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Journalism education: taking up the challenge of a changing world [Adaptation of presidential address to Journalism Education Association (Australia). Conference (1993: Brisbane).]

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Autumn 1995. Students will use the Issues Module to further explore what they learned their first year. The design metaphor for the module is “Issues as Complex Landscape” and “Students as Landscape Explorer,” a metaphor which will be realized in the system graphics.

For example, students will be able to click over mini-cases that are arranged on actual landscapes in order to “telescope” into related text, picture and audio. Module design is informed by recent research on the use of hypertext environments to facilitate transfer of knowledge to real-world situations, and weighing up the ethical implications of decisions.

We will assemble a bank of case studies—from internal and external sources so that instructors can conveniently acquire them and plug them into their practices. The case bank will include on-line cases, an increasingly popular method of delivery that helps cases come to life.

We both strongly believe that no instruction about computing software should be given without an ethical component. Nowhere is this more important than in the use of the Network.

Ethics should be integral to all curriculum planning, of course, but particularly when you are launching thousands of new students into cyberspace. We attempted to use the excitement of Mosaic, of color and linking, of instantly connecting halfway around the world, to hold the students’ interest while we presented the “rules of the road.” We created a program we see as a first draft, needing polishing and editing and pilot testing. After six months we planned to assess its effectiveness.

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Mark Pearson

Journalism education
Taking up the challenge of a changing world

Journalism educators urged to assert their legitimacy

Just over six years ago the Journalism Education Association held its annual conference in Melbourne. For me, that gathering represented a series of firsts. It was my first such conference after leaving the Australian to take up a job in Toowoomba as a journalism lecturer. It was my first opportunity to deliver an academic paper, “Producing a weekly newspaper on desktop - The Darling Downs experience”.

But above all, it was my first contact with my fellow journalism educators—until then just names on journal articles, course outlines and a couple of textbook covers. I recall one colleague giving me his rather cynical definition of a journalism curriculum: “In the first year we teach them the inverted pyramid and make them write a lot of intros. In the second year we let them have their heads and learn how to write feature leads. And in their final year we fine-tune their news intros again so they’re ready for industry. By the time they’ve finished their degrees they’ve only ever written the first sentence of a story.” If only things were so simple.

I think it would be fair to both the Melbourne conference and its organizers to describe that gathering as small or “intimate and collegiate”. That was the nature of the association and its conferences at the time. Since its establishment in 1976 the JEA had operated as a network for journalism educators at the nine or ten institutions offering courses throughout Australia. Conferences were fairly informal affairs, with papers exploring the relatively virgin territory of journalism education and critiques of Australian journalists and their practices.

Significantly, the day after that Melbourne conference a much larger gathering representing a cross-section of industry and education took
part in a single day talkfest which heralded the introduction of in-service training for journalists and fuelled calls in some industry circles for accreditation of tertiary journalism courses.

To my mind, the contrast between those two meetings was astounding. While the JEA conference was a rather chummy and chubby affair with an air of self-assurance about it, the training forum was a lively exchange, with unionists and industry representatives united in their criticism of tertiary journalism courses and their teachers. They were committed to going it alone with the development and introduction of in-service courses.

It seemed we had a problem. Even if we were confident of the content of our courses and the quality of our graduates, we were battling an enormous obstacle: the perception that our programs were irrelevant to industry needs. Since then a great deal has changed in journalism, in journalism education and in the JEA which has gone a long way towards countering that perception and rendering it less relevant.

In those six years we have seen a number of changes. Firstly, journalism education has grown, and the association has grown with it. The number of journalism courses offered throughout Australia has almost doubled and the association's membership has grown accordingly.

Secondly, our recognition of journalism education needs in the Pacific region has resulted in several New Zealand and Pacific Island educators joining our ranks and patiently watching and participating as the association changes its outlook from national to regional. Thirdly, while journalism education has grown laterally, it has also grown vertically, with the introduction of several postgraduate programs at one end of the scale and the emergence of secondary school journalism courses at the other. More providers of distance education have emerged, the latest being the University of Wollongong with its postgraduate distance courses on SBS television. More fee-paying foreign students are enrolling in our courses, presenting us with educational and ethical dilemmas as we realise that Australia's brand of journalism might not adapt well to their societies or cultures.

