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Uncovering the place of creative non-fiction in Australian journalism departments

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Abstract

This article reviews the results of a census of Australian tertiary journalism programs that sought to gauge opinions about creative non-fiction and its value within a journalism department. The census revealed the academy's support for creative non-fiction as a way to encourage innovations in print media, improve graduates' employability and the quality of journalism. The survey also exposed a number of concerns about creative non-fiction's inclusion in journalism education. These included creative non-fiction's use in industry, restraints on resources, and problems with students' capabilities.

Introduction

This article reports on a census of Australian tertiary journalism programs. The questionnaire asked the heads of journalism departments to assess various aspects of the teaching of traditional journalism and creative non-fiction in their departments. The survey was part of a larger study (Blair, 2007) that looked into the place of creative non-fiction in the tertiary journalism curriculum. The research aimed to discover the current place of creative non-fiction in journalism education and evaluate its future in a discipline that must constantly develop to keep up with the ever-changing face of modern media. The responses revealed not only what journalism students were being taught, but the opinions of senior academics on creative non-fiction and journalism education.

The term ‘creative non-fiction’ was chosen, rather than ‘narrative journalism’, ‘literary journalism’, or another moniker, as it was considered more inclusive than other terms. The ‘creative’ part of ‘creative non-fiction’ acknowledges the emphasis on creativity in the genre, its use of fiction writing techniques, and its links to art. The ‘non-fiction’ part of the term acknowledges that this is a genre of writing that is not fiction; instead it sticks to the facts in an attempt to tell the truth (Gutkind, 2000). Other terms, such as those which include the word ‘journalism’, tend to be inclusive only of journalistic publication styles – such as literary journalism and feature writing – but exclusive of other styles – such as the literary essay and memoir (Roorbach, 2001).

The study worked from the following definition of creative non-fiction:

Creative non-fiction is a genre of artistic writing which uses fiction writing techniques to tell true stories which engage readers. These techniques include the use of theme, action oriented scenes, dialogue, evocative description, character development, and the inclusion of the writer’s point of view. Writers of creative non-fiction strive to produce works of high quality which reach the emotional truth of the story and utilise creative structures. (Blair, 2007)

It also worked with a typology that distinguished between genre, techniques and publishing styles. This is represented in Figure 1.

Methodology

The journalism departments surveyed were chosen using a document provided by the Journalism Education Association which lists all university departments with practical journalism training (as opposed to general media degrees which may only touch on some of the theory of journalism). Twenty universities were surveyed via email, with a 100 percent response rate. While there were 20 universities surveyed, there were 22 respondents. The extra two respondents were necessary because the differences between the Gold Coast and Brisbane campuses of Griffith University and the undergraduate and postgraduate programs at the University of South Australia meant that they had to be surveyed individually.

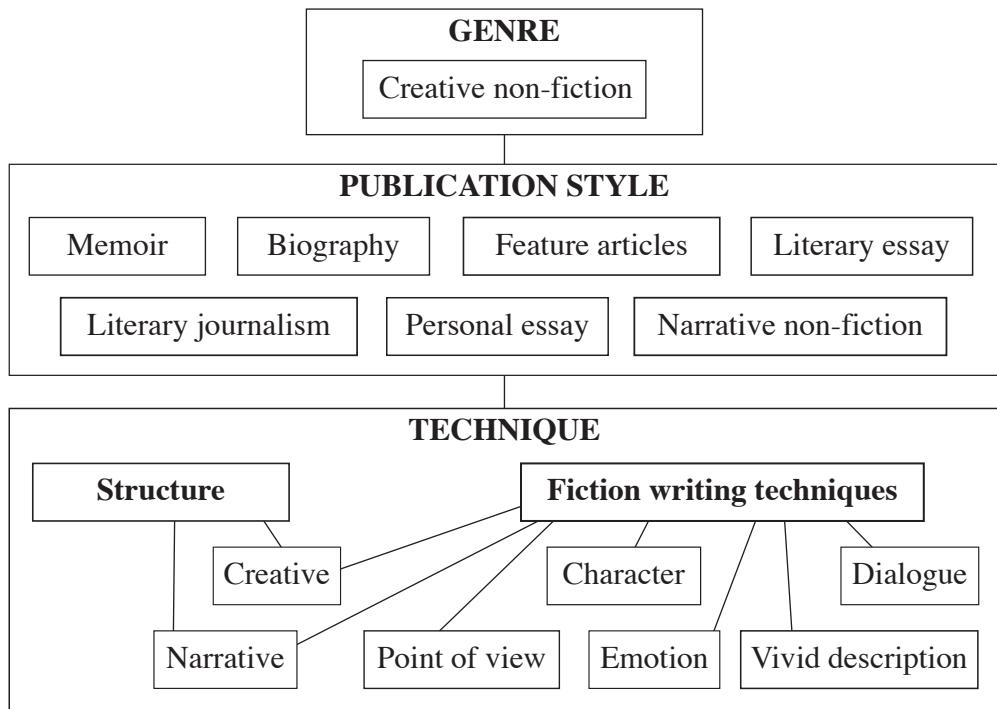
The questionnaire included both forced response and open-ended questions in which the heads of journalism departments (or their nominated representatives) were asked

