

Putting the “i” into journalism education: The why and the how of the re-working of the journalism curriculum at the University of Newcastle

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Abstract

In a provocative and timely essay, Picard (2009) contended journalists must “adapt or die”; they can no longer do what they have always done. He also suggested that journalists deserve low pay because “wages are compensation for value creation” and “journalists simply aren’t creating much value these days”.

The migration of advertising to online publications and the fragmentation of the mass audience—occurring inside a global financial crisis—have perhaps forever decimated heritage commercial media and industrial journalism. Websites such as newspaperdeathwatch.com provide regular obituaries for broadsheets and tabloids in the advanced industrial societies, while claiming that the death of the newspaper will provide for the rebirth of journalism; but what sort of journalism? The journalists no longer control “the story” that was always part of a newspaper or a bulletin (Marsh, 2009). “Search engines and news aggregators have ripped that bundle apart.” The audience wants in. So what skills will practitioners require and how can that be reflected in the university curriculum?

This paper examines and analyses the process of the re-design of the journalism major at the University of Newcastle in 2009. It asks: what skills will students need to enter this brave new world of digital journalism? What does the changing value of journalism mean for graduates entering the field? It also considers the risks of making assumptions about students’ level of technical engagement and their career aspirations.

The re-design must recognise that few students will work as industrial journalists, confined to a single medium. They will need to be multi-skilled and able to work across multiple platforms in a converged media industry.

So, just what should students be learning? Is the medium the message? Should academic staff be Facebooking their students' feedback and twittering their marks, or marking their Facebooks and giving feedback on their twitters?

Introduction: "Anyone can be a journalist . . ."

At the 2008 Future of Journalism summit held in Sydney, Australia, academic and former UK *Daily Mirror* editor Roy Greenslade told the assembled journalists and academics: "Anyone can be a journalist, anyone can contribute to journalism" and "journalism does matter, but journalists do not".

Deliberately provocative, this pronouncement was framed by the tumultuous changes in media markets, the demise of major newspapers, multiple "audiences" created by the Internet and the impact of social media networks, and a confronting imperative to embrace technology and incorporate it into everyday journalistic practice. It must be said the death of newspapers is not universally accepted nor a global phenomenon. Newspaper markets in China and India have seen rapid growth at a time when print giants are folding in the United States and the United Kingdom. In Australia, a 2009 report by accounting firm PriceWaterhouseCoopers predicted newspaper publishers would return to growth by 2012. Admittedly, it came after announcements by both News Limited and Fairfax media that they would be charging for access to online content.

The environment for journalists

Greenslade's analysis portrayed the journalistic environment as fluid, one underscored by ongoing debate over use of the word "journalist" and who can legitimately claim to practise journalism. In the not too distant past, a journalist was paid to write, research and reveal stories about our community and world for a newspaper, radio station or television network. The best were investigators with budgets to match. The majority of working journalists claimed one particular medium; this is no longer a given, nor can it be an expectation. Radio journalists are just as likely to shoot video and write print for online.

In the same week Picard challenged journalists to "adapt or die", former *Daily Telegraph* editor David Penberthy's online site *The Punch* seemed to be offering to *publish but not pay* well-known names from the Australian political and cultural landscape.

What are journalists worth?

What is the 'value' of a journalist in a world where accessing sources, determining the significance of information, and conveying it effectively (Picard, 2009) can be done by individuals who are not journalists, and operate without the support of a journalistic enterprise?

In the online platform, citizens can be key participants in a manner not previously possible. Some add the title "journalist" when they produce content used by traditional media. In some quarters, the term "citizen journalist" is used to differentiate the untrained witness from the trained professional who practises journalism for economic reward. Most "citizen" journalists don't get paid, but they can get published. One notable exception is the citizen, Janis Krums, whose photograph of the plane crash in the

Hudson made it around the world and into top newspapers. He was paid. Krums also twittered he was on a ferry heading to the aid of survivors. So in the 21st Century anyone with a mobile phone can be a producer of content. The means of producing that content is accessible and increasingly user friendly. The consumer is producer and publisher.

Picard's (2009) argument that the "primary value of journalism comes from the underlying value of the labour of journalists" and that "value is now "near zero"" goes beyond the question of how much someone should be paid to do journalism. It strikes at the heart of what journalists do, how they do it, and how they negotiate that role in the information economy.

The theoretical concept of news as a commodity is hardly new. What Picard and Greenslade have described in different ways is the pressure on journalism to maintain its relevance when the citizen can more readily access endless sources of information without mediation by a journalist.

