

# Working journalists and journalism graduands: How they rate television newsroom skills

## Abstract

This paper reports on the next stage in an ongoing study of skill needs in mainstream television newsrooms. It focuses on attitudes to technology skills by comparing a sample of television journalists at major Australian networks with a cohort of final year broadcast journalism students. Each group was asked to rank in order of importance six skills or traits - five that had been identified in previous research as important to the hiring decisions of senior news managers along with the skill trait of “technological fluency”. Both groups – journalists and students – ranked “technological fluency” on mean averages last behind story generation, news sense & passion for news, television writing, good general knowledge and voice & on camera presentation. They were also asked, in a separate question, to evaluate the importance of more than 40 different skills and traits to television – including four skills involving technological proficiency – by allocating a score of 1 to 5 to each skill on the list. Significantly, out of more than 40 possible choices, both groups independently gave the highest mean average score for importance to “Ability to work well under deadline pressure”. Both groups ranked the four technology skills in the bottom half of the 40-plus skills list, mostly in the bottom quarter.

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## Introduction

The digitisation of news delivery across traditional and new platforms is creating new skill requirements and raising questions about how the integrity of news content might be affected by resulting changes in newsroom structures. It might be said that the divide between pre-mouse generations and digital natives – in how they view the requirements of their news gathering tasks – could also affect expectations about news content. This paper aims to look at how the different experience of journalists and emerging journalists might affect their expectations about the changing job of journalism in the youngest of the “traditional” news platforms: television.

This paper compares attitudes to technology skills in television journalism by surveying two groups: working television journalists at major networks across Australia and a cohort of final year broadcast journalism students familiar with radio and television news production. This quantitative comparison is done within a broader quantitative survey of journalists and journalism students on how they rate the value of a basket of journalism skills and traits.

The skills and traits tested have been chosen within the context of how they might influence hiring practice within metropolitan television newsrooms. Hiring criteria have been looked at previously through qualitative investigation of hiring decision-making by television newsroom managers (Nankervis, 2005; Nankervis, 2006) and in studies of major hirers across the print, broadcasting and online platforms (Alysen, 1999; Alysen, 2005b; Austin & Cokley, 2006). In previous qualitative research preceding and informing this stage of ongoing television news research, most senior hirers interviewed believed they recruited according to writing, investigation and presentation skills along with a passion for news and indicated they were not influenced by the technology skills of their new journalists (Nankervis, 2005; Nankervis, 2006). Austin and Cokley concluded, interestingly, that operational flexibility rather than traditional journalism traits was a major hiring criterion for the predominantly Queensland-based managers they interviewed and that casual employment had “become the ‘new cadetship’” (2006, p 87). Their view supports that expressed by United States researchers on newsroom hiring practice, Hollifield, Kosicki and Becker (2001), who concluded that executives hire people on their personality and work habits over any professional characteristic. Meanwhile, here in Australia, Alysen (2005a) predicted, that journalists would be expected to provide more by filing for additional delivery platforms and assisting in technical roles such as camera operation. Oakham (2006) said the two main determining forces of “tension” in the training of young journalists at the workplace were

“technology and the increasingly virulent commercial imperative driving modern journalism.” (Oakham, 2006, p 183)

These pieces of research have been carried out since Patching’s seminal 1996 AJR paper (Patching, 1996) spawned research highlighting the shortage of journalism jobs waiting for a growing number of journalism graduates in Australia. This line of inquiry included the needs of the majority of journalism graduates who will struggle and probably fail to find a journalism job on leaving university (O’Donnell, 1999) along with study of the expectations and attitudes of journalism students about their career futures and the profession (Alysen & Oakham, 1996). As already noted, the changed Australian marketplace and newsroom culture awaiting graduates as a result of technology and new commercial demands on output has been also addressed more recently (Alysen, 2005a; Alysen, 2006; Oakham, 2006; Simpson, 2005)

Cohorts of Australian journalism students have been surveyed for published research since Alysen & Oakham’s co-authored paper (1996) on a range of subject matters: This has included their experience of journalism education (O’Donnell, 2006) and their use of technology (Cameron, 2005). Cameron’s research aims in part to meet the pedagogical challenge presented by Prensky’s papers that first coined the terms “digital native” and “digital immigrant” (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b): Prensky warned that those who have grown up with digital technologies, including computers, are wired differently to the “digital immigrants” who have the job of teaching them - and the “natives” must therefore be taught with this new wiring taken into account.

