Journalism as research?

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Over the past 25 years, journalism education and research have slowly won increasing acceptance within the broader Australian academic field.

This process has not been without its difficulties. Previously, many journalists expressed the view that they felt undervalued within humanities or social science faculties, but these days are now passing (Bacon, Groundwater-Smith, Nash & Sachs, 2000). Higher degrees, some success with research grants, the production of textbooks and the building of peer-reviewed journals have all played a role in accumulating journalism educators’ cultural capital and legitimacy within the field.

The struggle for acceptance was made more difficult in Australian by the “media wars”, in which some journalism educators attacked media studies and argued against linking journalism education with a critical studies approach (Turner, 2000). Aside from the occasional sidelines, these wars, too, now seem to be behind us. Compared with when Hartley wrote in the mid-90s that, despite its importance, journalism was under-researched compared with other cultural forms, there is now a steady flow of research outcomes being published in this and other journals (Hartley, 1996, p. 32).

However, some unfortunate consequences have flowed from this struggle. As Bourdieu argued, those on the margins tend to adopt, rather than contest, the rules of the game (Bourdieu, 1993). Journalists feeling pressure to transform themselves into academics have not necessarily had the time or inclination to deepen and develop their journalism practice. Even though some of us had felt cramped by industry practices, rather than pursuing possibilities for less constrained production, many journalism educators continued to teach rather than practise journalism, while developing skills in a range of social science methodologies which they applied in conventional scholarly ways.

The result is that we have paid less attention to the issue of how journalism itself might be regarded as research than we might have done. In this contribution to the discussion, I will argue (as John Herbert has done) that the public debate about the new Australian Research Quality Framework provides an opportunity to explore possibilities of journalism as research in ways that might not only increase our value to universities as researchers, but also enhance the broader field of journalism (Herbert, 2006). Since I began developing these arguments, the Department of Education, Science and Training has released the final Research Quality Framework (DEST 2006) guidelines. Journalism research has been placed in a new panel called Law, Education and Professional Practices (including journalism, curatorial studies and social

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work). While some journalism educators may prefer to have been included in the Humanities Panel, it is possible the creation of this panel will enable professional practice areas in universities to more easily develop their own forms of practice-based research and methods of assessing quality and social impact in ways that have previously been difficult. Much will depend on the membership and approach of the panel assessors. This development means that a discussion among journalism academics about the circumstances under which professional practice can be regarded as research and how we might assess the quality of that work is now urgently needed.

I am not intending to suggest here that journalism studies or the academic study of journalism are not important. Scholarly studies of journalism will have a clear place within this panel and interesting possibilities for cross-disciplinary studies around professionalism, ethics and self-regulation may open up. I have argued elsewhere that part of being a journalist in a university is to seek to understand and explore the nature of journalism (Bacon, 1999). The point of being in a university is to be able to question, not to replicate conventional practice. However, if traditional forms of academic study become divorced from active practice, there is a danger that university journalism will be seen as something apart from, rather than an integral part of, journalism professional practice.

Unfortunately, media discussion of journalism education tends to reinforce the image of journalism education as being for undergraduates at entry level to the profession, although this is far from the case. Not only are there many postgraduate coursework programs, but honours and higher degree students can now also include creative, professional work as part of their degree at most universities. If education is life-long, journalism academics need to be confident to teach mid-career journalists. To teach, one needs to practise. If academic journalists concentrate only on traditional scholarly work, there is a danger they will lose a feel for journalism. Journalism is constantly adapting to new technologies and seeking new ways to produce meaning for audiences. Without active practice, there is a danger of replicating old methods and being constantly in catch-up mode rather than abreast of peers or, indeed, in front of peers working in industry. In my own field of investigative journalism, new research techniques, public relations practices and forms of storytelling developed during the 10 years after I left full-time professional journalism. To be able to teach investigative journalism, I found I needed to renew my practice.

In considering journalism as research, one starting point is the Department of Education, Science and Training definition of research:

Creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications ...
Any activity classified as research and experimental development is characterised by originality; it should have investigation as a primary objective and should have the potential to produce results that are sufficiently general for humanity's stock of knowledge (theoretical and/or practical) to be recognisably increased. Most higher education research work would qualify as research and experimental development. (DEST, 2005) (author's emphasis)

This can be compared with the broader United Kingdom Research Assessment Exercise definition:

RAE must be original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, scholarship, the invention/generation of ideas, images, performance, artefacts where they led to new or substantially improved insights and the use of existing insights to produce new material, devices, products etc. (RAE, 2006)

The RAE panel for Media and Communication specifically mentions practice-as-research and allows for research outputs including digital, broadcast and other forms of media presentation (RAE, 2006).

