

ALY 07153

A strategy for vocational education in the news media at a time of industrial change: bridging the contradiction in Journalism education.

Barbara Alysen, University of Western Sydney

ABSTRACT: Journalism remains a popular subject choice for Australian students, with more than twenty universities offering undergraduate courses with a major in the subject. Unlike the situation in some other 'professional' subject areas, enrolments in Journalism are driven by student interest rather than industry demand. Indeed, the industry itself is in a state of flux as it manoeuvres to meet the challenges and opportunities presented by technological change and shifts in media ownership.

Our research considers trends, over the past decade, in entry-level employment in the Australian news media and the impact on journalism education. While the number of mainstream media positions is contracting, opportunities are opening up in other parts of the media. However, many of these jobs lack the public-interest element that traditionally drew young people into journalism.

How then do journalism educators bridge the gaps: Between ideals and reality; between student hopes and industry practice?

One of the defining features of what is termed 'professional education' is the ambiguity over the way in which 'professional' should be interpreted. For some it is defined by what it is not – that is, education for its own sake. For others, the definition is more prosaic; it is an education tailored for those intending to work in specific industries and implied in that is a suggestion that there are professional areas that require staff with an education the tertiary sector can provide. The term might also be seen as education for those who feel they have a vocation for a particular professional area.

Those who teach in a 'professional' field are confronted with the implications of these competing definitions and also with another choice; whether to focus on the communication of industry-standard skills, framed by the expectations of the profession into which students hope to move, whether to combine the provision of professional skills with a critical or reflective approach with the intention of 'raising standards' in the industry concerned, or whether to design courses independent of industry influence. This choice is of particular relevance to journalism education in Australia, because it speaks to the fundamental issue of the pathway between education and the profession. There are some industries in which that pathway is clear and widely known; where there is a stated need for numbers of graduates with specific skills. Medicine (including nursing) and dentistry are cases in point as is secondary education in mathematics and science. In areas such as these, enrolments may be a

response to known market needs. Our focus in this paper, however, is on journalism, where the situation is very different, where enrolments are driven by student interests and ambitions rather than labour force requirements and where, we believe, there is a need for greater emphasis on research into industrial issues and their relationship with education.

In order to put the 'market place' for journalism graduates into context it is important to review the nature of journalism education as a disciplinary area in the tertiary sector. The first tertiary journalism course in this country was established at the University of Western Australia in 1928, when it 'formalised' a program it had been running informally for the previous nine years. Its course structure was taken up by Queensland University from 1935 (Stuart, 1997, p. 44) by which time several other universities had introduced courses in journalism though, as journalism historian Rod Kirkpatrick has written:

Tertiary journalism studies in Australia began as studies for journalists rather than studies in, or of, journalism. They focused on English, history, politics and economics (1996, p. 258).

In recent years the field, once left primarily to a few universities and former Colleges of Advanced Education has expanded markedly. The website of the umbrella body for tertiary journalism education in Australia and the South Pacific, the Journalism Education Association, lists twenty one 'associated courses' at Australian universities (JEA, 2005). There would, in addition, be other such courses left out of that list because they have no staff affiliated with the JEA. The association's site also lists two private colleges offering journalism education and, independent of that organisation, there is growing competition from the Technical and Further Education sector.

Further complicating any analysis of journalism education in Australia is that professional studies in 'journalism' can fall under several degree options, including Bachelors degrees in Journalism itself and also major sequences in degrees in Communications and Arts. The ideal composition of a syllabus for journalism education is also a matter of debate (Henningham, 1994, Flew and Sternberg, 1999). When Debra Adams and Lee Duffield considered the structure of Journalism courses in 2005 using the federal government's Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) information they located twenty five programs. Within those they broke the course offerings down into three 'clusters', theoretical, professional and 'cognate disciplines'. Their analysis, aimed at tracing the 'connection between good education and good journalism' found that:

... in many of the universities studied, a journalism degree program can become a very different thing to different students, depending on the way they access the choices available to them (Adams and Duffield, 2005, np).

