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# Editorial: Back to basics in journalism education amid the techno hype

Eric Loo

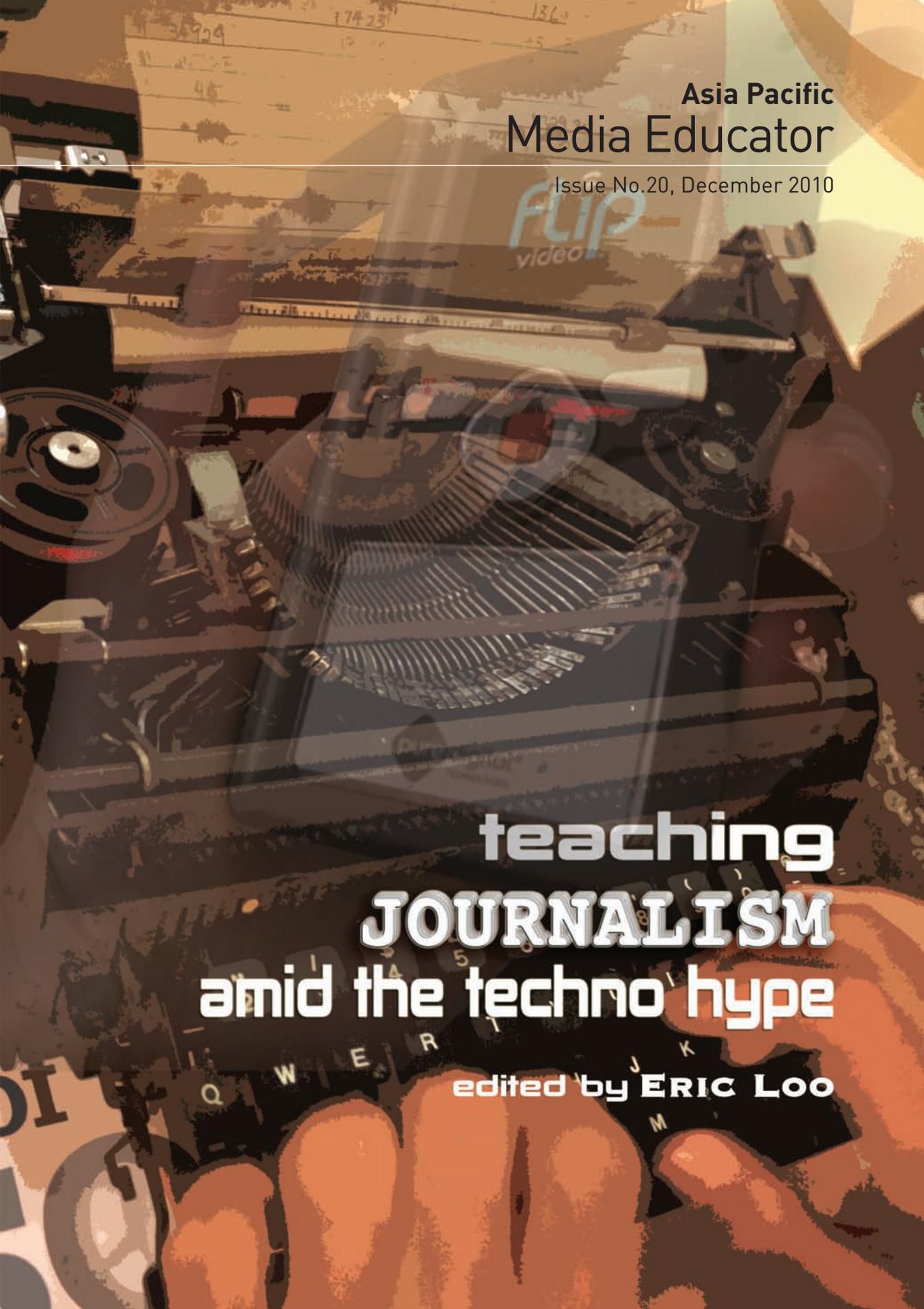
*University of Wollongong*, [eloo@uow.edu.au](mailto:eloo@uow.edu.au)