I agree with Bromley that it is immediately apparent that most journalism does not fit this bill. Rather, as journalism studies has so comprehensively documented, journalism routinely preferences the powerful, stigmatises deviance and reproduces the texts of corporate advertising and promotions. However, as Bromley also acknowledges, an argument that most journalism is not research is not an argument that journalism cannot be research (Bromley, 2006).

Journalism is an enormous field with porous and shifting boundaries, especially in relation to other communications fields. It can include everything from a news blog to a non-fiction book; from a documentary film to a short news brief; from a web slide show to a real-estate-funded newspaper. There is journalism which is shaped by commercial considerations, but there is also journalism, even within the same media organisation, which actively resists those considerations.

The same tension exists in all professional practice fields. Preparation of a little tourist brochure about a heritage precinct by a professional historian would scarcely qualify as historical research, standard conveyancing in a law firm is not legal research, nor is a doctor or nurse carrying out a standard blood test medical research.

This does not mean, however, that these fields of historical, legal or medical professional practice do not often encompass what can be seen as research.
University lawyers, doctors, scientists have often been at the innovative and critical end of their professions. For example, in the 1970s, academic lawyers along with legal consumers critiqued the power relations in daily legal practice, used this research to develop new professional practice subjects and were actively involved in setting up community legal centres for the purpose of attempting a different sort of practice (Chesterman & Wiesbrot, 1987). An example is the Consumer Credit Legal Centre (NSW) in Sydney, where the mundane practice of advising clients spawned court challenges that set precedents and generated a range of scholarly outcomes. Today, academic lawyers actively feed into the preparation of test cases in all areas of the law. Similarly, medical doctors in universities continue to actively research their practice.

So is there something different about journalism? It has been said that journalism is innately non-reflexive or in a state of ignorance about the implications of its own methodologies (Bromley, 2006, p. 213). However, I would argue that it is in the nature of all practitioners in all fields to adopt the habitus of their field, incorporating the rules of the game as if they are natural or the only proper way of doing things. This applies to scholarly research practice as much as any other field. There is indeed little sign of reflexivity in most scholarly work which follows predictable patterns and methodologies.

One way to consider how journalism might fit within the broader field of research is to consider the methodologies used by journalists in producing their stories. Descriptions of research techniques used by Australian investigative journalists have been documented in publications about investigative journalism. These techniques include archival research, freedom of information searches, companies and land searches and interviews with both “on the record” and “off the record” sources (Tanner, 2004).

To explore the implications of these techniques a little more broadly, I have chosen a celebrated example from John Pilger’s collection of investigative journalism, *Tell me no lies* (Pilger, 2004).

In March 1968, soldiers from the United States Army arrived at My Lai, a Vietnamese village. Over the next few hours, they slaughtered hundreds of Vietnamese villagers. A year later, young journalist Seymour Hersh received a tip-off from another journalist that a soldier, William L. Calley, was about to be court-martialled for killing civilians in Vietnam. Hersh found Calley and interviewed him. After his first reports were published, Hersh spent many months tracking down hundreds of sources, gradually piecing together a fuller picture that could support his conclusion that My Lai “was not a massacre, but a logical result of the war in Vietnam”. To quote one of the many soldiers, he interviewed: “The people did not know what they were arguing for and the guys didn’t know why they were shooting them.” (Pilger, 2004, p. 119)

Hersh’s dogged determination to chase every lead and explore each piece of evidence changed the reporting of the war in Vietnam and certainly contributed
to a shift in public understanding of the war. He has emulated these techniques in a lifetime of investigative reporting. Forty years later, his exposures of horrific human rights abuses in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq shifted public opinion about the invasion of Iraq (Hersh, 2004).

The methodologies of story production include assessing the existing state of knowledge, deciding what questions need answers and what of significance is not known. This involves a myriad of subjective and strategic judgements, but so does conventional academic research. While conventional social science researchers adopt a form of ethics which allows a source to withdraw statements made during interview, journalists use the code of ethics which guarantees confidentiality for “off the record” material but does not give interviewees the power to prevent their “on the record” statements from being published.

Journalists must constantly assess the credibility of sources, especially confidential ones. For example, it is important to consider what motives sources might have for lying, or if sources are independent of each other. Such judgements are the stuff of journalism, but our reasoning draws on broader notions of evidence in fields beyond journalism and are not unlike judgements about evidence that lawyers and doctors make every day.

