

Research Proposal

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A. Proposed study

(i) Title

Teaching the watchdogs of democracy: The professional formation of journalists through Australian university study and early employment.

(ii) Abstract

Print journalists have long been faced with technological challenges but in 2005 they are faced with more than just changes to the way readers access their news, they are also in the midst of greater

These changes impact on the way journalism training takes place in universities. Journalism programs in universities have never been more popular despite a shrinking job market and an ambivalence bordering on hostility from potential employers who are critical of so-called J-schools (journalism programs in universities).

(iii) Introduction

Area and topic

The central aim of this research is to develop theory to understand the pressures that affect the ability of journalists to act as the watchdogs of democracy (the 'Fourth Estate'). This question is at the heart of the practice and professional discourse of journalism but has not been studied in the context of Western Australia nor through the lens of journalists' own experience, in their own words. I will be locating the research in the two institutions critical to the development and function of socially responsible values in journalists: university and the newsroom. I think the best way to research this area is to develop an understanding of the processes by which journalism students become journalists. By studying beginning journalists before they become 'initiated' as journalists I believe the study will offer fresh insights and have increased validity.

Background and context

This is a time of change and critical challenge for journalism and especially print journalism. This study will take place at a period during which print journalism is

required to reinvent itself to arrest declining circulation and to remain viable as a business.

Location of researcher

Print journalist and print news journalism lecturer: have a social responsibility view of journalism. Value the role of journalism in democracy. Believe journalism programs in universities need to provide students with the type of vocational skills employers seek combined with social contextual information... Etc.

Aims

This qualitative interpretative study aims to develop theories to understand how journalists see their role in society and to determine the pressures they face in their normal working environment. It is likely that pressures in the newsroom that emerge from the data will include self-censorship, the extent to which journalists and their media managers consider that the media is "just another business" and the role of the editor in determining the nature of the story that goes to print. The study also aims to develop theory to understand the process by which journalism students become journalists. One of the core aims is to determine how effective journalism training is in furthering democratic ideals in journalism students and to then plot the influences and pressures on those same journalists in their first jobs in mainstream Western Australian newsrooms. The study also aims to illuminate the current debate in the media industry that questions the value of teaching journalism students the context and role of journalism instead of mere skills training. It also seeks to understand the perspectives and expectations final-year students have of their education and to compare these perspectives with those of their potential employers and university lecturers.

(iv) Literature

(v) Significance

1. Rule 3.3.3 specifies that a PhD study must make a "substantial and original contribution to scholarship, for example through the discovery of knowledge, the formulation of theories or the innovative re-interpretation of known data and established ideas". In what way is the proposed study expected to fulfil this requirement?

There is a quandary in journalism: the professional discourse that underpins journalism and the practice of journalism collide rather than reinforce each other. The dilemma is this: how do the commercially-driven news media fulfil the expected role of independent watch-dog of democracy when it is institutionally dependent on the state's and society's dominant economic forces? Further to this problem is the compelling contemporary debate about the value of journalism training in universities. This study will respond to some of the philosophical questions about the definition and function of journalism in a West Australian context that is at the heart of that controversy.

These questions are central to the profession but have seldom been explored through the perspectives of journalists. While there have been surveys of the attitudes and values of

Australian journalists in the past (Schultze 1998; Henningham 1993), there has been little in-depth interviewing of journalists in general, journalism students specifically and even less (I would suggest none) with a Western Australian print journalism focus.

This research is significant for a number of reasons: it will contribute knowledge to a research area that is under-investigated in Western Australia, and indeed in Australia as a whole; the methodology used will provide a study of the perspectives of journalism students and the reality of their working lives that could function as an important base for future studies in the area; and finally, the results of the research could be used to assist participating journalists to reflect on their practice of journalism.

It is expected that this research will provide a picture of the realities of the newsroom and the barriers to editorial independence from the perspective of journalists that are fresh from the academy and yet to be instilled with the culture of the workplace. From my review of the literature I believe this research is significant because this has never been done before.

This study aims to *explore the process* of journalism students becoming journalists. This research will also develop theories to understand the phenomenon of the newsroom and the experiences of journalists.

