

Conference 2003: Journalism in Universities

The Place of Journalism in the Universities of Tomorrow

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Thank you inviting me to address the JEANZ conference this year to add my mite to a discussion on challenges facing journalism education in New Zealand. The topic you gave, "The place of journalism in the universities of tomorrow" is rather a daunting one. As a former journalist – trained at university and on the job – and a current academic – researching journalism and teaching public relations – I certainly have no crystal ball. I'll try, though, to explore some of the issues linked to teaching journalism at universities in the current environment, ponder the overall approach we might take to this teaching, help you reflect on why you do the job you do and suggest some tactics for the future.

The conference has been built around the theme of "The Odd Couple" and sets the demand for degrees up against skills-based training. The implication is not just that journalism cannot be effectively taught at university but that academia, by its nature, is antithetical to the production of good journalists.

However, there is a long and honourable tradition of teaching journalism at universities, particularly in the mid-west of United States where teaching at Wisconsin-Madison, for instance, goes back a hundred years. Just as important is the strong tradition of research from university schools of journalism. I believe that research tradition is vital for the continued health of the industry and the democratic principles it should ultimately serve.

Your conference focus – vocational training versus education in order to best equip the practitioners of tomorrow – has been the subject of long debate, and not just in journalism. Whether medicine, dentistry, veterinary science and a host of other practical disciplines "belong" in universities has been hotly contested in the past. The fact is Med Schools and J Schools are in "the academy" and are there to stay. This leads to number of challenges for those who teach these disciplines from university. Essentially they have to balance the academic demands of university and the practical demands of industry. This is not new, but recent changes in New Zealand universities, particularly the pressure for greater "economies of scale" and for staff to research and publish, have exacerbated the tensions with industry.

We are now in the early stages of the debate that was most intense in the growth years of journalism training the United States during the eighties and nineties and still continues. Britain, and more recently Australia, have also thrashed out these issues with considerable vitriol added to the discussion in Australia by lively disagreement over differing theoretical approaches to studying news media.

However, if journalism training in universities *is* here to stay, it's no longer relevant to ask whether it is a good or bad thing. The question we need to address is: how can we teach journalism within the university framework in ways that will serve both students (as future journalists) and the practice of journalism? A further concern is how can all journalism trainers work together for their own good and for the good of the practice of journalism?

These are questions we can best address if we look closer at the issues and how others have addressed them. In the face of competing pressures there have been three main responses to teaching journalism in universities. The first is wholeheartedly to embrace the academy. Here journalism programmes move from the practical to the theoretical. The university gives older programmes a make over or establishes new programmes with no vocational aspirations (even if students don't always understand this). This approach allows academics to teach far larger classes and costs the university less in staffing and resources. Further, it keeps the department solidly within the university teaching tradition. Staff are also arguably better placed to join the great game of academic publishing. However, this is essentially education *about* journalism and, while important, it is not journalism education. I'm also willing to bet that full-scale escape into theory holds no great attraction for most of you here.

The second approach is to run a two-tier system. Practical training sits within a larger programme that also offers theoretical approaches. Practitioners teach the practical aspects. They often work part-time or on

short-term contracts. They are unlikely to have higher degrees and they teach intensively with little or no pressure to undertake research and to publish. Full-time career academics teach the more theoretical papers. Students benefit from the up-to-date experience of their journalism teachers. However, they often find the subject matter and the teaching style of the more theoretical papers less enjoyable. A more serious drawback from the student perspective is that there may be no real connection drawn between what academics teach and what practitioners teach, leading to students dismissing theory as irrelevant. This is to disadvantage them, as journalists who only practise without a contextual knowledge of what they practise are effectively disarmed for the struggle of producing excellent journalism.

The third approach, and one I'd like to advocate, is for journalism to be taught by practitioner-scholars. This seems best for students, the industry and the profession itself. But it is an act of balance, putting huge responsibility on you as teachers of journalism. While becoming fully fledged scholars you need to hold on to your practical orientation and your credibility as former journalists. It should be no problem for you to ignore any misguided jibes from others in the university system about the so called inferior nature of your practical teaching. You'll be confident that you have the best mixture of practice, context and deeper theory for your students. However, you will require astute political skills and a group of supporters to leverage the extra resources you need to teach intensively and yet still have energy for research. Additionally, and I speak from experience, once you start to research and publish in journalism, particularly if you want to "meddle" with policy discussions, you can find yourself offside with your former colleagues.

There are four major players whose needs have to be reconciled for the long term health of journalism education: the teaching institutions, the news media industries, students and teachers.

First are the needs of universities in the changing education environment. It should be emphasised here that these imperatives also confront most polytechnics, so educators in these institutions are coping with the same conflicting demands. The central problem is the increasingly competitive nature of tertiary education brought about by a "bums on seats" funding regime. This translates into pressure on departments and schools to increase numbers that in turn has resulted in a patchwork growth in communication, media studies and journalism-related courses. Another result is the influx of fee-paying international students. How these can, or whether they should, be accommodated in journalism courses targeted at a New Zealand market is something that needs to be faced and discussed. Allied to this is the growth in the number of journalism providers of various kinds and standards. Combine this with pressure to increase your numbers at a time when, I understand, there is a decrease in students seeking traditional journalism careers, and you have some trying times.