This is not to suggest journalism isn't embracing the digital revolution. The "heritage" media's bag of tricks now includes as a matter of course the social media phenomena such as blogs. The micro-blogging network, Twitter, is used to source stories. Search engine optimisation is an online journalist's tool; it is also a challenge, when the number of hits on a news website measures a story's significance. In this context, what or who is a journalist (Tapsall & Varley, 2006) is more than just a theoretical question. It impacts on how journalists think about their craft and underpins the jobs to which many of our journalism students aspire.

If journalism is to survive it must change

According to Greenslade (2008), what does matter, if journalism is to remain relevant, is participation and cooperation. The continuing popularity of crowd sourcing and social media such as Twitter is feeding that view. There is little doubt these Internet offspring are now part of the news cycle. According to Professor Jay Rosen from New York University the people "formerly known as the audience" (2006) want in, and they have the technology. Rosen has conducted his own experiments with *The Huffington Post* (www.huffingtonpost.com) using "citizen journalists". Volunteers became part of the information gathering process, door knocking to find out people's opinions concerning the Barack Obama election campaign. They were trained in how to ask questions, but were not professional journalists. In Rosen's view journalism culture has done "a clever adaptation to the demands of a production line" (2008). In short, journalists have become very adept at regurgitating information, and doing it to deadline.

Both public participation and connectivity pose a direct threat to the role of the journalist as intermediary, the "special figure of authority" whom the audience trusted to filter news and information, prioritise it and pass it on as accurately and fairly and quickly as possible (Rusbridger, 2010). "While journalists may remain *one* source of authority, people may also be less interested to receive journalism in an inert context" where it can't be responded to, challenged or linked to other sources.

Practitioners are understandably worried. As Deuze (2005) observed, "coping with the emergence of hybrid producer-user forms of news work is easier for some than others, and tends to clash with entrenched notions of professionalism, objectivity, and carefully cultivated arrogance regarding the competences (or talent) of "the audience" to know

what is good for them". Journalists have put various arguments against this hybrid, the main one being that "citizen" journalists, unbound by the ethical standards of the profession, also bypass the editing process found in traditional journalism practice. The potential is there for "mass misinformation".

The Future of Journalism project run by the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) in 2008-09 in Australia highlighted the universal nature of the issues confronting journalism: the "celebritisation" of news; the globalisation of content; the lack of money for investigative and quality journalism; a "dying" newspaper medium; and both infinite and less finite audiences brought by the Internet. This is by no means an exhaustive list but all of these have implications for the local journalism industry and the stories journalists produce.

Newcastle and the University of Newcastle

These ramifications underpinned the review of the journalism major at the University of Newcastle, and fed directly into the re design of courses in the major. Any review of a journalism curriculum in an Australian university grapples with much contested considerations of journalism theory and practice. Sitting alongside the stated aim of tertiary education to produce graduates who are critical thinkers is the compelling requirement to engage students in journalism practice. And so it is with the Bachelor of Communication degree at the University of Newcastle.

How journalism plays out at the local level in a burgeoning provincial city must also be taken into account. In Newcastle, Australia's sixth largest city and the second biggest city in New South Wales, industrial journalism is practised and news produced or presented by a variety of media outlets, including the Fairfax-owned daily *The Herald*, the ABC, a full-time television news presence in NBN and four operating commercial radio stations: NX FM, KO FM, 2HD and NEW FM.

In the last decade Newcastle has shed its steel city persona. The university is now the second biggest employer in the region attracting students from the Central Coast as far as Gosford, the north coast to Coffs Harbour and the Hunter Valley.

As part of a university restructure in 2003, the department of Communication and Media Arts combined with the departments of Information Technology and Design and migrated to the Faculty of Science and Information Technology. In 2005, Communication relocated to a purpose-built facility that was fully equipped to teach Media Production and Journalism. The move to a more technology-friendly home was a pragmatic recognition that the media industry, including journalism, is heavily reliant on technology. You can no longer teach journalism without it.

In 2007, the Communication degree underwent its five-yearly review, a big picture exercise. One of the positive outcomes was the creation of documents to help students plan their degree. Producing these documents raised numerous issues for academic staff.

Remapping the major: the challenges

How much of the major should be geared for those students who will work as "industrial" journalists? Fewer students can hope to achieve these jobs, particularly as highlighted by O'Donnell (1999) there are more graduates than jobs. More than ten

years on this is still the case: “There are roughly four times as many people studying to become journalists as there are working full-time in mainstream media” (Bolton, 2009).