to assess the place of creative non-fiction in their departments. It also asked for their opinions of creative non-fiction, its techniques and publishing styles.

No formal definition of creative non-fiction was provided to the respondents, as the researcher did not want to unduly influence their responses. However the survey distinguished between ‘traditional’ journalism writing techniques such as the inverted pyramid, news voice and hard news style, and the teaching of creative nonfiction techniques such as the use of action oriented scenes, dialogue, evocative description, characterisation, and point of view.

The following section summarises the key results while the second part of this paper discusses some of the qualitative elements of this survey.

Figure 1



Questionnaire results

Table one provides a context for the survey by reporting on what ‘traditional styles’ are currently taught in journalism schools. These styles were listed as ‘traditional’, as they would have been taught in journalism courses long before the term ‘creative non-fiction’ came into popular use in the 1990s (Blair, 2007).

Table 1

At your institution which of the following styles of 'traditional' journalism are taught for at least one hour per year?		
	Yes (n)	Yes (%)
Hard news writing	21	95.5
TV News writing	22	100
Radio writing	21	95.5
New media writing	22	100
Feature writing	21	95.5
Literary journalism	14	63.6
Other	8	36.4

The only two styles of writing in the list offered by all universities were television news writing and new media writing. However it is interesting to note that literary journalism is so widely taught. This indicates some level of openness to at least one of the styles of creative non-fiction.

This is further supported by Table 2 which reports on the creative non-fiction techniques taught by these departments. As can be seen, every creative non-fiction technique identified by the researcher was taught in at least 13 of the 22 schools.

Table 2

At your institution which of the following styles of 'traditional' journalism are taught for at least one hour per year?		
	Yes (n)	Yes (%)
Narrative structure	15	68.2
Characterisation	15	68.2
Literary language	14	63.6
Dialogue	13	59.1
Action oriented scenes	13	59.1
Evocative description	18	81.8
Use of writer's point of view	18	81.8
Theme	16	72.7
Other	5	22.7

Of the five respondents who ticked 'Other', four mentioned techniques that fall under the researcher's definition of creative non-fiction.

The researcher expected 'theme' to be one of the most selected areas, as it is an integral part of feature writing (a publishing style taught at all but one university). While 73 percent of departments taught theme, this was not the most widely taught technique. The use of evocative description and writer's point of view (both 82 percent) were the most selected options.

Although creative non-fiction techniques are widely taught, the spread of publication styles is more limited. Table 3 shows that all but one journalism department teaches feature articles and that literary journalism and narrative non-fiction are also widely

taught. However, other styles are not well represented in Australian journalism curricula.

Table 3

At your institution which of the following publication styles are offered as part of the journalism curriculum?	Yes (n)	Yes (%)
Literary journalism	15	68.2
Memoir	5	22.7
Biography	8	36.4
Literary essay	6	27.3
Narrative non-fiction	14	63.6
Feature articles	21	95.5
Other	2	9.1

The next two questions asked respondents to rank the importance of traditional writing techniques and creative non-fiction writing from one to 10 (where 10 is very important and one is not important at all).

The majority of respondents (21 out of 22) ranked traditional journalism techniques between eight and 10. These responses were expected as the styles listed under this heading (the inverted pyramid structure, paraphrasing for attribution, news voice etc) provide the foundation for tertiary journalism education. The responses for creative non-fiction techniques were much more varied.

