

On the Relationship between Journalism and University Communication and Media Courses

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I begin with a short series of anecdotes. About a year ago a colleague and I, both then lecturers in journalism in the School of Communication and Media at the University of Western Sydney, invited a group of senior journalists to a working lunch. Our guests were from newspaper, radio and television; from commercial media, the SBS and the ABC; all had some responsibility for the supervision and training of new recruits to their organisation. None of them was a graduate of a journalism, communication or media degree—they were all over forty-five and their training pre-dated the establishment of such courses in Australia—although some were university graduates of other disciplines. Our aim was to explore mutually beneficial ways of working and to seek advice from the journalists on what they expect of graduate recruits to the media. At first they seemed taken aback by the question and unsure what, if anything, a degree with a major in journalism would offer by way of preparation for the world of working journalism. It turned out these senior journalists did not particularly value a degree in journalism above other kinds of degrees, in terms of the qualities of mind graduates brought to the profession. Apart from the practical potential of specialist knowledge, of science, or a language or business, for example, all degrees were perceived as equally likely to teach students to think logically, to know how to find things out, and to persist in the face of difficulty or disinclination. No, what really annoyed them in journalism graduates was how often they could

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not *write*. The half dozen or so guests spent some heartfelt minutes bemoaning the poor writing skills of young people in general and journalism graduates in particular. What they wanted were correct spelling, good grammar and writing that was clear in meaning, vigorous, free of jargon and succinct. This was the one skill with which they had anticipated a journalism (or communication and media) degree would equip its graduates: how to write a news story. For my colleague and myself it was, frankly, rather a blow to our professional (as in, academic) self-esteem.

On a still earlier occasion, while teaching media production and journalism at the Bathurst campus of Charles Sturt University, I had gone to visit the head of news at Channel Nine, Paul Fenn. This was, again, in a spirit of cooperation, not to say ingratiation, as Channel Nine news is an important potential employer of those communication graduates who seek a journalism career in commercial television. Paul has been a journalist for a long time, and he has worked at Channel Nine for almost as long. While he was not discourteous, he made no attempt to hide his view that most of what young journalists recruited to his newsroom needed to know would have to be taught to them in the newsroom. He openly expressed a concern that the Charles Sturt University course, which began while the university was Mitchell College of Advanced Education and was run for many years by a former newspaper journalist, recently retired, might become 'too academic', to the neglect of practical, especially television, reporting skills, following the appointment of a former ABC journalist with an MA degree in Communication as head of journalism. This was confided to me only after I had emphasised my own journalistic background, including working as a journalist at Channel Nine in the late 1970s, albeit not in news but on 'The Mike Walsh Show'. I did not mention to Paul that I was enrolled as a PhD candidate.

I had found it necessary to call attention to my record as a media professional—and to divert attention from my role as an academic—in other such interviews; with the head of production (not the current one) at Foxtel, for example, who became markedly more cooperative once she realised we had both worked for

Channels Nine and Ten at around the same time. Finally, in case you think what I am describing is more applicable to commercial media than to the public sector, one last incident illustrates that there are differences of opinion within media. On behalf of a former student of mine, who had recently completed an MA in Journalism, I consulted an Executive Producer from ABC Radio National about whether or not the student should pursue a job reporting for ABC Radio News in a small regional station, rather than persist with the irregular freelance work that was all Radio National could offer her. The producer wrinkled her nose and said she didn't think 'there was much call for thought in regional radio news'. I should say that Radio National is probably home to more holders of postgraduate degrees than almost any other workplace outside a university. At one stage, veteran science broadcaster and holder of at least one honorary doctorate, Robin Williams, took to calling everyone on the fourth floor of the ABC's Ultimo building 'Doctor', on the grounds that 'if you work at Radio National you must have a PhD'. This was no doubt Robin's way of reminding us as broadcasters to avoid the sins of intellectual snobbery.