Adams and Duffield looked at undergraduate programs though there are, in addition, various post-graduate programs in journalism, ranging from Graduate Certificate to Masters, whose students are likely to come to their courses with different needs and expectations. Regardless of the precise nature of the qualification, all these tertiary courses have in common the presumption that

graduates can use them as a stepping stone to a career in the profession of journalism or as a means of professional upgrading, should they so wish. There is an unspoken assumption here that there exists an industry – in this case the news and information media – capable of and willing to create places for these graduates. Yet the structure of that industry and its employment practices receive considerably less attention from educators than they deserve. Even, the term ‘journalism’ is itself problematic. At a time when anyone with a mobile phone-camera may be termed a ‘citizen journalist’ what is a ‘journalist’? The Code of Ethics advanced by the professional association-cum-trade union that covers Australian journalists, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, defines the profession by its rights and obligations. It says in part:

Journalists search, disclose, record, question, entertain, comment and remember. They inform citizens and animate democracy (MEAA, 2007).

This definition reflects a ‘fourth estate’ model of journalism, one which performs a watchdog role in the public interest and one where journalist turned academic, Julianne Schultz, has noted:

Journalists engaged in news and public affairs reporting ... continue to define their work by referring to the public purpose of making information publicly available and uncovering information by scrutiny and investigation (Schultz, 1998, p. 16).

Not unexpectedly, this definition, with its focus on the worthiness of the profession, has informed tertiary journalism education in Australia, as in other democracies. As British-based journalism educator, John Herbert, has proclaimed:

Journalism educators have to teach journalism values that relate to the public good. The values of freedom, of integrity of reporting; about good writing; honesty and courage (Herbert, 1997, p.10).

However, this is not a definition without contradictions, something journalist and journalism educator, Sally White, pointed to when she observed that

The job that journalists do is vital in a democratic community yet most of the words produced by journalists are aimed at entertaining or selling (White, 1996, p. viii).

In the context of this paper we might best define journalism in the way we believe students see it – as a paid occupation involving reporting, writing and disseminating news and information. This definition encompasses both those journalists involved in what Schultz regards as the fourth estate ideal of the profession without excluding those involved in the ‘entertaining and selling’ acknowledged by White.

At present Australian journalism education courses are not industry-accredited and although the discipline’s umbrella body has spent some years working towards this not all journalism educators view it as an ideal. One problem with accreditation is that has the potential to privilege the mainstream media in issues of what should be taught at a time when these media are winding back employment at entry level (Alysen, 2005).

The disconnection between the aspirations and numbers of journalism students and the capacity of the Australian news media to absorb them has long concerned some journalism educators. The best known airing of the issue

appeared in 1996 under the stark title '900 into 300 won't go: Are Australia's journalism courses producing too many graduates?' (Patching, 1996) where the larger figure represented the assumed number of Journalism majors graduating each year in Australia and the 300 the number of available mainstream media entry-level jobs. Patching acknowledged that the field was littered with a lack of terminological specificity which made it difficult to know which graduates should be counted when looking at graduate destination data and which positions might qualify as journalistic. In this context, 'mainstream' media was taken to mean the metropolitan news organisations and also the 'suburban throwaway, country bi-weekly, or small country radio or TV station' (1996, p. 60). In reality it is all but impossible to determine the number of entry-level positions available each year because of the elasticity of the term 'the media'. However, some areas of entry-level news media employment are quantifiable and, taken at face value, these are not encouraging.

