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Building the perfect graduate: What news employers want in new hires



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The converged media environment has prompted journalism educators to question whether they should increase the use of digital media technology in the classroom and teach across multiple platforms. Newsroom surveys, however, reveal that Australian and US news employers are emphasising traditional journalism skills. This paper examines whether journalism schools are producing graduates with skills sets that media organisations may not consider highly critical to a cadetship. Research was undertaken to examine graduate skills deemed most important by West Australian news employers. The findings echo US employers in their preference for traditional journalism skills, such as good writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, general knowledge and understanding of ethics. Digital skills remain the poor cousin. But they also want graduates who embody the journalistic ‘ideal’: curious, hard-working, driven news hounds, a passion for writing and reporting.

Describing the modern Australian journalist and their role means using words that did not feature in the news lexicon a few short years ago. Mainstream newsrooms are employing 'mojos' (mobile journalists) and VJs (video journalists). Reporters may be asked to tweet their coverage on Twitter or live-blog it. A reporter may be asked to snap a picture, do a piece to camera, record some audio and prepare the material for a graphic (Birge, 2004). Photographers are being asked to shoot video, television reporters are asked to write story briefs, (Birge, 2004) and radio journalists need to be able to pen some words (Daniels, 2003; Fahmy, 2008). Some authors, such as Outing (2009:para 11), see the changes leading to a:

... transformed newsroom ... filled with multi-functional journalists who are comfortable carrying around a digital camera and tiny video camera; who make it part of their routine to record audio for possible use in Podcasts or multimedia project sound clips; who are regular users of social networks and understand how to leverage them to communicate with and attract new readers.

It seems logical to expect that this new workplace will require educators to adjust their teaching in order to produce journalism graduates with a broader set of skills beyond those useful in the traditional niches of print or broadcast. But there remains disagreement over exactly what skills these should be. Observation alone might suggest that as newsrooms incorporate more technology, produce across more platforms and rely more on the internet, that digital skills and multimedia training will be required. Despite this, repeated surveys of mainstream news employers have found that the industry is far less convinced of the importance of digital training for journalism students, and persists in its call to focus on traditional abilities, including general knowledge, news awareness, writing ability, passion and drive.

This study grew out of the desire to ensure that the journalism and broadcasting programs at Edith Cowan University are offering journalism students the best opportunities whatever their career aspirations, and it forms part of a broader review of our teaching and learning strategy, including our course materials, the technology we use, our students, their expectations and their career prospects. We recognise that the journalism profession is only one possible career for journalism students, and that mainstream news employers take an ever-shrinking number of graduates, so our response to this research takes this into account. We also believe that a university course is not vocational education — we should not focus on employability skills at the expense of higher learning. However, knowing the expectations of the news industry is fundamental to our ability to prepare students accordingly. Within this context, a study was designed to assist us to identify potential gaps in our teaching and areas for improvement. To do this, we looked at what the small but nonetheless important group of employers that make up the local news industry believed journalism graduates should be taught and the skills and characteristics they said they sought in hiring.

The results show mainstream news employers in WA still rate traditional skills as being far more important in the graduate toolkit than digital ones, despite the shift of these employers towards media convergence. Online employers are more enthusiastic than newspaper, radio or television employers about graduates who have a range of multimedia skills. However, all the employers prioritise skills including good spelling, grammar and punctuation; enthusiasm and drive to find stories; clarity of

writing and a passion for reading, hearing and watching news. The responses suggest that as technological needs change, the real demand is for graduates to embody the 'ideal' news employers have for journalists: hungry, driven, passionate news-gatherers who learn quickly and have an excellent work ethic. On the one hand this means educators need not fret over the difficulty of incorporating a range of new technologies into their teaching. However, the responses of these employers show they are unconvinced that many graduates emerge with basic journalistic skills, and they would like more emphasis on these.

Literature review

When looking at the literature for this topic, we considered four aspects: What can we see occurring in mainstream newsrooms? What have those changes meant for educators? Have the changes in education matched what industry says it wants? Finally, how much should the opinions of mainstream news employers matter to journalism educators?

