

Roles, routines, and responsibilities: the 3Rs of educating journalists for local government reporting

Peter English, Jane Fynes-Clinton and Renee Barnes

Abstract

In this era of cutbacks and restructuring, journalism graduates covering local government rounds in the regions are thrown organisational, ethical and practical challenges once reserved for more senior reporters. The changing environment has forced educators to rethink ways students are taught to report in this vital area. A pilot study of 13 recent University of the Sunshine Coast journalism graduates employed in regional newsrooms found that while they felt prepared for practical and ethical challenges, almost all of them were unprepared for the workload. They also reported that increased pressures had led to a dilution of the watchdog role.

Introduction

Journalism graduates in regional areas face different challenges to their metropolitan peers when entering local government reporting. Newsroom cutbacks and restructuring, which have been severe in regional media, have led to an increase in inexperienced reporters being appointed to what were traditionally senior rounds (for examples, see Hess & Waller, 2016; Robin, 2015; Hess, Waller & Ricketson, 2014). Often the journalists in these positions are recent graduates. This sink-or-swim assignment can result in compromises in the newsgathering process that impact on reporters, audiences and councils. The changing environment has forced educators to rethink ways students are taught to report on local government. This pilot study examines key issues for grooming the next generation of journalists for the council round. We conducted in-depth interviews with 13 recent graduates working on council issues in regional areas in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The participants reflected on how their University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) journalism degree had prepared them for this type of reporting. Themes that emerged related to the roles, routines and responsibilities of reporting local government, including workload management, dealing with large volumes of council stories, developing and maintaining contacts, newsroom socialisation and operating as watchdogs. We use Bourdieu's notion

of reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) to analyse these themes and examine the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of journalism education at USC in local government reporting. This pilot study provides a contribution to teaching scholarship and journalism research by examining the experiences of recent graduates in this altered environment, and suggesting ways educators can adapt curricula.

The importance of teaching local government reporting

Educating student journalists on the requirements of local government reporting is increasingly vital due to the recent decline of, and changes to, regional media. Economic and technological factors have resulted in reduced circulations, workload increases and staff reductions, placing greater demands on journalists – including recent graduates (Napoli, Stonbely, McCollough & Renninger, 2016; Finkelstein, 2012; Hanusch, 2015; Hess & Waller, 2008; 2016; Hess, Waller & Ricketson, 2014). This highlights the challenges for journalism graduates and tertiary educators, who are increasingly responsible for providing students with the grounding often missing in newsrooms, where senior staff have less time for training and mentoring. These factors also have a direct impact on the reporting of local government, which is a staple of regional media (Bowd, 2015; Hess & Waller, 2008). In this altered environment, graduates become more attractive for economic reasons and at times take on more senior roles quickly. For example, O'Donnell, Zion and Sherwood (2015) found that senior journalists were predominantly among those made redundant in Australia. Given this scenario, it is essential for journalism educators to consider their roles in preparing students for government reporting within regional media's evolving demands.

Journalistic challenges have been highlighted in previous journalism research examining traditional issues such as ethics, objectivity and watchdog elements. In regional journalism particularly, ethical issues can involve close relationships with sources, potential conflicts of interest and supportive coverage in relation to individuals, businesses and communities (see Bowd, 2015; Frost, 2006). This is much closer than in metropolitan newspapers, and also links with the reporter's loyalty to the publication and the community (Frost, 2006; Hanusch, 2015; Richards, 2013). Further, the changes in the regional journalism landscape, including reduced budgets and increased staff workloads, have resulted in local government having a greater impact on the content of regional media. Hess, Waller and Ricketson (2014) state that in the recent economic climate, regional journalists have become increasingly reliant on media releases, or items where there is little contribution from the journalist (see also Hess & Waller, 2008). This raises issues about the traditional roles of journalism, such as balance, objectivity and watchdog elements (see Hanusch et al., 2015; Mellado et al., 2013; Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972), as well as the problem of lack of access to key government sources. For example, the Finkelstein Report (2012, p. 328) into media in Australia noted how regional newsrooms did not have the resources for in-depth coverage and that much of the news content was "generic" and "with little independent analysis". However, Bowd (2015) and Hess and Waller (2008) recognise the large volume of local government-centred stories within regional newspapers, while also noting the media's role in keeping councils accountable. These examples indicate that journalism graduates in regional news outlets not only face the prospect of frequent coverage of local government, but that there are also challenges with their roles and responsibilities on issues of ethics, access and the core aims of traditional journalism. It is in these areas, therefore, where journalism educators have an opportunity to prepare students for the requirements of detached reporting within the time constraints and workloads of their media organisations.

