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# Australian Journalists' Views On Professional Associations

*Since the amalgamation of the Australian Journalists Association (AJA) with the actors', entertainers' and artists' unions to form the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) in 1992, the professional concerns of journalists have arguably lost their focus to some extent. To date, there have been no indications of the views of journalists in general on the professional association concept. This article presents preliminary findings on a survey of Australian journalists' opinions on selected professional issues.*

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One of the stumbling blocks for the development of journalism as a profession in Australia is the absence of a broadly-based professional association focused on journalism and comprising all who identify with that occupational label.

This has resulted from the industrial division in journalism between union members and non-members. The journalists' union represents rank and file journalists who organise in pursuit of improved pay and conditions; senior members of the occupation in managerial roles normally shed their membership when promoted to executive or middle-management positions.

Yet the union has traditionally been the body which has promoted professional issues. Formed in 1910 as the Australian Journalists' Association, the union is custodian of the profession's code of ethics, has been an advocate of professional education, encourages recognition of journalism through the Walkley Awards, was a key influence on establishment of the Australian Press Council, and is an active participant in the development of national media policy through submissions to parliamentary and other inquiries.

As the AJA's historian, Clem Lloyd, has pointed out, development of a professional role has been more a feature of the latter part of the union's history, and has been well received: "In

recent years, the blending of industrial and professional issues has improved the stature and status of the union in the eyes of its members without removing altogether the traditional antipathies and denigrations." (Lloyd, 1985:300)

The primary function of the AJA as a union has, however, conflicted with its role as a professional association. Exclusion of executive journalists from membership has meant that the association has both been deprived of the talents of, and has been less able to influence, such key newsroom decision makers as editors-in-chief and editors, news editors and chiefs-of-staff. The AJA's credentials as a professional association for journalists have also been somewhat muddled by the broadening of its membership base to include public relations practitioners and other communicators who are not journalists as normally defined.

This confusion of roles was exacerbated by the AJA's decision in 1992 to merge with actors', entertainers' and artists' unions to form the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. Although an AJA section continues within the super-union, the professional concerns of journalists have arguably lost their focus to some extent as a result of this amalgamation.

Writers on professionalism in journalism have pointed out that the formation of professional associations is, together with establishment of codes of ethics, achievement of autonomy and the development of specialist education, a mark of the evolution of an occupation into a profession (Johnstone, et.al., 1976; Henningham, 1990; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1991). Membership of professional associations, together with readership of specialist journals, can be used as indicators of professional orientation on the part of individual journalists (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1991).

Elsewhere (Henningham, 1989, 1992) I have argued the case for the development of professional associations in Australian journalism which cross the management-union divide. To date, however, there have been no indications of the views of journalists in general on the professional association concept. This article presents some preliminary findings on the issue, by analysing the results of a survey research into journalists' opinions on selected professional issues.

Questions on professional associations were included in a national survey of journalists conducted by the author in 1994. Telephone calls were made to 200 randomly selected journalists

## Methodology

working in print and broadcast news organisations throughout Australia. Interviews were completed with 173 journalists, a response rate of 85 percent.

The key question on associations to which journalists were asked to respond was: "Do you think there is a need in Australia for a professional association of journalists which includes rank and file journalists as well as editors and other executives?" Journalists were also asked to give their evaluation of the MEAA. They were also asked to respond to the phenomenon of very low public ratings of journalists' ethics and honesty.

## Results

Journalists overwhelmingly support the concept of an all-embracing professional association. Of those interviewed, 70.5 percent said "Yes" to the suggestion, compared with 27.7 percent who said "No". Only 1.7 percent said "Don't know".

Majority support for a professional association is found among most demographic and other sub-groups, but with differing levels of commitment. (Please note that in the cross-tabulations to be examined, cell sizes are often quite small. Results are indicative only, and differences are generally not statistically significant at the .05 level. Note also that in calculation of percentages, the small number of "Don't know" responses have been excluded).

