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Training in the Suburban Newsroom

Suburban newspapers have traditionally relied on a junior workforce, which means they have a significant influence in training cadets and shaping the journalists of the future. These cadets may find themselves comprising 50 per cent of the editorial staff of the newspaper they are assigned to, producing up to 16 stories a week on anything from complex planning issues to golden wedding anniversaries. Lack of staff and resources mean that the loftier ideals of journalism often give way for the more practical issues of finding enough stories and dealing with pushy advertising representatives. This paper discusses the challenges facing suburban journalists and trainers in this environment.

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Five Australian cadet journalists answer the question: How well did your tertiary education prepare you for the realities of life in the suburban newsroom?

- It prepared me well for general news gathering/writing. Not so well for the particulars of local news, eg councils, police, and many practical aspects of the job you only encounter once you're in it.
- I don't think I got enough practical training. It seemed that the course was geared towards "daily" reporting. I needed more knowledge of local council workings and responsibilities. I think that my course has given me a good grasp of the requirements and mechanics of news writing.
- Tertiary education helped very little with suburban reporting. Only general news style was introduced, nothing about interviewing or making contacts. Media law was covered well – updates annually should augment this training.
- Not very.... I did a writing course, not a journalism course, but it would be fair to say that I was not prepared at university at all for the workforce. The most I learnt about newspapers was after completing my degree and gaining employment in the industry.

Ignorance or arrogance?

Suburban newspapers, in the course I did, were not covered as sources that could publish work or raised as potential employers or trainers.

- Quite well – knew the basics of soft news, hard news, feature writing, interviewing and researching. But there was no focus on suburban issues or the different needs of suburban newspaper readers as compared to daily readers. There was a bit too much emphasis on getting cadetships at the dailies, which left you with the impression that getting on a suburban was a bit of a failure.

When I began my own journalism education at Royal Melbourne of Institute (RMIT) 24 years ago, my first task was to write an essay on “Why Journalists Should Be Better Educated”. Fresh out of school, I had no idea about what journalism education involved, let alone whether it should be improved. Eight months later, I still didn’t. By that time, I had a cadetship on a suburban newspaper. It seemed to me a gross waste of time to hear my lecturer say: “I’m Inspector Bloggs. Six cases of wine have been stolen. Interview me,” when I had real people to interview and real stories to be written back at the office.

It is with a certain irony that, as a journalism teacher today, I view my own efforts to be relevant to cadets facing the same problems. These days, most journalism educators that I speak to all seem to insist that the basic principles of good journalism remain the same no matter what type of organisation you are writing for. So why do the cadets that I teach at one of Melbourne’s biggest suburban newspaper chains feel so unprepared for life in the suburban newsroom?

After 24 years in journalism, the first five at a suburban and the last two training at Leader Newspapers, which publishes 31 newspapers across metropolitan Melbourne, Australia, I believe that there are two reasons for this. The first is ignorance among journalism educators about the structure and nature of suburban newspapers. Anecdotally, the attitude seems to be either that there is no difference between the requirements of suburbans and those of the dailies, or that the difference is so vast (and that suburban newspapers are not even real newspapers), it is not even worth considering.

The second is that there appears an arrogance and snobbery about suburban newspapers that leads to an unwillingness to suggest them as potential career or to prepare students for them. This is odd when you consider that suburban newspapers are one of the biggest employers of cadets, in Victoria at least. In the News Limited family of newspapers, Quest, Cumberland and Leader have a continuous intake of cadets, rather than an annual intake. At Leader this can mean having up to 15 cadets on staff at any one time. But as suburban newspapers do not have the profile and status of metropolitan daily newspapers,

getting a cadetship on a suburban is often seen like winning second prize in a beauty contest.

The stigma of the “local rag” persists despite quite significant changes in the past two decades. Suburban newspapers have come a long way since I began my cadetship. Although I count the five years I spent at Standard Newspapers (now part of Leader) as the most exciting and rewarding of my career, I am astounded when I look back at the lack of formal training for staff. In those days we had no sub-editors’ desk. We did our own corrections, in some cases after publication. Although we used a standard typeface, it was up to the individual editors, some of them with only two or three year’s experience under their belt, to decide how they would be used. The result was hotchpotch layout and writing styles that varied considerably in quality.