While this growth has taken place within tertiary course structures, some of us have ventured beyond these boundaries to forge links with those parts of industry which scoff at the claims that our courses are irrelevant or out of touch. While the metropolitan dailies looked elsewhere for their in-service course development, the regional dailies turned to journalism educators to write their courses. QUT was picked and the courses launched to date have won industry acclaim for their bridging of theory-practice gulfs. Further, the larger regional groups have seconded tertiary journalism educators to administer and teach their courses. Several among us are doing this. Deakin University has developed a distance in-service program for the Country Press Association. Again, some of us will be delivering the residential component of this course. Some have built links with Pacific industry associations and are developing and offering courses specially tailored to their needs.

On another level, the University of Technology Sydney has pioneered the notion of an independently funded journalism research unit with its Australian Centre for Independent Journalism. This group has been particularly productive in its generation of research projects, hosting of seminars and publication of books and materials, the most recent being the cadet training package Front Page...and Beyond, which has received widespread industry acclaim.

Journalism educators have raised their public profile and have been recognised for their particular expertise. Hardly a royal commission or parliamentary inquiry goes by without one of our number making submissions or giving evidence on matters of journalism or education. We are quoted in the local and national media as experts on journalism and the media. Many of us host radio segments or write newspaper columns. Some still practise as working journalists and their work appears in the mainstream media. And, of course, our members' faces appear at national and international forums ranging from the very scholarly Fulbright Symposium to the very tabloid 60 Minutes Symposium.

Our universities have also recognised our discipline as a legitimate field of study. Both the University of Queensland and the University of Wollongong have demonstrated this by establishing chairs in journalism, an institutional recognition of the valuable role journalism can play in a tertiary environment. Some have given a degree of academic status and administrative independence to journalism by recognising it as a school or department within the university structure.

Our members have had considerable success in their academic endeavours. Several have been awarded research grants by both the public and private sectors. Quality research has resulted in our members' work being published in esteemed international scholarly journals. Six years ago there were only two or three Australian journalism textbooks we could set for our students. Thanks to the labor of our members and others, there are now at least a dozen such texts and more in the pipeline.

There are still those in industry who accuse us of being irrelevant. But today we can counter their criticisms with numerous examples of how our courses have been successful in marrying theory with practice. My paper on desktop publishing six years ago is now ancient history. Most programs are producing in-house publications giving their students actual newsroom experiences. Some—notably the University of Queensland and Curtin University with their Independent and Western Independent—have taken on the mainstream press in the marketplace with commendable results. They have been able to structure their courses around commercially accountable products. Smaller scale initiatives have occurred in radio and television with several courses offering campus and community programs based on student journalism. These campus-based experiences have been complemented with more rigorous internship programs in which students are rewarded with both marks and dollars for their efforts in the mainstream media, elevating the schemes above the old voluntary work experience programs where our students were too easily confused with high school children sitting in office corners.

We have also been active in our classrooms. Several of our members have been experimenting with new teaching methods, some bringing the latest computer-aided educational techniques into their courses. Some
have been exploring this for distance education, with the University of Wollongong developing prototype multimedia programs for students. The University of Queensland has gone back to basics with its software package designed to cure students' grammatical problems and assist their news writing. At Bond University students use electronic mail to produce a newspaper, submit assignments and correspond with their lecturers. Charles Sturt University has begun a similar product.

But if that's where we've been, where are we headed in journalism education? What challenges do we face and what opportunities can we harvest?

Prominent US journalism academic Philip Meyer has heralded a new era in journalism and journalism education to accompany the change from the delivery of information to its processing. Meyer offered his thoughts in an essay in Journalism Quarterly last year, provocatively titled "After Journalism". He sees journalism education shifting from the craft model of straight reportage technique to a professional model adaptable to changing media technologies and social demands for interpretation and analysis. He notes that journalism schools are fast becoming schools of journalism and mass communication and that the next logical step is to drop the "journalism" from their titles.

