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# **We have the means, but what's the model? A better way for universities and industry to produce investigative journalism.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper offers a solution to two problems facing Australian journalism: the declining numbers working in newsrooms on investigative journalism and the shortage of specific and up to date curriculum materials about investigative journalism. These problems create an opportunity for universities not only to improve teaching of journalism but for them to play a greater role in providing the public with the fruits of investigative journalism projects. This paper examines the various models for producing investigative journalism within university settings. It explores collaborations with industry partners and the various forms of self-publishing undertaken by journalism courses. It asks which forms of association with industry work well and which forms of investigative journalism best suit such collaborations. It assesses recent examples in which industry partners work alongside journalism students on investigative projects. Several universities have created their own print outlets for investigative journalism and the proliferation of digital platforms has made self-publishing more accessible. This paper asks how worthwhile these stories are if they are limited to university rather than mainstream or independent publications. The paper proposes a new approach to industry-academy collaborative investigative journalism and the creation of a new model that draws on the successes and failures of existing and previous ones so that universities can better realise their potential in this field and so that student learning can be enhanced while audiences are better served.

Keywords: Investigative journalism, journalism education, Joint Bylines,

## Introduction

Investigative journalism is taught in more than 20 university and college journalism courses in Australia. It is most often an advanced course, undertaken in the final year of a student's undergraduate degree, and it is primarily practical in nature, meaning that approximately 1000 senior students are dedicated to producing investigative journalism for a sustained period each year. Contrast this with the news media industry in Australia, which tends to scale back investigative journalism in times of financial stress because it is expensive to produce, demands intensive resources and by its nature risks lawsuits that can be costly to fight even if the media outlet wins the case. Add to this the 750 journalists made redundant at the two major print and online media companies, News Limited and Fairfax Media, in 2012, which depleted reporting stocks more severely than at perhaps any time in the nation's history, according to media commentator Glenn Dyer.

Future years may see the commercial uncertainties facing the news media industry reflected in the overall annual intake of journalism students but projected enrolments remain sufficiently buoyant to suggest an emerging paradox: universities will continue to have large numbers of students willing and able to create investigative reporting even as the pool of investigative reporters within industry continues to decrease. In this paper we argue that the news media industry's current predicament represents an historic opportunity for university journalism courses to, first, make their curriculum more valuable for the industry they serve and, second, to help fill a growing gap in the news media's ability to fulfil what is termed its fourth estate role to act as a watchdog on those in positions of power and authority in society.

Furthermore, we will argue that as the recipients of public monies, universities have a social responsibility in democracies to contribute to public discourse and the public's right to know by drawing on the work of tomorrow's journalists. In 2009 in the United States, former executive editor of *The Washington Post*, Leonard Downie and communications scholar Professor Michael Schudson wrote in the *Columbia Journalism Review*:

Universities, both public and private, should become ongoing sources of local, state, specialised subject, and accountability news reporting as part of their educational missions. In addition to educating and training journalists, colleges and universities should be centres of professional news reporting, as they are for the practice and advancement of medicine and law, scientific

and social research, business development, engineering, education, and agriculture.

The severe editorial cutbacks in traditional media in the United States have led to both senior journalists moving into academic roles and an anticipation that journalism schools may at least partly fill the gap in the capacity of mainstream media to fulfill its traditional role.

Three factors, according to U.S. academics, are behind the growth of university-based journalism. Experienced reporters laid off by their employers are available to manage university programs, the internet has made publication cheap and convenient, and journalism schools are ‘trying hard to keep up-to-date to justify their own existence when young people are able to become “journalists” just by putting up a website or starting to blog’ (Francisco, Lenhoff & Schudson, 2011, cited in Birnbauer, 2013).

