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Better Press For Suburbia: Preparing Young Journalists For Suburban Newsrooms

Within a decade, humankind will become an urban (rather than a rural) species. The majority of the human race will live in cities of more than a million people. “So what?” you say, “most Australians already live in the cities”. Not so. Most Australians live in the suburbs of cities. Most of them get a daily newspaper. And virtually all, once or twice a week, have a local paper tossed on their lawn or stuffed in their letterbox.

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Suburban newspapers are “free” – paid for by advertising – their readers pay for them indirectly, whenever they shop or do business locally, instead of directly at the newsagents. They are largely produced by a young and lowly paid workforce that turns over fairly rapidly as it moves on to the metropolitan media, turns to related fields such as public relations and marketing or heads for greener pastures.

**Flawed but
not floored**

One question that arises is whether these young people require any different preparation than their counterparts who head directly for the metropolitan media. Similar questions arise in respect of those heading for provincial and rural media and those, from smaller or less developed countries overseas, who will return home on graduation. Another, more fundamental, question is whether current university curricula prepare anyone adequately for capable professional practice.

Cafarella (this issue, page) cites both her own experience as an undergraduate with a cadetship during the 1970s and that of the cadets she teaches today as evidence that they don't. Her observations echo those of journalists and commentators such as Mark Day in *The Australian* (march 22, 2001) who perennially deplore that things are “not what they were”, when they and the world were young.

Twenty-five years ago, suburban newspapers often had no subs' desks. Cadets corrected their own copy and chose their own writing style, typefaces and layout. Today, there are subs' desks, and design and layout

are uniform. And universities also have changed. They have recruited a new generation of lecturers and revised their degree programs. High school-type “work experience” has been replaced by properly structured professional placements and internships. Few would rely on essay topics and “simulations” that some colleges and universities allegedly did in the 1970s.

But, as the world has changed, what emerging needs have suburban newspaper owners and managers identified? Do they know what they want from their cadets? Have they discussed their needs with potential service providers, such as the universities or the Journalism Education Association (in Australia)? What specifically are the shortcomings?

Areas such as “interviewing and making contacts” or “courts, cops and council” are not the exclusive problem or preserve of the suburban press. Masterton and Patching (1986) cover these things in their book “And Now The News In Detail” as do many journalism manuals. Interviewing people who don’t want to be interviewed is no easier in London, Paris, New York or Melbourne than it is in Footscray or Frankston. If however there are specific aspects that need attention in the suburbs, it would be helpful to specify the problem.

The flaws in her argument notwithstanding, Cafarella raises important and challenging questions. What do people need to learn and where do they need to learn it, to be capable of working successfully in suburban newspapers? Professional education depends as much on how people are initiated and inducted into practice as it does on their instruction (Stenhouse, 1975; Josephi, 1999, 2000, 2001). She also reminds us that education – that process by which societies and professions transmit their cultures to their rising generations – requires people to learn more than skills and knowledge (Ryle, 1990; Scheffler, 1985). They are not enough. To become capable professional practitioners, people must also develop a range of personal qualities, such as persistence, ingenuity, inventiveness and worldly wisdom, all of which are hard enough to learn but harder to teach (Morgan, 1995, 2000).

Pre-service and in-service education are not mutually exclusive. Journalists, no less than any other professional group, need continuing education and development. Doctors, lawyers and accountants all have to keep up, throughout their careers, to maintain their registration. Media practitioners are not licensed, but the benefits of continual professional refreshment are nevertheless clearly evident. The question is how to ensure that suburban journalists are properly prepared,

initiated and inducted into professional practice.

Understanding suburban communities and how they function is surely what sociology is about, especially in a predominantly suburban society such as ours. At Stanford in California, journalism (like documentary film) is part of the communication program. It is seen as “fundamentally, a process of social inquiry” (Breitrose, 2000). Journalists are prepared to become “fair-minded participants in a community that works” (Glasser, 1999, 2000). Both require an understanding of “community” and of “society”. “Culture” has to be seen as “the way we respond to our environment” (Servaes, 2001). A 100 level course in sociology might be expected to provide the tools and lay the foundations to fill the knowledge gap in sociology raised by Cafarella. Sadly, however, academic sociologists don’t always cut the mustard with working journalists.