All of this is my way of illustrating the tension that still exists, more than thirty years after the introduction of professional communication degrees in this country, between media practitioners—especially journalists, I would argue—and the role of the communication and media graduate. In this paper I am using media, communication and journalism interchangeably with reference to professional communications courses at undergraduate level, which would infuriate some academics, especially those who have come to academe from journalism. However, the fact is that most degrees with the words communication/communications or media in their title also teach at least some journalism; and most degrees with journalism in the title also teach some communication theory and practice. The degree in which I now teach is called a BA Media and Communications. It thus proclaims its status as an Arts degree, with a specialisation that currently encompasses theories of mass communication, generic journalistic skills of research, interviewing,

synthesising, story-writing and sub-editing, as well as presentation and production skills in the electronic media, and an introduction to the practice of public relations and advertising. The degree is very new, only in its second year, but it is intended that the media and communications major will eventually offer students more emphasis on journalism. I distinguish journalism from public relations or advertising—also taught within many media and communication degrees—on the basis that, while all three may set out to entertain, the latter two are concerned with techniques of persuasive communication while the primary intent of journalism, ideally, is to inform. This is a woefully simplistic distinction but will serve its purpose here. I will just note that the distinction I have made does not necessarily label journalism as objective, as opposed to the vested interests of PR and advertising. Within journalism education and within the profession there is debate about what has been called ‘the objectivity paradigm’¹ of journalism, which is both a professional ideal and a guide to practice (see McQuail).² Of course there are university staff and administrators who are not convinced that journalism is a subject worthy of academic study. My concern here is with some of the arguments surrounding journalism education and what it is for, especially with those media professionals who doubt that a university education can make a useful contribution to the journalism profession.

The Problem for University Journalism Courses

Over the past six years or so a fairly vigorous debate has been conducted among media academics about the role of cultural studies in journalism education. What the debate is often really about is what the relationship should be in media and communication courses between studying production (the ‘how to’ of journalism) and studying journalism as textual and cultural forms. In 1996 John Hartley, who is credited with beginning the argument, put the view that journalism courses are ‘reducing news to a set of technical operations’ and, in so doing, are failing students for whom—along with the rest of us—‘citizenship and

communal identity are not possible these days without journalism'.³ Hartley also refers to the resentment from the profession (except that he argues journalism is a trade or craft, not a profession) towards 'the drift of recruitment and training towards graduates, and [insistence] that the best qualifications are personal attributes (a nose for news, a winsome face), the best training is on the job'.⁴

Even at the time Hartley wrote this, and certainly since, there has been a change in journalism education to encompass conceptual and theoretical knowledge as well as technical skills. The degree in which I now teach at the University of Sydney is broader still, as it is a four-year degree in which students must take two majors. In a recent article Matthew Ricketson, head of the journalism program at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, has drawn attention to the limitations of the 'theory versus practice' dichotomy, especially its implicit definition of journalism as 'simply a collection of craft skills'.⁵ He makes a number of other points that are relevant to this paper: that not all graduates of media degrees want to or will be employed in journalism; that it is not realistic to expect graduates of three-year degrees to be fully conversant with all aspects of journalistic practice; and, most importantly for my argument, that for the purposes of learning and as a place to do work, a university is not the same as a newsroom, nor should it be. There is, as Ricketson puts it, 'a distinction between training and education that few in industry seem to understand or care about'. I would agree that there is a distinction poorly understood (and not only by those in industry) but not that industry does not care. On the contrary, I believe that where there is resentment from news practitioners towards graduates (and it is by no means universal), it may be interpreted as a fear of disruption of professional norms. Here, surely, we meet a key distinction between education and training: training teaches performance in accord with accepted norms that may remain unexplored, while education teaches the value of offering new and different ways of understanding and doing things. In other words, education could be said to be the learning of norms in order to disrupt them creatively. Training on the other

hand is learning norms in order to observe them in the production of knowledge. Yet, in the newsroom no less than in the university, there is a recognised value to standing apart (objectivity), questioning and challenging. This, then, is where training and education come together in the preparation of journalists. The problem for universities is that the industry complains when graduates are not trained sufficiently in basic reporting and writing skills and reacts with suspicion to education 'as a subversive activity' (in the sense the phrase is used by Postman and Weingartner).⁶

This could be left as an argument for universities keeping their distance from industry, as Ricketson proposes in his short article. Ricketson concludes that 'While journalism schools need to work closely with the news media industry to provide job-ready graduates, they also, as part of the academy, need to stand apart from the industry, to study it, question it and offer new and different ways of doing journalism.'⁷ The question is: does the industry want the offer?