As already mentioned, a number of studies have been done in Australia on newsroom managers who are hirers and firers - in order to gauge what they want in their recruits. Studies have also been done across rank and file journalists – to test their attitudes to changes in the workplace. Gade (2004) has undertaken one such study in the United States of journalism managers and rank-and-file journalists on their attitudes to changing newsroom culture brought about by restructuring and shifting news values. Also in the US, a national study of college professors, news professionals and news editors (Huang et al., 2006) found “strong support” for training generalists and for schooling in new technology while emphasising critical thinking (Huang et al., 2006, p 221). However, unlike much of the literature on newsroom change, it concluded that “dealing with convergence was not an urgent necessity” (Huang et al., p221).

In Australia, Rodriguez recently completed a quantitative and qualitative study aimed at all working journalists in the state of Victoria (Rodrigues, 2008): she sent 600 surveys and received 83 responses to questions she asked about their workplaces. Of anecdotal interest are the quotes in her paper from journalists complaining that there are fewer people in newsrooms in 2008 and as a result investigative journalism is diminishing, government spin doctors are driving news agendas more so than in the past, on-the-job training of young journalists is less thorough and younger people are given more responsible jobs far earlier than they would have previously.

Vine has compared current journalist culture in Australia with that of the past by interviewing a group of young journalists and comparing their responses to those of a group who were young journalists thirty years ago (Vine, 2006). For the most part, however, comparisons between students of journalism and those already working in the industry do not appear to feature in much literature on journalism. This paper is one of the exceptions: it examines the results of a quantitative study of both television journalists and final year broadcast journalism students on how they rate technological skills alongside other journalism skills such as grammatical writing, investigation, contact building and television presentation.

## Methodology

The data for this paper was collected by using an almost identical quantitative questionnaire across two groups of respondents (working television journalists and broadcast journalism students). The only differences between the two groups’ questionnaires were in the profiling questions, reflecting the different work situations of the two cohorts. Aside from these, the questionnaire asked two main questions:

- (1) For respondents to rank six key skills or attributes in order of importance for television news journalism.

Five of these key skills were identified in previous research using qualitative interviews with senior news managers at the five major free-to-air networks in Australia (Ten, Nine, Seven, ABC & SBS) along with Pay-Television news network, Sky News (Nankervis, 2005; Nankervis, 2006). From those interviews, the most important attributes identified by the sample of senior managers in television news were (1) story generation, (2) news sense and passion for news, (3) television writing, (4) good general knowledge and (5)

presentation - including voice and on camera appearance. These five attributes were among the six ones that respondents from the two groups involved in this latest data collection were asked to rank.

A sixth attribute was added for respondents to rank for importance with the others: (6) fluency with technology. The importance of technological fluency as a hiring criterion was downplayed as “unimportant” by most senior managers in the earlier qualitative research (Nankervis, 2005; Nankervis, 2006). It was added here to test that qualitative result quantitatively across a broader range of television journalists and against a younger group: journalism students about to enter the workforce. The responses to this question will be discussed in this paper.

The second main question in the survey instrument asked respondents in each group

- (2) to rank forty two skills and/or attributes for their importance to television journalism on a scale of 1 – 5 where 1 equalled “not important” and five represented “crucial”.

These skills included general work skills such as “ability to work as part of a team”, “good English grammar, usage and spelling” and “good general knowledge”. The list also had a range of skills and attributes useful for uncovering information and dealing with contacts such as “persuasive skills”, “front” and “fearlessness” especially when pursuing controversial stories”, “ability to build contacts” and “ability to break new stories”. The survey instrument also asked respondents to rank the importance of degree qualifications, general knowledge and other specific knowledge such as twentieth century history, world affairs and ability to understand a financial statement.

There were questions covering technological skills such as familiarity and competence in “bulletin word-processing software” and in “using picture editing software”. Two other technology skills tested were those required by video journalism: “Ability to operate a camera” and “Ability to operate television sound equipment”.

Discussion of the question (2) survey results will concentrate on the responses for these four technology skills across the two groups. However, a summary of results for all thirty-six skills that could apply to producers and reporters will be included in an appendix at the end of this paper and the results discussed briefly. The other six skills relating specifically to on-

camera reporters have been discussed separately. The inclusion of all the skills results is necessary to put the technology ones in context.