For more than a decade, numerous authors (Birge, 2004; Criado & Kraepelin, 2003; Gordon, 2003; Hammon, Petersen, & Thomsen, 2000; Huang et al., 2003; Multimedia journalism: a classroom tour," 2002; Patching, 1996) have looked at the rapid introduction of technology in newsrooms and discussed whether it will mean journalists require a greater range of skills to operate different software or hardware and to navigate online, produce across platforms and play a diversified role. It is a debate driven newsroom by 'convergence', a broad term used to describe everything from physical convergence of media — such as a newspaper that partners with a television station — to convergence of media platforms for a single producer, such as a newspaper publishing online (Jenkins, 2006; Kolodzy, 2006). It may also mean convergence of skills within an individual: a backpack journalist or one-man-band (Kolodzy, 2006; Outing, 2009), or, in less flattering terms, an 'Inspector Gadget' or platypus (Quinn, 2005).

A key element in convergence is that it breaks down the traditional silos of broadcasting and print. In simple converged circumstances, journalists from different media might merely work together. Alternatively, journalists may be required to move between platforms. As Birge (2004: 12) puts it, newsrooms still need specialists:

... reporters who write, photographers who take pictures and television reporters who do stand-ups ... (but) they also need reporters who can think like graphic artists, television reporters who can write a brief and photographers who can shoot video and interview people at a breaking news story.

Given these observable changes, educators have tried to accommodate — and in some cases, pre-empt — what the industry will require from graduates. Just what commentators say needs to be taught to do this varies, but the emphasis is on flexibility. Quinn (1999) argues the ability to adapt in a fast-changing environment will be a key skill, along with a heightened respect for ethics and need for clarity of thought. Hammon, Petersen and Thomsen (2000) say students need to be more integrated and adaptable, whereas Usher (2009) wants them to be nimble and flexible. Others have called for students to be equipped with a willingness to thrive with

constant and rapid change, the ability to engage in teamwork, open-mindedness and humility (McKean, 2007), be instilled in a culture of experimentation and willingness to question (Jarvis, 2007) and develop an understanding and enthusiasm for new forms of media and storytelling (Outing, 2009).

These attributes don't tell the whole story about what a graduate journalist will require. A journalist still needs to spell and write a great lead sentence, pick up legal red flags, conduct strong interviews and use their keyboard as a research tool. However, the literature rarely focuses on specific skills, with a few exceptions. Bartram (2000: 190) called for students to be taught basic economics, interviewing and listening, know three languages and — if possible — how to write 'like an angel'. Pearson (1994) lamented the fact that few new journalists understood notebook management. Herbert (2000) noted that shorthand was still essential for accreditation by the UK National Council for Training of Journalists.

While there is a long list of potential skills that could be included in journalism education, teaching time is limited. Ricketson (2001: 96-97) urged the teaching of core skills and methods alongside the broader principles, noting that you could teach business journalism, grammar, foreign languages, investigative skills and media management, but "in a three-year undergraduate program, there is barely time to teach the rudiments of journalistic practice." Educators have repeatedly made clear their preference not to focus merely on employability skills but to provide students with the opportunity to reflect on journalism as a practice, study the fourth estate model, and have time to consider professional issues, problem solving and ethics (Alysen, 2007; Ricketson, 2005; Sheridan Burns, 2003). Perhaps Adam (2001: 317) best sums up the tension between teaching specific vocational skills and providing a broader education, saying "graduates of journalism programs should be comfortable with the tools and infrastructure marking the trade" but that these should be "to journalism education like laboratories are to an education in the experimental sciences. They are necessary, but not primary."

While this debate is going on, however, universities in Australia — as well as those in the UK and US — have had to adapt curricula to accommodate their best guesses for the future, which has often meant an increased focus on technology (see, for example, Birge, 2004; Castaneda, Murphy, & Hether, 2005; Daniels, 2003; Herbert, 2000; Sheridan Burns, 2003). The 2008 State of the News Print Media Report for the Australian Press Council found 63 per cent of university journalism courses in Australia offered dedicated online, web, multimedia or convergent journalism units. Another eleven institutions were also offering supplementary multimedia, web design or electronic writing units (Martin, 2008: chap. 8, p. 15).