B. The Research Plan

(i) The research questions

The study aims to answer three interrelated questions, each of which is subdivided into more specific questions to guide data collection and analysis. The research questions will be used to guide and focus enquiry. Similarly, data generation and sampling decisions will be made in the light of the evolving theoretical analysis. It is anticipated that, in such an organic study, there will be an evolving creation of several research designs sequentially as research strategy and practice evolve. A pilot study will be used to try out sampling strategies, data generation and analytical techniques and to firm up research questions and gain experience in the interview research process. Prior to the pilot study interviews with key scholars in the journalism education area will be interviewed for their perspectives on the field of study proposed by this project. It is envisaged that this interviewing will assist in developing guiding questions and interview questions for the pilot study and will ground the overall project in an area of research that is seen to be significant to scholars in the area.

General question 1: What are the stakeholder perspectives on the role of journalism?

General question 2: What are the stakeholders perspectives on the role of journalism education?

General question 3: What are the employment expectations of journalism students and other stakeholders and what do these students and stakeholders see as barriers to achieving their expectations after a period of employment?

(ii) The conceptual framework

The methodological framework of this research is qualitative and interpretive and based on the grounded theory paradigm.

1. The methods to be used or the approach to be taken. What similar projects have been undertaken here or elsewhere; have similar methods been used before? Empirical research in area.
2. What efforts have been made to ensure that the project does not duplicate work already done?

There is a tradition in the relatively recent field of international journalism scholarship of surveying journalists' attitudes and working experience in newsrooms (Sigal, 1973; Tuchmann, 1979; Schlesinger, 1987; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1987; Henningham 1995; Berkowitz, 1997; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996; Weaver, 1998; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Shultz 1998; Reese, 2000) Only the Henningham and Schultz surveys are Australian. There have been fewer studies of journalism students. There has been a study into the motivations behind first-year students' study of journalism from 22 countries (Splichal and Sparks, 1994) and a study of Australian journalism students' career expectations and attitudes to journalism (Alyson and Oakham, 1996 and Alyson, 1998). All of the above-mentioned studies have employed qualitative research methods. Indeed in this area of research, scholars tend to employ qualitative surveys and content analysis techniques more than any other research method.

One exception is Herbert Gans' 1979 study of journalists. Gans' seminal study is involved observation of journalists in newsrooms and interviewing with the objective of discovering 'how journalists, select news – what they left out, how they reported stories and why they chose as they did' and 'what kinds of people they were' (Gans 1979 : Preface xii).

From Deuze (2001) Comparative journalism research has been quite rare up until the 1990s, with some exceptions such as a 1981 survey of German and British N journalists. In the 1990s several projects addressed issues of cross-- national comparison of journalists. Examples include the "Media and Democracy" project of Patterson and Donsbach, which utilized mail surveys to collect data in the 1991-1993 period from journalists in Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden, and the United States.⁸ Another is a collection of journalist surveys in twenty-one countries, collected and edited by Weaver.⁹ Most of these surveys adopted the survey design and questionnaire of the 1971 U.S. project by Johnstone, Slawski, and Bowman. Sparks and Splichal conducted a somewhat similar study during the 1980s by surveying journalism students in twenty-two countries.¹⁰

Strategy:

Key elements of this study design are influenced by an attempt to ward off potential problems caused by the tight job market in Western Australian print newsrooms. There is no empirical data to support this concern, but using my understanding of the job market for graduate journalists I would estimate that there is a potential pool of around 20 to 30 print news jobs in any year in WA newsrooms. The Curtin University journalism program has an excellent track record but entry-level journalists are also selected from the journalism programs at Murdoch University and Edith Cowan University and from a broad range of other avenues. My case study boundary is limited to journalism students studying print news units at Curtin University and those students from that case that find employment. In order to increase the potential pool of participants in the final phases of my project I intend to purposively select a sample of student for in-depth interviewing that I consider to have a better than average chance of finding employment and I plan to collect data as early as possible to extend the time available for students to find employment (this is clear in the Data Generation Table in Appendix 1)

Case study.

This case study is, in the words of Punch (1998), “a study of a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context”. The case under study is print news journalism students in their final year of study at Curtin University and the same students in their first jobs as mainstream print news journalists in Western Australian newsrooms. It is anticipated that the propositions and theory developed from this case could be applicable to similar cases (Punch 1998): that is, to similar groups of students in tertiary journalism programs and early employment in Australia. The propositions developed by this study could then be tested in further research.

