Journalism specialisms: Generating better generalists

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Abstract

Experience shows that a subject intending to provide specialist knowledge and skills to journalism students at The University of Queensland (U.Q.) is, in fact, a valuable provider of generalist knowledge and skills. Two areas of reporting and writing – science and politics – and one course dealing with news organisation management have been shown to give students knowledge about aspects of journalism that are increasingly necessary for general work. At the same time, the classes teach students lessons for which life experiences and education have only poorly prepared them.

Introduction

Journalism educators would agree that the principal aim in Australian journalism education is to produce journalism graduates who are generalists in the broadest sense. Educators (Conniff, 1999; Conley, 1997, p. 102; White, 1996, pp. 111-128; Itule and Anderson, 1991, p. 18; Tiffen, 1989, pp. 30-31; Hess, 1985) know whether graduates enter mainstream journalism, non-mainstream journalism, quasi-journalism, or areas quite outside journalism, those with training in inquiry, comprehension, organisation, persuasion, critical thinking and clear writing, and those with a wide spectrum of general knowledge, are well on their way to successful careers.

Journalism schools in Australia and the United States (for a typical example, see Ohlone College, 1999), from where we get most of our cues, have traditionally aimed at producing graduates who are generalists. They do this because they know early journalism is mainly a generalist occupation. Educators producing not-so-raw material for newsrooms have always concentrated on equipping students with skills and experiences that prepare them for
almost any task, especially in provincial newsrooms where many graduates get their start (Green and McIlwaine, 1999). The aim has been to prepare graduates so they are familiar with newsroom practice and newsroom tasks to the point that they are useful from the first hour of the first day of their careers. In fact, the only specialism we have to concern ourselves with really is journalism itself, as Meditsch (1992) insists.

This has worked well enough. Graduate surveys and observations of student placements and subsequent movements show graduates have been given the preparation they require because educators are ensuring students can handle a range of generalist tasks and duties. In the past, that has often included an assumption that students bring with them a certain range of life experiences and knowledge onto which they graft their journalism training. It is assumed that as students emerge from high school and move through university they absorb insight into the ways of the world. For instance, it is often assumed that they will be interested in the way things run politically, and that they will follow this system in the media.

But, as many in journalism education are aware, such assumptions are no longer valid. It is clear that even final-year students do not always have a clear idea about what is happening in some areas of their world (Patching, 1998). This is not only because students may no longer display a personal interest in some standard areas of journalism - politics, for one - that Patching points to. It is also because the focus of serious journalistic work has shifted, or at least expanded. Good general knowledge for journalists has widened to include science and technology, for example, or business.

Many will ask the obvious question: Doesn’t a good training in the principles of inquiry, writing, research, and reporting equip any bright graduate to learn about and take on any task? We would once have replied in the affirmative. After all, no amount of university education is going to prepare everyone for every encounter in a career. People do learn about life and society and systems on the job and always have. We believe now, though, that where once people entering the profession had at least some useful grounding in nearly everything they might have to handle, graduates entering journalism today are likely to be doing so with significant blank spaces instead of starting blocks.

We are finding increasingly that, although our bright people can and do extend their life experiences to handle a substantial part of the work demanded of them (such as courts, cops, councils, school fetes, and sports), we can’t dependably supply newsrooms with people who know – or care - much about reporting the political system. This is no real surprise. Plenty of recent studies (notably those of Sternberg in 1998) have shown the so-called “Generation X” is resolutely – even truculently – uninterested in politics. (Readers of Amanda Mead’s Diary in The Australian’s Media section would have seen the item about the young television journalist, to all appearances a professional, who,
when told someone was a shadow minister, looked back blankly and said “What’s that?”

We can also be fairly certain that most of the same emergents into the journalism profession have had but a fleeting and largely negative encounter with science. It is an area of their education they have largely forgotten and which they little suspect they will encounter from day to day in the newsroom. In times past, such suspicions would have been largely correct. What little science was reported or discussed 10 or 15 years ago, for example, was more or less adequately handled by metropolitan specialists or, in the regionals, by outsiders such as Department of Primary Industries extension officers. Today, however, general reporters in metropolitan and regional media are expected to deal with science stories as a normal and frequent part of their day. This is a direct result of the public’s growing interest in science, generated by areas such as genetic technology and developments in health research. Generalists are increasingly expected to cover - and cover correctly - such science stories as general stories. Further, journalists are often pitchforked from general duties into specialising without significant specialist knowledge or background.