Given both the economic and technological climates, what sort of journalism career can our graduates hope for? What should communication students specialising in journalism be learning? Should they be studying history, politics and Mandarin as electives to give them better general knowledge, or funnelled into “media production” courses so their technology skills are up-to-date? Which skills, knowledge and conceptual frameworks are relevant? Given the massive changes in media technologies, how has this impacted on journalistic practice? As Rachael Bolton, IT reporter for the Financial Review wrote in *The Walkley* magazine, the current graduates are part of “a generation that was born into an analogue world”. In the past 15 to 20 years, this generation has witnessed the move from VHS and audiocassette to CD, DVD, and the digital technologies of the Internet. It is a “generation that now finds itself coming of age and entering an industry which in no way resembles that “childhood dream” of becoming a journalist” (Bolton, 2009). Quinn (2002, p.100) has also challenged journalism educators, claiming “journalism programs at universities need to make students aware of technology’s potential impact on their careers”. We needed to remove the print bias from the journalism major.

One year out from his 2008 graduation a former Newcastle student described his daily experience at AAP and his surprise at the amount of technology he must use to do his job:

When I joined AAP . . . I didn’t realise how much multimedia, how much technology AAP are using to assist journalists to file their stories. We are given these extraordinarily little devices which connect up to your mobile phone which enables us to file from the road. We’re also given cameras, which we’re expected to go out to jobs to get photos. We’re given these ridiculously large and quite technical Dictaphones where we’re also beginning to go to be asked to go out and to get radio and television quality audio from these jobs. I never expected that joining AAP, and I think it does go to show just how far these media organizations are taking these steps into multimedia . . . (Interviewed by L. Coleman, 2009)

His reaction was not surprising given how quickly technology and its use (e.g. Twitter) have changed daily journalistic practice. It was not that this student had not been informed about the changes gripping the industry but it is clear the dots need to be joined for intending students in a better way. Metropolitan newspaper journalists at Fairfax don’t just work in print. Radio journalists working for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation are expected to take photos, shoot video and write for online as well as producing content for broadcast. Any re-design must recognise this challenge. No longer will graduates work in one medium or even one format.

Digital natives?

Another challenge included the structural ones created by university policy. The major is only one-third of a Communication degree; there are no compulsory prerequisites (a function of university policy), and so there were no guarantees our students would use any relevant technology, or choose to learn the technology they might need in journalistic practice. It was possible for a student to complete their journalism studies and avoid the use of technology, apart from Microsoft Word and perhaps Power Point on their computer. As recently as the beginning of 2009, journalism students with little or no interest in the broadcast/electronic side of the media could avoid engaging with

technology such as audio and video recording and/or editing equipment, unless they chose to enrol in the Broadcast Journalism course, or one of the Media Production subjects on offer. Broadcast Journalism encompasses radio and television reporting skills and is a final year course. Students were attempting the course with scant knowledge around the technology. The decision as to whether they felt equipped to do so was left to them.

An unofficial pre-class survey by the course coordinator asked students enrolled in the 2009 Broadcast journalism subject what, if any, technology and editing software they had used, or with which they were familiar. Only two out of the 39 registered students had employed all of the technology and/or software they were to use. The students' subject choice highlighted the deficiency of relying on student understandings about which skills are required in the media of the 21st Century. However it was also a product of the degree structure. Not all journalism students undertook the first-year Foundations of Media Production course that involved audio and video editing; and those who did complete it were not required to engage any further with media production technology. As part of the review of the Communication degree, from 2009 it is a compulsory core subject for *all* Communication students. Students must engage with technology from first year.

So what expectations of our students should we have when it comes to technology? In a pilot study of first-year Communications students at Charles Sturt University, Cameron (2005, p. 8) tested Prensky's perception of students and found "they are still not the complete Digital Natives we are waiting for". In 2006 a collaborative project involving the University of Melbourne and Wollongong and Charles Sturt universities, along with the Australian Learning and Teaching Council, tested the assumption that students from the Net generation (born between 1980 and 1994) were technologically savvy. It produced the *Educating the Net Generation* report early in 2009. Contrary to the expectations of the teaching fraternity, the report surmised this cohort of Generation Y was not keen to engage with *all* technology. While students are high users of "established technologies such as computers, the Internet, email and mobile phones they are less likely to use emerging technologies". It found no support for the "rhetoric that university students are Digital Natives and university staff are Digital Immigrants".

Remapping the major: the process

These findings have pinpointed the uncertainty about how much time and pedagogical instruction should be dedicated to familiarising students with technology in a journalism major that comprises 80 units of a 240-unit degree; how many face-to-face teaching hours should be sacrificed to "learning technology". As well as reviewing recent academic literature, and the conclusions of the Future of Journalism summit, the teaching team at Newcastle canvassed industry representatives through the Communication degree's External Advisory Board, met with Fairfax training experts to discuss their requirements of graduates, and set up a brainstorming session to remap the journalism curriculum.