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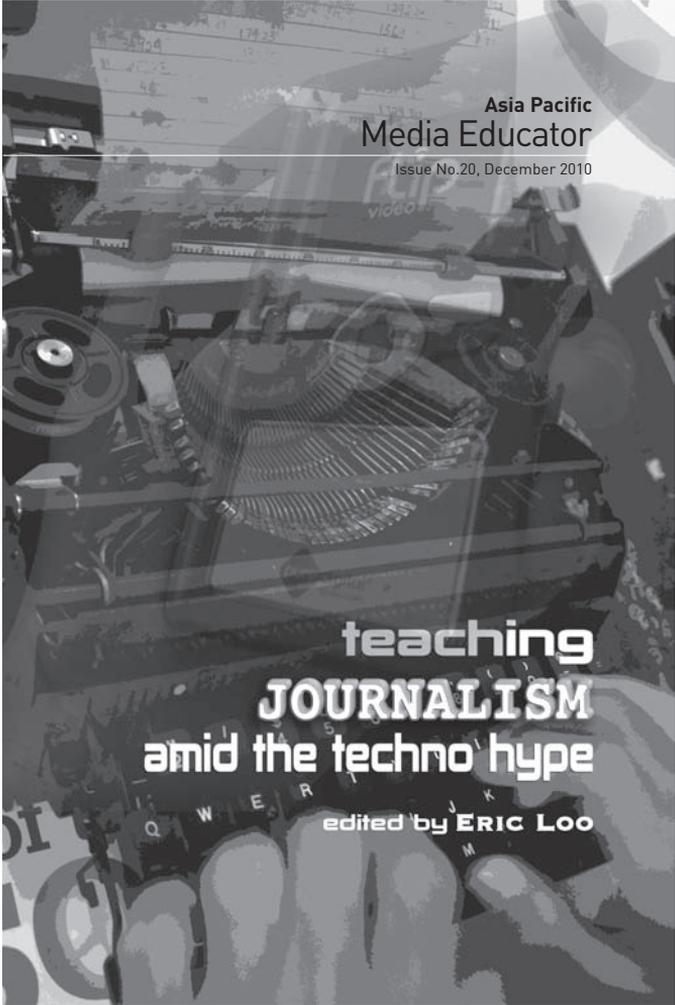


Asia Pacific  
Media Educator

Issue No.20, December 2010

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**JOURNALISM**  
amid the techno hype

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# Asia Pacific Media Educator

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**Asia Pacific Media Educator** (APME) is a refereed journal published annually by the School of Journalism & Creative Writing, University of Wollongong, Australia. It aims to bridge the gap between media educators and practitioners by publishing their informed analyses of media practices and innovations in media education and training. It will consider for publication original papers based on applied research that generates critical questions and examines research issues through a comparative framework. Papers should aim to challenge the conventions in journalism education and training, and provide practical ideas on improving the standards and currency of media reporting, training and instruction. We welcome articles on academic and non-academic topics, written in clear, accessible and succinct language. The deadline for email submission of articles to the APME is end of June.

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**Editor:** Eric Loo, School of Journalism & Creative Writing, University of Wollongong, Australia.

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**Editorial Office:** School of Journalism & Creative Writing, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia

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## Editorial

# Back to basics in journalism education amid the techno hype

Dominating the discourse among journalism educators in the early '90s was how the internet would 'revolutionise' journalism practices, how newspapers would see its end days with readers turning to online news sites, and thus, the need to revamp traditional journalism curriculum and focus on 'new media technologies'. Today, however, the smell and feel of newsprint is as pervasive as it was in 1991 during the days of the Netscape beta and HTML markups. Which reminds me of a remark by John C. Merrill, professor emeritus at the Missouri School of Journalism, at the AEJMC panel discussion I attended in Boston on August 8, 2009. With more than 60 years of writing about journalism, and teaching it, he said: "Twitter, new media etc – are they over-rated? So what? Journalism educators need to be mindful of the values that come with good journalism – investigate, public service, build communities, values, story-telling. What we hear today is change, change, change (in relation to new media). Maybe what we have now (traditional media) is good enough, just focus on making it better."

Likewise, Melvin Mencher, author of *News Reporting and Writing*, said in a phone interview with Tony Rogers (12 Sept 2010, *About.com: Journalism*): "How you can have a curriculum that's limited to 30 hours and stuff it with things like how to make a video and or create a blog? What the hell does that have to do with the basics of reporting?... It's now reached a point of no return where the technology is taking over the curriculum, with disastrous effects ... students are no longer going to be educated in the basic function of journalism."