There are several possible models by which the journalism academy can become more engaged. A recent trend has been a wide general acceptance among several U.S. journalism academics of adapting the model for medical education to journalism education. ‘In recent years, more journalism schools have plunged into producing news useful for the public. Journalism schools are finding ways to use what might loosely be seen as a “teaching hospital” model of professional education’ (Schudson and Downie, 2009). ‘Just as teaching hospitals don’t merely lecture medical students, but also treat patients and pursue research, journalism programs should not limit themselves to teaching journalists, but should produce copy and become laboratories of innovation as well’ (Anderson, Glaisyer, Smith and Rothfeld, 2011). University hospitals save lives. University law clinics take cases to the Supreme Court. University news labs can reveal truths that help us right wrongs. Based on the teaching hospital model, they can provide the news people need to run their communities and their lives (Newton, 2012). J-Lab’s Jan Schaffer notes that, ‘Quietly, and not so quietly, journalism schools around the country are starting to give their students new news opportunities. More than beefing up course catalogues with multimedia and convergence offerings, the schools are becoming incubators for entrepreneurial news startups – news websites that are populated with student content’ (Schaffer, 2012).

Schudson, from Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism and Downie, now a professor at Arizona State University’s Walter Cronkite School

of Journalism and Mass Communication, argue that serious in-depth and investigative journalism meets both a university's research mission and provides a public service, much like teaching hospitals in the health field.

Thinking through what universities can do for journalism requires some serious conceptual work about how best to integrate the legitimate educational and research missions of the university with service to society. Can university-based journalism enhance the quality of public information available to citizens and contribute to the intellectual life of the university at the same time? It needs to do the former to help serve the broader society; it needs to do the latter to justify itself in the university over the long haul. It can probably blend these purposes best if it focuses on the most ambitious and exploratory journalistic work – the in-depth stories that make use of new and complex databases, investigative reporting, new ways to make good use of multimedia technologies, and experiments that link volunteers and amateurs to professional guidance and editing. (Schudson and Downie, 2009)

At least 17 philanthropically-funded investigative journalism centres and programs in the United States are located at or affiliated with universities (Lewis, Butt and Musselwhite, 2012). In Britain, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism is based at City University. These centres utilise students and graduates as interns or researchers.

### **Investigative Journalism inside Australian universities**

Australia does not have philanthropically-funded centres of journalism, and the on-campus newspapers that have long been a feature of American journalism schools are less common in Australia. The Journalism Department at the University of Queensland was one of the first to experiment in this area when in the early 1990s it set up *The Weekend Independent*, a fortnightly paper that included student and staff work and a limited amount of advertising. It was edited by a staff member, Bruce Grundy. It eventually folded under the journalistic and financial pressures of trying to run a newspaper from a university department. In the late 1990s the Journalism program at RMIT began an ezine that published student and staff work focussed on journalism and the news media. Called the Fifth Estate well before the term became popular, the ezine housed, among other projects, the list of the Best Australian Journalism of

the Twentieth Century, which was assembled by a panel of industry and academic experts. The Fifth Estate ceased publication in the late 2000s. These are two examples among several (the role of UTS's Journalism program will be discussed separately).

What has marked recent years is a flowering of imaginatively conceived investigative journalism projects undertaken within Australian university settings. It is useful to focus on some of these as they demonstrate some of the different approaches.

### **Monash University**

Monash University's journalism school has three online student publications: a hyper-local site, Glen Eira Voice (<http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/gleneiravoice/>), a general news site, mojo (<http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/mojo/>), and an investigative site, Dangerous Ground (<http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/dangerousground/>) that focuses on environmental regulation in Victoria. Glen Eira Voice and mojo are updated continuously with student assignments and commissioned student stories that have been edited by a part-time editor overseen by full-time staff.

The investigative site, Dangerous Ground, publishes less frequently and carries articles that originated mainly from student assignments but have been augmented with additional sourcing, fact checking, editing, videos and documents. For the past several years, investigative journalism coordinator Bill Birnbauer has worked with students over the summer and mid-year breaks to upgrade and edit assignments that students have had an entire semester to research and write. Students also investigate stories initiated during editorial workshops and fact check and add to the work of other students.