Mensing (2010) argues that journalism education's goal is socialisation into the newsroom. In Australia, Hanusch et al. (2016) discuss how universities prepare their students for industry, with tertiary studies a first step of socialisation. However, they recognise the profession does not always deem the training adequate. Hanusch et al. (2015) found that the longer the degrees of

Australian journalism students lasted, the more likely it was that they began thinking like journalists: students are “beginning to be ‘moulded’ in the image of the industry” (Hanusch et al., 2015, p. 5). This highlights the importance of tertiary teaching in providing the skills for graduates to be job-ready, including in relation to local government reporting. As a result, this study examines the roles, routines, and responsibilities of educating journalism students in a regional setting. This includes the importance of the watchdog function and objectivity and balance in their roles; the routines of local government reporting around news gathering, contacts and workloads; and the responsibilities of correctly informing audiences and communities about council decisions and activities.

USC journalism and local government education

USC’s journalism program focuses heavily on local government reporting, particularly in the third year of study in both coursework subjects and work-integrated learning projects. It is considered an essential area of teaching given USC’s proximity to regional media, the amount of local government content graduates can be expected to produce (see Bowd, 2015), and the number of graduate opportunities for employment in regional newsrooms. The key local government coursework subject, News Rounds, is compulsory in third year and involves detailed coverage of council issues through students attending meetings and briefings, finding government sources and producing journalistic articles rather than media-department-driven content. Other challenges in dealing with local government are also examined, especially in relation to journalists in small newsrooms operating alongside larger government media departments, spin and being closer to official sources and communities than journalists in metropolitan rounds. Central to this course is the development of regular contacts and discussion of the practical and ethical issues that arise from these relationships. For assessment, students produce up to seven council-specific stories to deadline. Another third-year offering, Data and Investigative Journalism, targets finding council information that is not obviously available online and Freedom of Information requests. Ethical and legal elements, including in local government, are taught throughout the journalism degree. Work-integrated learning offerings such as internships and projects with regional media outlets expose students further to the socialisation of the newsroom, as well as preparing them for reporting on a range of issues, including local government. Similar to Mensing’s (2010) conclusion that journalism education’s goal is professional socialisation, the work-integrated learning opportunities offered through internships and projects at USC are intended to prepare students for newsroom reporting.

Method

To determine how recent graduates perceived their preparation for local government reporting in regional newsrooms, this study draws on 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews with USC journalism graduates. The sample is relatively small and focuses on students at one regional university. While these limitations are important to note, it is vital to recognise that this is a pilot study with a regional focus. This project has methodological significance in its reliance on in-depth interviews because previous research involving journalism students has often utilised surveys (for examples, see Hanusch et al., 2015; Hanusch et al., 2016; Splichal & Sparks, 1994). Recent graduates were defined as those who had completed their studies in the past three years – between 2012 and 2015. The interview guide included questions on roles, routines and responsibilities, newsroom expectations and ethical and legal issues. Specifically, it involved asking participants to identify to what extent their university degree had prepared them for working on these aspects in regional newsrooms, including in the local government round. All interviews were voluntary and confidential.

