

Journalism Research and the academy

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I started my career as an academic here at the University Technology Sydney, almost twenty years ago to the day today. Like many of you, I had been a practicing journalist, in my case, covering the waterfront for Australian Associated Press and later the ABC. I had been getting a little bored with ABC Radio National when I saw an ad for a new Masters Degree in Journalism about to be offered by UTS. I rang the convenor, Julianne Schultze, now a Board member of the ABC, and asked where I could enroll. She replied that since I seemed to know a bit about journalism, I should come to UTS and teach the Masters Degree. Which is where today's story really begins.

When I got here, I was told that if ever I wanted to be promoted even to senior lecturer, I would need to do research. "No trouble," I said, "that's exactly what I do as a reporter". However I quickly learned that research recognized by universities usually meant getting published in journals which hardly anyone appeared to read and speaking at conferences where no-one seemed to listen. It seemed that universities thought that it was much more important to write about journalism than to actually do it. Journalism students disagreed in large numbers.

But things have changed in journalism education.

When I started, we had one or two journalism professors in Australia. There are now at least a dozen, most of whom are attending this conference. (At this point I want to congratulate Steve Stockwell who's here and Michael Meadows (who's not) who have just become Professors at Griffith.

A number of us enrolled in PhDs and then became examiners and supervisors. You still don't need a PhD if you are an exceptional journalism educator, but if you combine a PhD with industry experience, it can still supercharge your career.

Professor Mark Pearson says most of the PhD topics have had strong application to the practice of journalism and this depth of knowledge has fed back into our teaching and research consultancies and eventually back into the thoughts and practices of working journalists. Mark reckons this has been an important factor in the parallel growth in industry concern for such issues as ethical practice, media freedom and the implications of new technologies.

Many of these issues have been taken up by the Journalism Education Association, to which many of you belong. Meanwhile, we have been developing academic journals to publish informed writing about journalism.

The Australian Journalism Review, seen as our leading refereed journal, has been publishing since 1978. Its stated aim is to be a catalyst for major issues affecting journalism and journalism education. AJR's former heavy focus on Australian research has been balanced by the growing acceptance of articles by authors from other countries.

The AJR's, Professor Ian Richards, says "journal publications should help us understand what journalism is and should be, to address such fundamental questions as what is and what should be the role of journalism, and how can and should we understand media systems and journalistic traditions."

There is now a raft of refereed journals, recognised by the Australian Research Council, which prioritise journalism research. These include:

- Pacific Journalism Review, is edited by Dr David Robie who is here today from New Zealand
- There's a local online edition of Global Media Journal
- There's Asia Pacific Media Educator, edited by Eric Loo
- eJournalist an online journal which I edit, celebrates its tenth anniversary this year.

But we haven't neglected journalism production.

Last year, Swinburne University established Foundation for Public Interest Journalism will support investigative, interactive journalism while exploring ways of making good journalism sustainable in the new media age.

Here at UTS, the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, which was established twenty years ago, is managing today's conference which is the latest in a very long list of journalism industry related events. It's consistently championed quality journalism through specialist training courses and practiced it through the publication of Reportage. The ACIJ Director, Professor Wendy Bacon, told me, "You can't really teach journalism, if you don't practice it!"

Which brings me back to where I started, academia's recognition of journalism as research.

ERA, Excellence in Research Australia, recognizes creative product,. I was part of an ERA trial of Humanities research last year. I am bound by a secrecy agreement of what happened and what we recommended.

But a number of things are on the public record.

- ERA recognizes journalism as research
- But we know that many journalism educators did not log journalism as research for the ERA trial.
- We also know that more than a few university journalism research departments were a bit confused about what they should submit and how it should be submitted. I reckon journalism research ratings suffered as a result.
- Journalism has at best a patchy record on winning ARC grants.
- Even before ERA, we were aware that the discipline was divided by ancient and often obscure rivalries and feuds.
- There is no national journalism research strategy.

ERA delivers the promise that journalism will be recognized at last.

But there is also a threat that ERA ratings will be used by government and business minded university administrations against poor rating departments. In Britain, low rating departments were closed and their long serving academics dispersed. In Australia, journalism educators make too much money through student fees to be sacked. But their careers could be further restricted as they are told become teaching intensive academics.

We don't want that to happen. I think its time to bring our maturing discipline together.

Today's conference will give your an opportunity to hear the ARC's Liz Visher who will give a background on ERA, the trial and what sort of research will be recognised in 2010. She may be able to advise you on presenting creative work such as journalism. She won't be able to tell you about journal ratings. That's not her department.

In the afternoon, Professors Wendy Bacon and Ian Richards will be giving you summaries on what they believe is important in the ARC presentation. That should make crystal clear what we can expect this year.

In the final session, Doctor Grant Hannis will talk about the New Zealand research quality process, which preceded Australia. He will tell us what he thinks such a process might mean for us. That paper will lead into a general discussion about future Australian journalism research strategies.

I believe that discussion should include the creation of a Council of Journalism Professors who could work to upgrade all of the journalism journals, mentor researchers, encourage multi university collaboration in ARC grant applications and help the JEA defend the discipline.

In conclusion, Professor John Henningham says we should beware of administrative fads and stick to the basics; “My advice to journalism teachers: do what motivates you; do what you think is best and most interesting and useful; approach your teaching and research with energy, enthusiasm and affection. The results will tell the story. Your students will be happy and well- taught; your research and writing, either academic or professional, will be relevant, readable and will make a difference. Above all, you will feel fulfilled and useful.”

But we must recognize, adapt and try to capitalise on the changes in the education industry

I will leave the last words to my friend and colleague Professor John Herbert, the best journalism professor Australia never had. John wrote in an email to me:

“Journalism... research should be powerful, a lion roaring to get out, a tiger wanting to change things. ...To become a discipline in our own right we have first to educate the educators, the universities themselves, teach them that as enemies we are something that is to be feared; but as friends, we are something they need because we bring with us students, lots of them.”