 Data

The data for this research consists of quantitative statistical data obtained via the online survey and qualitative responses generated within the focus group. To maintain clarity and clear communication of these results, the online survey and focus group each have a dedicated section below.

3.1.1 Online Survey

The online survey was distributed to some 75 recipients from the Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) School of Journalism. To ensure data

collected pertained to the most relevant individuals regarding the research question only postgraduate and third year undergraduate journalism students were surveyed. As outlined above the survey was distributed online through an email distribution.

Of the 75 survey recipients, a response rate of just fewer than 50% was achieved with some 34 responses.

Of the 34 survey participants 85.7% (29) were undergraduate students while 14.7% (5) were studying a postgraduate journalism program at QUT. The vast majority of these were aged 17 to 21 years (25 or 73.5%) with 9 (26.5%) in the 22 to 26 years age bracket. Interestingly, no student identified with being over the age of 26 years.

In an attempt to ascertain any career intention variations between students raised in an urban family and those who grew up in a rural setting, the question "Which of the following best describes your upbringing prior to the age of 15?" yielded results as outlined in Figure 1.

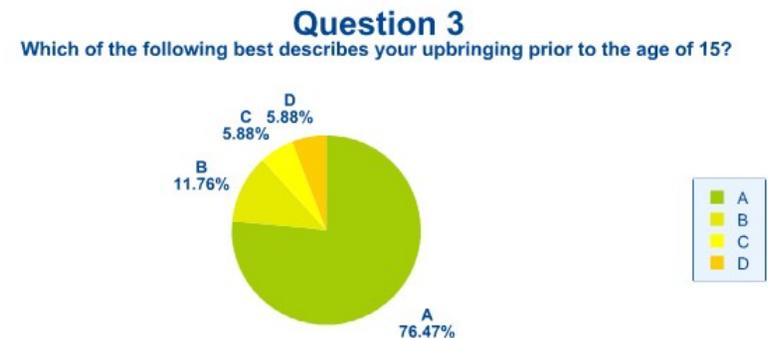


Figure 1

a) Urban - 50,000 or greater; b) Regional - 15,000 - 49,999; c) Rural - 1 - 14,999; d) Unknown

Among the many possible reasons these young people may have been drawn to journalism the most prevalent was a passion for language (14 or 41.2%). A passion for news followed in second on 26.5% (9). Family influence, personal ambition and other being identified on 5.9, 17.7 and 8.8 percentage points respectively (Figure 2).

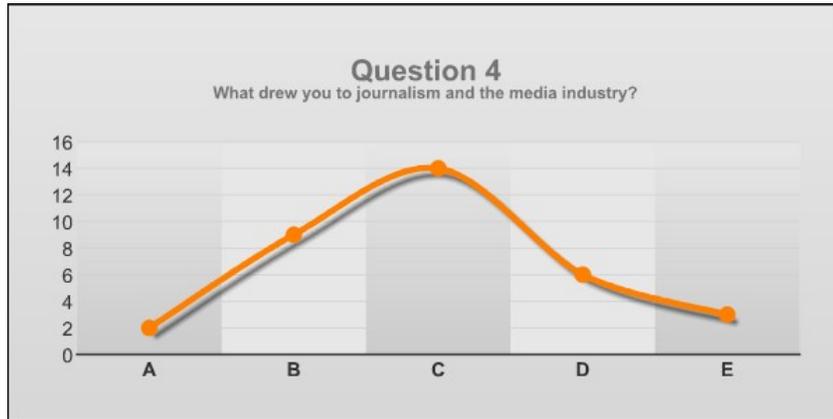


Figure 2

a) Family influence; b) Passion for news; c) Passion for language; d) Personal ambition; e) Other

Survey question five “In what medium do you see your career developing?” yielded the most unexpected results, as outlined in Figure 3.

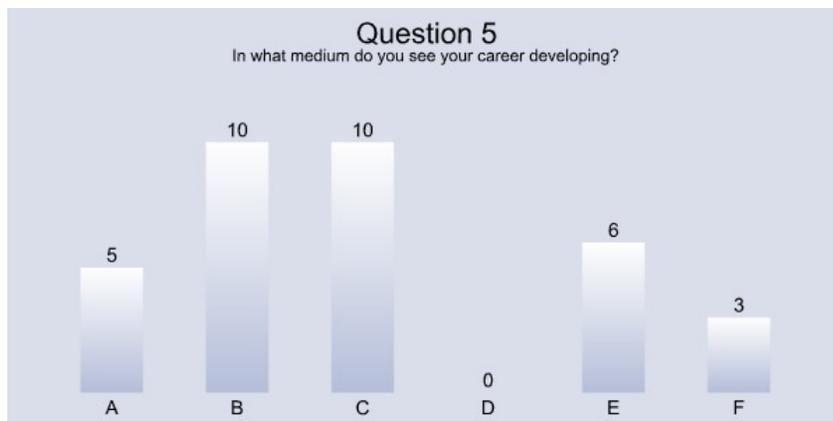


Figure 3

a) Radio; b) Television; c) Print; d) New Media (Online, digital activities); e) Public relations/corporate communications; f) Other