Indeed. Is journalism education being too carried away by exuberant interest for the latest digital device, its varied applications for breaking news in real-time, and emphasis on digital media production skills? Are journalism schools in fact graduating web technologists, news bloggers, news site designers, desktop publishers and videographers instead of street-smart conscientious journalists? Is the emphasis on training students how to produce and package multimedia products compromising the imperatives of educating students to be more reflective, investigative, ethical and community-oriented story tellers? To what extent have journalism curricula being diluted to adapt to the new student demographics – students who are reading less but more attuned to animated visuals, Facebook, Twitter and hypertexts? How have journalism teaching methodologies and contents changed when students – being digital natives – are unthinkingly relying on the internet for 'news' and 'information'?

These questions come to mind each time I listen to conference speakers deliver on the 'latest innovations' in digital communication gadgetries, and how, as recent conference themes go, 'new technologies' have 'transformed' journalism practices and restructured the newsroom. Platitudes, portmanteaus and imaginative descriptors of journalism – from 'mojo', 'vimeos', 'weblogs', 'backpack' and 'hyperlocal' to 'crowd-sourcing',

‘collaborative’, ‘convergent’ and the oxymoronic ‘cinematic journalism’ – are liberally coined to associate with the latest in ‘convergent journalism’.

How best practices of journalism could be sustained or significantly improved by the application of digital communication technologies is incidentally overlooked amid the technology hype. Consequently, groundbreaking journalism that investigates, deliberates, justifies and enlightens is often confused with creative online content packaging and dramatic multimedia presentation.

Is ‘convergent journalism’ being taught in journalism schools degenerating into “the lowest form of popular culture” (Carl Bernstein, 1992)? As quoted in *The Guardian* (London, June 3, 1992) Bernstein, who, with Bob Woodward exposed the Watergate scandal in Washington DC that led to the resignation of the Republican President Richard Nixon in 1974 – and that without the benefit of the internet – said: “The lowest form of popular culture -- lack of information, misinformation, disinformation, and a contempt for the truth or the reality of most people’s lives -- has overrun real journalism. Today, ordinary Americans are being stuffed with garbage.”

True, the internet has certainly been a gift to journalism educators, students, journalists and the wider community. We are certainly freer to engage, confront and challenge anyone and any establishments anytime and anywhere via ‘new media’ tools and delivery platforms. But, overly emphasising on digital technologies and tagging traditional journalism subjects with the ‘convergent’ label to show the curriculum is on track with current trends – are we losing sight of the fundamental function of journalism education? Which is to educate students to become journalists of conscience and integrity, to be responsive and passionate about exposing the disparities, poor governance, political patronage and the many layers of injustices and corruption in their respective communities. This is a prosaic observation, clichéd even. My point is good journalism should not be confused with multimedia delivery, website design, podcasting, blogging and packaging stories.

Journalism educators must draw the line when digital gadgetries, digital technologies and multimedia production lead to creative licentiousness, such as the cringing notion of ‘cinematic journalism’ where, for example, the coverage of the US Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan, can easily be turned, even by amateur videographers, into a filmic representation of tours of duty with the nuances coloured by dramatic grabs, background music and Hollywood-style baritone voiceovers. Apart from teaching about technology and training in production skills, students must be educated in how to tell stories truthfully, research, fact-check, engage with primary sources and represent actualities the best way they can, and to factualise what they hear, see and feel.

The fact is much of what journalists do today – apart from using digital devices in the field to gather, record and source – are what award-winning journalists did in the past. Students must be driven to pound the pavement, do the street work, knock on doors to find things out, face their sources, reflect on how they come to know about issues and events, show and tell about them. With students today, particularly in affluent societies, growing up in a visual culture with rather short attention span, whose preferred choice of major is in lifestyle, sports and arts journalism, the passion for investigating and reporting for the people, the critical sense of social justice and representing the interests of the ‘silent majority’ is more a rarity than commonplace.