The most recent change to tertiary funding – Performance Based Research Funding – means there is a price put on academic research and tertiary institutions are demanding publication outputs from all their staff. Here, New Zealand is falling into line with a number of Western countries and while, with the next funding round three years away, the immediate panic has subsided, the need to publish won't diminish. It will instead increase as universities will depend on research-based money for a growing percentage of their funding. Meanwhile, a similar fund for teaching excellence has been mooted. If introduced it is sure to bring in its wake another set of needs and resulting expectations for staff.

Often set in opposition to the needs of the university are the needs of industry for ready to roll journalists. You are the experts here, but there are a few points to consider. Our habit of referring to "industry" can blind us to the fact that there are a number of different, sometimes conflicting, needs from an increasing variety of players. Also the media industries are rapidly changing and some changes are hard to predict. In these circumstances, New Zealand's Journalism Training Organisation cannot fully represent the whole industry. It's likely too that your advisors do not represent the full spread of industry. So as educators we really need to ask ourselves how well we know "the industry" and what have we done to rigorously assess current and future needs.

Occasionally neglected in the clash of the industry and university titans are the needs of students. You know your students, but here anyway are half a dozen fundamental requirements they have. Students want practical training, underpinned by basic principles. They need contextual knowledge – including broader information about the media and their relationship to society. Crucially they want a job and the ability to find more in a changing world. Increasingly they believe a degree will give them an essential edge. Two more things will help them in the shifting job market: training in flexibility to apply their skills across a range of

career options; survival skills such as basic budgeting, business and career planning. Ultimately, of course, students want TLC (tender loving care).

Finally, and that's probably where you often feel you come, is the perspective of staff. Fortunately you have conferences like this to thrash out some issues of concern and to provide some mutual support. You don't need me to confirm you that you are all doubtless feeling overworked and overwhelmed by students. You are also inclined to feel like the meat in the sandwich because the task of reconciling the demands of their institutions, of industry and of students fundamentally falls on teachers. Third, recent changes – changing student patterns, pressure for industry upskilling and the demand for research and publication - have heightened the sense of job insecurity in your workplaces.

This then is the nexus of needs within which journalism is taught. But journalism education should not be just a reactive process. So what are the positive drivers for practitioner-scholars? Why are you here? First of all you are teachers; here to work *for* students and *with* industry. Second, practitioner-scholars are here to research and publish. This is not a chore because journalism provides the most exciting and relevant area in which to work. What other topic marries so nicely with the requirement of universities under New Zealand law to be “the critic and conscience of society”?

The research coming out of journalism schools tends to be different to that from departments of sociology or media studies. Perhaps unsurprisingly it is frequently applied in focus, positivist in approach and reformist in intent. Journalists, editors and media managers pay attention to journalism school research from universities because it is couched in language and approaches they find compatible and understandable. However, while your research may attract industry respect, it's also likely to draw fire from industry. This is the penalty for being relevant. Fortunately the crusading spirit seems to live on in journalism educators. They often want to make a difference. With your media skills you are well placed to face up to the responsibilities of becoming what the Americans call “public intellectuals”. It is also easier to stand firm under a barrage when if you accept that this is part of the job. Journalism is notorious for being unable to take the same scrutiny and criticism it is prepared to deal to others. Understandably the backlash is more bitter because those in industry feel betrayed by former colleagues – poachers turned gamekeepers.

This is generally where universities come into their own. Despite the University of Canterbury washing its hands over Joel Hayward's revisionist holocaust thesis, universities have a good record of providing automatic firm support for staff speaking out on controversial matters. However, with their close links and dependence on industry goodwill, journalism educators will feel particularly vulnerable. To deal with all this, practitioner-scholars need to keep up their contacts and be prepared to talk things through without being defensive. They can take heart from the knowledge that if their research and criticism is genuine and well founded and their teaching programme is well respected, their reputation will actually be enhanced. Their students will keep coming and will continue to get jobs.

It is important, though, that journalism educators support each other in this endeavour. We all want better journalists and better journalism. We should be prepared to speak up about improvements needed in the profession and its practice. We should also be prepared go public in support of colleagues. As former journalists we ought to know how to get a hearing from the media.

So if this is what we are facing and why we are here, what of the future? How can we move beyond surviving and into thriving? First, we can be assured the future of journalism training and education is secure if educators can remain relevant. This means a focus on understanding and servicing the student market, and on analysing needs and trends across the range of media industries. Second, educators must be confident in their roles. Each New Zealand teaching institution has a certain approach, strength or speciality that provides it with a niche. I'm not advocating a host of specialist schools, but I believe future opportunities lie in understanding and building on each school's strengths.

Third we need to think smart for publication. This means understanding the requirements of performance based research and meeting them with various cooperative initiatives that will make the process easier and more fun: initiatives like the *Pacific Journalism Review* , cross-institutional research, producing books or monographs, developing research partnerships with industry and so on.

Working together in New Zealand's small confines is essential to our thriving as teachers and researchers. The tertiary funding regime sets institution against institution in the pursuit of students and threatens to pit

researcher against researcher. This rivalry can work against the long term interests of everyone involved. We need to find ways of supporting each other, to achieve collegiality within competition.

Clearly, the educational changes of the last few years have sharpened your quest to achieve high-quality journalistic training. Similarly, the huge changes in the news media and its accompanying drift from the practices and ideals you promote in your teaching will give you ample and exciting challenges for investigation in your role as practitioner-scholars.