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All Things To Everyone: Expectations Of Tertiary Journalism Education

Australian journalism education has developed significantly since its major expansion in the 1980s. The conundrum is many older journalists appear to reckon the only way to learn the business is through the school of hard knocks – the university of life. Chances are, most middle-aged journalists have no idea how many of their colleagues hold journalism degrees. An example of this is the comments of Mark Day, who, fresh from judging the News Limited Cadet of the Year, devoted his 22 March 2001 column in the Media supplement of The Australian newspaper to the training of journalists. The winner was no high-flyer from a national daily or popular newspaper, but a reporter on a humble local rag, Victoria's Moreland Sentinel. The winner's stories were not necessarily better written than the other finalists, Day wrote, but what stood out was her news sense and persistence. These are qualities of the successful journalist that cannot be taught, Day said. "You've got to be a self-starter. You've got to be bold and vigorous. But above all, you've got to be a go-getting ideas factory."

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Day either did not know or chose to ignore that the winner was an RMIT journalism graduate. Telephone calls to the other five finalists for this year's award revealed that a further three were journalism graduates and the remaining two were graduates of other arts disciplines. This is not to say that Day's views are unrepresentative; most of us working in universities feel that journalists and editors are dismissive of the value of a journalism degree.

In response to Day's column, I posted several questions to the JEAnet (Journalism Education Network, jeanet@uow.edu.au) discussion group on the subject of journalism education, with the aim of gathering material for a follow-up article in the Media supplement about how journalism graduates are in finding work in the news media industry, whether they find work in certain pockets of the industry or throughout it, and to list some high-achieving graduates. Nearly 20 of

Australia's estimated 80 journalism educators replied to my request. The graduates extended to all media – newspapers, magazines, television, radio and online – both commercial and non-commercial. There were numerous well-known names across Australia. Other educators mentioned graduates working internationally, while several mentioned that their graduates were working in local media. The latter were primarily from those working in regional universities, whose journalism programs tend to create closer links with regional media.

This cross-section of employment outcomes for graduates illustrates not only the breadth of jobs gained by graduates but one of the difficulties facing journalism educators: how do we properly prepare students for such a wide range of jobs? I have probably heard the question raised in various public fora about 50 times since I began coordinating the RMIT journalism program in 1995. Some people want us to devote more time to basic grammar, because students have no idea how to use apostrophes. Some want us to teach business journalism, because it is now one of the biggest sections in newspapers. Some say create subjects about online journalism because the entire world and everyone in it has gone digital. Some say teach a subject about media management because journalists need to understand the commercial pressures media companies face. The list could go on, including history of the media, investigative journalism, foreign languages and many more.

The fact is that in a three-year undergraduate program, there is barely time to teach the rudiments of journalistic practice. Three years is the length of a school-leaver's cadetship. No news editor would expect a junior journalist, on completing a cadetship, to be fluent in all areas of journalistic practice. School-leaver cadets practise their journalism daily, whereas at best half the subjects that journalism students take are about journalism. In some cases, they comprise only four of the 24 to 25 subjects in the degree. In addition, universities are witnessing the gradual erosion of the full-time student. It is common for students to work up to 20 hours a week in part-time jobs to earn money to support themselves. For a few, these jobs are related to journalism, such as an editorial assistant in a newsroom. Most take standard student jobs – bar work and the like. There are, then, many competing pressures on students' time. Furthermore, as Michael Meadows of Griffith University's journalism program has said, a sizeable number of journalism students do not necessarily want to work in the mainstream news media, although they are interested in the media in a broad sense and they value the vocational skills learnt in a journalism course.

If journalism educators continually bow to the demands of

various interested parties in the industry, we will end up trying to stuff far too much content into an undergraduate degree. It is preferable, in my view, to teach students the core principles underlying journalism as a discipline and the core skills and methods of journalistic practice. You take that as far as you can in three years, while recognising that there will be much left untouched. Courses cannot be all things to all people and everybody views the world through the prism of their particular needs and experience.

There is also widespread misunderstanding about the respective strengths and weaknesses of universities and newsrooms. Editors may lament journalism schools as impractical, saying core skills can only be learnt on the job, but isn't that self-evident? No university course can prepare students for every eventuality. Doctors learn bedside manner when they begin practice, and lawyers learn the nuances of jury selection in courtrooms. Journalism courses can and should provide a grounding in core professional skills and methods. However, it is preferable for both universities and newsrooms to play to their strengths. Universities are great places to read about and study the history, literature, politics and sociology of journalism; to think about the role of the news media here and overseas; and discuss how new technologies might change it in the future. The unceasing crush of daily deadlines make newsrooms a poor environment for this kind of work.

If many working in the industry are lukewarm or even scornful of journalism schools, while nevertheless employing journalism graduates, few have publicly discussed the idea that universities and newsrooms should play to their strengths. The debate remains mired in the bog of dichotomy: theory versus practice. Ivory-tower-dwelling journalism schools versus on-the-job newsroom training. Perhaps it is not surprising that this false god of dichotomy is worshipped. It is a staple of news and current affairs. But it is also some years since the limitations of this approach were satirised in *The Simpsons*. As Kent Brockman said, introducing one item: "Michelangelo's David. Is it classical art, or just some guy with his pants down?"

On ABC Radio National's 'Media Report' of 7 June 2001, News Limited's training manager Lucinda Duckett was asked about the value of studying journalism as a discipline informed by a theoretical approach and grounded in a body of knowledge. She replied:

[I]f you're going to look at those wider issues of journalism, which are fascinating, that's absolutely fine, but it's not going to teach you how to write an intro, it's not going to teach you how to research a story, it's not going to teach you shorthand, which we still exist on. So we still find that we are needing to teach those subjects. We're getting very highly educated university graduates coming to us, many with a

second degree, whose knowledge of grammar and English is severely lacking; they can't make a verb agree with the subject. We teach that. One of the first things we do with our cadets at News Limited is a spelling test. We have only once seen in the last two years, a cadet get more than 50 per cent in that spelling test. It's not a very hard spelling test. We need to teach that stuff, because it's not arriving in the schools at the moment and it's certainly not being picked up at university.

Neither Duckett, nor another 'Media Report' interviewee, Cratis Hippocrates, training manager at John Fairfax and a former university journalism educator, saw beyond the theory/practice dichotomy. Only Chris Nash, Associate Professor of Social Communication and Journalism at the University of Technology in Sydney articulated the idea that journalism is more than simply a collection of craft skills. What is curious is the highly selective way in which various discussions are enjoined or avoided. Duckett and Hippocrates would not enter a theory of journalism discussion on radio, but if a government wanted to introduce legislation that curbed the media, they would undoubtedly start talking about freedom of the press, a concept that carries with it a complex philosophy and a long history.

Some of the cadet counsellors I have interviewed in recent months, like Geoff Williams of the Adelaide Advertiser and Kim Lockwood of the Herald and Weekly Times Ltd, spoke of the need to inculcate cadets in the way their company views news and "to write the way we want them to". However, there is a distinction between training and education that few in industry seem to understand or care about. Such understanding is unlikely to develop given the present direction of universities as propelled by Federal Education Minister David Kemp. While journalism schools need to work closely with the news media industry to provide job-ready graduates, they also, as part of the academy, need to stand apart from the industry, to study it, question it and offer new and different ways of doing journalism.

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