

1-2001

Journalism education and rural newspaper standards

E. Hart

Monash University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme>

Recommended Citation

Hart, E., Journalism education and rural newspaper standards, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 10, 2001, 31-37.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss10/5>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Journalism Education And Rural Newspaper Standards

In the newsrooms of the regional and rural press, the skills of fledgling journalists come into view, reflecting on the quality of the university courses that trained many of them. Country and city journalists have studied the same subjects and learnt the same skills in preparation for the workplace, but recruits to the rural press face particular challenges that might inhibit their capacity to work to the professional standards of their metropolitan counterparts. These challenges arise partly from the lack of professional support in rural newsrooms and partly from the culture of the country press. Attempts to lift standards therefore depend not only on the subjects studied in three years of university education and training for the workplace, but also on the conditions cadets face in the early months of their first jobs in journalism and on how well prepared they are to challenge these conditions. This paper considers four ways to lift the standard of the rural press through education and training in universities to prepare students for the rural workplace.

Elizabeth Hart

Monash University

The country press, for all its achievements, falls short of honouring the major function of journalism under the western press system: to enable an informed public to engage in democratic discourse. Rural papers reinforce the status quo (Pretty 1993), prop up the established order, and rarely display signs of independence. They suffer from a shortage of trained and experienced journalists (Hart 1998), the absence of a long tradition of high-quality independent journalism, an acceptance of authority in its various forms, little group philosophy, and a consensus model in their relationship with readers (Pretty 1993). By contrast, mainstream Australian journalism places itself in an adversarial position to political institutions, to the government and, to a lesser extent, to the business sector in its attempts to uphold the important functions of journalism. It expresses adherence to a 20-point code of ethics, a libertarian tradition, a fierce defence of freedom of expression, and a serious intention to uphold public debate. It too falls short of fulfilling the functions of the Fourth

©AsiaPacific
MediaEducator
Issue No.10
Jan - June 2001

Estate. "It fails to report the news and fails to inform the citizenry" and has been "colonised by entertainment" (McKnight 1997: 23).

The subject of this paper is the country press as a starting point in the careers of young journalism graduates. The value of country papers as agents of communication in local communities is beyond question. But they have yet to make their mark in contributing to the force of Australian journalism, and they remain the weak links in the networks of mass communication that the press provides. Calls for specialist training for regional and rural journalists attempt to address the problem of relatively lower standards evident in country newspapers. One question that universities might consider is how to prepare students to contribute more to the political vibrancy of the regional and rural press.

Lifting standards involves more than just imparting knowledge at undergraduate level. The simple acquisition of knowledge about the operations of local communities and their political and social institutions does not go far enough to turn country press cadets into intrepid independent reporters. The character of the rural press is pertinent to any discussion about journalistic standards. Universities could better prepare undergraduates for work in rural and regional Australia. However, without a critical understanding of the *raison d'être* and motivation of country papers and the culture of the country newsroom, most specialist knowledge students acquire in their undergraduate years would hold functional rather than higher professional value. That is, it would enable the cadet to work faster and more accurately but would not necessarily lift the newspaper's contribution to the democratic discourse. This is not to deny the importance of expanding the scope of undergraduate subjects.

A more effective strategy for the education of rural press journalists would be fourfold. The first component is already in place to a greater or lesser extent in all university courses professing to teach journalism. It is the teaching of the method, practice and principles of journalism in Australia. The second component would be additional to most courses: the teaching of specialist knowledge about the regional and rural press. The third component, also at undergraduate level, would develop in students a propensity to challenge the culture of the country press for the sake of more vibrant journalism. The fourth component would be continuous training in the workplace.

This approach recognises the particular characteristics of the rural press as an integral part of the training of rural journalists and suggests ways students might be better prepared to confront the exigencies of the workplace to honour their profession rather than serve the agenda of proprietors. It recognises that just as a finance journalist, health journalist or science journalist develops a critical approach to her subject in order to honour the principles of journalism as set out in the introduction to the Australian Journalists Association

The education basics

Specialist

(AJA) Code of Ethics, so might a rural journalist more critically evaluate the stories that are told, or remain untold, in regional communities.