Responses ranged from two to 10, with an average response of six. The averages show that most journalism department heads see traditional techniques (an average of nine) as more important than creative non-fiction (an average of six). This result was expected, however, what was not, was that six respondents out of 22 (27 percent) stated that creative non-fiction techniques were as, or even more, important than traditional techniques.

In spite of the somewhat ambivalent response to the ranking of creative non-fiction techniques, when asked if they thought it worthwhile for journalism students to learn creative non-fiction techniques all but two respondents answered 'yes'. Surprisingly when asked a similar question about the worth of learning creative non-fiction publishing styles the response was even higher with all but one respondent answering 'yes'.

The reasons why the respondents thought creative non-fiction publishing styles were worthwhile for journalism students were that the genre created a wide knowledge base for students and it was useful as an elective and as a postgraduate offering. The reasons why it was not thought to be worthwhile were because there is not enough room in the journalism curriculum and the genre is too confusing for students. The reasons given for the worth of teaching creative non-fiction techniques included the way the genre expands students' understanding of writing, improving journalism's quality, and the benefits of storytelling. The reasons why the techniques were not thought worthwhile were that they were taught by other departments and that the techniques were too ambitious for students.

Table 4 summarises the respondents' opinions of creative non-fiction. While this was a qualitative question, the responses were categorised by the researcher as either positive or negative opinions of creative non-fiction. The results were overwhelmingly positive with 82 percent categorised this way and only 18 percent categorised as negative.

Table 4

Respondents opinions of creative non-fiction		
	N	%
Negative	4	18.2
Positive	18	81.8

The positive responses included those respondents (11 out of 22) who stated it was a valuable genre and those who thought it was valuable, but only for advanced students/writers. Negative responses (four out of 22) showed some respondents were not interested in the genre, thought it was unappealing, pretentious, or could be confusing for students.

Qualitative results and key findings

Some of the survey's most interesting findings were discovered in the responses to the qualitative questions. Here respondents voiced positive and negative views of creative non-fiction and of journalism students, examined the problems of time, resources and additions to the curriculum, and the viability of creative non-fiction in the workplace.

1. The popularity of certain publication styles

The survey confirmed what the researcher had suspected about the popularity of creative non-fiction publication styles – that among academics the feature article is the most popular style and that memoir is the least popular.

The reasons behind the popularity of feature articles (95 percent of respondents answered this style was taught in their program) are clear. This publication style has long been accepted by the journalism community and its place in every daily newspaper cements features as a popular style. Features are also seen as viable for students to learn as they have the opportunity to sell them, or write them in a staff position, early in their careers, particularly if they work for a magazine.

The next most selected style was literary journalism (68 percent). This result could be explained because of the style's extensive history, its popularity (particularly during many of the respondents' youth in the 1960's and '70's) and acceptance in the journalism world. The term uses the word 'journalism' and is found in many popular journalism text books (for example Conley 1997; Ricketson 2004; Garrison 2004). The reason for the relative popularity of narrative non-fiction (64 percent) may be its nature as an expansive style: as long as a piece is written as a 'story' and is non-fiction, it falls under this term.

Unsurprisingly, the more literary and controversial styles of memoir (23 percent), literary essay (27 percent), and biography (36 percent) were significantly less popular than the other styles. The least popular of all – memoir – has also received the most criticism for being prone to bending the truth (Freedman, 2006, p. 50).

Memoir's poor reputation stems from some notably fraudulent books, such as *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey (famous for being praised then reviled by Oprah Winfrey) and Vivian Gornick's *Fierce Attachments* which she revealed contained fictional scenes (Freedman, 2006, pp. 50-51). While some authors think there is some grey area in memoir, the prevailing theory amongst creative non-fiction academics, many eminent authors, and (judging by the uproar surrounding Frey's deception) the public, is that if composite characters are created, or scenes are made up, it is no longer memoir, it is fiction (Brien, 2004; Forche & Gerard, 2001; Skloot, 2004). Readers will accept the failings of memory, but not outright fabrication.

2. Students' capabilities

There would be few academics or writers of creative non-fiction who would say that it is a simple genre to master. Creative non-fiction's techniques are advanced and (as James Frey found out) the genre expects a high level of journalistic ethics. However statements by some academics in this survey that the genre is completely beyond the reach of journalism students are surprising. Their views were that students are:

- Unable to understand that they must be as truthful with creative non-fiction as they are with inverted pyramid stories.
- Incapable of understanding the difference between creative non-fiction and hard news.
- Not competent enough to use the techniques of creative non-fiction to produce the publishing styles of the genre.