While I agree with most of Meyer's analysis and predictions, I for one will not be rushing to take the word Journalism off my office door. To my mind, Meyer is throwing the baby out with the bath water. Certainly, journalism is changing. And, yes, the era of mass instant communication brings a need to adapt our methods and to seek new ones. But surely, no matter what the means and method of delivery, if we are talking about journalism, the more diverse the range of media, the greater the challenge journalists and educators face in finding the most suitable ways of making information more relevant to various audiences.

Herein lie both the challenges and opportunities for journalism educators. It's all a question of whether we sit passively and allow ourselves to be bypassed by changing media and societies or take on a role as innovators and lead our students and our profession into the new era of journalism. Some of the innovations I have already mentioned are doing just that: Wollongong's research into multimedia teaching and news dissemination; the University of Queensland's computer-aided learning packages and Bond's electronic newspaper are all examples of journalism education keeping a step ahead of industry and thereby giving students a head start in their careers.

We've all done that over the past few years with desktop publishing. We have graduated hundreds of students with pagination skills in the time industry has taken to install equipment capable of performing the task. These students are now perfectly poised to capitalise on industry's slow start. The same might be said of digitised sound and cameras, electronic news transmission, multimedia presentation and of experimentation with new communications devices such as Apple's Newton as vehicles for news delivery.

But let's not confuse the technology of mass communication with the practice of journalism. I think this has been Meyer's mistake. We are in the business of developing methods of interpreting and analysing a mountain of information for audiences who may have the technical potential to access it but lack the time and understanding to make sense of it.

Too technical a definition of the role of journalism also neglects the other major changes occurring in our societies. Our postmodern world of multinational corporations, changing social mores and tangled webs of cultures raises other challenges and opportunities for journalism educators. The whole application of demographics to the media is a largely neglected curriculum area, despite the fact that news delivery seems to be changing from mass dissemination to a consumer-oriented, needs based package. Without understanding those consumers, how can we but guess at their needs?

Part of the challenge is in making our research and our courses relevant to today's practitioners. Too often we keep our research findings to ourselves by merely publishing an article in an academic journal or presenting a paper at a conference. Journalists and news executives should be hungry for this kind of analysis, particularly if they can see it adds to their efficiency, improves their product or service or hints at a new market.

We can do much more towards promoting ourselves to industry. We need to silence our critics, but not through public slanging matches. It seems every journalist and media executive is an instant expert on journalism education. They are only too willing to share with the world their musings on the best ways to educate journalists. Every now and again the same criticisms and quick-fix solutions surface.

- We don't teach them enough of the liberal arts. / We teach them too much of the liberal arts.
- We don't develop critical minds. / Our graduates are too critical and they ask too many questions.
- We don't give them a world view. / They're all leaving after two years to work overseas.

... the list goes on. The flavour of the month seems to be the suggestion that undergraduates not learn journalism but instead learn history and philosophy and study journalism at postgraduate level. Will someone please advise the critic that there are at least six such programs available? It's easy to criticise from the sidelines. Invariably, when you ask such would-be experts to design the ideal journalism course, they come up with something very similar to what most of us are already doing.

Occasionally someone will have a genuinely bright idea which we are all too willing to build into our programs. We saw that at the 1992 JEA conference when we conducted a workshop on the skills and understandings we believed the ideal journalism graduate should have on exiting our courses. Some people came up with curriculum areas most of us had never contemplated. The exercise showed just how much we have in common, yet also how much we could build into our courses and how our approaches and priorities varied. It also provided the opportu-
nity for some serious navel gazing as we considered how far short of the optimum our own courses might fall. The exercise continued in the form of a curriculum workshop on journalism ethics at the 1993 conference, and the formation of a committee to report to our July gathering at the ICA conference in Sydney.

One way of silencing our critics is to explain our track record, using the kinds of examples I have already mentioned. Another way is to rally the troops, marshal the success stories our courses have produced over the years and use them to spread the word about tertiary journalism education. Too often in the past the only attempts at this have been done on an institutional basis with course co-ordinators boasting that a particular graduate has taken up a certain prominent position. Indeed, institutions need to do much more in the way of developing relationships with alumni. But as an association we need to share this data so we can provide the names of graduates to critics to demonstrate just how many of the rising stars of modern journalism are graduates of tertiary journalism courses. Their testimonials are crucial to our perception in industry. And for too long they've hidden their degrees under a bushel for fear of being ridiculed by the anti-intellectual troglodytes who still inhabit many of the nation's largest newsrooms.