The process by which the news media engages and trains young journalists traditionally involved a cadetship which combined formal training (particularly in shorthand and legal matters relevant to journalists) with on-the-job mentoring. In the days when journalism was largely a profession for non-graduates, the cadetship was of three years' duration after which the cadet progressed to the graded ranks, providing they had achieved the required speed in shorthand. Significantly, however, there was an expectation that a cadet would be retained once the period of training was completed, regardless of their progress. Graduate cadets took a one year cadetship. In recent years the cadetship system has given way to a more flexible form of training and employment. One sign of this is that the Fairfax organisation (publisher of *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Financial Review* and other titles, including a string of suburban newspapers) no longer uses the term 'cadet' and now engages its 'trainees' on a one-year performance-based contract. Other major news organisations use the same system though some have retained the original terminology. For at least the past decade almost all metropolitan traineeships/cadetships have gone to graduates, though only Fairfax had specified that applicants were required to be graduates. However, in August 2007, Fairfax signalled that it would both significantly cut its trainee intake in 2008 and reserve half the available places for school leavers, a move which has, not unexpectedly, drawn strong criticism from journalism educators (Simons, 2007, np). The decision by Fairfax acknowledges long standing criticism of exclusively graduate trainee intakes from some in the profession, including the suggestion that it has contributed to the 'gentrification' of the profession (Salter, 2001). The structure of the Australian news media as employers is also significant here. If we consider modes of delivery there are, in order of age, print (newspapers and magazines), radio, television and online. As the media converge, the traditional lines of demarcation between these media are increasingly redundant and many reporters now work in newsrooms where they may be expected to file for two or more of these platforms. The media are also divided by frequency of publication - primarily into unrestricted (round-the-clock radio and TV news plus online) daily, weekly and monthly. The news media may also be segmented according to geography: national, metropolitan,

suburban and regional, by subject matter, from mass media to niche media covering specific subject matter and finally by ownership, either private or public. Traditionally, greater prestige has attached to the metropolitan, daily media and this is reflected both in some of the terminology used about some media (such as the reference to 'suburban throwaway' mentioned above) and also to the award pay scales for each medium (see MEAA, 2007).

Our concern is with 'entry level' employment though, we are aware of the deficiencies of this term. O'Donnell has argued that a career path which sees 'young journalists start at the bottom... and work their way up the newsroom ladder'... does not necessarily apply in broadcast, magazine or online news media, much less ... the newer areas of journalistic work...' (2006, pp. 28-29). However, we believe that while some new graduates may sidestep the hierarchical nature of newsroom employment by seeking a career outside the daily news media, the entry-level model remains a fixture of daily news work, though it may be applied in different ways, depending on the nature of the organisation.

In an era when the media are ubiquitous, it is worth considering just how few entry-level training positions there are. Over the past decade, we have collected data from several of the main metropolitan news organisations whose product is known nation-wide: The ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation), Melbourne's *Age* newspaper and the Herald & Weekly Times, part of News Corporation and publisher of the *Herald Sun*, the largest selling newspaper in Australia. This data has been supplied on an annual basis by their training departments and includes an estimated number of applicants for the annual trainee intake and the number taken on each year. The organisations involved have had relatively stable hiring practices over this period, which makes it possible to track their entry-level numbers and we believe the trends at these organisations may be applied across the rest of the main metropolitan news media in Australia. Perhaps more importantly, these organisations are among the minority that now offer formal training rather than just on-the-job mentoring (or even less) to journalists. As such they are among the most prestigious institutions at which an entry-level journalist might begin work and it may be conjectured that the journalists offered this level of training will be more likely than others to take on the most complex, investigative, journalistic work later in their careers. In addition, these organisations conduct an annual trainee/cadet intake which makes it possible to monitor numbers more easily than is possible at those organisations which hire only when there is a vacancy. The largest metropolitan broadcast newsrooms, other than the ABC, rarely employ at entry-level, finding it easier to engage staff with experience gained in smaller outlets, usually in the regional areas, and sometimes community broadcasting or other media. The table below compares the number of applicants for training positions at the three institutions named above to the numbers they hired.