Though society is their field of expertise, (our sociologists) don’t much like people – at least, not enough to put them in their books (Horin, 2001).

At Columbia (Carey, 2000), this is seen as an area better learned “from the inside out rather than the outside in”. He recalls Park at Chicago sending his students out “to report what was happening on Main Street”. Carey does not want his students to learn about society and journalism but to be social scientists and journalists, to engage with the world. This can be done through assigned projects set in the classroom, through professional internships and attachments during a course, and subsequently as tutored assignments during a cadetship. Visiting Columbia, it is striking to see the agency service that their students operate and to realise the level of their engagement with both the profession and the world.

Australia is one of the most suburban nations in the world. Yet, its suburbs get a very mixed press. Popular perception is reflected in dictionary definitions such as “narrow-minded”, “parochial” and “conventional in outlook”. But, to many Australians, the suburbs that we come from are not only physically peripheral, they are culturally “further away than anywhere else in the world”.

In Frederic Raphael’s (1975) “Glittering Prizes”, British suburbs were where upwardly mobile baby-boomers came from and “don’t ever want to go back to”. The centuries of mythology that have built up around “moving to town” from the country seldom acknowledges how many of these migrants actually made landfall in the suburbs. And the escape from suburbia has no generic parallel. In “American Beauty”, suburbia is a dead end in more ways than one.

Once upon a time in Australia

A new speciality?

A better understanding of suburban society might improve the suburbs as well as suburban journalism and its journalists. Suburban papers could well publish regular columns exploring the “realities” of life in their neck of the woods.

There’s no one dies

But what we know about it. Births, deaths and marriages,
Council reports, wool prices, river heights,

The itinerant poem and the classified ads –

They all come homeward to “The Western Star”

Rosemary Dobson (1958:67) not only celebrates “the country press”. She deftly depicts its vital connection with the life of its community. Who has written likewise of “their local rag” in the suburbs? And what suburban paper publishes poetry, itinerant or local?

Having grown up between The Western Star and The Rising Sun hotels in Geelong Road, Footscray in Melbourne’s western suburbs (Morgan, 1994), I am continually reminded that globalising forces have redrawn the map of the world, ripped the jumper off my own old loyalties, made me barrack for the Western Bulldogs (a football team), and despatched Fitzroy to Brisbane and the Swans to Sydney. “Such is life”, the Furphys and the Kellys of the world would sigh.

Those same forces, however, made it possible for cassata and cappuccino to replace Greasy Pete’s rancid hamburgers when his Barkly Street shop burned down in 1955, and laid the foundations of that suburb’s spicily polyglot present. Brunswick Street Fitzroy was then still derelict and the cosmopolitan joys of Lygon Street, Carlton were few and far between. The Italian flag on the corner of Grattan Street flew over a bike shop not a restaurant. La Mama, the APG and “Don’s Party” were all more than a decade away.

Meanwhile, the same itchy, ugly rash of suburbs that had irritated and dismayed Theodore Adorno and other immigrants in the USA was spreading south and east across Melbourne’s market gardens, and westwards into the thistle belt. By 1972, that tide across the nation would carry Gough Whitlam and the ALP to power in Canberra, not just for their “big picture” vision of Australia in the wider world but because they promised to pave and sewer suburbia.

In the generation since, both community broadcasting and local suburban newspapers have learned to live on “the smell of oily rags”.

Visions of suburbia

Television in 1956 and colour in 1975 hijacked the mass broadcasting market and forced radio to target much more narrowly stratified audiences. Suburban papers likewise learned to co-exist, rather than compete, with their metropolitan and national counterparts. Some gave up trying to be journals of first report. Instead of breaking news, they analysed it and framed it to make local sense of it. Others, of course, continued to play newshound, sniffing out those “stories that others wanted suppressed”. Others again, long before Don Chipp’s Democrats, tried to “keep the bastards (in local government) honest”.

The suburban press has had a vital role to play in Australia’s communication system. Like academic sociology, it has had the opportunity to “tell us about ourselves, elucidate trends (and) combine research, original thought, and narrative for an intelligent general reader.” (Horin, 2001)

It could also have strengthened the formation and maintenance of communities struggling to build their schools and clubs and sporting facilities. It could have promoted places, partly through the advertising that it carried and partly through the way in which it presented itself. And, it could have provided a forum for people to embark on what John Dewey, the American philosopher, called “the great conversation of our culture” (Carey, 1989).