Today at Leader, we have two large subs’ desks, a uniformity of design and layout that consistently wins prizes at the suburban newspaper awards, and a management that is committed financially as well as verbally to training. These standards are reflected in the readership. The most recent independent audit through Roy Morgan Research shows a weekly circulation of 1.3 million and a readership of 1.7 million. These figures reflect the important role that suburban newspapers play in communities, economically and socially, not to mention the important role they play in employing and training young journalists.

From my experience at both suburbans and metropolitan daily newspapers, although the principles may remain the same, the nature of suburban newspapers is vastly different to the dailies. This leads to different requirements and pressures in five key areas, discussed below.

Firstly, the newsmakers are unlikely to be media savvy. For example, among Melbourne’s large daily newspapers, The Age and the Herald-Sun, among those who made news on 5 December 2000 were business forecaster Phil Ruthven, various Federal politicians involved in allegations of vote-rigging and preference buying, a marine mammal specialist, a spokesperson from Bicycle Victoria, actor Dudley Moore, swimmer Michael Klim and various consumer experts. The only ordinary people who made the news in the first few pages were victims of road rage, an armed holdup and a car theft that led to the death of a baby.

By contrast, in the suburban Moonee Valley Gazette, a local mural painter and a man calling for a ban on pit bull terriers shared the front page. The inside featured a local sports star, residents seeking better drainage, and another group of residents seeking an alternative site for a needle exchange. Most of those featured in the local newspaper would not have been interviewed for the media before and would be unlikely to again. This can pose a challenge for young reporters who find that inexperienced newsmakers either clam up or

will not shut up. The nature of news and deadlines is also often difficult for inexperienced newsmakers to understand. With 31 newspapers printed in one week, deadlines are tight, yet at the same time, the printing schedule may mean that the newspaper does not come out for 10 days after deadline.

Secondly, the big daily newspapers tend to report the politics and views of decision-makers and their effects on the decision-makers, such as how the political futures of politicians and parties will be affected by allegations of vote rigging. Suburban newspapers tend to report the effects of government policies on ordinary people. For example, The Age may report State Government planning policy changes. It is the effect of these, through applications to local councils and appeals to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal that tends to make news in suburban newspapers. Federal Government budget cuts may be reported in the dailies, but it is the effect of these, such as closures or cuts to local services, that is reported in the suburbans. The ordinary person is given much more of a voice, not just as a victim or hero, but as citizens who contribute positively to their community through voluntary service or efforts to improve local services, or are simply well known and respected. It is typical to find staff teasing a news point out of a story on yet another golden wedding anniversary, while juggling several council stories on complex planning issues and booking enough picture stories to fill the paper.

Thirdly, the local council is the principal governing body and source of news on a local newspaper, yet few journalism courses cover this in depth, if at all. To report effectively and accurately, reporters need to know some of the history of local government, its structure, where it gets its money, how the rate system works, how council meetings work, how council elections work, how to read council reports and how to immunise themselves from the mind-boggling jargon that permeates council reports.

Fourthly, the symbiotic relationship between local newspapers and the local business community is reflected in every suburban newspaper. As there is no revenue from sales, local newspapers depend on advertising revenue for their survival. Part of this includes providing advertorials, or ad features as they are known at Leader, for loyal customers. Lack of staff on suburban newspapers often means that journalists must also write this advertising copy. At Leader, these stories are differentiated from editorial copy with special logos and the words 'A Leader Advertising Feature' in italics across the top. Although company policy stipulates that these advertorials are a reward service for loyal advertisers and not an automatic right for those who buy a lot of advertising, it is difficult to get advertisers to accept this. Also, in a bid to sell more ads, advertising representatives often make promises that go against company policy. Balancing the need to resist these demands and the need to support the local business community puts extra pressure on suburban journalists.

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Are suburban papers really different?

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Fifthly, suburban newspapers provide great training and employment opportunities for young journalists. It is easier to get a foot in the door at a suburban than at a daily newspaper. Cadets at Leader commonly start as casuals, who having been tested, are offered a cadetship.

Once you are in, it is sink or swim. There may be only two or three people on each newspaper, which could be anything from 36 to 96 pages or even more in length. Some weeks, the newspapers may be tight, others they will be open, but as you never know till the last minute, you must write as much as possible. Deadlines are strict, as 31 newspapers must be printed each week. Delays can create a domino effect that can cost millions. Additionally, resources are limited, as reproducing reference books and materials across 13 offices across Melbourne is expensive and sometimes impractical. The pay rates on suburban newspapers are less than on daily newspapers, and there is more pressure to produce stories, so getting experienced casuals to replace staff who are sick or on leave can be difficult. All this means that all reporters, including cadets, are required to take on more responsibility, usually much earlier in their careers than cadets and reporters in daily newspapers.