### Sample Group Profiles.

Seventy-three people responded to the survey, comprising forty two television journalists and thirty one tertiary students. The working television journalists’ email surveys were disseminated to newsroom staff by senior news managers at the researcher’s request over a six month period ending in February 2008. This was done across ten known newsrooms chosen randomly across all states – reaching approximately 200 journalists (an approximate response rate of 21%). The student cohort of 35 was surveyed on one day in mid-2008 at Charles Sturt University with a response rate of 88.57%.

Most journalists were employed by either Channel Nine, Channel Seven, SBS or Sky News, with two journalists employed by the ABC and one working as a freelancer. Half of the journalists were men. The most common job position amongst journalists was reporter/producer, with reporter, line-up producer and reporter/presenter the next most common job position. Six journalists worked as either an executive producer, news director, network editor or assistant chief of staff. More than 60 percent of journalists were based in Sydney, with 26 percent in Brisbane and the remainder spread between Canberra, Melbourne and Auckland.

The journalist respondents reflected a range of experience, with 26 percent having five years or less experience, 19 percent with six to ten years experience, 14 percent with 11 to 15 years experience, 14 percent with 16 to 20 years experience and 24 percent with more than 20 years experience. One journalist had 35 years experience. In terms of non-television experience, 29 percent had previously worked as a print journalist and 48 percent had worked as a radio journalist. More than 60 percent of journalists had a tertiary qualification in journalism while 26 percent had tertiary qualifications in an area other than journalism (some respondents had tertiary qualifications in both – 69 percent of journalists in total had tertiary qualifications).

The student cohort was less diverse than their journalist counterparts. All were third-year students in the journalism course at one Australian university. Most students were planning a career in broadcast journalism. Thirty-nine percent of respondents had previous or current paid work as

journalists, all of whom had two years or less experience. Most of this experience had been obtained through the community radio station located on their university campus.

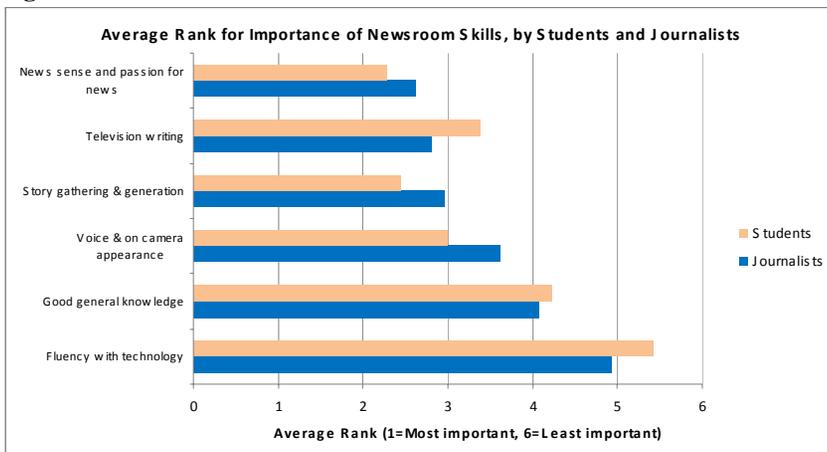
## Data

### Survey Q1: Ranking of Six Key Skills Identified in Previous Qualitative Data

Respondents were asked to rank from one to six the importance of the six skills listed, with “1” being the number allocated to the most important. Therefore, the lower the average mean response for a skill, the greater the relative mean importance indicated by the sample groups for that skill or attribute.

The following tables set out the different average rankings given by the two cohorts for the six television journalism skills tested:

**Figure 1**

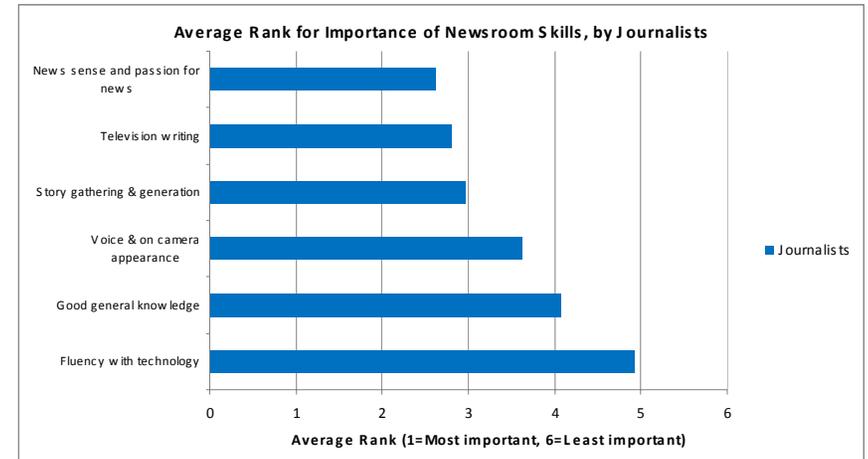


As can be seen in Figure 1, three of the six skills tested were ranked in the same position, on average, by both groups: average mean rankings for each group, students and journalists, listed “news sense and a passion for news” as the most important attribute for a television news journalist and “fluency with technology” at the bottom of the list of six. The average ranks for both