One respondent's comments were fairly representative of this group:

Most students have considerable difficulty in mastering traditional news writing techniques. Adding creative non-fiction techniques is generally confusing for many students, and reduces their ability to master traditional techniques.

However the researcher's experience with teaching creative non-fiction is that students are not confused by creative non-fiction techniques. They are certainly challenged by the genre, but they are able to decide when to use the inverted pyramid and a traditional news voice, and when the writer's point of view and theme-based structure is more appropriate. They also understand that if they are writing any sort of non-fiction — whether its hard news or a narrative story of their grandmother's journey to Australia — they make nothing up.

The views of these respondents clearly diverge from their colleagues from other departments such as creative writing, English, and film and television, who ask their students to write complex short stories, poetry, short films and even feature films and documentaries. All these forms use many of the same techniques as creative non-fiction, such as narrative structure, characterisation, literary language, dialogue, action oriented scenes and theme. The academics in creative writing and film and

television departments expect their undergraduate students to learn, practice and use these techniques to produce the publication styles of their respective genres. These students are also expected to know the difference between poetry and novels, or literary essays and short stories, or romance and horror, or documentary and short films, or feature films and video clips etc. These departments also ask their students to understand and incorporate the differences between fiction and non-fiction styles in their work.

3. The pressure of time

In reply to a variety of questions, the respondents explained that there was a lack of time to teach the traditional range of skills to journalism students, and that creative non-fiction was a burden not all universities could afford to carry.

One respondent explained the limited constraints of a standard bachelor degree this way:

It is challenging enough to adequately cover the essentials of traditional journalism in a three-year undergrad degree (or less for post-grad students). Adding creative non-fiction would put pressure on other areas of the curriculum, and create potential for confusion among students.

Another respondent spoke directly to the demands on time in university courses. When asked if it was worthwhile introducing a single subject devoted to creative non-fiction writing techniques into the journalism curriculum he stated that it was not possible to add additional techniques into units taught by his department as they were too busy covering and practising what he described as the traditional “more commonly published” and broadcast forms of journalism. He explained that adding creative non-fiction techniques to these units would cause complexity, distraction and over-work for the other courses and it would not do the techniques justice:

Lit journalism needs time to explore and BREAK boundaries, rather than the exacting discipline of keeping within them (as per news writing, for instance).

While it is clear from his comments that this respondent appreciates the style of literary journalism, it is also evident that he can find no room for it in his current offerings. Instead, he has asked for a separate subject so the time necessary to examine all its techniques can be devoted to it.

Another respondent also spoke to the time constraints suffered by some universities, opting for a single subject for creative non-fiction:

Obviously the option you suggest is worthwhile, however Australian universities are operating within constraints of numbers of students and teaching resources. For some it may be more appropriate to contain within another subject or make it an individual project choice.

She explained the issue, however, with the clarification that at her institution she expects students interested in creative non-fiction techniques to take electives from the writing and cultural studies degree or from the ideas and concepts in the journalism feature writing subject. Another respondent made similar suggestions of

coupling creative non-fiction with feature writing or proposing that students take classes from the writing major, as a way to deal with time constraints.

This concern about time is often related to a lack of resources: if a department had more money it could employ more staff who would then have more time to teach a wider variety of subjects. As the interest in creative non-fiction is increasing it would be worth ascertaining if subjects in the genre could be money spinners for journalism departments, aiding in the curriculum limitations so many universities clearly experience. Perhaps this is a topic worth further research.

4. Which department should teach creative non-fiction?

One of the core issues surrounding the teaching of creative non-fiction is where the genre fits in universities. For some universities, to the chagrin of many creative non-fiction professionals, the genre is taught in creative writing or English departments rather than in the journalism curriculum (Gutkind, 2004, p. 1).

According to five respondents, creative non-fiction techniques have almost no place in a journalism department – instead it should be left to creative writing departments. As one respondent noted:

Writing, which includes the creative elements, can be taken as the other major or minor. It is offered in a different faculty as part of the English dept., which has a good (creative) writing program. However, we have no objection to the mix and match. Quite a number of students chose to do it. This is why we are concentrating in our courses on what you call traditional journalism. The other ways of writing are covered elsewhere... I think it sits comfortably in the writing program (which is a good one — has produced already one Vogel prize winner).