What Industry Wants; What the Academy Offers

There is some evidence that employers and trainers in newspaper and broadcast journalism value graduates as trainee journalists. Barbara Alysen of Deakin University has been collecting data on the availability of traineeships and the relevance of tertiary journalism qualifications to selection for them from the ABC, the *Herald & Weekly Times* and the *Age* in Melbourne, and from News Limited in Sydney.⁸ She has found that only the *Age* requires its cadets to be graduates but graduates are the great majority of those offered cadetships or traineeships across all four organisations. Of these, over half are graduates of a journalism course, either at undergraduate or at postgraduate level. The actual proportion of journalism graduates in the graduate intake of journalism trainees or cadets varies from year to year of her study, between 57 and 63 percent. The trainee managers generally were lukewarm about any advantage a journalism degree might give applicants; generic skills such as research and writing were

considered important, and evidence of active engagement in journalistic activity even more so, at whatever level, from student newspapers to work experience in local media. In relation to this, the *Herald & Weekly Times* Editorial Development Manager specifically mentioned 'extra emphasis on placements and internships' as a mark of improvement in journalism courses. Alysen found some evidence that the ABC has become less likely to select journalism graduates for traineeships and more likely to select graduates with other degrees. It is no accident that the University of Sydney has devised a BA Media and Communications degree that offers a double major, in media and communication, but also in a choice of second majors in the Arts and Social Sciences. The degree is both a response and an initiative; it recognises the desire in some quarters of the media industries for generally better educated graduates, and pursues a belief in the importance of a broader education for those who would enter careers in the media.

Research results from Britain and the United States show broadly similar themes. Dickson and Brandon⁹ found that newspaper editors—over half of whom had journalism degrees themselves—still did not necessarily see a journalism degree as an essential prerequisite for the practice of journalism. Overall, however, there was considerable agreement between editors and educators on the importance of various journalistic skills and abilities (such as writing well, presenting information well, thinking analytically and understanding the community) and on the types of general knowledge journalism graduates should have (such as knowledge of current events, knowledge of government, understanding journalists' responsibility to the public and journalistic ethics).

A 1998 study of radio journalism training by Heather Purdey, from City University in London, also collected data from editors and educators.¹⁰ In Britain, as in the United States, there is a system of industry-accreditation for journalism courses. In broadcast journalism the accrediting body is the Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC), a body funded by and composed of industry, National Union of Journalists and college

representatives. BJTC-accredited courses have traditionally been one-year postgraduate MA degrees, although in the past five to ten years there has been an increasing number of three-year undergraduate journalism courses.¹¹

Purdey found the BBC almost twice as likely to recruit graduates of accredited courses at graduate level as commercial radio, in which the sources of recruits were much more diverse. One very significant finding was that over half the BBC editors and nearly 80 percent of the commercial editors responding to Purdey's questionnaire had recruited people who had worked with them on internships or work experience. I am not aware of comparable data in Australia but should like to test my guess, based on anecdotal evidence and personal observation, that a similar finding would be made in our much smaller industry. We need research to tell us more specifically than we know now just how people are being recruited to journalism work and the role of internships or work experience in securing employment. The final year of the BA Media and Communications degree at Sydney includes a work placement, as do most such degree programmes in Australia, with the placements varying from one to four weeks, considerably shorter than their North American equivalents, which tend to be semester-long.