groups also put “good general knowledge” at the same average rank: fifth in order of importance.

The following figure diagrams separate the results for journalists and students.

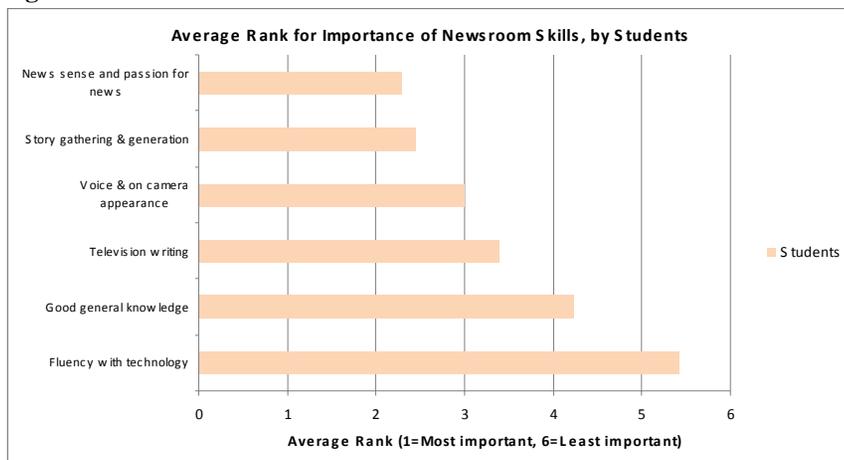
**Figure 2**



The journalist results for “fluency with technology”, placing it last in order of importance, appear to tally with the attitude of most newsroom managers surveyed qualitatively in 2005 and 2006 (Nankervis, 2005; Nankervis, 2006): Nearly all the managers said their criteria for hiring journalists did not include video journalism skills or other technology proficiency. However, the mean average response for this skill listed here, being less than five, indicates that not every working journalist put technology fluency last (at “6”) with some therefore ranking it above one of the other “key” skills.

Also interesting is that the mean average ranking of the three skills ranked highest - news sense, television writing and story gathering and generation – were very close. This indicates all three had significant mode responses at first, second and third place across the aggregate journalist responses. In other words, all three were regarded as very important by journalists and difficult to rank in order.

Figure 3



Interestingly, journalism students did not, on average, rank television writing as highly for relative importance as the working journalist cohort did. This skill slipped when ranked by students, on average, from second to fourth spot. “Story gathering and generation” was ranked second highest, very closely behind “news sense and passion for news” suggesting that those two skills sets would have had strong modes at first, second and third place across the student responses ranking the skills.

“Voice and on camera appearance” was given greater relative importance by students than that accorded it by working journalists: placed in third spot by students and above “television writing”. This is not surprising given Australian literature on journalism student attitudes showing that many students of broadcast journalism overestimate the importance of a “telegenic” appearance in determining their attractiveness to a television newsroom employer (Alysen & Oakham, 1996; Nankervis, 2005; Nankervis, 2006). The lower ranking accorded “presentation” attributes by journalists might also be a reflection of the fact that many of the journalists responding were producers rather than on camera reporters; what is not clearly measured in survey question (1) across the journalist cohort is the importance that television voice and appearance had for *on camera reporters* as opposed to the much larger group of television journalists who did not appear on air. This is addressed in the next survey question: traits that could be said to be specific for on-camera reporters have been identified and separated.

### Survey Q2: Ranking 42 TV Journalism Skills and Attributes for Importance

As already explained, respondents were asked to rank forty two skills and attributes for importance with “1” representing “not important” and “5” representing “crucial”. The lowest possible score provided for importance of a trait, therefore, was one and the highest was five. Six of the traits listed would only apply to on-camera reporters and have been placed into a separate diagram (figure 4, below). The mean average response results for thirty-six remaining traits (that could apply to both producers and reporters) have been placed into two appendices at the end of this paper. These traits and skills have been listed in order of average mean importance as indicated by the two groups. Before discussing the results for the technology skills, it might be useful to note some general trends across those thirty-six traits.