The same kind of situation exists with business reporting and, more importantly, reporting on organisations in general. Few beginning journalists have an understanding of how organisations work, of how leaders can affect the environment within organisations, or of general human resource issues. There are, of course, some journalists who have worked in bureaucracies and have even studied bureaucracy at the university level. There are also some journalists who have similar experience in management issues. But, by and large, they are few.

At U.Q., we have recognised the vacuum from which many students come to us and have set out to do something about it. We have instituted a third-year, one-semester elective, generically called “specialisms.” In this elective, we give nearly graduated students compressed preparation in that we think they will soon need in reporting, writing, and working. The specialisms also attract postgraduate students. Our main concern, however, is for undergraduates, who form the bulk of those entering newsrooms.

Specialisms is something of a misnomer. We are conscious, as is Meditsch, that we are setting out to make generalists better generalists by teaching specialist subjects. If graduates become specialists as an outcome of their experience, that is incidental. Our principal concern, though we currently have access to only a fraction of final-year students, is to equip as many as possible with insight into what is essentially terra incognita for most.

The specialisms idea consists of two or three separate subjects that, unfortunately for some, run concurrently under the umbrella term. We want to describe each of these briefly.

The area of science and technology is, in some ways, the most distantly

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removed from the life experiences of most of today's journalism and humanities students. As the literature on who journalists are makes clear, most of our students come from as far away from the science end of the spectrum as they can get (Tobias, 1995). Apart from a consistent but tiny number of science-journalism double degree aspirants, the overwhelming proportion of our students are good examples of C. P. Snow's "two cultures" (Snow, 1959). Not only are they not interested in natural sciences and mathematics, but they have also sought actively to avoid them (Mencher, 1995). Design teachers can report the instant panic created by the announcement that proportion and division of space on a page need to be expressed mathematically. (A design student last year reported that, in dividing 39 by three, she could "do the three but was not comfortable with the nine.")

Any group of final-year volunteers will be skittish in the face of what seems the return of a childhood nightmare. And, of course, if educators tried to make them science-capable journalists by teaching science, that terror might be justified. That is not, however, the approach taken in specialisms. This course aims to prepare people for handling day-by-day science stories largely by demolishing false and fearful notions. Thus, the Science and Technology Journalism course at U.Q. (taught by Stephen McIlwaine) consists mostly of exposing students to real, live scientists doing real, live science. Students spend time in labs talking and listening to scientists and losing their phobias about the "otherness" of these people and what they do. They also spend time discussing the history of science in general and of science as part of society - the social science of science. This builds on observations of science and scientists by providing a vantage point from which the students can observe science as a normal and useful activity. They learn it has justifications and limitations, just like any other human activity. In short, the class aims to take the fear and strangeness out of the popular conceptions of science while not proceeding to glorification. It seeks to give people confidence in their ability to report and write sensibly and accurately.

The class seems to succeed - at least with the 19 undergraduate and postgraduate students (none with a science background) who did the course last year. The first field trip laid good foundations. It was a visit to the university's physics department, with the prospect of science at its most baffling and daunting - Boffin Central. What the all-female class encountered, however, were two vibrant and very communicative young female physicists. One was working with laser light as a tool to manoeuvre molecule-size objects under an electron microscope. The other was also using laser light to produce beautiful hologram images of gas turbulence around a model scramjet, as the gas blast ed supersonically down a building-length steel tube. No-one was baffled and no-one was daunted. Instead, everyone seemed excited.

There followed visits to the university's pharmacology department, to look
at drug designers at work; to the microscopy centre to see, among other things, atoms sitting neatly in rows in a chunk of metal; to the genetic engineering laboratory, where growth hormones were being synthesised and detected; and to the Centre for Vision, Touch and Hearing, where students could test themselves for potential polar depression. Students also visited the chemistry department to observe work on drugs extracted from coral reef animals and plants, and the perinatal unit at Royal Brisbane Hospital. For most, these were their first meetings with real scientists and their first looks inside a working laboratory. The first experiences appeared positive. The students’ representative to the student-staff liaison meeting described the general attitude as “rapt.”

The class appeared to find the work interesting. Each student was required to find seven new journal articles, to contact the author or authors, and to write news or feature stories as directed. Thanks to electronic mail, and to the number of scientific establishments on the campus, students found the scientists relatively easily and produced good, timely stories for the journalism department’s newspaper, the Queensland Independent. In the process, they were exposed to scientific publishing, some of it very arcane, and again to real scientists who, almost without exception, cooperated in helping students understand their research and translate it into manageable language.