Investigative journalism goes through many drafts and checks, and is subject to legal scrutiny. This process could be compared to a peer reviewing process, although unlike blind refereeing, it is an open dialogue between those involved in the production process.

So can this sort of journalism be counted as research? Much of what journalists do working on in-depth stories draws on accepted methods of historical and legal research. In reflecting on stories, I am struck by the interdisciplinary nature of the work, but the fresh information that is often a critical factor in achieving publication often depends on well-established methodologies of professional journalism. In fact, the praxis of journalism is one of the few means by which new insights can be achieved into developments the powerful would like to keep secret. The capacity to move between time periods, apply methods flexibly and to investigate official notions of “truth” characterises the investigative production process.

Indeed, if one takes Bourdieu’s strictures that all theory is a product of its own fields of epistemological praxis, then any field of praxis producing new knowledge must be recognised first as its own field and second as requiring theorisation in relation to its praxis (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 73). In other words, the issue for journalism as academic research is not whether it is research, but how the nature and practice of its research is to be theorised.

Most would agree that much in-depth journalism does meet the criteria of being creative and original investigation throwing fresh insight on a particular situation. This would be sufficient for it to qualify as research in the United

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Kingdom, assuming of course it was peer reviewed. But are the results "sufficiently general for humanity's stock of knowledge (theoretical or practical) to be recognisably increased", as described in the DEST definition? It might be argued that when confidential sources have been used, the results are unable to be tested because the sources are anonymous but, in this respect, journalism is no different from other fields of research that use anonymous interviewees under ethically constrained conditions. It can be argued that journalists often do provide fresh insight into under-researched areas such as human rights abuses, abuses in the criminal justice system and the political process. However, broader analysis and interpretation in journalism is often embedded rather than explicitly argued and might often be revealed in a whole body of work rather than a single piece.

In considering the practicalities of counting journalism as research in a university context, there are other problems. Often journalists build their work by following inquiries or court cases. Each report involves careful decisions about significance that are associated with court reporting. I would not argue that each report can qualify as research if the material largely reproduces evidence already given. So should criteria for establishing journalism as research include a requirement that a journalist establishes information that has not previously been articulated? I am not sure if the situation is so straightforward. For example, if the information had been articulated privately, is it publicity that makes the difference? It is often the task of the researcher in other fields to present information in pre-existing texts in fresh ways which bring new insights. For example, if you piece together evidence given in an inquiry across hundreds of days to produce a report which provides fresh insights, can this be seen as research?

Journalism often consists of a number of shorter reports. I think of "the story" as a series of shorter pieces that combine to produce the larger narrative. Does this perhaps mean that smaller stories have to be produced together, perhaps in a book, before they qualify as a research? But why a book, why not a website? These sorts of questions, as well as what qualities are required before any particular piece of journalism qualifies as research, can be explored through peer reviewing processes.

In dealing with these issues, it is helpful for journalism academics to look to how other areas of creative and professional practice are dealing with similar issues.

Humanities faculties have tended to be more accepting of other forms of creative practice such as novels and films than journalism. This may be because of a hangover of prejudices about "high art" as opposed to popular art, and perhaps the routine, daily contact with journalism tends to overshadow its more experimental and investigative forms. Industry bodies within the field of creative arts have organised themselves to lobby for recognition and thus are bet-
ter organised to defend their practice as research. This is clearly demonstrated by reading the submissions on the DEST RQF site.

A number of submissions argued strongly for a wide definition of research and for an open attitude to the measurement of research impact. Perhaps of most relevance to journalism was the submission from RMIT University’s Portfolio of Design and Social Context, which includes journalism (RMIT, 2005). This submission called for research to include feature articles, creative writing, built works and products, and visual research on DVD and websites. The RMIT argument was supported by comments across the range of fields in the portfolio. “I publish through installations. I publish through radio broadcasting – I’ve been commissioned several times ... to produce work for radio,” said a lecturer in sound.

“Once we move into networked environments and things like academic blogs, self-publishing is the rule. So one of the things I am most interested in is the ways of generating peer review systems that can recognise the legitimacy of work that is self-published in that context,” an applied communication lecturer was quoted as arguing. A senior journalism lecturer said:

I’m not just a journalist who’s never done academic work. I’ve done both and so I know what’s involved. And in some way, I think if you do an extended feature or a journalistic investigation you are doing as much work – in some ways more – because you not only have to do the research but you are doing it in a contested environment: in a difficult environment where people don’t want to talk about things, or where the issues are very contentious and sensitive – and you’re communicating to a broad audience.