Students involved in the production of Dangerous Ground stories have had a full range of 'live' investigative reporting experiences: they shared the excitement of a whistleblower coming forward with valuable information, a mayor disputing the findings of a story, and a Freedom of Information request that yielded valuable information. Original documents were published on the site with one of the first uses of DocumentCloud in Australia; and each story and video was heavily edited and subject to vigorous fact checking.

In the summer of 2011-12, students downloaded more than 360 waste discharge compliance records submitted by businesses to the Environment Protection Authority and analysed the data on a spreadsheet before producing a story based on the results. Dangerous Ground stories have been published and referenced in media including *The Sunday Age*, the ABC's *Stateline* program, Crikey, the HeraldSun Online and local newspapers. The site has been recognised with an Arts Faculty award for programs that enhance learning and with a Journalism Education Association of Australia Ossie Award for convergent journalism.

### **The University of Melbourne – The Centre for Advancing Journalism.**

*The Citizen* is a central component of the University of Melbourne's Masters of Journalism degree. The first edition of this exclusively on-line journal was published in late April 2013. Its mission is aligned to that of the Centre for Advancing Journalism in that it attempts to further journalism through 'innovation in teaching, experimentation and engagement'.

*The Citizen* is not exclusively investigative, but does aim to report a proportion of stories in greater depth. *The Citizen's* target audience is general readers, both nationally and locally. The model is unique because the Centre has employed two people, Simon Mann and Russell Robinson, as professional staff members – as opposed to academics – to edit and deputy-edit *The Citizen*. Their role is to commission and develop the content for publication while effectively teaching and working alongside the students. Both of them have held senior roles in the industry. Several other academic staff members have extensive industry experience and they also mentor students as they research and write stories. Such stories appear under joint by-lines, often with the students' appearing first. Interestingly, *The Citizen* has a charter of editorial independence which stresses that the publication and its writers will abide by the codes of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance and the Australian Press Council. The charter also asserts that *The Citizen* will report on issues with integrity, 'regardless of any commercial, political or personal interests of the staff or the university as proprietor' (Centre for Advancing Journalism 2013). *The Citizen* relies on program funding and is seeking philanthropic support and sponsorship. Under this model the publication and the newsroom are owned by, and operate within, the institution, although the newsroom is often virtual in nature as many students tend to work off-campus. It is too early to assess the long-term viability and the journalistic success of this approach.

## **Swinburne University of Technology**

Over the past three years the Swinburne Journalism program has collaborated with the independent on-line news site Crikey.com.au on investigative projects. The first, in 2010, was called *The Brumby Dump* <http://www.crikey.com.au/the-brumby-dump/>. The second, in 2011, was called *The Baillieu Dump* <http://www.crikey.com.au/the-baillieu-dump/>, and the third, in 2012, was called *The Sext Files* <http://www.crikey.com.au/topic/tsf/>.

In the first two exercises, the students were charged with the task of finding the stories that the rest of the media had missed in the annual reports of State Government departments and statutory authorities. To the writers' knowledge this had not been attempted by any other journalism course. It was a leap into the unknown but the academic staff members were experienced as reporters and had confidence that there would be sufficient stories to unearth and that they would be suitable for in-depth reporting. They were also confident that the process of finding and reporting those stories would constitute a highly valuable form of experiential learning. On both occasions the students found around 14 stories that no other media outlet had reported. In 2012 the students searched for stories in the submissions to the state parliamentary inquiry into the issue of sexting – the dissemination of sexual material on mobile devices. Again, this was an untested model but their confidence was rewarded when the students found and published an equally high number of stories that had been missed by the rest of the media. In the process they learned many of the same lessons about the realities of doing journalism.