In the case of the politics specialism (taught by Stephen Tanner), the focus of news coverage seems to have changed quite dramatically in recent times. This is possibly because so few young reporters understand what really is happening. Policy making and legislation were once a staple of political news coverage, particularly that provided by newspapers. However, the amount of serious and informed reporting on, and analysis of, policy issues has waned. Instead, the focus has turned to the so-called “theatre of politics” (Gronbeck, 1978; Szasz, 1986). This consists of the dramatic incidents: the corruption allegations, the heated exchanges in question time, and the personality contests that election campaigns have tended to become. Students need little specialist training for this kind of political reporting, as anyone with a flair for the dramatic can talk about a leadership tussle. Journalists can focus on the colour, the witty riposte, or the ill-chosen words.

Sadly, such an approach doesn’t say much about politics other than to reinforce, perhaps, public perceptions about both politicians and journalists. And typically, neither group is held in particularly high regard although, as we are frequently reminded and in turn advise our students, politicians do better when adjudged on ethics and honesty than journalists (Morgan, 2000; Bulletin, 1996; Murphy, 1996; Walsh and Richardson, 1995). Not only do members of the wider public bemoan the efforts of journalists, but so also do the politicians. It is easy to say politicians are self-interested and not likely to welcome coverage not presenting them positively and opponents negatively. Still, these concerns are worth considering. They question whether young journalists who
have little or no life experience are capable of reporting on the complexity of politics.

Perhaps the politicians and their increasing battalion of minders are in part to blame, because of the way in which they play "the game." They release or refuse to disclose information at their leisure, playing favourites with journalists and organisations they believe sympathetic to their cause (such as former Prime Minister Paul Keating who threatened journalists with the drip treatment). They reduce information to digestible sound bites that appeal to electronic media but that do not satisfy the appetite of print media journalists. This does not excuse, however, the fact that young journalists can be better prepared to confront the tasks they will face if seeking a career covering politics. If they understand how the system works, how power is distributed within different parties, how legislation is drafted, and why the electoral system works as it does, they might be prepared to tackle the more difficult questions and issues within the constraints various media impose on them.

In many respects, recent graduates are aided by technology (see, for example, Quinn, 1999) and the increasing recognition within journalism schools that students need to be equipped to travel the Information Superhighway. While many older journalists reluctantly grapple with technological change or refuse to embrace it (Henningham, 1995; Ewart, 1998), young journalists enter the work force as computer-savvy individuals. If their interest is politics, they are also helped by governments around the world making large chunks of information Internet-accessible.

In an Australian context, this includes an enormous amount of departmental and ministerial information, including reports, speeches and media releases; election data, including results and expenditure by political parties; and other statistical information. In some respects, journalists wanting to cover politics never had it so easy. But in wanting to cover politics they confront a major hurdle. Whereas previously politics was covered by media organisations as a matter of course, today it has to compete with stories from other sources. In this, Australia is not alone. It is also evident in the U.K., where media coverage of Parliament has declined and MPs have to compete for news space (Franklin, 1996). Perhaps this shift is due to the changing mix of media content, including the move towards an "infotainment" model (Tanner, 1998).

This is only one explanation and we need to consider other possible causes, including the fact that young journalists are not properly equipped to cover politics, and that because of this they are vulnerable to the wiles of the MPs and their advisers, as mentioned above. The Specialisms (Political Journalism) course seeks to prepare students to jump in on day one of their careers and tackle a political story, without being overwhelmed by the task or intimidated by the individuals they have to deal with.

Students do not come to the political journalism course with the same pho-
bias, but certainly with enormous areas of ignorance despite previous academic encounters. The small group last year (about 15 students) was divided roughly in half between those who had studied political science and those who were undertaking a Bachelor of Journalism degree. None of the students enrolled simply to make up the points they needed for their degree. In fact, it was interesting that a small number specifically changed their enrollment so they could do the subject (it was a relatively late offering and was not widely advertised). These students had an interest in politics. They were informed about current political issues, unlike their peers in other courses who, despite professing a desire to become journalists, could not understand why they should read newspapers, watch the television news or listen to the radio.

Like the science and technology course, this unit was designed to be hands-on. In developing the curriculum, Tanner looked back on his own experience as a journalist and as a press secretary. He asked himself, “When I started as a journalist covering politics what were my weaknesses?” He also asked, “When working as a press secretary, what were my main criticisms of journalists, particularly the young ones?” Significantly, the responses to these two questions overlapped. The answers weren’t difficult. They involved understanding how policy was formulated and the legislative process. Not surprisingly, these responses also reflected the concerns of the MPs mentioned above.