Emeritus Professor Alan Knight from the Queensland University of Technology was invited to be an impartial guide to our remap of the major. Queensland University of Technology had only recently reworked its own Journalism degree. One aim of the two-day exercise was to examine and analyse when, where and how we were delivering

components that are key to ensuring the “incorporation of learning that reflects the massive changes in technology” and its impact on journalism practice.

The journalism curriculum had to be examined as part of the Communication degree. Another key consideration was the cohesiveness of the major and the skills that were essential for graduating journalism students. Did each course facilitate students’ understanding of journalism practice? Did it build on the skills progressively? And did it engage them in a critical dialogue about journalism, as well as reflection on their own work? Each of the six courses in the major was put under the microscope. A SWOT analysis was undertaken of the strengths and weaknesses of the course, the various opportunities available to us, and any perceived or real threats to the course and/or its ability to deliver to the cohort.

The brainstorm revealed a well-structured degree overall, taught in a supportive learning environment (for students and academic staff) by industry-experienced staff, using great facilities with excellent technical support.

Other strengths included the university’s proximity to Sydney and major media outlets, effective and friendly relationships with local media, a supportive external advisory board made up of industry representatives, as well as students who were positive about the training in the practical professional skills and the reasonably flexible program.

The weaknesses included a concentration on print journalism and a lack of understanding and interaction with online journalism practice, a tendency for students to stick to what they were comfortable with and their perception there was “too much theory” in the degree, and no real outlet for student work. Another challenge was the make-up of the student cohort. Newcastle’s intake includes those from the third lowest socio-economic grouping of any university in the country with all the attendant issues, including retention rates and the level of preparation for university study.

Threats perceived—but discrete from the journalism program itself—were the global financial crisis, the decline of journalism and the rise of public relations, and perhaps some of the higher achieving students opting for “guaranteed” jobs linked to professional outcomes, e.g. in the law.

On a macro scale, there is the role the Communication degree itself plays in preparing students for the media industry, and conversely how the media industry perceives what graduates should be able to do when they arrive on the job. This is of universal concern to journalism educators particularly as fewer training opportunities exist for graduating students. There is also no uniform view of the skills that industrial journalism organisations seek in a new entrant. (Nankervis, 2008; Bolton, 2009; Callaghan & McManus, 2009). Fairfax Digital Editor-in-Chief Mike Van Niekerk has suggested a fundamental understanding of new platforms and technologies should be a given. News.com.au editor David Higgins believes “blogging and high-level social media involvement are paramount for a new media journalist” (Bolton, 2009). At the ABC, technological competence is not a requirement for recruits but having a good voice and being able to read and present is. What the representatives of all these media organisations agree on is the ability to “write solid, clean, crisp copy” and to be able to “tell a story” is as crucial as ever. Competent story-telling skills remain in fashion.

Remapping the major: the changes

Under the re-design, each course in the Journalism major has been modified so that students must engage with the technology most commonly used in today's media at every stage, meaning students build on their skills as they move through the major. Beginning with the first-year offerings, Introduction to Professional Writing and Introduction to Journalism, students must think about how they "tell" a story and which format and technology they use to do so. To counter any print bias, the Introduction to Journalism course includes an audio-visual assessment task that requires students to create a slide show with an audio sound track using the Macintosh computer labs. Students then upload their productions onto YouTube. The rationale: "Concentration on the written word is old school" (Scott, personal communication, 2009). They are required to use a phone to record audio and take photos to evidence their participation in face-to-face interviews. The latter measure is to counter the "cut and paste" culture of the Internet that threatens to kill off good journalistic research skills.

The second-year course, Magazine Journalism, re-branded Feature Writing, encompasses feature style writing across platforms including how the story is presented online. Students will also need to consider the visual layout of their story, and produce graphics or photos for their final feature. The changes recognise the countless online publications, including blogs, which require the journalist to be content creator and sub-editor as well as reporter. The intention is to create an online space for student publications.

The third-year course, Broadcast Journalism, a troublesome hybrid of radio and television, is being expanded to two courses. The first, Radio Journalism, will cover radio and online and will be a *directed* course for all 2000-level journalism students. It will build on the problem-based learning approach established in the existing course. Collaborative group work, one example being the production of a five-minute radio news bulletin, pushes students out of their comfort zone, and acts as a barometer of their decision-making skills.