The case study strategy is an appropriate method for this study because it will allow a ‘fleshing out’ of the missing detail from the few surveys that have gathered the perspectives of journalists and journalism students. This study will complement earlier research that has quantitatively mapped and measured journalism students’ attitudes by providing depth and complexity to the picture drawn by that pioneering research. (Cite examples of survey work completed in the area...) The case study approach is also a pragmatic choice of method because I have a strict timeframe of three years to complete this project and other suitable methods (full ethnography, post-positivism) are likely to require more time than I have available for this project.

However this study will draw on elements of ethnography in its commitment to the cultural interpretation of the print newsroom. I will “aim to construct an account of the culture under investigation that both understands it from within and captures it as external to, and independent of, the researcher” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 9-10 in Punch, 1998: 159). The final phases of this research project will be constructing an account of the print newsroom culture as it relates to the acculturation of initiates as they attempt to

learn the “shared cultural meanings” (Punch 1998) of the print newsroom. (What studies of newsrooms have been done?)

The study, however intent on discovering the culture of the newsroom and, to a lesser extent, the classroom, merely borrows from ethnographic techniques: an unfolding and evolving study; an element of fieldwork (ethnographic interviewing) and repetitive data collection (Punch 1998). The use of ethnographic techniques will aid in gaining insight into the complex behavioural setting of the two institutions I am attempting to describe and explain: the J-school and the print newsroom as they impact on the perspectives of the participants of the case study.

The study will involve focus group interviews with a sample of final year and graduate diploma students as they enter their last year of study (Phase 1 data collection). Students that are in their final six months of study will also be interviewed. The same students will be interviewed in focus groups as they enter their final six months of study. A sample will be chosen for in-depth interviews (Phase 2 data collection) on the basis that they are illustrative of certain cohorts of students. The third phase of data collection will take place six months after graduation of both groups of students. The students will be interviewed in their new jobs or as they search for jobs.

In the fourth and final stage of data collection, employers and journalism educators will be interviewed. Graduates, now working journalists, from previous years prior to the data collection phase of this study might be interviewed if required. Interviews will be supplemented by documents such as newspaper reports and appropriate literature.

The study sample or participants:

Sampling: the entire population of the case will be selected for group interviewing (see Data Generation table Appendix 1). Following group interviews, individuals will be purposively (or deliberately) selected using a maximum variation plan married with (a possibly conflicting and undeniably pragmatic) sampling method that aims to select the students most likely to gain employment in a mainstream print newsroom in Western Australia. In Phase 3 and 4 of the study sampling again becomes simple because I will be interviewing the entire case population; that is, all of the students that gain employment in WA print newsrooms within the timeframe of the data collection phase of the study. It is anticipated that there will be roughly eight to twelve students that fit within the boundaries of the case at this stage of the research project. These students, now journalists, will become ‘vignette case studies’ within the larger case study of the project.

Data collection:

Interviews. Semi-structured group interviews followed by semi-structured one-on-one in-depth interviews. Group interviewing is chosen for the first section of phase 1 of the study as an efficient, data-rich and flexible tool to select students for in-depth interviewing and to stimulate the group in making explicit their views and perceptions of journalism and journalism education. I am aware that there can be problems associated with group culture and dynamics and in achieving balance in the group interaction (Punch 1998). The group interviews will be semi-structured in that they will follow guiding questions, in some cases borrowing from patterns of questions asked of

journalism students in previous surveys, but they will be unstructured enough to allow for new and unexpected responses to evolve. I am familiar with semi-structured interviewing from a career in print journalism which relies heavily upon this efficient form of data gathering.

Recording: note taking and recording. As a journalist it has become clear to me that for pragmatic reasons it is important to have both forms of record of an interview. The written form is valuable because it provides data for instant analysis and a back-up for faulty recording equipment, and the recording is valuable because it provides a resource to return to if written notes need to be checked or are incomplete.

Documentary data will be collected as it becomes clear that it is relevant to the participants in the project (for example news articles they write that illustrate a perspective they hold on journalism or journalism education, or later in the study, a news report they refer to in interview that is illustrative of the impact of newsroom culture on their, or others, news judgment or editorial independence. Unit outlines could also be important documentary data).

Data collection procedures will borrow heavily from the Miles and Huberman 'transcendental realism' approach. I intend to collect data repetitively as required throughout the study (see study strategy in the data generation table in Appendix 1).

Data analysis:

Coding and memoing Miles and Huberman.