In a previous answer, this respondent had said that the genre's publication styles widened journalism students' skill base, so this response was a little unexpected. Perhaps this respondent appreciates that creative non-fiction opens a wider number of career doors for journalism students but these options should be at the students' request, rather than as core requirements. What is clear though, is that the respondent did not believe it was the journalism department's role to provide these options for students. Instead they could be provided by other departments.

Other respondent comments included:

We aim to produce journalists not writers in a general sense.

It may properly belong in a creative writing course, rather than journalist.

I do not think that they are yet essential to our journalism students and those who are so inclined are able to teach these as electives within our creative writing courses.

Though few of the responses can be categorised as negative opinions of creative non-fiction, they do represent a feeling in the academic community that creative non-fiction is not journalism. At the time of the survey there were no journalism departments in the USA that housed creative non-fiction (Gutkind, 2004), and the

only Australian journalism department that has a subject with creative non-fiction in its name is Bond University. However, while five respondents indicated creative non-fiction did not have a place in journalism education, there was more than double that number that directly referred to creative non-fiction as journalism (a result discussed below).

5. Importance of storytelling

In reply to a number of questions, and on a number of topics, six respondents referred to the changing face of journalism and the changing interests of readers. To this end the journalism department's role in teaching students the importance of storytelling was raised.

The issue of storytelling was broached by one respondent who stated that,

Journalism needs to be about telling stories, and using whatever techniques are appropriate.

Another respondent raised the matter of reader enjoyment:

Because it is all part of telling stories... any literary devices should be used to encourage people to read... and to enjoy the activity.

This was reiterated by another respondent who wrote:

One of the fundamental tenets of journalism has always been entertainment. Increasingly this is being pushed to the fore. I believe that creative non-fiction techniques will be important if future generations of journalists, particularly those working in the print media, hope to compete with their electronic counterparts.

These responses present a different view of journalism and contrast with the more traditional view that journalism should be taught through the hard news approach and creativity is best left to creative writing departments.

6. Industry requirements: no need for creative non-fiction

For any discipline that seeks to produce job-ready graduates, industry-relevant education is vitally important. Journalism academics have long argued over the balance between theory and practice in the curriculum and now, it seems, over the usefulness of creative non-fiction for journalism students (Herbert, 1997, p. 12).

Eight respondents raised the fear that creative non-fiction would not aid students in their careers. This is in direct opposition to the 10 respondents reviewed in the section below who discussed the increasing opportunities presented by the genre's techniques and publication styles.

Two respondents had previously voiced their problems with creative non-fiction because of the constraints of the university setting, but the survey also revealed that they doubted the practicality of the genre's techniques. One stated: "... most students are seeking employment in mainstream journalism, where the techniques of creative

non-fiction are not widely used.” The other agreed: “Given that there is minimal employment demand for students able to use creative non-fiction writing techniques, and given that most students want employment in journalism, it is logical to focus on traditional techniques.”

Another respondent went further questioning the genre’s ability to be accepted in mainstream newspapers: “A lot of creative non-fiction is unpublishable and self-indulgent, attributes that would not be tolerated in most newsrooms.” While another respondent explained that at his university the course was focused on preparing students for the workforce, rather than training them in more theoretical or experimental aspects of journalism, “Because this is what the industry tells us they want their journalism graduates to have. They are less interested in literary journalism because they claim that style is left to more experienced journalists.”

7. Industry requirements: increasing need for creative non-fiction

In spite of these concerns expressed by one group of journalism educators a number of their colleagues expressed a great deal of enthusiasm for the opportunities creative non-fiction offers graduates. Six respondents spoke directly to these prospects

One respondent stated that while traditional journalism skills are vital “... there is much more interpretative reporting today.” He also explained the financial opportunities of creative non-fiction techniques “... as, firstly, devices for use in their other writing and, secondly, means of writing and income in their own right.”

Another respondent summed up this attitude well:

I believe journalists need a grounding in traditional journalism techniques and in the first phase of their studies the focus should be on developing these skills. However, given the changing nature of journalism, and particular the tendency towards larger magazine and feature sections, journalism students should also be able to experiment with creative non-fiction.

One of his colleagues went on to point out that creative non-fiction provides a bridge between traditional and future demands of journalism. This idea is also raised in the literature, where the future of the newspaper is suggested to be tied to a reinvigoration of storytelling (Cunningham, 2003, p. 8).