Questions 6 and 7 regarding new media and its influence on general career intentions prior to entering a journalism program at university and the effect new media now has on shaping their journalism career intentions were quite standard with little variants. Out of the 34 surveyed, 44.1% (15) stated that new media did in fact shape their overall career intentions while 16, or 47.1%, believed new media had not shaped their professional futures.

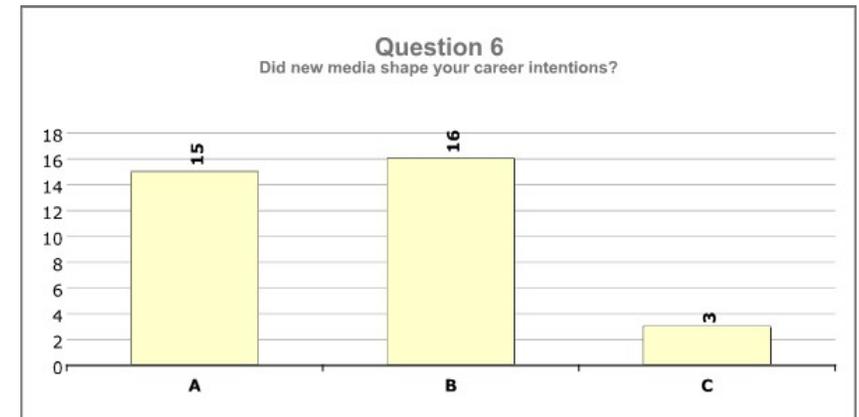


Figure 4

a) Yes; b) No; c) Unknown

In question 7, it was particularly interesting to find that 23.5% of respondents answered ‘not at all’ when asked “to what extent did new media affect your career intentions?” In a sign of what may be good things to come for news service proprietors and consumers, 32.4% (11) of respondents stated that new media “integration with other mediums (radio, TV, newspapers etc) is exciting”.

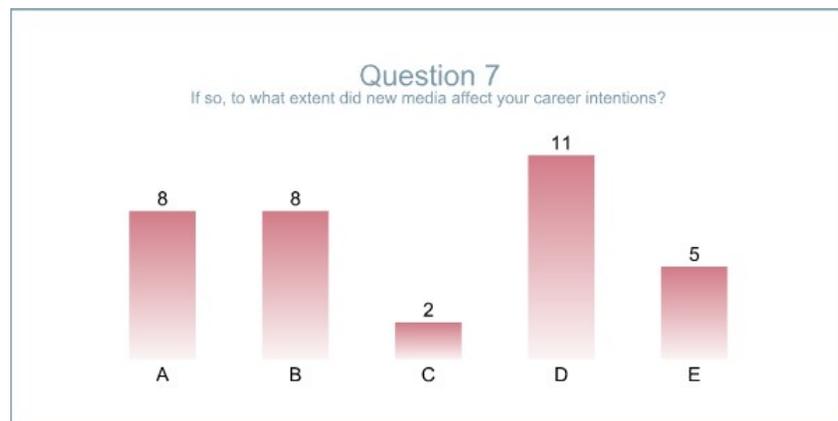


Figure 5

a) Not at all; b) Slightly; c) Underscores it completely; d) Integration with other mediums (Radio, TV, Newspapers etc) is exciting; e) Unknown

Questions 8 and 9 pertained to self-employment in the media industry and attempted to gauge the interest of generation y journalists in establishing their own news service or media business. A staggering 55.9% (19) stated that they had no interest in creating their own media business in the future. Only 23.5% (8) expressed an interest in this area. To put this figure into context though, 20.6% (7) also responded as not yet knowing if the world of media entrepreneurship was for them.

From those who did express interest in self-employment, however, it must be noted that some 50.0% (17) stated plainly that if they were to enter business for themselves that new media would not be the specific industry. Only 8.8% (3) of respondents stated that their business would be new media based. However, again, this must be put into context by outlining the fact that 41.2% (14) responded “unknown” to this same question.

