

Discussion: The 2010 ERA Round

Chair: Dr Rhonda Breit, School of Journalism & Communication, University of Queensland

Rapporteurs: Professor Wendy Bacon, Director, ACIJ, UTS and Professor Ian Richards, Editor, *Australian Journalism Review*, UNISA

Prof Bacon made the following key points:

- As scholars, we need to stop thinking of ourselves as journalism educators. We are researchers and educators. Doctors who also lecture don't identify themselves as medical educators – they are doctors as well as educators.
- We will need to be careful to not let teaching take over our careers, while scholars in other disciplines work on research and ARC grant applications.
- We must develop a national collaborative research strategy to build our field.
- Practice-based research in journalism is acceptable in the ERA model – that is settled. The question of portfolios does not pose major difficulties.
- One emerging issue concerns the groupings in which we find ourselves. Journalism is in a cluster with creative arts and our relationship with media studies still needs to be worked out. We're not in Public Relations, for example, but we remain in the same faculty.
- A group of us might get a portfolio together and peer review it ourselves to develop benchmarks before it goes through the ERA process.
- This will be the end of the desk points process (major/minor creative work).
- There is now an opportunity to advance non-profit investigative journalism, for example, at the ACIJ based at UTS and at the Swinburne Institute of Technology in Melbourne. Think about collaboration for high-end research.
- There are still some problems regarding the reconciliation of professional and academic ethics and how to get practice-based material through universities. If we are going to do practice as research we can only use the journalism Code of Ethics, so we're now going to have to sort out that issue.
- In the creative arts field, the journals won't make that much difference. However, journals are still important for us and we need to make sure that faculties put that into their background statements. We probably will end up focusing on international journals.
- One thing that emerged from the ERA trial is that we need an organisation, some form of council, because when it came to consultation regarding journals, this would have helped the discipline. So along with the JEA, we have to work collaboratively despite being in competition with each other.
- Above all, we remain journalists. In our departments, we have Four Corners producers, heads of investigative journalism units, former investigative editors. We are journalists and must continue to produce practice-based research.

Prof Richards made the following key points:

- The draft list of ranked journals is used for promotions within academic environments. It's a bit naïve to think such metrics won't be weighted by individuals and institutions to count for more than they're supposed to.
- I was involved in a peripheral way with the compilation of the draft list, which resulted in the *Australian Journalism Review* journal losing its A* ranking.
- In my discussions with people who were directly involved in the ranking and the downgrading of the journal, I have been advised that:
 - they are comfortable with the ranking process and downgrading the AJR;
 - they are confident that there was no prejudice against journalism, that no mistake in the process, and that ignorance of quality journalism research was not a factor; and
 - there is no mechanism to appeal the decision.
- Some of the points made were:
 - the journal lacked a sufficient number of international papers;
 - there was an insufficient number of high profile international members on the editorial board;
 - regional relevance is not a factor in the ranking;
 - submissions received regarding the AJR recommended A*, A and B rankings;
 - association was a problem; and
 - universities shouldn't just publish A to A* journals.
- There is a danger now that Australian journalism research could be marginalised.
- To avoid this, we should make a serious submission to ARC to detail what's wrong with the ranking.
- None of us know who performed the assessment, but some groups benefited from the rankings while others lost out.
- The journal is as good as was before the rankings came out, so keep submitting quality outputs to the journal. We will address all points as required. We don't have to wait to until the next round of ERA to have our voices heard.

Follow-up Q & A

A number of delegates asked Prof Knight if he had been consulted regarding the ranking of the AJR.

Prof Knight responded that he had been consulted and had made his opinion clear.

He added that:

- many people who had been consulted about the AJR were outside the discipline and had expressed disbelief that Australian journalists could have an A* journal – they found the very notion inconceivable;
- A and A* journals WILL matter because that's the call of our DVC;
- there will almost certainly be a higher number of articles submitted to the journals listed in the first few lines of the table;
- we have to work hard to bolster Australian journals including educating research departments that this is important.