But it is not clear if this academic speculation matches what the news industry actually wants from journalism graduates — and even if it is able to articulate a cohesive position. Lum (2004) found that although US journalism schools were 'responding' to industry trends by teaching convergence journalism, much of this change was based on academic belief that students needed to be conversant in multiple-media skills rather than hard evidence from industry. Birge (2004) also found industry executives did not articulate a desire for convergence training for graduates, even while arguing for them to have extra skills in multimedia.

So what is it that news employers want — or, at least, say they want? Numerous studies have sought to pin down editors and news professionals on this point, although the research should be seen in light of the well-documented tension between academia and industry over whether university courses are useful, what they should be teaching and what they should omit (see, for example, Macdonald, 2003, Ricketson, 2001, Sheridan Burns, 2003, Stuart, 1997).

The American Society of News Editors in 1990 asked editors to rank skills that educators should focus on when preparing new journalists (Dickson, 1996; Pierce & Miller, 2007). The findings, as described in Pierce & Miller (2007: 1), were that “writing skills, spelling/grammar and knowledge about journalism ethics (were) the most important skills that new journalists should possess,” with computer skills and online reporting rated as least important. Similar studies were conducted by Dickson and Brandon (2000), Criado and Kraeplin (2003) and Huang, Davison, Davis, Nair, Shreve & Bettendorf (2003), generally finding that writing and reporting skills — including spelling, grammar and punctuation — ranked highly with employers, while computer skills were less essential.

Josephi (2004) interviewed media professionals from four international newspapers about their expectations of graduates, and found desire for curiosity and a strong preference for understanding of news and context, confidence, news sense, and the ability to make informed and intelligent choices. Nankervis (2005, 2006, 2008), found similar issues were important to Australian television managers when hiring: they prioritised story generation, news sense and passion for news, television writing, good general knowledge, and presentation. She also found digital skills were less important, saying “there appears to be little concern at any of the networks for recruits to have skills related to new technology such as desktop video editing, reporter-operated cameras or bulletin software” (Nankervis, 2005:5). Just how news professionals arrive at these skills being important is addressed by Oakham (2006: 190-191), who asked cadet trainers about the qualities they prized and found some cultivated in cadets the qualities they believed were important for themselves or previous generations, seeking to employ or mould new workers “in our own image”.

What the literature suggests, then, is that there has been substantial change in newsrooms, which educators have followed, tried to interpret, reflect in their teaching and incorporate in their coursework. At the same time, however, mainstream news employers — when asked — are very conservative about the skills they say they seek, returning to traditional skills and ideal qualities for journalists. This leads us to the final thread of the literature we think needs to be considered: how much should the opinions of mainstream news employers matter to modern journalism educators? This goes to the crux of what journalism education should be, with many educators opposed to university courses being used as vocational education institutions or de-facto cadetship programs for a shrinking employer group (see, among others, Alysen, 2007; Henningham, 1999; Herbert, 2000; O’Donnell, 1999, 2006; Oakham, 2006; Ricketson, 2001, 2005; Sheridan Burns, 2003; Stark, 2000). This is partly an issue grounded in education imperatives but also in the reality that mainstream journalism is not the main employer of journalism graduates. Certainly, research suggests that no more than a third of students will end up in mainstream media, a third in non-mainstream media and the remainder in non-journalism areas (Hill & Tanner, 2006; see

also Alysen, 1999; Green & McIlwaine, 1999; O'Donnell, 1999). Cokely (2008: para 9) cites Margaret Gee's Media Guide to conclude that in 2007,

... there were 99 Australian journalism workplaces ... each employing 10 or more journalists or producers. But there were a stunning 2357 other journalism workplaces, each employing one to nine writers, editors or producers (depending on the medium). The 99 bigger workplaces, "Big Media" such as large newspapers and television operations, employed 3407 journalists. Those other 2357 workplaces ... employed a third more—fully 4560 ...