In each exercise the students were mentored by tutors with extensive industry experience. The students were engaged with most steps of the process, from the initial research right through to the final sign-off of copy. The tutors acted as sub-editors, critiquing and correcting the students' work until it was ready for publication. Each step of the process, including the research and interviews, as well as the submission and corrections, were integrated into an aligned curriculum and reflected the learning outcomes of the course.

## **The University of Canberra**

The journalism program at the University of Canberra is one of few among regional universities that offer an investigative journalism subject, and it has done so since around 2000 when Kerry Green set up one devoted to what was at the time termed computer-assisted journalism. When he left the university,



Jennifer Kitchener, formerly a producer with Channel Nine's *Business Sunday* program, took it over and attempted to inculcate in students the famous advice to 'follow the money' but found students resistant to examining financial statements. Instead, she encouraged students to 'take advantage of the uniqueness of Canberra; its peculiar parochial/national composition that can throw up some terrific story ideas' (Email interview). She introduced them to rich information stores in the National Archives of Australia but also required students to investigate their local area. One student, for instance, 'did a great piece on security cameras not working in Civic around the time of a widely reported fatal hit and run accident. She based her story on an FOI search which revealed a disturbing lack of maintenance of the cameras. No media outlet had discovered this'. The students' stories were published in the program's online news website, NOWUC, which for several years was edited by a former editor of *The Canberra Times*, Crispin Hull.

In 2013 the unit has introduced a Group Investigative Project in which all enrolled students (around 55) pool their collective labour to focus on one task. The aim of the project has been to investigate a federal parliamentary inquiry that concerned an important public policy issue, but also a controversial one. The Exposure draft of the Human Rights and Anti-Discrimination Bill 2012 was chosen for that reason; it generated 594 submissions, many of which received little if any attention in the media coverage, which is a longstanding fact of journalistic life, but one aggravated by the winnowing of Canberra press gallery newsrooms. The students summarised all the submissions and at the time of writing this paper have begun analysing them. A small number of potential news breaks have been identified by students and staff and these will be written, along with a forensic analysis of the nature and preoccupations of the submissions. They will be published on NOWUC and perhaps in mainstream and alternative media outlets.

### **University of Technology, Sydney – The Centre for Independent Journalism**

The journalism program at the University of Technology, Sydney, was one of the first in Australia to offer an investigative journalism subject, beginning in the 1980s. Wendy Bacon, who began teaching the subject as a sessional staff member in 1989 after working as an investigative journalist at *The National Times*, became central to the program's approach of encouraging students to work on demanding investigative stories that, if successful, would be published in the magazine *Scoop*, that was published for several years from the mid-

1990s. One example was an article about housing problems in Sydney at a time when global attention was on the city as it hosted the 2000 Olympic Games. A number of the program's students have produced award-winning work. In 1997 Bonita Mason won a Walkley award for magazine feature writing published in *HQ* for a story headlined 'The girl in cell 4' about the death of an Aboriginal woman in a Sydney prison. *Scoop* was replaced by another magazine, *Reportage*, which published students' investigative stories and also focused on journalism and the news media. The costs of producing a regular glossy magazine became burdensome after a few years but by this time it was possible to publish online, which is how the magazine continues to be published, though it is now known as *Reportage Online*.

Since 1990, the program has had an affiliated body, the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ), which is dedicated to producing high quality journalism, particularly investigative journalism. It encourages a collaborative approach, working on projects with freelance journalists, academics and industry. The centre also conducts and supports research into journalism and the media. It runs public forums on issues of public importance and hosts the annual George Munster award for independent journalism.

These examples, and others, demonstrate that the Australian universities are seeking ways to enrich the learning and teaching experience of investigative journalism while delivering real journalism about matters of public interest to general audiences.