The submission from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music (which is part of the University of Sydney) addressed the issues of context and audience which are so crucial to journalism:

In music, our research documents include: CDs, TV, media press reviews, radio broadcast and interviews, internet streaming, and printed music. The type and location of performances, and whether they are invited or self-promotional activities are critical variables. The people who perform on the same program, and the material performed are also relevant variables. For example, a concert in a church hall is not the same as a performance at Carnegie Hall or with an international orchestra. (Sydney Conservatorium of Music, 2006)

A number of art and design faculties made similar arguments.

The UTS Dean of Humanities and Social Sciences, Theo Van Leeuwen, in an individual submission, took up the question of whether a creative work itself

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could be counted as research. Referring to Section 1.2.3. of the Preferred Model, which includes "experimental development including creative work and performance insofar as they directly relate to original basic and applied research", he argued:

It is not quite clear what is meant by this phrase, and I would prefer a wording that clearly expresses that the work itself might also be seen as the outcome of research. Like researchers, creative practitioners may (1) set themselves a problem or question, (2) use existing practices and relevant literature as a point of departure for devising a strategy towards solving the problem or answering the question, (3) publish the results, albeit in a form that is different from the journal article or scientific monograph, and (4) contribute in this way to new knowledge and know-how in their fields. It is important that the members of the relevant panel will have the capacity to judge when creative work, performance, etc. does possess this quality of "research" and when it does not. (Van Leeuwen, 2005)

It would seem the idea of setting a problem and reviewing existing knowledge before further investigation is one that is akin to investigative journalism. In further pursuing the notion that journalism can be research, it may well benefit journalists in universities to pay close attention to the efforts of other creative practitioners to build acceptance of research outcomes.

In immediate terms, it would seem productive to develop exegeses to accompany journalism work that can demonstrate its methodologies. Such reflective statements are already envisaged in higher degree programs which include the possibility of media production as part of doctoral research. However, there are few exemplars of such journalism projects.

It may be useful to explore approaches to professional practice as research being adopted by other university professional fields of nursing, teaching, architecture, engineering, law and medicine.

"Reflexive practice" or "reflexivity" is itself a contested term. Many are familiar with the work of Schön on reflective practice of professionals (Schön, 1983, 1987). In the past 10 years, Sheridan Burns, Pearson and others have applied Schön's ideas of reflective practice to journalism education (Sheridan Burns, 2002; Pearson, 2000). However, so far, journalism educators appear to have applied this notion to their teaching of journalists rather than to critical or in-depth forms of journalism practice.

Nursing is one field in which notions of reflexive practice have been applied to both educational and professional settings. This has included some discussion of how reflexive practice can unearth unspoken knowledge and how those in power respond to encounters with reflexive practitioners (Mantzoukas

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& Jasper, 2004). This work envisages going beyond the sort of post facto explanation that I have attempted here to embedding the reflection in the practice itself at the moment of production.

Bourdieu warned against a type of “diarising” reflexivity in which the researcher her or himself becomes the subject and centre of the process, in favour of a reflexive approach which involves getting a critical distance from the research by reflecting back on the structures of field itself, including its dominant professional ideologies (Bourdieu, 1992). This approach leads back to the links between journalism as research and journalism studies itself. All journalism takes place in a social context. For journalism to be research, its context needs to be understood. For the researcher as well as those who judge research, this involves reflecting on how that context may determine as well as close off certain choices and how the work of reporting relates to other fields.

I would suggest, however, that journalism studies tends to examine journalism from the outside as an object rather than from within. Some form of diarising, reflective journal or interrogation of the process of investigation may be a way of closing the gap between theory and practice in journalism.

To build journalism as a professional practice form of research in a university is a challenging, long-term and necessarily collaborative project. It is certainly not simply a matter of technically matching ourselves against any particular definition of research. Even in the United Kingdom where the official RAE parameters would appear to be broad, journalists have not yet been strongly represented in discussions of “practice as research” (RAE, 2006, p. 2). What I have attempted to show in this article is that a range of answers to the question: “Can journalism be research?” are possible. Our collective efforts could involve working both with journalists whose journalism we regard as research and journalism studies academics who wish to avoid the pitfalls of becoming distant from journalism as active practice; establishing closer links with other creative and professional practice fields; developing “journalism as research” exemplars and peer-reviewed outlets; and promoting a research atmosphere which encourages risk taking and experimentation.

References


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