While these figures show the importance of mainstream media organisations is waning as an employer group, that does not mean their perspectives should be dismissed. They remain the major producers of news in Australia, significant employers of working journalists and serve as an aspiration at least for many graduates. It is our contention that there is a problem if courses are producing journalism graduates disdained by mainstream media, even if things aren't as rosy as when Sheridan Burns (2003: 66) argued that "the great majority of journalists in Australia are employees ... and the desires of potential employers cannot be overlooked."

Method

Our study sought to find out what major news employers in WA considered important when hiring new journalists, as part of a wider investigation to assess our course, our teaching, our students' expectations and their career prospects. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used (albeit with a small sample group), incorporating an online questionnaire and follow-up interviews with respondents. Ten senior representatives (editors and news directors) were surveyed on the desirability of a range of potential graduate skills and attributes in order to see which they regarded as most important to them when hiring a new or recent journalism graduate. The sample was purposive rather than random, as we sought the opinions of the most senior representatives of the biggest news employers in WA. The survey responses included three representatives from two newspapers (one newspaper had two respondents, representing hiring attitudes for the online arm as well as primary print arm of the publication), two online news outlets, three television stations and two radio stations. Eight of the 10 were happy to have their names linked to responses.

While 'traditional' in most respects, the media organisations are taking some steps towards media convergence. The two newspapers have online sections and journalists writing for the print publications are required to file online. They also employ video journalists and photographers who use galleries. One online news outlet has journalists who primarily file for the internet but also write for a newspaper; the other is a stand-alone online news outlet with no print arm but links to radio. The three television stations have a web presence, the most significant held by ABC, and Channel Seven has an agreement with The West Australian through Yahoo7 News that allows some sharing of resources (WA Newspapers Holdings Annual Report, 2009). Fairfax Radio has links with WA Today through their common ownership.

As part of the research, respondents were given the opportunity to answer two broad questions:

1. If you could design the perfect journalism or broadcasting graduate, what skills and attributes would they have?
2. Are there specific skills or attributes that you are NOT seeing in university graduates that you believe should be addressed in journalism and broadcasting programs?

Employers were asked to rate the importance of 45 individual skills using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Not important, 2 = Somewhat important, 3 = Important, 4 = Very important, 5 = Essential). These skills included technological skills we expected might be useful to new journalists, including the ability to take photographs, record or edit sound or vision, coding in HTML or navigating online.

There are some issues with the chosen methodology. First, the respondents were chosen deliberately as the most important individuals in the biggest news employers within Western Australia. Furthermore they are a disparate aggregate linked by the nature of their operations but with different organisational experiences and requirements. Because of this, they cannot be held to be representative of all media groups in other states. Second, the survey can also only provide an answer to the question: what do news employers say is important when hiring? It cannot be held as indicative of actual employer behaviour. With these reservations in mind, however, this survey was able to indicate the priorities of these WA news organisations.

Findings

What skills and attributes do mainstream news employers say they would want in the perfect journalism or broadcasting graduate? There was unanimity among employers when ranking potential skills in terms of importance. The highest-ranked skills (shown in table one) were traditional journalistic attributes, including good spelling, grammar and punctuation, drive and enthusiasm to find stories, clarity of writing, and an ability to learn. Only one 'digital' skill was ranked in the top 12 — the ability to navigate online. In contrast, there was much less agreement over technological skills. Low rankings were given to knowledge of specific software or hardware, skills in programs such as Audacity, Flash or Soundslides, the ability to prepare digital images or the ability to code in HTML. Broadcasters and online respondents gave more priority to the ability to edit sound and vision; print employers were less enthused. Fairfax Radio called for students to be more adept with technology overall — a surprising response, perhaps, considering the popular notion that students are tech-savvy.