The responses of newspaper editors/broadcast news directors, reporters, feature writers and producers (TV or radio) are similar to those of the whole sample (Table 1). Somewhat deviant are sub-editors, who are particularly in favour of professional associations; chiefs of staff and section editors, who are split 50-50; and chief sub-editors/back-bench staff, who are against.

Too much may be made of this, as the samples for some of the latter groups are quite small. However, there is some indication of lack of interest in the professional association concept on the part of some middle-management journalists in the print media. Particularly interesting is the strong commitment on the part of sub-editors, which may reflect particularly difficulties faced by those engaged in the processing of news, particularly in an environment of rapidly developing technology.

The type of organisation for which a journalist works was an important factor related to interest in professional associations (Table 2). Only 25 percent of national daily journalists support

associations (of a small sub-sample), while the figure for metropolitan daily journalists is 63 percent. Support runs at 77 percent among Sunday newspaper journalists, and 78 percent among regional daily journalists. Among commercial broadcast journalists sampled (radio and television, metropolitan and regional), 92 percent support establishment of a professional association. Support is also very strong among journalists employed by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), of whom 82 percent favour an association.

**Table 1: Percentage of journalists within job categories who support a professional association**

	%
Reporter (n=86)	68.6
Sub-editor (n=31)	87.1
Feature writer (n=10)	70.0
Producer (n=14)	78.6
Chief-of-staff (n=4)	50.0
Chief sub (n=6)	33.3
Section editor (n=10)	50.0
Editor/News director (n=12)	75.0

**Table 2: Percentage of journalists within different media who support a professional association**

	%
National dailies (n=12)	25
Metropolitan dailies (n=46)	63
Sunday newspapers (n=13)	77
Regional dailies (n=37)	78
Commercial radio/TV (n=26)	92
Aust B'casting Corp (n=27)	82

A similar pattern emerges when ownership type is considered as a variable (Table 3 next page). Of journalists employed by the major newspaper proprietors, support for a professional association is lower than average – 49 percent in the case of Fairfax journalists (*The Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Australian Financial Review*), and 63 percent in the case of Murdoch

journalists (*The Australian, Daily Telegraph Mirror, Herald Sun, Courier-Mail and Advertiser*). By contrast 91 percent of journalists employed by Australian Provincial Newspapers favour an association, as do 88 percent of those working for other newspapers (mainly non-metropolitan), and 83 percent of those with public broadcasting organisations (*ABC and the multicultural Special Broadcasting Service*).

These findings are evidence of a greater need for a professional organisation among non-metropolitan and broadcast journalists, perhaps indicating that the journalists' union's greatest strength has traditionally been among the ranks of metropolitan newspaper journalists.

**Table 3: Percentage of journalists within ownership groups who support a professional assoc.**

	%
News Limited (Murdoch) (n=43)	63
John Fairfax Ltd (Black) (n=33)	49
Publishing & Broadcasting Ltd (Packer) (n=6)	50
Aust Provincial Newspapers (O'Reilly) (n=11)	91
ABC/SBS (public broadcasting) (n=29)	83
Other (n=48)	88

Women journalists surveyed (78%) are rather more in favour of a professional association than are men (70%), a difference which holds for most age groups. Women's greater support for the concept may be related to perceptions of powerlessness within newsrooms, or else to a stronger commitment to community-based methods of advancing professional aims. It has been found that women are conscious of special hurdles facing them in newsrooms, and are more likely than men to report prejudice (Henningham, 1996). The greater desire for associations may also be related to the stronger ethical commitment expressed by women journalists (Henningham, 1996).

A relationship was found with political leaning (Table 4). Those most in support of an association are those who describe

their leanings as middle of the road. Least interested are those who say their views are left of centre. Similarly, Liberal or National Party voters favour an association more than do Labor voters. This may be related to greater affiliation with union-based models of association on the part of Labor voters.

Similarly, it was found that journalists who believe that the current union is doing a good job are less in favour of a professional association (63%) than are those who feel the union is doing a medium (71%) or a poor job (75%). Non-members of the union are more in favour of a new association (83%) than are members (71%).