At the end of the survey three open ended questions were posed to allow for further contributions. On “*what is your view regarding the effect new media technology has had on journalism practices and reporting strategies?*” respondents offered a variety of information. Responses ranged from “new media technologies have taken journalism to a whole new level – it’s still continuing to broaden the scope” through to “new media has encouraged a

younger generation of consumers” and “(it) opens up new avenues for individuals and offers new business opportunities”.

When asked “*where do you see Australian journalism in the future*” the most consistent response was simply “online”. Others proffered that Australian journalism “will become more and more commercialised, a few big companies, less jobs ... greater role of the citizen journalist”. And from another “hopefully not influenced like the American media. I hope that Australian journalists can remain true to a journalists’ aim – objectivity.”

And finally some interesting responses to “*do you think online and new media technology has influenced journalistic ethics and professional values?*”. While there were some straight “no” contributions, the overwhelming majority seem to believe that journalism has been negatively impacted upon by online and new media developments. This position was quite consistent across the material with the following response indicative “yes, there is so much pressure to get it out there first. Therefore, journalists put ethical decisions second after time limitations.”

3.1.2 Focus Group

The focus group for this project was conducted on the Kelvin Grove campus of the Queensland University of Technology on Wednesday August 17, 2008.

Although some 9 people were invited to participate and replied as being willing and able to attend, only six eventually partook in the meeting.

To facilitate further analysis and assist in future reporting the session was recorded with a selection of responses outlined below.

A couple of the questions from the online survey were initially posed to attendees in an attempt to generate discussion. Following this, the conversation ensued as a result of contributions and the dynamic with in the group.

The contribution from attendees was encouragingly insightful, each member of the group offered a variety of intelligent and astute observations and as a collective organism they set a high standard for collaborative research.

The first question posed, following an explanation of the research project, was “why journalism?” A diverse range of contributions ensued including one dedicated to television journalism, one radio broadcasting, three interested in print and one as a complimentary program to a business degree. Interestingly, no new media intentions were expressed in the initial responses, and even once prompted only one attendee suggested that as a result of her studies she understood the need to have multimedia journalism skills as opposed to experiencing a personal desire to pursue new media.

As outlined above, many of the responses in the focus group ran parallel with the data collected through the online survey. Attendees expressed a passion for news and language as the underlying principle that drew them to journalism, but with equal intensity, outlined the fact that market forces within the media industry will probably determine their futures in relation to new media. “For me being a gen y journalist ... a big, massive factor that has come into it for me, is the money factor. I actually stepped out of a career as a journalist in a magazine in April because I felt financially I couldn’t cope anymore. I was being paid a pittance and was putting in so many hours.”

It also became apparent during the group discussion that the generation y journalists, as indicated above by Mackay (2007), are well aware of the economic and social expectations and demands on their skills and the role they are going to have to play in their future careers. This was evidenced by “we know what we are getting into to ... we know we’re going to be going into newsrooms that are going to have less and less staff because its going to have a bigger and bigger expectation on us ... we know we are going into a career that will say ‘I’m sorry you don’t get as much time as anyone else, you don’t get to go out in the field as much as anyone else’.”

When probed about any entrepreneurial intentions in new media only one attendee expressed any interest. “Yes ... absolutely ... I think that the knowledge I’ve got from my degree has given me the capacity to understand what the landscape is like at the moment and to see any opportunities I would like to jump on.”

One of the most notable statements of the meeting came on the back of discussions surrounding what is news and how do media outlets strike the balance between providing consumers with what they want as opposed to what they need. It was put to all group members what role they saw for themselves as the next crop of Australian journalists and one attendee stated “our generation can re-define what news is”. This strength, confidence and commitment were the common themes throughout the focus group.

3.2 Interpretations

Of all the results in the current study, the information most unexpected was that new media did not warrant much interest among those surveyed. The most notable finding of this research project was the astonishing response to survey question five, in which *nil* participants indicated new media (online, digital activities) as a medium in which they saw their career developing. The more traditional journalistic practices of television and print (and to a lesser extent radio and public relations) still won out.

The results indicated that if there was any interest in new media at all it was because they were interested in its integration with other mediums (radio, TV, print etc) (see Question 7, Figure 4). Most (47.1%) even denied that new media shaped their career intentions in any way, with only 44.1% suggesting that it did play a part in their developing career in some way (see Question 6, Figure 3).

One could be forgiven for thinking young people’s online consumption habits would lead to a desire to work in this field, however, the evidence suggests otherwise. There was even a lack of interest in their own new media or news service businesses. If there was any interest at all in this area they were not interested in online businesses (only 3 respondents expressed any inclination in developing a new media based business in the future).