Figure 1. Comparison between the number of applicants and entry-level journalism 1995 - 2007

	<i>ABC</i>		<i>The Age (masthead)</i>		<i>HWT</i>	
	App's	Hired	App's	Hired	App's	Hired
1995	n/a		n/a		n/a	10
1996	1800	14	n/a		n/a	8
1997	1800	11	n/a		n/a	5
1998	2000	7	320	9	n/a	6
1999		6	200	10	250	7
2000	No intake		200	8	250	6
2001	675	7	250	8	160	7
2002	700	12	350	8	75	4
2003	700	11	400	6	120	5
2004	No intake		500	7	200	4
2005	410	9	300	6	130	5
2006	450	8	200	6*	130	3
2007	340	8	200	8*	130	3

Notes: In some cases, organisations can supply only an approximate number of applicants. These have been rounded to the nearest five. * Note that in 2006 and 2007 *The Age* took only so-called 'advanced trainees' who were required to have at least three years' prior experience in journalism.

There are several points that can be drawn from these data. The first is that large numbers of graduates continue to chase a very small number of mainstream training positions. The number of applicants has fallen substantially at the ABC and HWT over the years because both those organisations have introduced more complex and time consuming application procedures. The figures rose at *The Age* when Fairfax began advertising its trainee round and then fell when it demanded prior experience in journalism. Secondly, while the numbers of trainees hired are small (which is significant in itself), they nevertheless show a clear trend, with entry-level employment of journalists at metropolitan dailies now half the level it was a decade ago. It is also important to note that not all of the available positions went to graduates of Journalism programs. Most employers indicate a preference for graduates to fill entry-level journalism positions, however they also specify that the degree does not have to be Journalism (MacLean, 2004, 18) and journalism cadet/traineeships are regularly filled by graduates of law, science, economics even, on occasion, engineering and medicine. The ABC recruits the highest percentage of journalism graduates and most of its cadets come from that background. By contrast, special interest media may look to graduates with different backgrounds, and thus the finance publications *The Financial Review* and *Business Review Weekly*, for example, look to graduates of Economics and Commerce rather than Journalism. We should note also that while the number of traineeships at the 'top end' of the profession is very small, graduates continue to enter the profession by other means and that these figures should be taken as an indication of trends rather than as an indication of the total number of available positions.

While mainstream entry-level employment in what might be termed 'old media' has been contracting one area is showing clear signs of growth. Over the past two years there has been an upward trend in online or multimedia news employment at entry level. In the most striking sign, NineMSN announced in March 2007 that it would hire six cadets for the online operation (Meade, 2007, p. 15). To put this in perspective consider that National Nine television news had last hired cadets two years earlier, when it took just two for the entire country. Managing editor for NineMSN, Max Uechtritz, pointed to the new requirements of would-be reporters when he told *The Australian* the cadets would be 'doing everything that is expected of online journalism, which is print, audio and video' (ibid). In another sign of the growing role of online journalism as a field of employment, both *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, hired a small number of trainees specifically for their online arms in both 2006 and 2007.

The figures above suggest, first, that only a tiny elite of journalism graduates can expect to find work in metropolitan daily newsrooms; the newsrooms most likely to devote the resources to pursue the public service model of journalism described earlier and this has repercussions for teaching and learning in this professional area. Secondly, they suggest that growth in journalism hirings in the future will be in other areas of the media, including multimedia.

The contraction in the number of training positions coincides with other developments in the news media that will also affect employment. These include well-publicised reductions in staff numbers in some major news outlets (see for example Ricketson, M and Westerman H, 2006), rationalisations of staff and content across some services (see for example *Media Watch*, October 30, 2006, np), an increase in the number and variety of news delivery systems (including online services and mobile platforms such as phones) and a growth in multi-platform reporting, where reporters are expected to work for more than a single medium. Australia's new media ownership laws, which came into effect in April 2007 can be expected to further drive all these changes, a point noted in relation to the transfer of majority holding in major Australian media company, PBL Media, to private equity ownership (Tabakoff, 2007, p.3). All of these developments point to a news media sector which is atomising; and where jobs will be scattered rather than concentrated in specific organisations. These developments raise questions about the ways in which educators should respond to the competing demands of students' expectations of media careers and industrial shifts.