Participants

Sampling was purposive to ensure a variety of media platforms and respondents' experiences since completion of their degree were included. Of the 13 interviewees, six identified as print and online journalists, four as television journalists, two as online journalists and one as a radio journalist. Three respondents were male and 10 were female; all were aged between 20 and 31. Eight were in their first professional job in journalism. Each participant was given a code, ranging from J1 to J13, to protect their identity.

Data analysis

The interviews – ranging from 30 minutes to an hour – were recorded and transcribed. After transcription was completed, interviews were analysed using a modified grounded theory approach, in which theories and conclusions were generated directly from patterns in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This is the most useful approach for this project as it ensures the resulting work is rooted in the experiences of the graduates rather than outside theory or assumptions. We independently analysed the transcripts and then met to discuss our interpretations to address and improve the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). While the names we chose for our codes were not always identical, the majority of ideas converged. We discussed any differing interpretations and agreed on the final analysis. While the ultimate goal of using more than one investigator in qualitative analysis of data should not be replicability, this discussion related to the analysis contributed to its credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using this analysis process, four main themes emerged: issues related to workload management and government stories; the importance of developing and maintaining contacts; the dilution of the watchdog role; and newsroom culture and socialisation.

To enhance the data analysis, we outline our reflections on the results. This approach is in line with Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which is based on the understanding that "every sociological inquiry requires simultaneous critical reflection on the intellectual and social conditions that make the inquiry possible" (Schwartz, 1997, p. 270). Through this act of reflexivity we seek not just to outline where we as researchers are situated within the field of inquiry (although prior to teaching journalism at USC the researchers worked in professional newsrooms and covered local government), as overemphasis on the autobiography of the researcher has been criticised as failing to appropriately situate the inquiry within the field of knowledge (see Bacon, 2006; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). As Maton (2003, p. 54) notes, researchers who explicitly position themselves in relation to their objects of study not only display a "conspicuous display of acute self-awareness", but also render the research innately narcissistic. Instead we utilise a reflexive approach that values the insider knowledge of the autonomous characteristics of the field, as it is "only through understanding the structure and processes of a field that arguably relationships can be identified, explored and authoritatively established or contested" (Nash, 2014, p. 83). In this case, the researchers draw on their knowledge as journalism educators who developed and delivered curriculum to the study participants.

Results and discussion

Workload management and government stories

One of the key themes to emerge in the analysis was expectations and preparedness for the workload required in a regional newsroom. As will be discussed, this relates closely to the respondents' roles, routines and responsibilities of reporting on government stories, which contributed heavily to their workloads. J1, who had worked in both metro and regional newsrooms, noted there were specific pressures for a regional journalist:

I think it's the workload, that's the big one ... You have quite a large area to cover on your own. And you're expected to be across every single thing going on, and sometimes that can be really difficult.

This sentiment was also reflected by other participants who had worked only in regional newsrooms:

The lack of resources and the shoestring budget make it enormously challenging working in the regions. You are always being asked to do more with less ... No overtime is paid to journalists ... It is nothing to work a nine or 10-hour day and I struggle with that. (J13)

Definitely the hardest thing is finding stories, because there is no one sending you media releases out here ... You walk into a city newsroom and the whole day is already up on the board because it's been worked out. For me I've got to go out and search for every story I get. It's just me. (J5)

Given that significant cutbacks in Australian media have been felt in the regions, this is perhaps to be expected (Hess & Waller, 2016; Robin, 2015; Waller, Hess & Ricketson, 2014). However, almost all participants felt unprepared for these workload expectations.

Initially coping with the workload was maybe a bit of a shock to the system. I was aware I'd be expected to write three or four stories a day, but there's a bit of a difference between knowing what was expected and doing it. The range of stories was manageable, but getting comfortable jumping between a story about the Gumnut Kitchen having its anniversary birthday celebration and in the same day writing a story about something hard newsy, it takes a bit of getting used to. (J2)

I felt very prepared in some ways and completely not in others. I went from doing one news story here and there to doing four or five a day. It was like night and day. I felt I had the tools to be able to do the job, but it was hectic to start with. It was make or break stuff. (J11)

However, most participants felt there was nothing additional required from the university to help prepare them for issues related to workload management. The difficulties and expectations associated with workload were something that could only be truly understood when immersed in the newsroom (J5, J7, J3). Participants suggested that universities could only "partially replicate" (J5) workload pressures. They also clearly differentiated between the "real world" of their newsrooms and the "safe spaces" of university (J3, J10), suggesting they have different expectations of applying the learning generated in each place.