### **The Teaching Hospital model**

Australian university journalism schools have not fully embraced the 'teaching hospital' model for producing investigative journalism. Little research has been done into this question yet but the authors hypothesise several reasons why this might be the case. Investigative journalism, by its nature, is highly challenging to practice, takes a good deal of time and its disclosures are often legally challenged which can be costly for media companies even if they fight lawsuits successfully. It is reasonable to assume that it is beyond the experience of even final year undergraduate students. Second, it is possible that the majority of journalism academics have insufficient experience of investigative journalism and may lack the confidence to teach what is a complex and demanding area. In addition, the curriculum resources available are neither as detailed nor as specific as they need to be for this specialised field that requires knowledge of

how to lodge a Freedom of Information request and appeal against adverse decisions, search and analyse databases, scrutinise corporate documents and conduct company searches, among other tasks.

In the U.S., the most common criticism of the ‘teaching hospital’ model is that students might be a source of cheap or free labour, displacing professional journalists at a time when staff are being cut (Waldman, 2011). One response has been that students are doing journalism that newspapers no longer can (ibid). Another quite legitimate criticism, in our view, is that student journalism requires a high level of oversight and editing to meet professional standards (ibid).

The situation in Australia differs markedly from the U.S., but the fact that there is comparatively little diversity of quality journalism production is enough reason, we argue, for universities to expand their social responsibility obligations to the media field. The authors of this paper, academics with considerable professional journalistic experience, have developed a framework that they believe would assist universities in this regard, while at the same time meet traditional teaching and research requirements. Their framework is grounded in the view of professors Schudson and Downie that university journalism schools should undertake the ‘most ambitious and exploratory journalistic work’ (Schudson and Downie, 2009), particularly investigative journalism.

The authors are not blind to the many challenges and hurdles a shift toward integrating the public service-orientated production of journalism by students with a university’s broader research and educative missions might entail:

For (journalism schools and programs) that have occupied a position between journalism students and the journalism industry and have, for the most part, resided at the periphery of universities, this change will require leadership and risk-taking. For schools and programs often looked upon, sometimes disdainfully, by university administrators and other academic units as “professional programs” and considered to make only a small contribution to the overall university mission, this change provides a chance to build considerable value (Anderson, Glaisyer, Smith and Rothfeld, 2011).

## Joint Bylines

‘Joint Bylines’ is a conceptual framework and potential investigative journalism curriculum resource that the authors have devised to assist journalism schools to teach the techniques and underlying theoretical frameworks of investigative reporting while producing news reports for a discrete website, and more broadly for the media. It was developed as part of a 2013 application for an Innovation and Development grant with the federal Office of Learning and Teaching. It builds on an earlier model, ‘UniMuckraker’ (Birnbauer, 2011), which in turn flowed from a study of student investigative journalism models in the United States (see News21.com) and the structure of a global network of investigative reporters who are organised from a central editorial office in Washington DC (see <http://www.icij.org/>).

The ‘Joint Bylines’ model recognises that there is a limited pool of journalism lecturers who have real world experience in the production of investigative journalism, yet many are called to teach or tutor in investigative reporting. It further recognises that there are few basic teaching resources available to lecturers and that a concerted effort is required to bring the teaching of various forms of investigative reporting – such as data journalism – to world best practice.

The curricula, pedagogies and specialist skills – for instance, corporate financial analysis, requesting documents under Freedom of Information and online data collection – of those few lecturers with investigative reporting experience are available to just a small percentage of students who attend Australia’s 42 universities and colleges that teach journalism. These students attend mainly a handful of larger, capital city-based campuses. In contrast, the teaching and learning of these skills at other journalism schools is sporadic, at times incorporated in more general courses, and there is no national uniformity of learning outcomes.

At the same time, the practice of investigative reporting is changing dramatically. Traditionally investigative reporting has been the domain of broadsheet newspapers and programs like the ABC TV’s *Four Corners*, ABC Radio National’s *Background Briefing* and, until 2008, the Nine Network’s *Sunday* program. Increasingly, however, investigative reporting is being performed by independent online media outlets (Crikey, New Matilda, The

Global Mail, Inside Story, The Conversation), and by individual bloggers, non-profit investigative reporting centres, and a small number of university publications (see: ‘Dangerous Ground’, <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/dangerousground>; ‘Brumby Dump’ and ‘Baillieu Dump’ <http://www.crikey.com.au/the-brumby-dump/> and <http://www.crikey.com.au/the-baillieu-dump/>) and ‘NowUC’ (<http://www.nowuc.com.au>).