#### Like Scorings

There was, generally, little disparity between the mean averages given to skills and traits by the two groups. For instance, the top mean average score for importance was achieved by the same attribute in each group: “Ability to work well under deadline pressure”. Lack of different scores between the two groups was most apparent in those skills that scored highly – between four and five – for importance (See Appendix A). A majority of the skills tested were ranked within those margins. In fact twenty-three of the skills listed were ranked by either both or one of the groups at between four and five for importance. A majority of the “top” twenty-three skills were the same for both groups. Each group gave all their “top” twenty three average means scores more than four. This high score for a large number of traits may be a result of the fact that many of those listed were known to the researcher to be useful in a television newsroom, through earlier research and pre-academic workplace experience. There were however, a number of less certain skills added to the survey to test its efficacy. Additionally, the four skills involving technology fluency and fluency with video journalism equipment did not score as highly as the “top” twenty-three with either group. This will be discussed in greater detail after the general response trends are dealt with.

#### Divergent Scorings

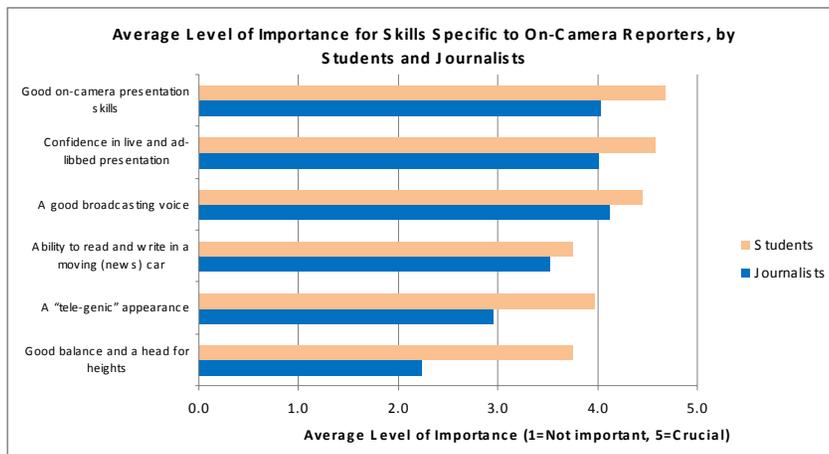
There was one major trend in the difference between scores allocated by each group: the student group rated nearly every trait or skill slightly more highly for importance on average than did the journalist cohort. This difference in mean average ratings became more marked between the two groups with

those skills or traits rated less highly by either group (refer bottom half of Appendix B). There were only five traits or skills which mean averaged a higher score for importance among the journalist group. Four of these traits were still only given marginally stronger journalists' scores than the mean average score given by the students: news sense, knowledge of 20<sup>th</sup> century history, empathy for others and analytical thinking.

The only trait that journalists ranked significantly higher for importance than did the student group was "High ethical standards (especially when dealing with subjects of stories)". With an average mean score for importance of approximately 4.5 among journalists, it came in at the fourth most important attribute to that group after "news sense". Among students, however, it scored just over 4.00. Partly because students gave more generous scores than did the journalist group for most of the other traits, this one came in at equal 23<sup>rd</sup> place for importance among students alongside "ability to break new stories".

### Skills Specific to On-Camera Reporters

Figure 4



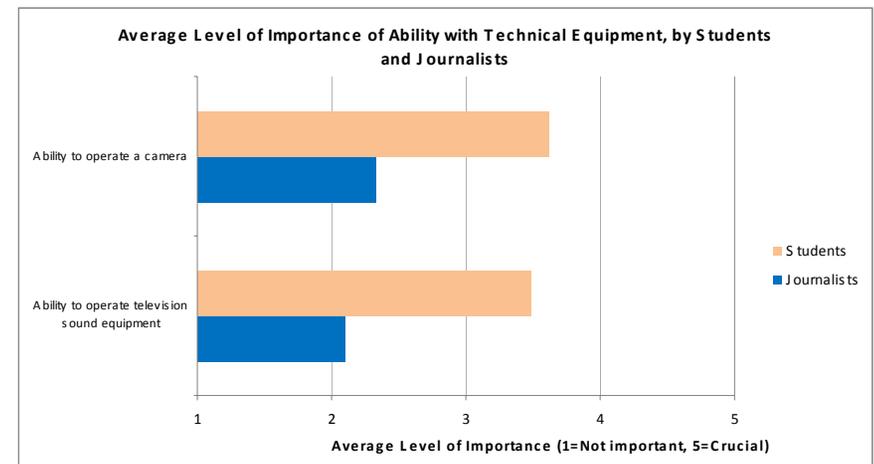
As with the thirty six "producer/reporter" skills, students gave more generous scores for every "reporter only" skill here. (As with the larger basket of