Participants recognised the consequences of these workload pressures on story quality. For example, J13 said the "intensity and unreasonableness" of the workload in his regional TV newsroom meant the stories produced were not as balanced, polished or high-quality as he would have liked. Participants found the reality of newsroom restrictions and workloads, and what they expected in their stories, were different and resulted in compromised content. These types of comments support Finkelstein's (2012) argument that there is an absence of independent analysis in regional newsrooms, resulting in more generic stories. Further, there is conflict with traditional approaches to journalism such as balance, objectivity and watchdog elements (see Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972).

The consequences noted by participants were particularly important to the central aim of this study: to examine perceptions of local government reporting. Participants were in contact with local government sources anywhere from on a daily basis through to monthly:

A lot of our reporting has a local government link. Local people want to know what is going on. It is the level of government whose decisions most directly impact their lives. (J13)

Probably a third of the stories I did linked in some way to local government issues. So I got to know the councillors pretty well. Apart from doing council stories, councillors were everywhere I went. (J2)

[My region] loves their local government, *loves their local council*, so all the time we are dealing with them – there’s press releases, there’s community events that they put on, there’s local issues that they will want to comment on. (J6)

The majority felt prepared for these roles, routines and responsibilities, saying they had taken them on at the right stage of their new careers. As J5, who was in his first role, responded:

Especially in a regional town, it’s not difficult, I don’t think. We did a really, really extensive local government [election] coverage. So we did every week in our weekly bulletin, we spoke to six candidates and got to know each of them and so it was a lot of extra work to cover a local government election.

It is increasingly difficult for tertiary programs to attempt to replicate the intensity and workload requirements of “real-world” newsrooms. This is particularly noticeable in the constraints of contact hours (three hours per course per week) and policy around assessment (three items per course at USC). Despite respondents perceiving there was nothing more their university education could do to prepare them for the professional workload, the responses highlight a greater need for newsroom experience during their studies, both in terms of the volume of stories produced and working on multiple articles simultaneously. This aspect is being expanded at USC through broader internship and work-integrated learning opportunities, and the introduction of “newsroom” days where students produce a complete online publication. Further, the shock of students at the beginning of their employment outlines the importance of educators initiating early and regular conversations to ensure students are aware of the demands. Encouragingly, the respondents’ perceptions of local government reporting reflect their comfort in dealing with council sources, suggesting the preparation during the News Rounds course, in particular, was beneficial in socialising them for newsroom roles and responsibilities.

Importance of developing and maintaining contacts

The importance of developing contacts in a regional context and the challenges associated with this was identified as another theme within the analysis. The majority of participants felt they were prepared for this role within their local government reporting:

Multiple times there [at university] we contacted different councillors and were dealing with the council, so I’m not sure it’s the case of whether anything could prepare me for this particular role as the challenges seem to be quite specific to culture and approach embedded in the local councils here, but I think ... I definitely had a bit of experience going out there and actually having conversations with people. (J7)

However, the majority of participants felt the true value of contacts could only be understood when working in a newsroom. For example:

One of the biggest things that I have seen confirmed in my time here has just been how important it is to develop connections with the community. That was something really talked about [at university] but I guess you don’t really understand until you are actually here, in the newsroom, fishing for stories every day. (J7)

If I am honest, I never really understood the value of contacts. We were told to keep a contact book during uni and I never realised how important that was ... I would be absolutely lost without my contacts – and my contact book – now. (J11)