The role of the internship or work placement could do with more exploration than I have time or data to offer here. It certainly offers students an opportunity to find out if they want to pursue a career in that area of the media in which they elect to do their internship, be it advertising, public relations or journalism. It certainly gives potential employers the opportunity to look over the latest crop of final-year students and, as Purdey's data demonstrates, select what they consider the pick of that crop for job offers. The comment in Alysen's report, from the Editorial Development Manager of the *Herald & Weekly Times*, that journalism courses are 'improved' by the introduction of internships or work placements, also suggests a number of similar possibilities. One of the implications of these findings is that journalism tends to recruit people like those already working in the profession, and internships give it that opportunity in advance

of formal recruitment. The tendency of job interview panels to select people similar to those who constitute the panel is a well-recognised phenomenon, and has resulted in attempts by most organisations to increase the diversity of selection panels, even if that extends only to ensuring both sexes are represented. It could also be argued that internships give students who do not fit the mould the opportunity to demonstrate their ability and potential. Finally, it would be interesting to explore how much socialisation into the profession goes on during internships.¹²

Purdey found both the industry and the educational sector 'had remarkably similar ideas about the kind of knowledge they looked for in a new recruit'. They looked mainly for knowledge of current affairs and for 'general knowledge'. Interestingly, far fewer of the British respondents mentioned journalistic ethics than did those in the US study. (I wonder what the comparable figures would be here?) Alysen does not appear to have raised an understanding of ethics as a specific question with her respondents, although it does form a part of most university media and journalism courses in this country.

When it came to skills, Purdey's findings are again very similar to those of the Dickson and Brandon study and Alysen's data. The ability to write and speak good English is paramount, followed by skills in interviewing, reporting and research (this last is mentioned less by commercial radio than by the BBC). The ability to meet deadlines was also considered very important, as no doubt it would be in media organisations everywhere, but what is interesting about Purdey's findings is the importance ascribed by her industry respondents to something university courses have a limited ability to influence, to say the least, and that is 'personal qualities'. Those considered essential by most editors, both commercial and BBC, were 'being able to learn quickly, to withstand pressure, to work in a team, to have a positive attitude and to possess a good voice'.¹³ The last, obviously, would be less likely to appear in an equivalent survey of newspaper editors.

Most journalism courses with which I am familiar do attempt to instil such qualities, through the imposition of deadlines, setting group assignments, and voice presentation training. These personal

qualities appear to be more important to recruitment than either skills or knowledge: enthusiasm, ambition, good communication skills, working well in a team, and, mentioned by all those editors whom Purdey interviewed, not showing 'arrogance'.

It is interesting that the issue of 'arrogance' should arise in this UK study; it reflects a phenomenon I have observed here too. The manager of an ABC regional radio station rang and asked me to recommend a recent or imminent graduate of the Charles Sturt University journalism degree for a producer position, but, he said, 'don't send me anyone with agendas'. This seems to me to be a variation on the theme of Kerry Packer's reaction when someone innocently asked his son James which university he was going to: 'Uni! Why would he want to go there? ... To learn how to smoke marijuana?'.¹⁴ It is related also to Purdey's finding that editors place a low value on 'enthusiasm for social reform' in potential recruits. The belief that university teaches its graduates to be arrogant enough to hold positions on issues and to be incapable of writing or broadcasting without proselytising is ironic, in view of the academy's belief in scholarship as disinterested inquiry. (Equally ironic is the historical fact that objectivity in reporting developed in response to a cultural change that began in scholarship, that is, in the application of 'the scientific method' to social inquiry towards the end of the nineteenth century.) This dislike of 'arrogance' and rejection of 'agendas' brings us back to the challenge that journalism graduates represent to the established norms of journalism practice, which I referred to earlier in distinguishing training from education.