Another way of answering the critics is to finally come to terms with the legitimacy of our own careers and identities as journalism educators. To some, the words "journalism" and "educator" mix as well as oil and water. We get the same kinds of questions and comments: "When are you going back to the real world?"; "Those who can't, teach and those who can, do.; or "Journalism academic? Now that's an oxymoron." How many times do you have to tell people that when you are teaching journalism you are doing it? Most of us have learned as much about journalism by teaching it as we did by doing it. Every day we encounter challenges to traditional practices that have gone unquestioned in newsrooms for generations. And, by the way, we spend much of our lives still "doing it"—sub-editing students' assignments and editing their tapes week in, week out. Not to mention the actual journalism we perform as we edit and author students' publications and programs which we have built into our courses. Indeed, we are journalism educators. Next time we return home from overseas, we need not ponder over what to write in the Occupation box on our immigration form. No, most of us are no longer active journalists in the trade-union sense of the term, although many try to do some part time or freelance work to maintain an industry link. Neither are many of us comfortable with the term "academic" as it is usually defined. That hasn't been our career path and is not our primary focus. We need to become ever more confident in the legitimacy of our careers and identities as journalism educators. There's no need to apologize for it to our former colleagues or to our current academic ones. Lawyers, accountants and doctors have the same difficulties. Like most teachers in professional disciplines we are driven by a fundamental belief that we have much more to contribute by educating than we would in professional practice—no matter how great our abilities there. To most of us, there's more satisfaction in seeing understanding dawn in a student's eyes than there would be in occupying a leather chair in some mahogany row of a news organisation or going back to a newsroom to do for another ten or fifteen years what we have already done—and enjoyed doing—in earlier stages of our careers.

While we need to develop and maintain a higher level of industry recognition, we need to do the same in academic. Our research needs to be seen to be relevant to industry, but it also needs to satisfy the exacting demands of scholarly review. To that end, we are fortunate in that we now have two respected academic journals in our specialised field—the JEA's own Australian Journalism Review and the University of Queensland's Australian Studies in Journalism. Other journals in the broader mass communication field—most notably Media Information Australia—publish our research.

We also need to continue the trend towards academic qualification. We can do with more higher degree holders in our ranks and will indeed see more qualifications in journalism as graduates of our postgraduate courses and doctoral programs join our ranks in the future.

We need to continually review and improve our teaching strategies. Let's always remember the second strand of the "journalism educator" title. Curriculum issues arise which deserve our attention. Certainly, we need to equip our students to develop journalism skills across a range of new technologies. But, much more than that, they need to be equipped to deal with the contradictions that arise in our changing world such as reporting across cultures, privacy concerns, changing legislation, the new world order, and even coming to terms with the small rural community which will continue to support its traditional weekly newspaper well into the next century.

All this needs to be done in a nourishing educational climate where we should choose the learning environment which best suits the imparting of the particular skill or understanding. Thankfully, we have seen the end in most institutions of anecdotal stand-up lectures in theatres containing hundreds of students. Workshops and computer-aided learning packages have taken over.

Although we might reject Meyer's proposition that we are entering a post-journalism era, we should reflect upon the kinds of journalism that are relevant to our changing societies. Rather than an era of no journalism, I suggest we have arrived at an age of many journalisms. The thrust of some courses has been towards an ultimate goal of graduates working in the mainstream metropolitan or national media. We have told our entrants they might need to do a couple of years in the provinces before they break into the big time, but they'll get there eventually. Those days have passed.

Of course, one reason is that there are not the jobs in the mainstream media for the hundreds of graduates we are producing each year. But there is a more cogent reason than that. There is a smorgasbord of career opportunities out there for young journalists who see their roles as information gatherers and processors. There are many journalisms: com-
community journalism, corporate journalism, agency journalism, niche publishing and broadcasting, social research and government journalism, to name a few. And then there is mainstream metropolitan journalism, which is itself undergoing rapid change. Our challenge is to equip our graduates with the skills and understandings to work in any of these fields, to become truly multimedia.