Young journalists who come to the Leader group look for practical help and advice in understanding their communities and how to become effective and productive reporters. With only four days, instead of five, to produce stories, they seek ways to maximise story possibilities and help to resolve practical issues, such as dealing with advertisers, council politics and getting stories. Some of the topics they have requested for the next year reflect this: 'How to make more out of less', 'Interviewing people who don't want to be interviewed' and 'Weddings, Parties, Anything'. At their request we have recently covered death knocks and funerals, reporting ethnic diversity and covering religious issues. These topics improve their understanding of issues and help broaden their news base. Having been a suburban cadet myself, I understand their feelings. That is why I try to reflect their needs, as well as those of news editors and general management, in the topics we cover.

Cadet classes at Leader are held every Tuesday afternoon for three hours, after three hours of shorthand in the morning. The curriculum for the class, devised by me with consultation with the editor-in-chief, Wayne Buttner, and deputy editor-in-chief, Bob Osburn, aims to fill the gaps between what they have learned in their tertiary courses and what they need to know for reporting on a suburban newspaper.

Most have completed tertiary study and come on as graduate cadets. Theoretically, the cadetship is for one year. In reality some

finish earlier and some may take up to two years, because each cadet must first achieve 120 words a minute in shorthand before graduation. Incremental pay rises, as dictated by the award, provide incentives to achieve the 120-word standard. The other incentive is getting out of cadet class. While they may enjoy the class interaction and acknowledge the need, cadets struggle to balance this against the demand to produce up to 16 to 20 stories a week to help fill the newspapers.

While the core class subjects always remain the same, the structure and other topics are fluid, depending on the needs of the cadets. These can be highly diverse, ranging from people who have been at Leader for two years and had three years of tertiary training, to those who have been there for one week and had no tertiary training. Catering for everyone is therefore a challenge.

Not surprisingly, much of the emphasis is on local government. Lately, we have also covered the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, the state's judiciary body that resolves disputes on everything from planning to equal opportunity issues. Other topics include police reporting, obituary writing, sports reporting, covering a local election, writing from personal experience, telephone interview skills, interviewing children and teenagers, finding stories, reporting ethnic diversity, death knocks and funerals, arts reporting and reviews, advertorial writing, public relations tricks, understanding the Goods and Services Tax (GST) and spelling and grammar. We also invite guest speakers, including those from our own organisation, to explain the various roles of editorial staff, as well as experts in various fields such as local government and criminology (on how to read police statistics). Guest speakers have enabled me to provide other expertise and role models and for Leader to forge links with many people and institutions in our community.

The value of the class is not just in the curriculum. The interaction between the cadets, who have no other opportunity to share ideas unless they happen to work at the same office, is invaluable. As an icebreaker, we do a round-the-class high/low, where the cadets each describe their highest and lowest point for the week. This gives other cadets, particularly newer ones, an idea of what others are doing and what may lie ahead for them. It also gives me and other cadets the chance to hear the types of problems they are facing and to give advice or make suggestions. I can also raise with management any issues that cadets may have.

This is a vital part of their education and one I would not like to see lost if Leader was to adopt the online course being piloted at the Herald and Weekly Times (HWT) next year. The course, devised by Lucinda Duckett, Kim Lockwood and other trainers, would involve cadets working individually at their terminals in their own time or in class time. As there are no terminals in the Leader auditorium, the

Cadet classes

cadets would need to work in their own time. I applaud the content of the course, but worry about it resulting in further isolation for Leader cadets for whom time constraints and distances between offices make isolation a problem generally.

The classes also provide opportunities to identify and address further training issues. From the class came the idea of a kit on advertorial writing. Cadets who were required to write ad features found themselves trying to work out company policies and guidelines. At my suggestion, management has agreed to a kit that provides guidelines to advertisers, advertising representatives and editorial staff and which cadets can point to when they are challenged or in need of advice.