skills, the higher the average score the greater the respondents viewed that skill's importance.) Journalists gave "a good broadcasting voice" greater importance than a "telegenic appearance" and this might explain why "good on-camera presentation" – which would combine appearance, voice and delivery scored strongly with both journalists and students. However, in keeping with the results for survey question (1), journalists gave far less importance to appearance for on-camera reporters than did the students surveyed. The journalists gave even lower scores to three of the four technology skills examined below.

### The Technology Skills

As already noted, those four skills involving technology fluency and fluency with video journalism equipment did not score as highly as the "top" twenty-three with either group. In all four cases, the students' average mean rankings for the importance of these skills were higher. This was more marked, as can be seen in figure 4, in relation to the two video journalism skills listed, camera operation and proficiency with sound equipment.

Figure 4

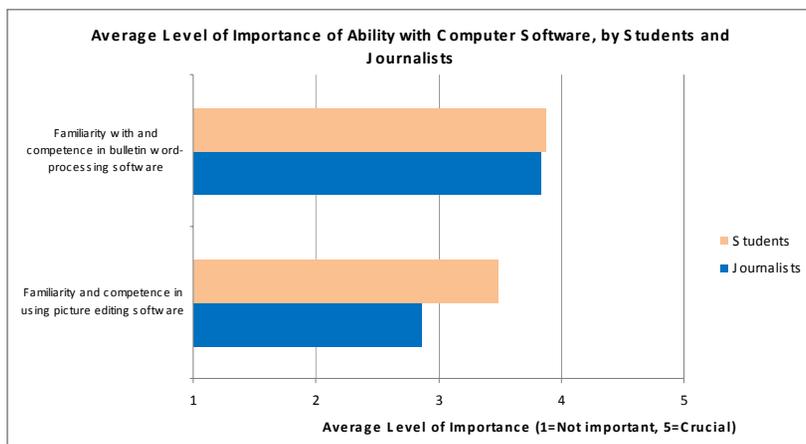


For both video journalism skills, as "1" represented the lowest possible score ("not important"), the average ranking for importance allocated by journalists

was half that score allocated by the student group. As already noted, greater generosity in scoring by students was more marked for those skills and attributes that were ranked lower in importance by both groups and these two skills provide an illustration of that tendency. The average mean scores for the skill “Ability to operate a camera” came in at 26<sup>th</sup> place among students and 31<sup>st</sup> among the journalists. The related skill of “Ability to operate television sound equipment” was scored 29<sup>th</sup> by students and 33<sup>rd</sup> by journalists.

The other technology skills surveyed, involving the use of computer software, appeared to be ranked more highly for importance than the video journalism skills, especially by the journalist group (see figure 5. below).

**Figure 5**



The relatively strong score for “Familiarity with and competence in bulletin word-processing software” among journalists probably reflects the fact that every television journalist must operate this equipment but most will not yet be called upon to operate cameras or sound equipment. Increasingly, they are being called upon in metropolitan television newsrooms to use picture editing software (Alysen, 2005a) and the slightly stronger score for this compared with the other VJ skills might reflect this. The similarly stronger student scores might also reflect their experience, as the student cohort tested

is accustomed to preparing radio news bulletins on News-Boss bulletin software and cutting television news packages using Final Cut Pro.

## Discussion

It can be generalised that journalists and students alike rate the importance of technological fluency below “pre-mouse” television journalism skills such as television writing, story generation, information gathering and television presentation. It would appear also that these results align with those achieved by the researcher’s qualitative studies of senior hirers and firers (Nankervis, 2005; Nankervis, 2006): that technological fluency is not front-of-mind when hirers recruit journalists. However, the construction of the surveys discussed here do not provide conclusive evidence that technological fluency is of little importance to television journalism today or to the employment prospects of today’s journalists, new or experienced. The relatively low ranking for technological skill that emerged in survey question (2) across the two groups, especially journalists, reflected the number of skills in the list that were known to be integral to television journalism: technological skills might have been higher up on a differently skewed list. In addition, a higher response rate from journalists would have enabled analysis of differences in responses on the technology skills across different age groups or those performing different roles within their newsrooms.