Country press journalists start out as well trained as their city counterparts. All graduates study the same subjects and all go into a range of jobs to which they can adapt the fundamental skills of the craft and the profession: news gathering, news writing, critical thought, powers of interpretation, and a working knowledge of media law and journalism ethics. The new cadet will be expected to find stories; write them in the active voice with conciseness, brevity, clarity, force, and detail for a mass audience; attribute all commentary; push the legal boundaries while avoiding litigation; produce 5000 words a week or five stories a day to deadlines; and get it right.

Beyond that, the cadet's personal attributes, aptitude, and in-house training will determine success. The same broad principles of journalism method and practice apply in city and country journalism: independence, fairness, accuracy, fearless reporting, and respect for sources, ethics and the law, and readers. It is not the purpose of this paper to judge how well or poorly students learn these while at university, but it is to state that these few basic subjects aim to prepare them for work in all fields of journalism. With the fundamentals in hand, the graduate going into a country paper still has a lot to learn, but no more than the graduate going to a metropolitan daily.

The second component, specialist knowledge of the regional and rural press, might include familiarity with the structure and processes of local government, a knowledge of the local farming or mining practices, sensitivity towards small-town family and friendship networks, an understanding of the importance of business to the economic livelihood of a regional or rural centre, an understanding of the importance of sport and community groups to the neighbourhood social order and to the community mindset, knowledge of the local electoral system and its terminology, and knowledge of the particular roles of the magistrates courts and the police in small communities. In towns where the magistrate is also on the school council, the publican on the hospital board, and the chamber of commerce president on the football fund-raising committee, junior journalists work in a tangled web of financial and personal interaction in which they themselves, as residents, can be participants too.

The graduate who had attended local council meetings and interacted with the appointed and elected officers, sat in the courthouse on a busy morning, attended chamber of commerce meetings, and spent a day at the local electorate offices of both parties while a student would presumably be more *au fait* in the early weeks

of employment, as would be the metropolitan cadet who had attended state and federal parliaments and the industrial relations court. The one going to a mining town such as Mt Isa would benefit from knowledge of the corporate structure of mining companies, industrial relations law, the history of industrial action in the mining industry, and metallurgy. Hence there is a case for increasing the field knowledge of all journalism students. Rural reporters will rarely cover parliaments; nevertheless at every state and federal election they will report on the nuances of the parliamentary election process in all their intrigue and complexity. Similarly, metropolitan reporters will occasionally cover local council events. Specialist training would serve them all well – in science, sport, politics, entertainment, trade, international, and finance journalism.

The decision for universities is how much to specialise. A glance at the curricula of Australian universities reveals that some are specialising. James Cook University in Australia's tropical north, a regional campus with an emphasis on earth sciences, has offered science journalism, sports journalism, and regional and rural journalism as electives. In Victoria, Monash University's journalism strand includes international journalism as a compulsory subject at third year, to coincide with Monash's wider international training agreements. These specialisations add weight and dynamo to a course, but it is difficult for students to predict which ones would be most useful in their careers.

Ongoing training

The third component would arm students to uphold the general principles of serious journalism despite the obstacles they face in country newsrooms – obstacles that derive from the character of the country press. It would involve teaching students about the power structures and social forces in regional and rural centres, thereby to equipping them with the insights to produce more informative stories, to represent all the voices in the community, and to find new angles. This would take undergraduate journalism education beyond the realm of knowledge of, say, local councils and into the realm of informed critical thought. Thus tertiary courses could contribute more, not only to the education of young journalists, but also to the quality of the rural press.

A new graduate on a small country paper is often expected to be an instant all-rounder: a writer, an editor, a photographer, and a desktop publisher. Where guidance from senior journalists is not available at call and formal workplace training schemes are rare, young recruits learn by trial and error. It can be a lonely introduction to journalism without the quasi-educational benefits of café conversations and bar chatter with colleagues at the end of the week, regular editorial meetings, or down-the-line subs to detect and correct errors before they reach the chief. Rural editors, sometimes with less formal journalism education than their cadets (Hart 1998), are close enough to the editorial

production line to detect the skills and solecisms of new staff at a glance. Consequently, any gaps in the undergraduate training are immediately evident to invoke criticism of the academic courses. If in these same workplaces, editors are too busy to monitor new recruits, the pace of professional development is slow, and the quality of the rural press suffers.