In this changing media environment, the profession of journalism is increasingly difficult to define clearly, however it is also arguable that students themselves lack a clear perception of the news media. There have been several studies on student ambitions and graduate outcomes in journalism in Australia, including (Alysen & Oakham, 1996, Alysen, 2005, O'Donnell, 1999, Green and McIlwaine, 1999). A three-year study of students at Victoria's Deakin University over the mid to late 1990s found that two thirds of those in the first year of Journalism planned a career in the field, with another third undecided. More than half were optimistic about their chances of finding work. This enthusiasm was despite the fact that nearly half did not consider the profession well paid and another third did not know what salaries in the field might be. Nearly 80 per cent considered

the public image of journalists to be poor or very poor. Their television news and current affairs viewing tended towards the tabloid and when asked which journalist or commentator they most admired the most common answer was 'no one' (Alysen and Oakham, 1996). As a former careers adviser interviewed by Patching reported:

Those who say they want to be journalists – and from his experience there were plenty of them – (had) an “unhelpfully narrow idea of what constituted journalism, and what a journalist did” (Patching, 1996 p. 59). More than a decade later, in a very different, digital, media environment, this lack of understanding may constitute an advantage, since it allows students to take a more fluid approach to their post-graduation future.

In trying to assess the degree to which this is happening we are hampered by the dearth of more recent research on the motivations and aspirations of journalism students, including their sources of pre-enrolment information about journalism as a profession. News media practitioners take a cautious approach to encouraging would-be reporters. One illustration may be found in annual workshops organised in each state capital city by the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance for journalism students in their graduating year. The tone of these events, which generally attract large numbers of students, is that competition for full time places is considerable and that remuneration is not sufficient to be an attraction on its own but that journalism offers variety and excitement and the power to influence, which are not easily found in other occupations. O'Donnell (2006) has written of the need to break the impasse in the view of journalism education as 'workforce reproduction', suggesting that the key stakeholders, students, need to be accorded a greater voice in defining 'generational change' in the profession. She echoes the concerns of Splichal and Sparks' (1994) landmark international study of journalism education, wondering whether the dearth of research into student concerns is that 'usually nobody feels anxious about the interests and expectations of students' (quoted in O'Donnell, 2006, p. 24). On the contrary, we suspect there is a great deal of informal discussion of these issues within courses however the paucity of published research may owe more to reluctance to negotiate the ethical difficulties of conducting formal research on students than any other obstacle. Moreover, we have a concern with placing too much emphasis on students as agents of generational change in journalism, particularly when there is an even greater dearth of research into the nature of both employment in journalism as well as other industrial issues, such as real wage rates for early career journalists, long-term career options and working conditions.

Those reservations noted, we believe that even the limited industry research cited here has important implications for journalism education. In particular, it suggests that educators need to look beyond the requirements of the main metropolitan daily media in determining the professional skills component of courses. Secondly, educators need to question whether it is appropriate to preference certain media or outlets in any discussion of career options for students, since even the largest media take very few graduates. Instead, students need to be exposed to as wide a range of media as is practicable

within their courses and then encouraged to interact with different types of journalistic practice in the workplace in the form of internships. Educators need to be able to impart established best practice in educating journalists; practice based on a 'fourth estate' model of journalism, while simultaneously directing students towards work placements in a variety of media both traditional news media and non-traditional, including 'corporate journalism' and other quasi public relations work that falls outside any model of journalism as a 'public service' profession. Finally, educators need to give students a realistic view of the nature of the industry to prepare them for the professional challenges they will face should they decide to enter it. Additionally, educators need to direct more research attention towards the industrial climate in a changing media environment. It is difficult for journalists to remain wedded to a 'fourth estate' model of the profession when the ground is shifting under them as a consequence of changes in the media environment in which they practice.