Such findings are conducive with what Wu (2000) uncovered when an investigation was conducted into Chinese journalists and journalism students. Wu found “that Chinese journalism students reportedly choose journalism for some professional motivations: for a chance to develop their potentials and for a love of writing instead of being attracted by monetary benefits or glamour factors such as quick fame or high social status” (2000, p.64). The current research has very much reflected similar sentiments.

A possible explanation of these findings may lie within the description of the generation Y population. As stated in the literature search on this age group in the introduction, “generation y are purpose driven, they want there jobs to have purpose.” The fact that the respondents of the present research also indicated that they are far more interested in making a difference through “old school stake out journalism” than immediate but “shallow online journalism” is clear evidence of such.

However, this research also identified that financial concerns and the inevitable evolution of the journalism profession towards new media/convergent/online practices, meant that millennial students are aware

they may eventually, albeit reluctantly, be required to work in this field. Results from the focus group in particular acknowledged that industry demands will dictate future journalists may have to shift their career directions and as a result they acknowledge the need for education and exposure to new media skills and technology.

In particular, financial implications warranted specific mention as justification for young journalists heading into new media more so than a specific interest in the area (i.e. other journalism fields pay too little). Thus financial concerns appear to be a contributing factor to low retention rates and personal dissatisfaction in the journalism profession. Such results indicate that news proprietors and journalism industry leaders may need to actively address remuneration issues in order to keep journalists in the fields of interest they feel most passionate about.

As with most research, the current topic has merely demonstrated further gaps in knowledge and opened doors for more investigation into the area of generation y journalists, their career directions and the education and training they receive.

3.3 Conclusion

Given the ever changing nature of the media industry and the constant stream of material asserting generation y's reliance on and knowledge of technology, one would have thought the online/new media/convergent journalism world would have been their career option of choice. The research conducted in this project has uncovered however, that this is not the case. Many young journalists are still pursuing the traditional journalist's path with their passion and values still entrenched in 'stake out' and 'truth seeking' style journalistic practices.

Although, it was also acknowledged throughout this research that skills in online journalism and new media are essential if the next generation are to sustain a media career. Despite their best efforts to avoid it, these up and coming journalists are fully aware that at some stage they will probably end up in the field of online and new media; it is the way of the world and these journalists seem prepared for the ride.

"We can't know precisely what journalism will look like 10, 20 or 50 years from now. It's fun to speculate, but even the experts – professionals who work daily in the online field – are unclear exactly what the job of reporter or editor will entail as this century unfolds. The one thing about which they do

agree is that qualities such as curiosity, thoroughness, accuracy, fairness and a commitment to good writing are the core elements of an outstanding journalist. In the 21st century, however, you can add one useful trait – a willingness and an ability to adapt to ever-changing technologies in the gathering, processing and dissemination of news. If you display these qualities in your work, you will be a credit to the field of journalism, period. It shouldn't matter if you're on paper, on a web page, on streaming video, a PDA or a cell phone. Good reporting is good reporting" (Craig, 2005, p271).

APPENDIX A: Survey Questions

The questions posed to survey participants were:

1) Are you an undergraduate or postgraduate journalism student?

a) Undergraduate

b) Postgraduate

2) How old are you?

a) 17 – 21

b) 22 – 26

c) 27 – 35

d) 36 or over

3) Which of the following best describes your upbringing prior to the age of 15?

a) Urban – 50,000 or greater

b) Regional – 15,000 – 49,999

c) Rural – 1 – 14,999

d) Unknown

4) What drew you to journalism and the media industry?

- a) Family influence
- b) Passion for news
- c) Passion for language
- d) Personal ambition
- e) Other

5) In what medium do you see your career developing?

- a) Radio
- b) Television
- c) Print
- d) New Media (Online, digital activities)
- e) Public relations/corporate communications
- f) Other

6) Did new media shape your career intentions?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Unknown

7) If so, to what extent did new media affect your career intentions?

- a) Not at all
- b) Slightly
- c) Underscores it completely
- d) Integration with other mediums (Radio, TV, Newspapers etc) is exciting
- e) Unknown

8) Do you have any interest in creating your own media business or news service in the future?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Unknown

9) If so, would this business be new media based?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Unknown

10) What is your view regarding the effect new media technologies has had on journalistic practices and reporting strategies?

Open response

11) Where do you see Australian journalism in the future?

Open response

13) Do you think online and new media technology has influenced journalistic ethics and professional values? Why?

Open response

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