In some country newsrooms, the cadet is the best-educated staff member. My own study in 1998 of 59 Victorian country press journalists from 20 newspapers found that fewer than half had university degrees and just over one-quarter had journalism majors. The survey included 18 editors, three of whom had tertiary journalism training. Under these and other constraints, cadets in country newsrooms have little opportunity for in-house training. This leaves them dependent on their undergraduate education to carry them through the novice years. Continuing professional development is now mandatory in many professions. It is part of the enterprise agreements of major metropolitan newspapers. My own survey (1998) found that the 59 respondents had completed a combined 763 hours of in-house training that year – a mean training per journalist of 12 hours, 56 minutes per year, or less than two working days per year. However, it should be acknowledged that this training was concentrated among the junior/cadet journalists.

Yes, after university educators have educated them they still need training (see the paper by Leader Newspapers editorial training consultant Jane Cafarella). The need for workplace training can provide an excuse to criticise the quality of undergraduate courses, particularly as much of the workplace training content reiterates the basics already studied at university. But such criticisms of universities overlook the following educational principles: just because the lecturer said it does not mean the student heard it; just because the student heard it does not mean she understood it; just because the lecturer said it, the student heard it, and the student applied it for the assignment and the exam, does not mean the student will remember it two or three years later; and just because all students studied this point or that point and passed the year does not mean they all shared the same abilities. All education turns up a pattern of performance that discriminates the higher and lower performers, just as a race for the four-minute mile would turn up discriminating results, one winning, others following, others doing their best but losing. These educational principles are little comfort to the workplace editors who expect competency upon graduation. Nor are they an excuse for sloppy educators. But they do illustrate the importance of workplace training in the early years, even it is just to reinforce common grammatical and stylistic points such as the use of the comma in non defining clauses or the matching of

Challenging the rural press culture

tenses within sentences.

Following the rapid expansion of journalism courses since the 1960s and 1970s, educators have argued about the best ways to prepare undergraduates for the challenges of press journalism. The rapid increase in journalism graduates through the 1990s has reduced the relevance of the old trade-versus-profession arguments in journalism education, but course content remains a point of argument for journalism educators and the industry, evidenced by the fact that many journalists move from print to broadcast or balance both throughout their careers. Universities have recognised the case for specialisation in such areas as print, radio, television, investigation, online, and editing. The generic skills of news gathering and language use, meeting deadlines, and understanding law, pervade them all and serve metropolitan press cadets well alongside the benefits of professional support in the workplace. They would serve country cadets equally well if not for the idiosyncratic nature of the country press, which can inhibit the young cadet's propensity to inject political vibrancy into news reporting. Universities can prepare students to counter these constraints by teaching students to critically analyse the role of the country press and to apply the general principles of the western press system that aim to lift the level of public debate in country towns.

Conclusion

REFERENCES

- Buckridge, P. (1993), "Brian Penton: a career in journalism," *Australian Studies in Journalism*.
- Hart, E. (1998), "Formal education levels among Victorian country newspaper journalists," Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Wollongong.
- Henningham, J. (1989), "Industry and academic views of journalism education," *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 11: 62-72.
- Henningham, J. (1992), *Issues in Australian Journalism*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne.
- Henningham, J. (1994), "A suggested core curriculum in journalistic education," *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 16, no. 1: 88-93.
- Pretty, K. (1993), "Dusting off the Grassroots: A survey of Australian country journalists," *Australian Studies in Journalism*, no. 2: 75-119.
- Kirkpatrick, R. (1996), "Diploma to degree: 75 years of tertiary journalism studies," *Australian Studies in Journalism*, no. 5: 256-263
- McKnight, D. (1997), "Public journalism, citizenship and strategies for change," *Culture and Policy*, vol. 8, no. 2: 23-30.
- Pearson, M. (1994), "Rethinking quality in journalism education," *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 16, no. 2: 67-72.
- Pearson, M. (1994), "Journalism education: taking up the challenge of a changing world," *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 16, no. 1: 99-107

Wallace, J. (1989), "Journalism education and award restructuring," *Australian Journalism Review*, vol. 11, January-December 1989: 50-54.

ELIZABETH HART is a former regional press journalist and subeditor with the independently-owned South East Newspapers in Victoria, Australia. She lectures in journalism at Monash University, Australia. Email: elizabeth.hart@arts.monash.edu.au