The importance of contacts was reiterated when participants discussed local government reporting, because “we [regional journalists] spend so much time focused on local government we tend to focus on them” (J6). The majority of participants felt they were prepared during their university degrees for the importance of developing good contacts within local government. However, they did note there were challenges in the routine of managing council contacts, in particular accessing the “right” people and dealing with spin. For example:

My major contact for both councils ... it is primarily the media adviser. And there’s quite a significant, I want to say, gag order. (J6)

Sometimes councils tended to be very scripted and staged. It can be hard to get further into the issue and take the story further than what maybe they’ve got. (J1)

These examples run contrary to the literature which suggests a lack of resources has resulted in higher input from council public relations teams (Waller, Hess & Ricketson, 2014; Harrison, 2006). Instead, participants are suggesting it is a structural hurdle developed through local government policy in relation to controlling access.

All participants agreed that working in regional media meant more familiarity with sources, including those in local government. For many, though, this had only positive impacts:

It’s a good thing if, when people know each other to be human beings, they tend to treat each other with a bit more respect. In [the town I worked in], probably all of us had a more mutually respectful and beneficial relationship with council ... certainly better access, and I can think of occasions where it resulted in more stories. Not necessarily council-related stories, but always stories of interest. (J2)

Other participants noted that there were challenges with this increased familiarity:

Sometimes there are some councillors that you really hit it off with and then you’re left with that sort of issue of when you need to ask the hard questions of them. It is harder when you hear negative things about them that you need to investigate. It’s hard to go and ask those questions because you spend so much time with the council people, so that can be a tough thing. (J6)

The ex-mayor when I first got up here, we would chat a lot and you’d see him out at the pub on a weekend and he’d be like, “oh I’ll shout you a beer” ... There’s people that get the wrong idea when they see the mayor shouting a journo a beer on the weekend. (J5)

For J5, the issue is not just an ethical one, but also related to the role of the regional journalist in the community and the additional responsibilities associated with managing community perception. This is also an important aspect in relation to the responsibilities of inexperienced regional journalists as they weigh up access to stories, close relationships with sources and supporting their region (see Bowd, 2015; Frost, 2006; Richards, 2013) with the demands of traditional objective newsgathering.

In this theme, it is clear that while students are asked to develop and keep contacts from their introductory journalism courses in their first semester, there is still a gap between what they are told and the value of this in the newsroom. Reinforcement of this in class as well as through broader work-integrated learning tasks could help, although it appears the importance of this is unlikely to be fully understood until they are attempting to find sources for multiple stories daily. There is further confirmation of the graduates being comfortable in the roles of developing contacts, which reflects the familiarity of dealing with local government during their studies. Spin is an issue discussed regularly across journalism courses, including that these challenges can be difficult to circumvent even by senior journalists. Ethical discussions are also integrated into all

journalism courses and specific local government scenarios are used with students, which helps with the process of evaluating the difficulties of increased familiarity with sources.

Dilution of watchdog role

Another key theme was the importance and positioning of the journalists' roles and responsibilities as a watchdog on government decision making. This theme is important because the authoritative position of local government within a regional community means its operations should be critiqued and scrutinised, including through local media (see Franklin, 2006; Hess & Waller, 2008). Some participants reported a broad lack of understanding of, and appreciation for, the watchdog role when dealing with sources, particularly among candidates at Queensland local government elections. J10 said a consequence of "playing the watchdog" was that some candidates would not deal with their media outlet:

[Some] got quite aggressively angry because they did not understand that we were not just putting their side – that we have to have balance, that we have to critique what they say. It got to the point that I found we had to explain the function of journalism. It seemed strange to me that they did not know what journalists do. By the end, we would do the story, but the relationship was severed.

However, some of the participants revealed the edict in their newsrooms was to pursue only low-risk stories to avoid potential legal action, although this was sometimes dependent on what risks the competition would take. J13 said the threat of defamation action from local government officials often prevented what he described as full and proper presentation of information in some stories:

The company I work for has a low-risk policy. I have had stories sent to the lawyers and they de-identify it and remove everything from it that makes it newsworthy or even a good story. There is no point in running it sometimes, and that is extremely frustrating.