A range of other activities has been conducted to help journalists improve their confidence, research skills and productivity. It was also clear that story ideas were a big issue, particularly for those not covering the council, the police and the schools – the three main news sources. The result was a Story Ideas Bulletin that could be emailed to News Editors and used when they were short of local stories or needed an idea for a feature. Excursions to places such as VCAT and the Immigration Museum have also helped cadets understand how these organisations are structured and whom to contact, as well as being a morale booster. In my role as general trainer, I have also adapted a HWT course devised by Chris McLeod on headline writing for our subs, and produced a “survival kit” on punctuation and general grammar for photographers. Other plans include short on-site courses at outer offices to help staff who find it difficult to get the time to attend more formal courses at head office. From among the list of course ideas I presented, news editors chose grammar revision and “maths for journalists” as priorities.

Since April 2000, I have also been employed a further two-and-a-half days a week for general editorial training, which has mostly consisted of Computer Assisted Reporting. Five other staff and I undertook a three-hour course with Stephen Quinn, based on his book, *Newsgathering on the Net*. Stephen’s notes were adapted to suit Leader’s needs, and we have subsequently trained more than 120 staff. As part of the News Limited Group, I have also been involved in contributing some ideas and materials to the online course that will be piloted at HWT next year. This involvement has been an important recognition of the role of suburban newspapers in training and of the need to provide some materials that specifically address the needs of suburban cadets.

The cadet class curriculum has been reviewed for this year, in the light of a recent class survey and in consultation with editor-in-chief Wayne Buttner. Our latest topic of reporting religious issues has

Challenges

Special initiatives

identified several large groups in our local communities that were not represented in our newspapers previously in either editorial or advertising. My aim is to encourage the cadets to broaden their news bases to more realistically reflect the demographic changes that have occurred in local communities in the past 20 to 30 years.

Training suburban journalists requires a special understanding of the nature of suburban newspapers, a willingness to respond to changing needs, creativity in presentation and a passion for suburbans that enables you to transcend the inevitable frustrations. The frustrations for me have not just been in the lack of resources, but lack of time. When I reflect on the 32 or so topics I have covered in cadet classes in the past year, there is one topic that I have not covered, and that is time. I can teach cadets how to manage it, but I cannot create more of it. It is disheartening to hear the cadets sometimes say that they do not have the time to apply what I teach. This problem is not exclusive to Leader or suburban newspapers. Doing more with less is a problem across the industry. I can only encourage them to do the best they can in the time available and to campaign vigorously for more staff and resources.

The other frustration is in something that I feel should have been addressed in their tertiary courses, and that is the lack of critical-thinking ability. Increasingly among young journalists there is a tendency to take at face value things that should be questioned. Not least among these are stories on New Age topics, such as a recent one that Leader published on a local "witch". It seems he was born into a family of English witches, and his skills include visualising parking spots before he goes shopping to ensure that he gets one when he arrives. He enjoyed the sort of free plug that loyal advertisers can only dream of. Nobody thought to ask him what evidence he had for his claims and what he charged for his "counselling".

The other disappointment that makes me despair about what is taught at journalism school is stories that read like brochures because the reporter has failed to do anything more than diligently take down every word the interviewee has said and faithfully reproduce it. I think confusion between what is opinion and what is legitimate questioning is one reason for this. Another is the tendency to report on behalf of the interviewee rather than on behalf of the reader. This is exacerbated on a local newspaper by the fact that the reporter is seeking to maintain limited contacts and may well be rubbing shoulders with that person in the street the next day. Unfortunately, I have also seen many cadets who seem to lack the curiosity to ask the basic questions of how, when, what, where and why. They may also lack of awareness of the issues that need raising due to inadequate reading and general knowledge.

Dare I suggest that another may be the tendency for nice girls

from nice middle-class homes to do journalism these days? Being nice, as many girls are still socialised to do, is not the best characteristic for a journalist. I would prefer we employed some people, whether male or female, who were not so concerned about being liked. These girls make diligent workers, but they do not always make the best journalists, and surely that is what we are aiming to achieve. From my experience, the tendency to want to be nice to the interviewee and to be liked by the interviewee gets in the way of what I regard as a more important role: to represent the reader and to ask what the reader needs to know.

This newspaper has aimed to provide insight into the training needs of suburban journalists and the ways one employer is tackling them. University educators may want to bring out the cross and garlic, because I suspect that what I am talking about may be termed "craft". I am aware of current pedagogy, which pitches the lofty ideals of journalism tertiary "education" against the more practical, less glamorous, industry "training". But I am afraid that even after university educators have educated them, they still need training. I hope that in future suburban newspapers, which have been largely excluded from this debate, can play a greater part in achieving a happy marriage between the two, and can be recognised more for their important role in training the journalists of the future.

Conclusion

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