It was with those responses in mind that the political journalism curriculum was structured. After an introductory lecture on the press gallery and the role of the media as the Fourth Estate, the course covered a number of specific topics. The second lecture looked at the Australian political system. This lecture and the seminar following immediately afterwards highlighted one concern expressed above. The majority of students, even those who had completed political science majors, struggled to explain how the Australian political system works. The third lecture built on this by looking at Parliament and the legislative process. Tanner believes his concerns were vindicated, but during the seminar and subsequent discussions he was able to put the building blocks together. This was done in two ways: by visiting Parliament and by looking at legislation. Students visited Parliament with a view to write a story, either a news or colour piece, about question time. It was a worthwhile exercise, and one the students enjoyed.

The course then turned to sexier topics - those that have become a staple of political journalism - including party politics, elections, and leadership. After that it looked at more practical issues, including the drafting and interpretation of opinion polls, negotiating with press secretaries, asking the right questions of ministers and other MPs, and accessing information from government departments through the use of freedom of information legislation and other strategies. Students also discussed how to access non-government sources such as interest groups. This part of the course was very popular. Most students
could tell war stories, based on their experiences in other subjects, on trying and often failing to access information.

The two remaining pieces of assessment were designed, like the parliamentary assignment, to be hands-on. The first was to interpret a departmental report or government policy statement. Like scientific reports, these can be rather turgid documents and their distillation into a 10- or 20-par news story can be a daunting task for even relatively experienced journalists. Most students did a reasonable job with this, partly because they did not have to meet a particularly onerous deadline as they would on the job. After completing this task, the parliamentary assignment was relatively straightforward. The third task – interpreting and writing about the Budget – was more problematic. Even with a lecture that basically pointed out what to look for and how it had been covered by mainstream media, many struggled to find and/or explain the detail.

Despite this, students appeared to enjoy the course. There was positive feedback in course evaluation surveys, which suggested students were satisfied with both the course material and the assessment procedures.

The third element of specialisms, News Media Organisations and Management (taught by Kerry Green) is essentially a one-semester subject designed for delivery in the postgraduate coursework offerings. Here students typically are older, may have already had work experience, are usually ambitious, and have a real interest in how that mystical – almost mythical – monster, “the media,” is organised. For postgraduate students, the subject is a means of understanding an element of society at once fascinating and brand new for most of them. It also helps students understand what career paths exist within the industry.

The subject is also offered at undergraduate level under the specialisms umbrella, and it has an entirely different focus for this group. For undergraduates, the subject demystifies the process of newsroom organisation and organisation in general. It also identifies, however, structural weaknesses underlying news organisations. Many of these weaknesses are at the heart of reporting and writing problems students have grappled with over the past three years. In other words, this subject helps clarify organisational, as distinct from professional, reasons for some journalistic practices.

This subject provides 13 weeks of lectures and aims to go from the general to the specific in terms of organisational theory. It does the predictable, such as looking at the history of management theory and organisational structures; it compares management with leadership; it spends considerable time on the roles of management; and it provides an introduction to market research practice and human resource management.

Thirteen weeks of lectures does not a news manager make. The course does, however, produce students who are more aware of the possibilities for
change within news organisations. They are better able to recognise strengths and weaknesses of both structures and individuals, and they are willing to look for better ways to do things. Overall, they are more aware of how the system works. As a bonus, these students also are better equipped to report on issues affecting organisations or institutions because they are able to see beyond the horse-race aspects of leadership struggles to more basic issues that drive such struggles. Society is better served when such issues are clarified rather than hyped.

This is a subject especially suited to delivery at U.Q., because the assessment is project-based and in the past three years has involved inspections of and improvements to our own publications. The Queensland Independent has been scrutinised carefully by two groups of students, whose recommendations for change – just as in a “real” newspaper - sometimes get implemented. More often, however, they are ignored because of journalists’ antipathy towards outside interference. Students also looked at the way the radio and television news offerings are produced, and they made recommendations the department found extremely helpful.

The projects are not limited to in-house work. A number of students have been welcomed into industry newsrooms and their reports have produced change. Indeed, one student already working for the Sunshine Coast Daily in Queensland produced impressive project work welcomed by his employer. Such real-life projects provide students with enormous satisfaction and boost motivation, while at the same time providing industry with insights into their own operations that they might not be able to afford (in terms of both time and money). This is not a subject for students doing combined journalist/management degrees. It is not as intense and does not adequately prepare students for roles in management. It does, however, cover some journalism-specific ground that management courses do not cover.

In conclusion, the specialisms subject allows the department to cover a range of topic areas that might not be approved individually as course offerings by an academic board. It provides expanded choices for students and turns them into better general reporters. It also has the capacity to take advantage quickly of specialist knowledge or skills from our staff as new skills come into the school, or as lecturer availability changes. On the down side, students who might be interested in taking more than one of the specialisms are unable to do so because they can get credit for the subject only once.

References


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