What are we teaching journalism students when the lines between fiction and non-fiction writing, 'professional writing' and journalism, documentary and drama, news and narratives are becoming increasingly blurred. APME attempts to address this key question: How can we best apply 'new digital communication technologies' – not as an end in itself but as a means – towards developing best practices in journalism – such as in the days of 'old' analogue media? As Padma Iyer, weekend professional editor of the national daily, *The Australian*, notes in his commentary for this issue:

Classroom exercises, group discussions, simulated newsroom practices, production of a student newspaper or website – these are useful steps that contribute to the task of embedding skills. But journalism education needs to go beyond the ability to create content. Interviewing, background research, writing and editing are activities that need to be practised. They can be perfected until the student-originated content gains instant publishability. But these activities do not constitute the core of education. These are the very skills that journalism trainees pick up from the newsroom merely by being there. The industry can justifiably claim to be able to impart these skills within a few weeks to anyone who has not had the privilege of undergoing a journalism course. The academic component that underpins the skills – debriefing, reflective discussion and the ability to justify and improve upon the activities – is the most significant aspect of university education. This intellectual engagement provides the would-be journalists with a methodology that can be adapted to changes in the industry. It gives them endurance. With sufficient application, it can lead to excellence.”

This issue of APME has attracted a range of papers and commentaries from journalism academics, trainer and practitioners. *Ruth Callaghan* and *Joanna McManus* open this issue with their qualitative surveys of editors in Western Australia. They examine the graduate skills deemed most important by West Australian media employers. Their interviews with editors echo employers in the US who stress on traditional journalism skills, such as good writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, general knowledge and understanding of ethics. Digital media skills remain the poor cousin. Graduates should thus embody these journalistic traits: curiosity, diligence, driven news hounds, passion for writing and reporting.

*Stephen Quinn*, however, thinks otherwise. He alludes to the global financial crisis of 2008 and 2009, which had accelerated structural changes in media houses around the world. As the value of media companies plummet, he says, some newspapers have closed entirely or reduced staff numbers, while other publications have stopped printing and produce online-only editions. Others have chosen to outsource contents. At the same time, evolving digital technologies are changing the way journalists operate. Some journalists are embracing multiple media forms of reporting, and managers are coming to understand the need for changed mindsets. Quinn believes that educators need to appreciate the issue of mindset, and prepare students for new opportunities associated with new entrepreneurial forms of online media. *Shelton Gunaratne* also notes the demise of newspapers in the converged media environment. He reminds journalism educators of their function, which is to graduate students who are intellectually and culturally competent “to produce news as a social good devoid of the capitalist desire for profit accumulation”.

*Mary Garden* offers a different view. Newspapers, even in Australia, she says, are far from suffering major declines with the proliferation of online news sites. Australian newspapers are faring better than many in the developed countries. Quality newspapers, with their clearly defined and targeted markets, are outperforming their tabloid counterparts. A fair assessment of newspaper performance needs to consider not only the circulation figures, but also the readership and online reach. The latter is significant, as unlike the US and the UK, the main newspaper publishers Fairfax and News Limited dominate the online news field. Regardless of quantitative measures, Garden says, newspapers have unique properties that will ensure newsprint's survival in the digital era.

*Seok Kang* explores the question of 'new' mindsets in his study of the strengths and weaknesses of media communication curricula at 95 universities in South Korea. In examining whether the communication departments at the universities reflect the global trend towards an integrated curriculum in the communication discipline as the literature suggests, Kang notes that overall the current curricula in universities in South Korea, which tend to lean toward liberal-professional education, are lacking in inter-disciplinarity. Most lacking is in the theory and practice of Communication Studies, particularly Speech Communication and Public/Business Speaking. Kang concludes with a model for an integrated liberal, practical, and interdisciplinary communication curriculum. *Serajul Bhuiyan* asks if media academics' experience in multimedia news production and delivery are keeping pace with their students who are commonly being referred to as 'digital natives'? At the same time, he alerts journalism educators to students' increasingly lack of ability to write in clear succinct language given the current emphasis on technology-oriented production courses.

The various applications of digital communication technologies in journalism education have been tried, tested and adopted by numerous educators in Australia and the US. *Alexandra Wake* from RMIT University in Melbourne reports on how she experimented successfully with using Wikis to teach feature writing to tech-savvy journalism students. The experiment in 2008 was aimed at shifting the focus from teacher-centred learning to self-directed, exploratory and collaborative student-centred learning. *Paul Bethell* investigates his journalism students' usage of mobile phone technology when they began their university studies at Deakin University in Victoria, and considers the implications of these baseline data for future journalism education research. His findings from three consecutive annual surveys of first year journalism students' use of the applications available on their mobile phones confirm that as well as using their phones to text and call, many are making video calls, shoot photos and take videos by the time they arrive at university. More than half of the students now go online on their mobile phones.