What is significant is that a group of journalists with varying years of experience behind them – a mixture of digital natives and immigrants – on average, still give greater weight to those other television skills revered by senior managers interviewed in previous research: television writing, news sense & passion for news, story generation, information gathering and television presentation (Nankervis, 2005; Nankervis, 2006). The television journalists’ view appears to be similar to that of a cohort of students of broadcast journalism looking for their first job in radio or television journalism. Thus the attitude of rank and file television journalists, along with that of graduating broadcast journalism students, appears in step with that of key television news managers making hiring and firing decisions.

## Pedagogical Implications

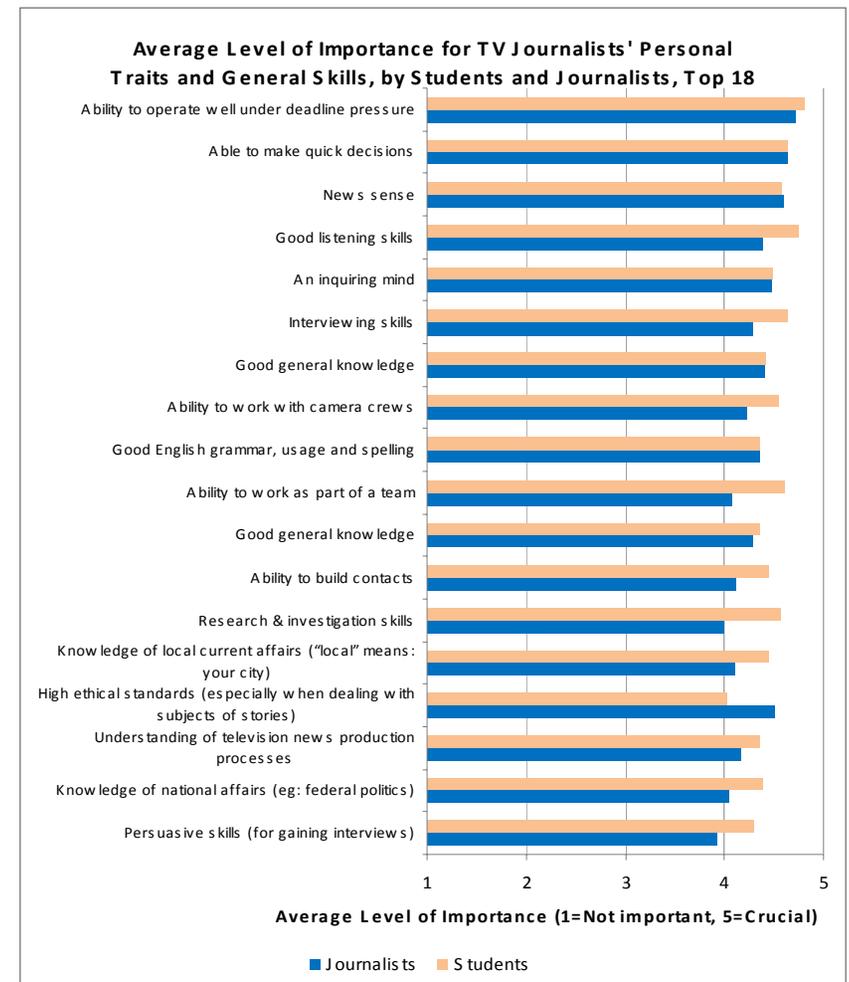
These findings suggest strongly that journalism education must continue to devote a large proportion of its vocational teaching of television journalism to pre-digital skills – especially those related to investigation, information

gathering, television writing and presentation. The work of both Oakham and Rodriguez suggest that investigative skills - and training of young journalists in all these pre-mouse skills - are in danger across many newsrooms because of staffing changes. It would seem from their research and the data here that this is more from a lack of respect by “bean-counters” for these skills - a problem identified by Richards in his recent book on journalism ethics (Richards, 2005) - than indifference among journalists. Therefore, educators must send their students into the workforce armed with strong skills in information gathering and dissemination via their brains and senses - and not just via digital recording and duplication devices – so that they can withstand commercial pressures to adopt a cut-and-paste news production culture.