The Need for Research

After more than thirty years of journalism graduates entering the profession, journalism in Australia has had to adapt its treatment of new recruits. The old three-year cadetship for school leavers has all but disappeared. News Limited was the last news organisation in Australia to insist all potential journalists first work as copy people, and it has finally abolished that system (from the 2002 intake of cadets), one not unlike fagging in an

English public school, saying it was inappropriate to ask graduates in their early or mid-twenties to run errands for journalists, not to mention put up with their sometimes brutal teasing and occasional abuse (this is not my description but a paraphrase of the reasons given at the time).

But these are reasons that have to do with the age and experience journalism recruits now bring to the profession, not to do with the impact media and communications graduates are having on journalism itself. Or are they? Assuming for the moment that university journalism education has resulted in graduates offering, as Ricketson urged, 'new and different ways of doing journalism', where is the evidence? We need research to demonstrate not only that there have been changes in journalism in Australia, for there surely have, but also that they have resulted, at least in part, from the increase in the number of graduates of media and communications courses entering the industry. This will not be easy, because the already recognised socio-cultural-economic factors that affect journalism are many and powerful. Changes to media ownership, changes to the technologies of production, distribution and reception, cultural change: all these are clearly significant factors in any changes to the form and content of journalism. Nonetheless, despite the many thousands of words that have written about journalism education, there is a tendency in the research to emphasise if and how the industry influences the academy (and whether or not it should). I am calling for research that looks at how the growth of university education in media might be influencing industry practices. As a media consumer, a journalism educator and occasionally still as a broadcast journalist, I don't see much evidence on the surface of journalism practice changing as a result of there being more journalism, media and communications graduates recruited to the industry.

Among the issues such research might consider in relation to this central research problem are the nature and role of work placements, the recruitment process for trainee or cadet journalists, the effects on recruitment and practice of variations between journalism courses, and the role of communications graduates in

the growth of independent media. The new BA Media and Communications degree at the University of Sydney may offer an opportunity to initiate research in this direction. The difficulty of making causal connections from such studies should not deter us. For, if we do not know what journalism education is for, what is the point of undertaking it?

Notes

- 1 E. Megwa, 'Democracy without Citizens: A Challenge for South African Journalism Education', *Journalism Studies* 2.2 (May 2001): 281–285. Megwa argues that journalism education in South Africa must 're-examine its reliance on the objectivity paradigm in teaching news reporting [and replace it with one that] recognises that reporters are not disinterested actors but are active participants in the process of news production' (p.283).
- 2 D. McQuail, *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest*, London, 1992, p.183 ff.
- 3 J. Hartley, *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*, London, 1996, p.39.
- 4 Hartley, p.36.
- 5 M. Ricketson, 'All Things To Everyone: Expectations of Tertiary Journalism Education', *Asia-Pacific Media Educator* 10 (January-June 2001): 94-98.
- 6 N. Postman and C. Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*, Harmondsworth, 1969.
- 7 Ricketson, p.98.
- 8 B. Alysen, 'Tertiary Journalism Education: its Value in Cadet Selection at Metropolitan Media', *Asia-Pacific Media Educator* 10 (January-June 2001): 100–11.
- 9 T. Dickson and W. Brandon, 'Media Criticism of US Journalism Education: Unwarranted, Contradictory', *Asia-Pacific Media Educator* 8 (January-June, 2000): 42-58.
- 10 H. Purdey, 'Radio Journalism Training and the Future of Radio News in the UK', *Journalism Theory, Practice and Criticism* 1.3, (December 2000): 329–52.
- 11 In Australia the Journalism Education Association, the membership of which is largely made up of former and still practising journalists who teach journalism at university level, is pursuing a policy with industry of setting up accreditation for journalism courses. The Public Relations Institute of Australia already offers accreditation to university PR courses that meet some not particularly challenging criteria of course content.

- 12 An overview of the processes of workplace socialisation can be found in F. Jablin and K. Krone, 'Organizational Assimilation', in C. Berger and S. Chaffee, *Handbook of Communication Science*, Newbury Park, 1987, 711–46.
- 13 Purdey, p.338.
- 14 Quoted in G. Stone, *Compulsive Viewing*, Harmondsworth, 2000, p.502.