Television Journalism, a 3000-level course, will engage with the skills required to produce television and video news stories for traditional media and online. Current media interviewing practice is a feature of both courses. Interview exercises serve a dual function: students learn an important journalism skill. They must also consider the ethical implications of getting information; and how they use it. Students will be able to hone their story-telling skills, including their voice and on-camera presentation, in a way not previously possible or required in the degree. It is now not possible to complete the major without engaging with writing for print *and* the spoken word, and using the appropriate technology. There will be more time for critical reflection around the practice of journalism in a broadcast environment.

The final-year course, titled simply, Journalism, traditionally has explored the nexus between theory and practice, and has been moving steadily towards putting that theory into practice. The changes made to this course are an attempt to reflect the evolution of journalistic practice in the industry. For the first time in 2009, it did not have an essay as a major assignment choice. Students instead were asked to choose: they could write a feature, create a video or audio story or produce an interview. The subject matter was limited to the key issues in the course. These included topics such as: Globalisation versus Localisation; Who will pay for journalism; Online journalism; Citizen journalism;

Truth and Objectivity; Privacy and the public interest; as well as the ethical and moral minefields surrounding journalistic practice, to name a few.

Each assignment required students to show evidence of research and their reasoning for the angle they took. Students bristled at the lack of an essay and it is true that many see it as an easy option that can be whisked up the night before the due date. Up to nine students out of 51 took up the challenge of using a non-print medium. In the previous year no student had taken up this option. This development demonstrates a growth in confidence in the use of technology. Students were also asked to keep a blog on what they were learning, reading and issues relevant to class discussions. Not all found this a comfortable fit as the marking criteria reflected their use of this online format. The more they engaged with the technology of the blog, the better the mark. The criteria also emphasised clear and coherent writing, punctuation, grammar, spelling and content.

Definition of core skills

To focus the re-design of this course, the coordinator chose to define the core skills of a journalist in the 21st Century, as we understand them. This was done in consultation with the journalism lecturers responsible for key courses, as well as feedback from industry advisers. This definition recognises not only that the work of the journalist has changed but also that there are new “base line” skills our graduates require to get a job. The core skills of a journalist working professionally in the 21st Century include being able to:

- research (i.e. find out) key information that is accurate using all available resources and cultivate sources for future reference;
- interview people from a variety of backgrounds and ask questions relevant to the subject, issue or event being reported;
- demonstrate an ability to gather information using appropriate technologies;
- recognise a story (news sense), interpret its meaning and disseminate it to a variety of audiences in a form relevant to each audience, and using the relevant platform;
- communicate and/or present information to an audience in a written, oral and/or visual form appropriate to the medium of delivery of that information—e.g. print, radio, television, online;
- deliver their completed work to a required deadline and a pre-arranged length and/or time limit; and
- undertake their work with a commitment to accuracy, fairness and ethical practice.

It is vital to re-affirm these core skills if we are to distinguish the professional journalist from the “citizen” journalist. So, each assessment task is designed to advance students’ practice and understanding of journalism in tandem with any technological expertise while “connecting the dots” between journalism practice and communication scholarship (Cohen, 2005).

Conclusion

We acknowledge this re-design of an 80-unit major cannot hope to provide as fully integrated an approach as may become necessary in this “brave new world” of digital journalism. As Postman (1990) observed, “technology always has unforeseen consequences, and it is not always clear, at the beginning, who or what will win and who or what will lose”. To ensure journalism does not become a victim of the technologically expedient, it is vital that the review does not skew the balance between technical competency and the development of core skills, such as newsgathering and storytelling. The aim is not to produce cyborgs capable of regurgitating content across multiple platforms, but highly skilled professionals fully aware of the demands of the industry they are heading towards.

Historically, the doing of journalism has and will be influenced by changes in technology, and that means certain skills and practices may become more valuable, and others perhaps redundant. This requires our journalism scholarship to keep pace with the practice. It does not mean we follow it blindly. We want students to develop a cohesive overview of how journalism operates, while recognising it has and will continue to evolve. Only with the underpinning of scholarship can we hope to critique our daily practice in any adequate way. One can only hope these better-integrated and more representative courses together with the improved Pathway documents will produce graduates that, as Nankervis (2008) has identified, are

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.

There is a recognition that it is important for intending journalists to engage with emerging technologies but not at the expense of developing solid research, interviewing, and writing skills, as well as an understanding of ethics and media law. The “value” of the journalist in the information economy cannot simply be about economics, or the use of technology. Value in a qualitative sense is created by where and how journalists meet their fellow citizens to present the narratives or stories that are important to them, and which inform, explain and entertain.

Regardless of whether we Facebook their feedback, or Twitter their marks, we must remain mindful *how* the medium becomes the message.

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