*Yanick Lamb, Ingrid Sturgis* and *Charles Fancher* report on how the journalism faculty at Howard University in Washington DC had tested the efficacy of teaching converged media techniques during the US presidential election on 4 November 2008, and the Inauguration of President Barack Obama on 20 January 2009. They note that students should be educated to adapt to a workplace shaped by innovations in media technologies, exacerbated by economic pressures from the global recession, shifting news consumption patterns and declining newspaper circulation.

*Bruce Garrison* explains how traveling to distant places and experiencing different cultures are essential to the learning experience of journalism students. Portable digital

media technologies, which students are highly familiar with, create opportunities to teach them hands-on convergent and multimedia skills in travel-based journalism courses. He concludes with examples of how he has combined travel and new media technologies to teach traditional news reporting, feature writing, travel writing, and other courses regardless of whether the program has an international or multimedia-convergence emphasis.

Contributors to this issue also deliberate on the reporting of race and religion. *Kristy Hess* and *Lisa Waller* report on their trials with a set of curriculum materials they developed for a Reporting Diversity and Integration Project tailored for Australian journalists and students. Deferring to ideas developed by Russian psychologist, Leo Vygotsky, they proposed several 'scaffolding' strategies to support student learning. The material was trialed with 30 first-year Deakin University journalism students and 30 regional journalists. The responses showed that both groups felt that materials the researchers added to the curriculum resources, which provided information on Muslim women and the headscarf, affected how they would write the story. Hess and Waller say that providing cultural information in an accessible format for students and journalists in newsrooms should be integral to education and training materials designed to improve media coverage of cultural diversity issues.

*Trevor Cullen* revisits the need for journalists to actively engage with the people to improve the quality of reporting across race and culture. Cullen notes that change begins from the practices, moral and intellectual values that journalism students take to the field after they graduate. For instance, non-Aboriginal journalists seldom get to meet and talk with Aboriginal people about their life and beliefs, which often results in narrow and misinformed reporting. Cullen reports on an initiative between the Combined Universities Centre for Rural Health (CUCRH) and the journalism program at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Western Australia to help journalism students achieve a better understanding of Aboriginal communities and culture, and, consequently, a more informed approach to their reporting of Aboriginal issues.

*Shawn Burns*, former editor at WIN Television in Wollongong (New South Wales), writing as a journalism lecturer and a parent of a son with physical disabilities, provides a personal insight into the power that journalists wield when they use certain words in their stories about people with disabilities. He notes: "People with disability are not defined by their disability; people with disability are people before anything else and should be treated and represented that way." Which, he says, journalists sometimes forget.

*Ahmad Murad Merican* takes the challenges of reporting diversity to another level of abstraction based on his experience as a Malaysian-Muslim media academic. After years of discourse on the distortion of Islam by the media, Murad suggests that the link in understanding the (mis)representation of Islam is in the corpus of Orientalism. He argues that reporting on religions, or reporting on Islam, be adopted as critical components in the curricula of journalism education. He notes that in Malaysia, despite a proliferation of journalism/communication schools over more than three decades, there is no university course on the reportage of religions, and specifically Islam. Such a course could be embedded in the historical contexts of encounters between the West and Islam and the assumption that the language of news and the language of religion are two incompatible paradigms. Murad calls for overcoming

this incompatibility by re-examining the conceptual and ontological aspects of the reportage of Islam and religions, the journalism curriculum and the intellectual production process in the university.

*Mustafa K. Anuar* complements Murad's paper with a commentary on returning to the basics of teaching good journalism in different cultural contexts. He notes: "A good grasp of the society in which the journalist operates is crucial, particularly in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies such as Malaysia where conflicts emerge from time to time in varying degrees. Armed with such knowledge and comprehension, the journalist would be in a better position to do a comprehensive coverage of issues so that readers and citizens of the country would have deep understanding of the issues at hand."

With the emphasis on skills-oriented subjects in tertiary journalism programs, is the intellectual component of journalism education being diminished? Weekend editor at *The Australian*, Padma Iyer, thinks so. He believes that news selection, newsgathering, writing, design and news distribution – the core activities of news journalism – can only improve with the application of philosophical reflection. Excellence in the newsroom is a product of thoughtful minds at work. The production of media narratives, which deepens our understanding of world events is not an accident. He says it is the result of know-how and intellectual inputs at the learning stage. It is a reward for training that works. Iyer reminds us that university classrooms play crucial role in fostering this culture of excellence at the workplace.