One respondent went further than the rest of the respondents stating creative non-fiction is more important than traditional journalism techniques. He asserted this was due to a shift towards more creative styles in the media, though not necessarily literary ones:

Traditional techniques are no longer attractive to audiences. Writing is no longer the major form of journalism. We need to recognise the visual nature of journalism; the various ways of constructing stories which do not involve writing, and to position ourselves for the future where all these trends will be even more evident.

These responses (and others like them) are encouraging for the future of creative non-fiction. More respondents back the industry viability of the genre than were

concerned that it is not work-place relevant, and those who were positive about creative non-fiction also tied its relevance into the changing trends in readership. It seems for these respondents, that creative non-fiction is not a risky radical style, but instead it is a mainstream, if not advanced, choice for students.

8. Creative non-fiction as a form of journalism

While there are many different points of view when it comes to the way creative non-fiction should be taught, it is also clear that a number of respondents see creative non-fiction as a form of journalism.

In response to a question about issues of ethics and the truth 12 respondents (55 percent) explained their responses as if creative non-fiction and journalism belonged to the same genre of writing. One respondent referred to both genres as non-fiction, but more encouragingly for the future of creative non-fiction in journalism education, 10 respondents (46 percent) referred to both genres as journalism.

One respondent who was not an emphatic supporter of creative non-fiction categorised creative non-fiction as both a “style of journalism” and a “genre of journalism” in response to two questions. Another respondent called creative non-fiction, “a difficult form of journalism to pull off well” while a colleague stated that creative non-fiction “has a place in the broad spectrum of journalistic writing.”

The respondents listed above, and others who called creative non-fiction journalism, disagreed on many of the issues surrounding creative non-fiction and the differences between it and traditional journalism. For example while one lauded the new opportunities for journalism graduates in the ever-growing world of creative non-fiction, another stated there were few employment opportunities for students versed in the genre. Yet despite these enormous differences, it is interesting that they see creative non-fiction as a form of journalism (even if they’re not all sure it is as important a form as hard news). It is also worth noting that none of these respondents stated that creative non-fiction should be taught by another department reinforcing their position on the close relationship between creative non-fiction and journalism.

Conclusion

Journalism has always adapted to keep up with changes in society and in technology. Journalism education has followed suit. Universities today offer a wide range of courses in computer assisted reporting, multimedia reporting, and other ‘new’ media opportunities. What the survey has shown is that the importance of quality writing has not been forgotten.

Australian universities are offering teaching in a wide range of creative non-fiction techniques and publication styles and, it seems, if funding increases or the interest in creative non-fiction rises, departments may find they are given the resources they need to expand teaching in this area.

In the USA, where many of our media and educational trends begin, there is a movement to develop creative non-fiction – to include narrative in the newspaper. It is hoped this injection of creative prose will reinvigorate, if not save, newspaper

sales. One small example of this move is an initiative by the Associated Press. In 2005 the AP announced a new service for its subscribers – an optional lead. While, in the past, subscribers were offered only a “straight” lead – a traditional 4 Ws and H style – for each story, they now have a choice. As AP Managing Editor Mike Silverman explained: “The other will be the optional, an alternative approach that attempts to draw in the reader through imagery, narrative devices, perspective or other creative means,” (2005). In other words, the AP now offers a small piece of creative non-fiction to their subscriber newspapers.

Perhaps Australian media will follow these trends and as the call for graduates who can write creatively increases so will our need to teach these skills. Outlets other than traditional hard news media must also be considered. Australians are the world’s most passionate magazine buyers and with titles like *The Monthly*, *Vogue*, *Marie Claire* and *FHM* regularly featuring creative non-fiction it is clear there is work to be had (Circulation, 2005).

In the book world non-fiction titles now outsell fiction. In Australia in the 2002-3 year 24 million non-fiction books were sold while only 10.6 million fiction titles left the shelves; that’s a difference of 13.4 million. In 2003-4 the gap had increased to 19.2 million copies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003, 2004, 2005). While not all undergraduates will be leaving university to write and publish their first memoir, teaching students the skills they need to write a book offers them this opportunity and it is one that many students are interested in taking up.

It seems academics, and the universities which fund them, need to have faith in journalism students, in their abilities and in their impact on the future of the news media. They are the next generation of journalists, of writers of books, magazine articles, and newspaper and online stories. We owe it to them to make sure they are as equipped as they can be for the changing world they enter.

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