References

- Adams, D. and Duffield, L. (2005) Profiles of Journalism Education: what students are being offered in Australia, Proceedings of the 2005 Journalism Education Association Conference, <<http://live-wirez.gu.edu.au/jea.papers/Adams%20and%20Duffield.rtf>> Retrieved. Accessed August 29, 2007.
- AAP, (2007) World shortage of 18m teachers by 2016. *The Age*, <<http://www.theage.com.au/news/National/World-shortage-of-18m-teachers-by-2016/2007/01/16/1168709745938.html>>, Jan 16. Retrieved, Accessed May 29, 2007.
- Alysen, B. (2005) The changing newsroom: Shifts in journalism work practices and the implications for journalism education, *Australian Studies in Journalism*, no. 14, pp. 61-78.
- Alysen, B. (1998) From hopeful to hardened: How Three Years' Study Changes Journalism Students, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 20, no. 1, pp.133-148.
- Alysen, B. and Oakham, K. M. (1996) The Jana Wendt factor: an Empirical study of Myths and Misconceptions Among Journalism Students, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 39 - 52.
- Flew, T. and Sternberg, J. (1999) Media Wars: media studies and journalism education, *Media International Australia*, no. 90, pp. 9- 14.
- Green, K. and McIlwaine, S. (1999) Where do all the graduates go?, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 134-141.
- Henningham, J. (1999) Proud to be a Journalism educator, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 21, no. 3, pp. 181-196.

- Herbert, J (1997) Journalism education at the tertiary level, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 19 no. 1, pp. 7 -18.
- Henningham, J. (1994) A suggested core curriculum in journalism education, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 88-93.
- Journalism Education Association, (2005),
<<http://www.jea.org.au/courses.htm>>, Retrieved: (Accessed: June 3, 2007).
- Kirkpatrick, R. (1996), Diploma to degree: 75 years of tertiary journalism studies, *Australian Studies in Journalism*, no 5, pp. 256-264.
- MacLean, S. (2004) So you think you've got what it takes, *The Australian – Media*, November 18, pp. 18.
- Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, (2007)
<http://www.alliance.org.au/component/option,com_docman/Itemid,28/task,catt_view/gid,7/> Retrieved (Accessed: 4 June, 2007)
- Media Watch*, Tassie Fires Seem Far Away (2006), ABC TV, October 30,
<<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s1777010.htm>>, retrieved (Accessed 5 June 1007).
- O'Donnell, P. (2006) Journalism students and intergenerational change in journalism, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 28 no. 1, pp. 23 – 41.
- O'Donnell, P. (1999) The other 66 per cent? Rethinking the labour market for journalism graduates, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 21 no.2, pp. 27-55.
- Patching, R. (1997) Who teaches Journalism at Australia's Universities?, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 19 no. 2, pp. 31-43.
- Patching, R. (1996) 900 into 300 won't go: Are Australia's journalism courses producing too many graduates?, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 53-65.
- Pollard, R. (2006) Shortage of doctors to train interns, *Sydney Morning Herald*, September 27, p. 3.
- Ricketson, M. and Westerman, (2006) Damage Control, *The Age*,
<<http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/damage-control/2006/06/30/1151174400055.html>>, Retrieved, Accessed June 4, 2007.
- Salter, D. (2001) The trouble with journalism, *The Age*, October 6, p. 7.
- Schultz, J. (1998) *Reviving the Fourth Estate: Democracy, Accountability and the Media*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

Simons, M. (2007) Fairfax fails graduates and the industry, *Crikey*, <<http://www.crikey.com.au/Search.html?searchKeyWord=Fairfax+fails+graduates&Author=&YearFrom=0&MonthFrom=0&YearTo=0&MonthTo=0&Section=&SearchTags=&SortField=#simple>>, Retrieved, Accessed October 13, 2007.

Stuart, C. 1997, Any Course Can Wear a Journalism Label, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 44 -58.

Splichal, S. and Sparks, C. (1994) *Journalists for the 21st century: tendencies of professionalisation among first year students in 22 countries*, Ablex Publishing, Norwood.

Tabakoff, N. (2007) Packer's media cast-offs fear cuts, *The Australian*, June 5, p. 3.

White, S. (1996) *Reporting in Australia* (2nd ed), MacMillan Education, Melbourne.

Windschuttle, K. (1999) Journalism and the Western Tradition, *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 50 – 67.