Table 1: Skills or attributes rated most highly by news employers

Skill/characteristic	Essential	Very important	Median
Ability to learn	8	1	5.00
Good spelling, grammar and punctuation	7	3	5.00
Enthusiasm/drive to find stories	7	3	5.00
Clarity of writing	7	2	5.00
Passion for reading, hearing and watching news	7	2	5.00
Strong work ethic	7	2	5.00
Understanding of journalistic ethics	7	1	5.00
Objectivity	6	3	5.00
Curiosity	6	3	5.00
A passion for words and writing	4	5	4.00
Strong general knowledge	4	5	4.00
Ability to navigate online	4	5	4.00

n=10

Asked what other skills the respondents believed were essential for new graduates the respondent from ABC News Radio provided detailed criteria his organisation uses to consider cadets. We use a six-element model for journalism training, which specifies 'core capabilities' reporters require. They are:

1. Generate viable stories: Ability to identify and generate viable story ideas for radio, television and online.
2. Research: Ability to research information, and verify factual and contextual accuracy of information gathered.
3. Interview: Ability to conduct interviews that obtain information in a form that can be used for the story on radio, television or online.
4. Write: Ability to write clear, concise, and accurate copy in a style appropriate to the program and platform.
5. Present: Ability to present news and current affairs reports with authority and credibility on radio, television.
6. News judgment: Ability to exercise news judgment in the selection, treatment, preparation and presentation of stories. (ABC News, Perth, Radio)

The same employer said there was a need for graduates to have a better general knowledge and understanding of the world, and they would benefit from an interest in history, literature, arts, science, music, philosophy and religion, suggesting a liberal arts education was still valued.

Employers also gave detailed responses to the question of how they would design the perfect journalism or broadcasting student, and their answers reflected awareness of the high benchmark they were setting. Some key terms emerged, including a 'hunger' to succeed and for news gathering, along with similar terms like being 'keen', 'passion', 'determination' and 'drive'. There were calls for a 'multi-skilled' graduate, one comfortable in producing different news styles, and a request for 'multitasking saints', as can be seen in some sample responses:

A hunger and passion for news gathering, ability to get to the heart of matters, an analytical mind, knowledge of key issues to the audience, strong preparation and organisation, ability to think broadly and to be multi-skilled. Oh yeah, and friendly and able to work within a small team. (Online news organisation)

I guess we're looking for multitasking saints, prepared to work diligently in a broad range of areas and be willing to turn their hands to a range of tasks to produce a range of content both for online use and in-paper. (PerthNow)

Hunger to succeed by reporting with authority and clarity. Determination to seek out news and present in a way that stands out from the pack. (Television news)

Someone with drive and enthusiasm for news, the ability to enhance pictures with great script-writing, the ability to handle hard news and soft features, and equally comfortable broadcasting live or putting together a recorded TV package. (Nine News Perth/Win News WA)

A perfect journalism graduate should be honest, personable, inquisitive, upbeat with a sense of humour, logical and thoughtful, diplomatic, a team player with not too much self-confidence, have common sense, be resourceful, should know how to take direction but know when to say no, and they should have strong writing knowledge and aptitude. (The West Australian)

He or she should present well, be confident and approachable, bright and keen to learn, and listen to advice. I would also love to have someone who was keen to take some risks, but aware of the consequences of her or his actions should they overstep the mark. (Major Australian newspaper)

When asked what skills or attributes news employers were not seeing in graduates that they believed should be addressed, writing skills were cited as a particular problem for both print and broadcast organisations:

Many graduates lack a basic working knowledge of writing for newspapers and simple story construction. Some have poor writing skills and it is staggering how many cannot spell. (The West Australian)

Many students also struggle with basic writing skills: grammar, punctuation and spelling. In the TXTing environment, we're swimming against the stream on this one, but it's still an important element of what we do. (ABC News, Perth, Radio)

Another area considered in need of strengthening was news sense, which was seen as a symptom of poor general knowledge and lack of news awareness. This was

compounded by what respondents saw as a poor work ethic among would-be journalists: a problem experienced across the industry. One respondent from a major newspaper lamented a lack of humility in students and said he was seeing

... plenty of over-confidence and arrogance ... in young journalists and students who know little about anything.