In the case of a number of important occupational variables,

Table 4: Percentage of journalists of different political leanings who support a professional assoc.	
	%
Left-leaning (n=73)	63
Middle-of-the-road (n=58)	79
Right-leaning (n=30)	73
Vote Labor (n=72)	65
Vote Liberal or National (n=52)	81

no relationships of any note were found with views on professional associations. Thus, age, socio-economic status, salary, education level and job satisfaction were unrelated to whether journalists supported or opposed establishment of an association.

Those who see "profession" as the most appropriate label for journalism (as opposed to "craft" or "trade") are more likely to support a professional association.

Although job satisfaction is unrelated, perceived level of stress is linked to the association question. Those who experience high stress levels in journalism are far more likely (80%) to support an association than are other journalists.

Education itself is not a related variable, but differences were found with journalists' views on desirable levels of education for future recruits to the occupation. Of those who feel journalists should have a degree, 76 percent support a professional association, compared with 66 percent of those who do not feel journalists should have a degree. Of those who feel recruits should have a degree in journalism, 82 percent support a professional association, compared with 69 percent of others.

The link with journalism education is also shown in terms of responses to the question as to how good a job is being done by university education in journalism. Of those who believe universities are doing a poor job in teaching journalism, 60.5 percent support a professional education. By contrast, 80 percent of those who believe universities are doing a medium job, and 78 percent of those who believe universities are doing a good job, support establishment of a professional association.

These findings have important implications for educators, in that they suggest that those who value professional education are more likely to value professional associations. It is important to point out that this is not the same as saying that those with degrees are more in favour of associations: in fact, level of education was not a variable of any significance. Graduates are no more inclined towards associations than non-graduates. But those with a positive attitude towards tertiary education in journalism (with all its faults) are more in favour of the value of associations. A cynic may suggest that these are the more idealistic or even naive of journalists -- but it is surely those who have hope for the future will be those whom journalism will depend on.

An important predictor of journalists' attitudes on this question was their level of concern about community views of journalism. The journalists were questioned about the low ratings regularly given to journalism as an occupation by the public when asked to rate a variety of professions and other occupations. Typically, only 7 to 8 percent of people interviewed consider that journalism has high standards of ethics or honesty (*Bulletin*, 30 Apr, 1996:38). Asked whether they were concerned at the public's perception of their occupation, 65 percent of journalists said yes, while 35 percent said "No".

Of those who are concerned at the public's impressions, 81 percent are in favour of a professional association, compared with 56 percent of those who are not concerned about the opinion poll

## Conclusion

The results suggest the need for consideration of professional associations in Australian journalism. Clearly there is much dissatisfaction with the status quo: despite the professional roles undertaken by the journalists' union, it is obvious that many journalists feel that a union-based structure is not in itself adequate to function as a professional association in journalism.

Most journalists support the concept of a broadly based professional association for journalists. This support is found



**Table 5: Percentage of journalists who support a prof. assoc. by various attributes**

	%
Males (n=123)	70
Females (n=46)	78
Concerned at low ratings of journalism (n=109)	81
Not concerned at low ratings of journalism (n=61)	56
Journalism seen as a:	
• profession (n=101)	77
• trade (n=10)	50
• craft (n=49)	65
Practise a religion (n=43)	81
Don't practise a religion (n=127)	69
Stress levels low (n=9)	64
Stress levels medium (n=41)	66
Stress levels high (n=75)	69
Stress levels very high (n=45)	80
Press freedom is low (n=10)	90
Press freedom is medium (n=72)	76
Press freedom is high (n=84)	65

among journalists of different age groups and of different socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Journalists in broadcast media and in provincial newspapers are particularly in favour of a professional association. Support is also found among those concerned at the news media's low image among the public, or worried about press freedom. Those who believe in professional education in journalism are among those who strongly support a professional association.

As indicated, the imperatives of developing a professional association or associations open to journalists at all levels are quite clear. Such an association could help in the development of

professional orientations in Australian journalism, and could help to unify union and non-union journalists by fostering professional aspects of their occupation.

The findings of this study reinforce the view that Australian journalists in general favour the establishment of professional associations. It is time for further discussion and research on this question to be undertaken.

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