Analysis will take a Miles and Huberman 'transcendental realism' approach and will occur in a cyclical continuous process that goes through data reduction, data display and the drawing and verifying conclusions. As in the grounded theory tradition, analysis and collection of data will occur simultaneously. Coding, memoing and the development of propositions will borrow from the data collection and analysis methods of Miles and Huberman. I intend to start coding with an initial coding scheme that develops as other labels and categories are suggested by the data. Discourse analysis could be useful in making explicit the interrelationships between accounts and hierarchies, power and ideology in newsrooms (Punch 1998:229).

Trustworthiness:

(iii) Parameters of study

(limitations)

Possible problems:

Access to participants – access to students at Curtin University has been agreed to verbally by lecturer but individual students still need to give approval and employers will need to be approached once students find employment. It is not considered viable to seek prearranged access at this stage of the study.

Not enough students find employment as print news journalists.

C. Scholars

Identify some leading scholars in the field, particularly some whose published work you have had occasion to study. If possible, include at least one from Australia. Please provide contact details for those scholars nominated including email address if known.

Professor John Henningham, J-School, Brisbane
Associate Professor Wendy Bacon, UTS, Sydney
Catharine Lumby, Ass.Pro and Dir of Media and Communications at Uni of Sydney
Mark Deuze, research associate in social and behavioral sciences at the School of Communications Research, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

D. Bibliography

E. Facilities

1. In addition to confirming that proper supervision is available for the project, please comment on any other requirements, for example:
2. Special Equipment - if not already available, how it will be obtained.
3. Special Techniques - may be required. If so, what are they and are expert staff available for communicating any special skills?
4. Special Literature - if not available from the Library, how will access to it be obtained?
5. Statistical Advice - is it available? If not available in the School, how will it be obtained?

F. Estimated costs

What funds will the School commit to maintain the project? Please include all contributions that the School will make, excluding staff salaries and building/infrastructure costs. Please give a breakdown of the costs, including, for example, items such as photocopying, telephone, computing and other administrative costs as well as costs specific to the research project.

G. Supervisors

Each candidate must have a supervisor who is nominated as the Coordinating supervisor. The Coordinating supervisor is responsible for ensuring that the administrative and reporting requirements of the supervisors are met. This supervisor will receive all correspondence from the Graduate Research School relating to the candidate, and is responsible for communication with and between

other supervisors. The Coordinating supervisor must be a member of staff of this university.

If a candidate is enrolled in Joint Schools, there must be a Coordinating supervisor from each School.

Where a candidate has more than one supervisor, the supervisors and the candidate must discuss the relative roles of the supervisors, record this in writing and lodge the record with the Graduate Research School as part of the Research Proposal.

Please provide a list of your supervisors and their role, including percentages, as indicated in the Research Proposal Cover Sheet.

H. Confidentiality

It is acknowledged that some of the research themes explored in this study may be sensitive. Participants will be assured of the confidential nature of their contribution and they will not be identified in any report arising from the research.

If your thesis is likely to contain information of a confidential nature, the matter must be drawn to the attention of the Board of the Graduate Research School from the outset, or as soon as it becomes apparent.

The Board's attention must also be drawn to any intellectual property issues that need to be considered, including any existing intellectual property of value that is pertinent to the research and to any agreements that may affect the candidate's right to intellectual property arising out of the research.

A simple guide for Research students as to confidentiality and intellectual property issues is available at <http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/policies>

Candidates who are likely to be affected by matters concerning confidentiality or intellectual property should familiarise themselves with Rules 3.1.24- 3.1.30 of the University General Rules for Academic Courses, General Provisions for Research Higher Degrees (by thesis) and with the University's Intellectual Property Policy. Both are available on the WWW at <http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/policies>

I. Approvals

The Head of School is required to certify on the Research Proposal that all necessary approvals in relation to it have been obtained from the appropriate University committees. Approvals will be required prior to the use of animals, the participation of human subjects, genetic manipulation, potentially biohazardous procedures and situations, the use and disposal of potent teratogens and carcinogens, the use of ionising radiation, or other matters of a hazardous

nature. It is the responsibility of the candidate, the supervisor and the Head of School to ensure that appropriate approvals have been obtained. Similarly, it is essential that all required safety and other training is complete prior to the commencement of research

J. Appendices

Data collection questions

Appendix 1: Data generation table.