International and local experience shows that journalism students working under the supervision of academic staff are capable of producing investigative projects that, with professional editing, are of sufficient quality to be published in mainstream news outlets (Schudson and Downie, 2009; Richards and Josephi, 2013).

Under the proposal, the authors plan to develop an open source, sustainable step-by-step teaching package for investigative reporting with input from industry and journalism academics. The resource would be trialled initially by the three university partners, which each have substantial numbers of investigative journalism students, before being distributed for discussion among journalism academics and presented at conferences of the Journalism Education Association of Australia and the Australia and New Zealand Communication Association. Following an evaluation, the resource would be publicly available and other journalism schools would be encouraged to join the framework.

The project would result in opportunities in year two for universities to opt-in to national investigative reporting projects. Lecturers at participating schools would continue to supervise and assess their own students but would utilise the resources and give their students at least the option of investigating and reporting on one of several common issues (to be developed by the Reference Group of media and academic representatives) in their assignments. Informal feedback would be sought from participating students by way of a questionnaire.

The project would also develop a set of preliminary Threshold Learning Outcomes that would be the basis for minimum learning standards in investigative journalism courses, providing guidance to institutions that teach the course. This would dovetail with an existing OLT project (Reference: S111-2124) which is mapping standards across the wider related discipline areas and will extend beyond by building a basic set of flexible curriculum resources to be used (at the discretion of institutions) across Australia. A second OLT-funded study (Reference: ID11-1998) is examining the relationship between theory and

practice and the skill sets that graduates should have when entering the industry. That project's leader, Professor Stephen Tanner, has agreed to be a member of the Joint Bylines Reference Group.

A proposed scoping study would determine how many schools have investigative/advanced reporting/ journalism research courses, the pedagogies involved, the academic schedule, the experience of lecturers, and the additional teaching resources that lecturers would like to utilise. A separate section of the scoping study for industry would determine the research/ investigative skills that media organisations believe are lacking in journalism graduates. As mentioned above, a reference group of media industry representatives, lawyers and journalism academics would propose stories or themes that students at participating journalism schools could investigate in their assignments. After the assignments have been assessed by relevant lecturers, they would be sent for editing and augmenting by a professional editor/ digital producer for a discrete website. The resulting stories would be offered to mainstream media.

The authors believe the project creates a framework that would embed industry and academia in a collaborative alliance to improve student learning, augment the skills of lecturers and create a new voice in the much-needed production of quality journalism in Australia. It would provide the online component to a blended learning environment (Ross and Gage, 2006) where students would collaborate, learn and communicate with others about investigative reporting techniques while using a variety of online resources such as audio and video snippets, reading materials, writing examples and blog reflections. The online environment complements face-to-face teaching creating a blended learning opportunity where students would be empowered to lead their own learning, collaborate with others and are motivated by authentic, real life experiences which will prepare them for the industry. In seeking to improve students' prospects of employability, it utilises the pedagogy of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) that is 'framed within the broader context of real world and life-wide curriculum' (Jackson, 2010).

'Joint Bylines' is a positive response to the challenge of bridging the gap that exists between industry values/practice and academic values/practice. Students in participating universities across Australia (possibly globally later) would research topics chosen by the reference group of industry and university representatives, write to a brief (as professional journalists do), collaborate with

other student journalists, liaise with a professional editor/ web designer and potentially work with media editors and reporters. It would enhance graduate employability as employers generally want to see portfolios of published work and value experience in ‘real’ journalism. The authors believe that the resulting stories could provide national perspectives on matters of public interest and be an important, independent voice in a diminished media landscape.

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