Media people need to know something about something else. Expertise in a field of media content remains a strong entrée. As do the skills and knowledge of professional practice and an understanding of the context in which they have to be practised. The various forces that control the ownership and operation of the media are vital aspects of that context, which necessarily includes the suburban press. To what extent, for instance, did the ownership and control of the media affect the outcomes of the recent reconciliation and republic debates in Australia? Henry Mayer (Tiffen, 1994) often observed that ordinary people are wiser than either academics or media people on these issues. Again, there is a challenge to all media educators, not just those preparing people to work in the suburbs.

Technological convergence and cultural diversification increasingly affect media practice. Journalism (Morgan, 1998; Quinn, 2001) is no longer simply the daily reporting of events and issues, in print, for closed and homogeneous communities. The frequency of the news cycle has accelerated, through twice daily and hourly, to now be virtually continual. Many journalists now have to produce for radio, video and on-line as well as for print. Sectioning blurs the boundaries between newspapers and magazines. Information, entertainment,

**Convergence
and diversity**

**The pros
and cons of
community**

Changing places; changing times

education and persuasion are no longer separate genres of content but qualities expected of all content. Audiences stay only so long as they are entertained, educated and made to feel welcome, as well as informed. The need to persuade, that has disciplined all storytellers for all time (Barthes, 1975:4), now requires reporters to straddle the mythical divide between the message and the message. The positive side of this situation is that having to do both gives them a better chance than their predecessors to learn how to do each well, and appropriately.

Community can be as elusive at the suburban level as it can at the national, sometimes even more so. As the renowned economist Amartya Sen has observed in the all-too-simplistic, and often xenophobic, controversy over globalisation, even the idea of nations as "loose federations of cultures, held together by common bonds of interest.... risks lumping people into 'communities' they may not want to be part of and interferes with their freedom to make their own choices". (Steele, 2001)

The so-called "local community" cannot, therefore, be taken either as a starting point or for granted. The local is not inherently any less coercive than the national, the regional or the global. Civic associations in any meaningful sense are only possible through active participation in articulating the common good and mutuality in articulating it. (The test of any "community" is its members' ability) to share a set of beliefs and values... and demonstrate solidarity with one another..." (Christians 1999:71)

Ultimately, this means agreeing to articulate a space for contrary individuals who cleave to other goods and other gods.

Consensus is no easier in respect of media ethics. David Weaver (1998), in his study of news people around the world, found no agreement on the value of giving the public a voice in the media or campaigning for worthy causes. All that journalists agreed on globally were the need to be quick and the need to protect their sources. Lying, cheating, trespassing, pretending to be someone else, even bribery, were variously acceptable worldwide. The decision to do or eschew is thus inescapably local. Fostering and nurturing community, anywhere, requires particular knowledge and skill, and inclination. Knowing what to do is one thing. Knowing how is another. And actually doing something about it is something else altogether.

Contemporary curriculum theory focuses on enabling adults to learn what they need to know rather than trying to teach them everything – which clogs courses and confuses students. New technology makes it easier for people to learn at their own preferred times, places and paces. “Help” and “tutor” programs in computer software packages are good examples. Lecturers no longer need to waste course time teaching people to type. We can all learn and rehearse keyboard skills by ourselves.

A bigger issue is whether people are going to learn “about” (say) the structures of local government and the media, or to be capable of using that knowledge professionally. Should they take a course of lectures, undertake a program of exercises, or be given actual projects that require them to demonstrate and refine their capacity? Cadets could, for instance, rehearse their subbing skills by banking all stories in a computer and having to correct a certain number each week, submitting their corrections for correction by a tutor. Publishing the corrected versions on a tutorial website would provide feedback to authors and editors alike.

Elsewhere (Morgan, 2001), I have written more fully about the general strategy of providing the ingredients and the recipes for curriculum on the Internet to enable people to cater for themselves. jourNet, the global network for professional education in journalism and media, was conceived and developed to meet the needs of developing countries. This debate shows that it is relevant here too. Which is not really surprising, when you remember that many of the UN’s small member states are about the size of suburbs.

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