The West Australian's respondent had a similar problem, saying:

... it is difficult to teach good attitude e.g. How is it that an intern can turn up to work late, with no tie, shirt hanging out and without having read the newspaper? Basic manners and common sense are sometimes lacking.

Discussion

In doing this research, we were not seeking to develop a wish-list of skills and characteristics to be imprinted on students; instead, we wanted an up-to-date assessment of how this segment of employers — the biggest news groups in WA — felt about journalism graduates, the skills they saw as important and the areas where they saw gaps in learning or teaching. The response of the news employers did not disappoint. They proved to be thoughtful and willing to discuss their perceptions of journalism graduates. If they found some skills and characteristics lacking, for the most part their answers reflected an understanding that this can be a product of youth and inexperience, rather than the fault of university education. There were, as was expected, examples of tension between academia and industry: the respondent from ABC TV took universities to task, saying academics over-analysed journalism and relied too strongly on theory without being adequately informed about the industry.

They query (journalism's) worth and encourage students to question why they're doing something rather than how they could do it better. (ABC TV)

However, respondents were also positive about graduates and one made the point that he was

... often surprised by the quality of students coming into the industry, and their readiness to take on a variety of roles. (ABC News, Perth Radio).

What can educators take from the industry response? The first point must be the unanimous agreement by respondents about the importance of basic writing skills and that they are not always seeing these in graduates. This must be a concern to educators — however much they may dislike the idea of having the industry dictate terms. Spelling, grammar, punctuation and clear writing form the cornerstone of journalism practice and if graduates of journalism courses are not demonstrating competence, this is a problem. General knowledge and news awareness were also highlighted, and ignorance here was linked to an inability to generate ideas or put stories into context — both important for journalists. These responses are not particularly surprising, and reflect similar findings in employer surveys taken over many years and in different contexts, demonstrating a remarkable uniformity among news employers for the skills and attributes they believe are essential to journalism.

The emphasis by WA news employers on the more intangible issues of work ethic, enthusiasm, passion and curiosity show the industry continues to demand graduates who fit the ideal of the perfect journalist — a hard-working news hound, eager to chase leads and beat the competition; an avid news consumer as well as producer. This is a sensible stereotype for newsrooms to promote: not only does it mean a journalist is competitive and driven to find stories, but it is commercially useful to have such a member of staff — someone who embodies this work ethic may be prepared to put in long and unsociable hours without complaint. Calls for students to have greater passion for news, words and writing may also reflect the gap the industry sees between the newsroom and the classroom: it was clear from responses that employers saw educators as needing to do more to encourage students to love and enjoy journalism, rather than criticise it.

The findings on digital skills echo those of Nankervis (2005) that employers are not particularly concerned whether their recruits have specific new technology skills, as well as the surveys by Dickson and Brandon (2000), Criado and Kraepelin (2003) and Huang et al (2003), which found traditional skills prioritised over computer skills. The exception here is computer literacy, including navigating online, which was rated highly by all employers. Still, broadcasters said they favoured graduates with excellent production, presentation and packaging skills, which may suggest that graduates are more useful if they remain specialists in broadcasting or print rather than generalising. This is an area deserving further exploration, including examination of whether employees with digital skills have opportunity to use them in mainstream newsrooms or whether they find them beneficial in career advancement.

Conclusion

In considering how these results should be treated, we have always seen this study as part of a broader investigation of Edith Cowan University's journalism and broadcasting program, our students and their career prospects. We sought the perceptions of this group of employers knowing they employ relatively few graduates each year, yet find their responses nonetheless enlightening. Clearly these mainstream employers have not greatly changed their thinking about what educators should be teaching journalism students. Strong writing, reporting and news gathering skills remain vital, even if employers are less convinced of the need for graduates to demonstrate these skills across platforms. The flaws they see in graduates include poor writing skills, a lack of general knowledge and news awareness, and what they perceive as poor work ethic. What we don't know as yet is whether non-mainstream media employers will also have the same preferences and problems with graduates, or whether these will be considered less important than a journalism graduate who can work easily in a multimedia world.

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