During the ensuing discussion a number of comments and ideas were exchanged:

- There needs to be a probation period whereby authors whose submissions were accepted for publication before the change in ranking could still receive A* credit for the article – this should apply for AJR as well as other journals.
- In the 1902/3 categories, radio is the ignored form. Are there examples of practice-based research we can refer to in the course of putting together submissions, and how do we go about cross-disciplinary applications? Other delegates responded that Ms Visher had not answered that because that is left up to the academic and the institution. Prof Knight said that radio outputs should be multiple-coded and that packaging radio research will involve putting the research into a database for DVD/CD formats, with a series of programmes on a disc, accompanied by a research statement of 250 words max and an outline of what the research consists of.
- The discussion taking place in the journalism research community regarding the impact of the ERA on the discipline should be open, and this includes talking to the media. A lot of what is written about journalism is not evidence-based and we should use our authority to respond to it.
- No one has clearly identified which practice-based outputs will be counted as quality research. Does it count as research because it has good research in it? Our peers might not accept it as research in this new environment. Does it need to inject the fruits of other journalism research into the practice? We don't know how individual outputs were ranked.
- We need to talk now about what makes journalism research good – number of sources, place of publication, complexity of the structure, innovative nature?
- In the short term, ERA will prioritise journal articles, with rankings, and then consider a 'big pile' of journalism pieces. It's our job to take works of journalism practice and make sure they get through this process.
- We need to get some idea of what will count as a quality practice-based research and develop collective strategies based on that. During the trial, were there significant differences in the kinds of journalism artifacts submitted? How were they rated?

- The steps in the process appear to be:
 1. package the material in a way that improves the quality of submissions
 2. scholars need to go back to research depts to follow up on submissions
 3. ARC – submission goes through committees
- Prof Bacon asked Dr Zion ‘Were you able to pick 20 out of thousands of your (practice-based) articles that revealed fresh insights or knowledge about one particular field? Dr Zion replied that he had, using a portfolio on DVD spanning 52 weeks. Latrobe had responded that he had submitted quantity instead of quality. Dr Zion added that this will be big issue we face – a lot of people in our faculties don’t think a 3,000-word piece in *The Australian* represents the same level of quality as a journal article.
- Dr Breit said that we need a discussion paper that helps people unpack these issues.
- With respect to the new ranking of the AJR, a number of delegates agreed that, even though there is no appeal mechanism, scholars could demand transparency. An FOI request might enable us to find out more regarding the decision.
- There is a need to articulate how journalism is a research methodology.
- Prof Bacon said that, if we can get a group going, we can try to find out what happened to the practice-based submissions from the ERA trial. We could also do samples of good research statements and circulate them.
- It was agreed that we need a clear indication of what actually constitutes quality. No one will tell us, and there are some tight timeframes (over next two months).
- We need to take ownership of our discipline and ask realistically what we accomplish in this round of ERA, and the next.

Presentation: Defining a National Journalism Research Strategy

Chair: Professor Alan Knight, UTS

Speaker: Dr Grant Hannis, Head of Journalism Programme, Department of Communication, Journalism and Marketing, Massey University, New Zealand

Dr Hannis's powerpoint presentation is attached separately.

Dr Hannis made the following points regarding the Performance-Based Research Fund (ERA equivalent) introduced in 2003 in New Zealand:

- the rationale for evaluation of research quality was to drive funding;
- annual research income obtained by each institution is considered;
- completions by research students are also counted for each year;
- the model provides an overall grade for each researcher –
 - A (world class)
 - B (high quality)
 - C (reasonable)
 - D (new and emerging)
- each individual and institution gets an aggregate score
- traditional research-based disciplines such as earth sciences, biomedical research and physics received top rankings
- the category 'communications, journalism and media studies' ranked 35th
- the category did poorly, with an average of 2.96 score because there were
 - only 7% "A" grade researchers
 - 25% "B" grade researchers
 - 35% "C" grade researchers
 - 33% "R" grade researchers
- As result of PBRF, there has been an increase in research output in academic journals, increased focus on producing research, more research staff hired, existing staff encouraged to obtain higher research degrees and research-active tutors used more for teaching.
- Journalism as research is still a vexed question. It could be argued that investigative pieces have all the hallmarks of research – they are research intensive, quality assured and can have high impact.
- In the PBRF, what has been most valued has been research articles, especially those published in international journals.

- Assessment panels made it clear that the reason journalism has not done well is because of low research outputs.
- There have been calls for assessment panels to give weight to non-academic research and to change the composition of panels, so there is a sense that there is a problem for journalism researchers.
- It would be useful for Australian journalists to –
 - focus on international publication;
 - conduct mock rounds and performance assessments;
 - promote research teams and stage conferences;
 - produce a coherent platform of research;
 - put their research on the web (to encourage citations);
 - submit well-presented portfolios, emphasise best work, only include quality-assured work; and
 - lobby your institution for support and give them enough time to do research and prepare evidence.
- Published journalism may not fare particularly well in the ERA initially, but many journalism skills will serve journalism scholars well:
 - interviewing
 - researching
 - networking
 - time management
 - writing
 - publishing
- It is highly recommended that the discipline work together to get journalists onto the relevant assessment committees.