However, these results do not demonstrate that fluency in technology – especially production software and video journalism equipment – can be ignored with safety by journalism educators. The results rank technological literacy behind some other skills but do not fully evaluate what value technological literacy has per se. There is no shortage of evidence elsewhere to demonstrate that technological skills have palpable value in the production of television news: (Alysen, 2005a; Alysen, 2006; Simpson, 2005). It’s also possible that the different “wiring” of the “digital native” (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b) may make the learning of television industry technology an easier learning pathway into those other “older” skills for the young natives we must teach. At the same time, newsrooms are changing in ways that are not easy to predict and it would be foolhardy to embrace the view expressed by some that there is no urgency to understand or teach for the convergent newsroom (Huang et al., 2006): a study of television newsrooms does not, for instance, encompass the applications of video journalism being embraced by online news services (where many of our students will need to find jobs).

However, the results do allow us to remember that technology and how it is used in television newsrooms will continue changing rapidly: if the aim of journalism education is to prepare graduates to make an impact on the craft throughout their careers, and not just in the short-term, sacrificing enduring journalism skills for those that will become out of date as technology changes is not responsive to change, but short-sighted. These results suggest that television journalists do not believe technological fluency is valuable without traditional journalistic inquiry: content is still revered by television journalists and despite what others might report (Simpson, 2005, p. 119), the medium, to working journalists, has not yet become the message.

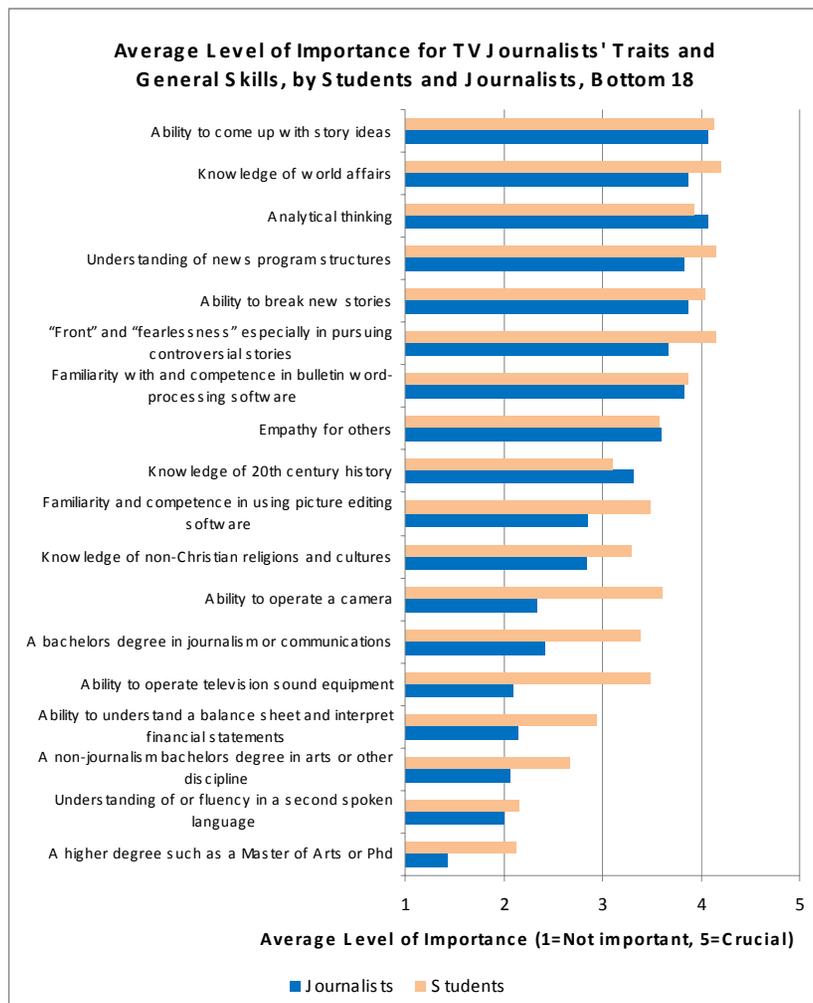
## Appendix A: Top 18 skills av. ranking by journalists and students (Survey Q2)



**Note:** The “top” skills are sorted here by averaging out the combined responses of journalists and students. Some of the journalists’ “top” 18 skills are pushed down by student averages into the lower, Appendix B, list on the next page and vice versa.

## Appendix B: Lower 18 Skills – Av. ranking by journalists and students

(Survey Q2 contd.)



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