This issue includes a series of non-thematic papers that analyse the differences between 'Western' and 'Asian' media discourse on a global event. *Alma Kadragic* offers an overview of journalism practices and the media landscape in the United Arab Emirates. *Terence Lee* and *John Bottomley* examine how the SARS crisis was reported in Australia and parts of Southeast Asia in 2003. *Jiang Jinglong* and *Hao Xiaoming* examine the complexities of media bias in covering the collision between an American surveillance plane with a Chinese fighter off China's coast in 2001. In comparing the news reports of the event by *The People's Daily* and *The New York Times*, their study shows that despite the differences in political and media environments and journalistic traditions, both papers echo their respective government's stand, thus fostering the diplomatic and political agenda of their own government.

*David Blackall* and *Seth Tenkate* deliberate on the concept of 'dog-whistles' in the Australian media coverage of terrorism and climate change issues. 'Dog whistle' refers to a range of hidden messages enunciated clearly, but inaudibly by politicians reported in the media. Blackall explores how the 'dog whistle' continues to be heard and obeyed by politicians and mainstream media alike. For instance, he explains, although the original message on anti-terrorism came from figures such as former Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, and his Attorney General, Philip Ruddock, there have been others working with the 'dog whistle' to run what is essentially a quietly agreed upon process of spin and reality construction. These hidden messages in media texts are now working well beyond the arena of the war on terror.

Indeed, where stories and commentaries are increasingly written by armchair journalists relying on the internet, where news reports are generated from public relations materials and government releases, 'bull' and 'real news' are becoming more similar by the day. 'Gonzo journalism' may even become a 'respectable' practice and

a popular elective in journalism schools for students, the ‘digital natives’, who are carving their niche in blogosphere. How journalism students, consumed by a culture of Googles and Tweets, can be taught the best practices of journalism like in the days of the typewriter and punch cards is one of journalism education’s critical challenges. To address these questions, I interviewed *John McManus*, author of *‘Detecting Bull: How to Identify Bias and Junk Journalism in Print, Broadcast and on the Wild Web’*, which won the 2009 Society of Professional Journalists Sigma Delta Chi (SPJ/SDX) award for research about journalism. As McManus notes: “Emphasis in journalism education ought to be more on critical thinking and ethics and somewhat less on skills.” As Padma Iyer notes in his commentary: “Universities have traditionally emphasised theoretical rigour, reflecting the awareness that students leaving their portals are unlikely to submit themselves ever again to an intensive education. Hence, universities have the responsibility to go beyond the training (or skills) paradigm to give students more than just the tools, which will get them a job.”

Award-winning journalists, *Yvonne Chua* and *Chay Hofilena* write of their experience in training and educating investigative journalists in the Philippines, one of the world’s most dangerous countries for investigative journalists. Hofilena challenges journalism educators with these questions: “Are news organizations at fault or are journalism schools not producing enough good and ethical journalists? Are universities doing a lousy job of preparing future and present journalists to cope with the pressures and challenges of real-life journalism? Do news organizations end up corrupting the greenhorns who carry with them the idealism and enthusiasm of youth? Are they not doing enough in terms of re-tooling practising journalists?”

For a realistic picture of how investigative journalism is practised in places where journalists work under adverse conditions and often as personal risks, I interviewed *Syed Nazakat*, an award-winning journalist at The WEEK based in New Delhi. Syed visited Australia in June 2010 on a diplomatic journalism fellowship, which involved meetings with defence ministry officials in Canberra, a profile interview with then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, and journalists.

Concluding this thematic issue are journalism educators from Hong Kong, Indonesia and the United States who share their experience in teaching journalism in different cultural situations. *Judith Clarke*, former journalist and currently teaching at Hong Kong Baptist University notes that teaching “best practices in journalism are not just rejecting ‘unethical’ trends as commercially driven reporting and power manipulation, but understanding that these are fixtures in a profession that is fraught with difficulties on all levels”. *Warief Djajanto*, a ‘development writer’ and media trainer with the Jakarta-based Dr. Soetomo Press Institute report on how he taught development reporting to Indonesian journalists. *Janice Wood* explains how she applies Aristotelian rhetoric in teaching her advertising students to be more socially responsible.

**- Eric Loo**