Where then, are the opportunities for us as journalism educators? I see a range of opportunities surfacing which we are well poised to capitalise upon with our unique combination of skills and qualifications. The Australian Centre for Independent Journalism has led the way with its reports on topics such as cross-cultural reporting, youth and the media, inaccuracies in newspapers and foreign affairs reporting. The essence of their work has been to bring research into the field; to develop professional solutions to cultural and ethical problems. While they have taken on particularly large projects, there is a niche market in providing specific research-based solutions to carefully identified and narrowly focused problems in journalism performance and practice. For example, a bi-weekly newspaper has just realised that its circulation has been falling because the fabric of its society has changed. The formerly rural area has become part of the commuter belt. How does it attract the new readers? Market research companies might be able to give the publishers some of the answers. But surely journalism educators are best placed to develop journalistic solutions to such demographic problems. What kind of reportage is required? How is it best staffed and resourced? How should design changes be implemented?

We need to build more new technologies into our courses so that we can be seen as the innovators and experimenters with its applications for the news media. We’ve mentioned desktop publishing, multimedia and electronic mail as examples of journalism educators exploring possibilities. But how carefully did we explore the use of facsimile machines, mobile phones, 0055 numbers and pagers for their news gathering and news dissemination potential? Some of us have looked at the news potential of FoI legislation, but how many have seriously considered the news gathering potential of computer bulletin boards and the Internet?

Like Teletext and Videotext, some of these new technologies will undoubtedly lead to dead ends. But we need to be at the leading edge to offer that advice to industry and to prepare our students with the skills needed to adapt to technological change and tailor it to their journalistic purposes. In other words, we need to position ourselves as innovators rather than remaining a pace behind industry as it embraces innovations.

It’s also about time we launched a full-scale assault on the journalism in-service market. We’ve had some successes with the regionals and the corporate offices who are desperately in need of in-service education. Some institutions have started offering combinations of subjects as certificate courses. That goes part-way towards addressing the problem. This needs to be extended to programs committed to in-service education for journalists which address identified needs. The in-service market is a mess and the door is wide open for under-qualified and fly-by-night operators to enter the field and do substantial damage to the reputation of journalism education.

Other opportunities exist within our own institutions. Just as law degrees are often undertaken by students who do not plan to be lawyers, many of our subjects are taken by those who do not want to be journalists. Why do they take our subjects? This itself needs some sound research, however my own observation is that some people take the subjects because they like to write and others because they want to know more about the media. It might suit us to leave such students in our courses, but there are genuine opportunities for those who want to develop media literacy courses for non-journalists and professional writing courses for those who want to develop their written communication skills. It comes down to how broadly—or narrowly—you define the role of journalism education.

Opportunities abound. In this new era some will choose to specialise, while others will try to cover the gamut of journalism education. Some, like Meyer, might change their titles to reflect changing technologies or market niches. Some might make the conscious decision to exit the journalism education industry as their universities choose to commit resources to other disciplines which happen to be in vogue at the time. There is no doubt some will simply be left behind as they try to force-fit their dated inverted pyramids to a new generation which deserves a radically reinvented view of journalism. We are well placed to lead the profession into the new era of journalism as traditional notions of the news media are redefined and superseded.

But first we need to come to terms with the legitimacy of our role as educators when our right to educate is still disputed by some of our fellow journalists and academics. The answer lies in a commitment to quality and innovation in both research and teaching. Finally, we need to be willing to blow our own trumpets about our successes. We need to demonstrate to the profession that our work in both teaching and research is not peripheral but central, not merely relevant but necessary, not merely useful but crucial. Opportunities await educators who are willing to take up the challenges created by shifting paradigms in communication and society. Looking at our achievements over the past few years it’s easy to see that journalism education has come of age. Now it’s time to start telling the world about it.

Mark Pearson is Associate Professor of Journalism at Bond University. This essay is an adaptation of his presidential address to the annual conference of the JeA, QUT, Brisbane, December 1, 1993.