	Semester, month and year	Data Collection Phase	Sample	Method
	Sem 2, October 2005	Pre-pilot study	Academics: John Henningham, Wendy Bacon, Matthew Ricketson, Chris Smyth.	Interview selected journalism academics to aid in structuring pilot study semi-structured interviews.
Study Phase	Sem 2, October 2005	Pilot study	Grad Dip exiting students (Group PS1)	Focus group interviews with all graduate students in print units at Curtin University followed with interviews with selected representative students
			Grad Dip new intake (Group A)	Focus group interviews with all graduate students in print units followed with interviews with selected representative students
			Final year undergrad leaving students (Group PS2)	Focus group interviews with students in print production unit followed with interviews with selected representative students
	Sem 1, March 2006	Phase 1	Grad Dip new intake students (Group B)	Focus group interviews with students in print units followed with interviews with selected representative students
			Grad Dip leaving students (Group A)	Same cohort as in pilot study.
			Final year undergrad students in last year of study (Group C)	Students in print production unit.
	Sem 2,	Phase 2	Grad Dip leaving	In print subjects – same

	August 2006	Follow-up	students (Group B)	cohort as in Phase 1
			Final year undergrad students in last semester of study (Group C)	Print production class – same cohort as in Phase 1
			Group PS 1 (grad students) have been out of uni for 8 months. Interview if have jobs.	Interview students in employment
			Group PS 2 have been out of uni for 8 months. Interview if have jobs.	
Employment Phase	March 2007	Phase 3	Group A students might already have jobs (been out of uni for 9 mnths). Interview ones in employment	Interview selected students in employment, This selection of students will become case study vignettes.
			Group B students (out of uni for three months). Interview if have jobs.	
			Group C students (out of uni for three months). Interview if have jobs.	
	June 2007	Phase 4 Follow-up	Group A (out of uni for a year)	Interview same students in individual semi-structured interviews
			Group B (out of uni 7 months)	
			Group C (out of uni for 7 months)	
			Group PS 1 (out of uni for 19 months)	
Group PS 2 (out of uni for 19 months)				
June 2007	Phase 5 Employers	Interviews with employers		

K. Timeline

Year 1	Jul – Sept 05	Write proposal and apply for ethics clearance.
	Oct - Nov	Conduct pilot study and refine interview protocol
	Dec – Jan 05	Analysis of data
	Jan – June,	Write introduction, lit review and methods chapters. Collect Phase

	2006	1 data in March.
Year 2	Jul – Dec, 2006	Collect Phase 2 data in August. Transcribe and analyse data.
	Jan – June, 2007	Collect Phase 3 and Phase 4 data. Transcribe and analyse data and write results chapter/s.
Year 3	July – Dec, 2007	Complete results chapter/s. Write discussion, implications and recommendations and conclusion chapters.
	Jan – June, 2008	Complete final drafts of thesis. Bind thesis ready for marking.

K. References

Punch, K. (1998). Introduction to Social Research Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches. London, SAGE Publications.

Rationale
These academics will be selected from universities around Australia for their prominence in the contemporary debate about the role of journalism education.
Focus group interviews chosen to interview large number of students efficiently, expeditiously. Students selected for follow-on interviews on basis of most likely to gain employment and for greatest variety within cohort. Curtin chosen because largest journalism program in state and to narrow study. Print news students chosen to narrow study and direct focus to news journalism. Grad dip students chosen because they are likely to gain employment, are likely to have firm beliefs about journalism and provide a point of comparison with undergraduates in study.
As above. The pilot study has the added advantage of increasing numbers of potential students I can interview in phase 3 and 4 of study. Students from this group (and PS 1 and 2) are more likely to gain employment in duration of study because they will have longer to find employment.
As above and because group is large choosing to narrow study to students in one unit of study. This unit is selected because it is a ‘hands-on’ unit that simulates a working newsroom. Students produce a newspaper and are required to make news value judgments and ethical/legal/moral decisions.
As before
As before
As before in PS2.
Same students to allow for longitudinal aspects study.
As before.
Phase 3 and 4 of the study requires students to find employment as news journalists in

WA print newsrooms and be willing to be interviewed for this study.
As above. Students in employment in mainstream print newsrooms are selected for study to narrow study and to maintain focus on journalism and democracy.
Employers of students that are being studied in Phase 3 and 4 will be able to provide insights into the culture of the newsroom, expectations of early career journalists and perspectives of journalism and journalism education.