J10 said this low-risk approach led to a restriction on holding local government officials and elected representatives to account:

It can be crushing. I recently had a high-risk story and my news organisation has a directive that we should do low-risk stories. We are told explicitly not to take risks ... Really, they do not want legal trouble. That can mean good stories have to be let go.

These newsroom restrictions also mean a reduced focus on stories falling within the traditional roles and responsibilities of journalism, such as objectivity, balance and watchdog elements (Schudson, 2001; Tuchman, 1972). However, this low-risk approach was not the case with all respondents. J1 said her university studies did not equip her for using interviews to hold politicians to account, which she said was an important part of the watchdog role. Scrutiny of local government officials was also raised as a challenge by J4, who was concerned that if he was too critical of the council he would not be given stories. This highlights the dilemma of attempting to balance questions of access with the responsibility of watchdog reporting and informing the audience. This conflict, in conjunction with low-risk policies, has the potential to dilute the journalists' watchdog and investigative approaches.

As a result, continued emphasis in journalism education on the watchdog role remains a significant priority. This is in conjunction with providing students with the confidence, including through a strong legal and ethical grounding, to pursue risky public interest reporting based on balanced story development that can help avoid compromises in news quality. What the results in this theme highlight, though, is a possible disconnect between journalism education, which

teaches traditional normative values – for example, to chase the story no matter the cost – and management in some regional media outlets. These are important considerations for educators, who are preparing students for the possibility of entering newsrooms without senior figures (see O'Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2015) who could provide regular advice and support.

Newsroom culture and socialisation

The final theme that emerged from the analysis, and which broadly related to all of the other identified themes, was newsroom culture and socialisation. This theme refers to suggestions that there were some elements of working as a regional journalist that could only be learnt or understood after they started working. When discussing whether university prepared him for the challenge of managing community perceptions, J5 said:

I just don't think there is any way to teach that. You just have to be here, doing it, being a journalist to truly understand it.

Or for participant J8 when discussing workload management:

There's nothing you could have said, anyone could have said, that would have made me truly understand. You kind of just start watching the other journos, the more senior ones, and you work it out from there.

If university begins to mould students within the image of the journalism industry (Hanusch et al., 2015), then these results suggest the newsroom completes the socialisation of what it means to be a journalist (see Mensing, 2010). The role of newsroom culture and socialisation on recent graduates has profound implications when considering the loss of senior staff in newsrooms (O'Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2015). The majority of participants within the study expressed disappointment at the lack of "levels above me" (J7), "time for advice" (J6) and "direction" (J1). J4 works as the only journalist in his regional town, with his sub-editor and editor about 140km away. He said it was "tricky" to know about the expectations of working in a newsroom because he was there by himself.

While some participants noted that there were aspects of local government reporting that could only be learned "on the job", there were cases where the socialisation developed through university was vital in preparing graduates for remote, regional newsrooms. As J3 stated:

It was throw you in the deep end and you're ready to go. That was something I wasn't expecting at the end of uni. Everything you learn at uni, that's all you've got. Go – be a journalist.

Conclusion

The USC journalism program aims to prepare students for newsroom roles, routines and responsibilities, which include a focus on reporting on local government in regional areas. The 13 participants in this pilot study said they had been prepared through their tertiary studies for many aspects of life in regional newsrooms, such as dealing with council officials, developing sources and performing some watchdog functions. This highlights the importance of the moulding and socialisation of journalism students through their university education (Hanusch et al., 2016; Mellado et al., 2013; Mensing, 2010). However, the challenges in this changing environment, in which graduates in regional newsrooms are taking on broader roles and responsibilities, have forced educators to reconsider their teaching approaches and content inclusions.

Utilising Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1990; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), this paper has examined the preparation of USC journalism students for local government report-

ing. Other educators may benefit from these critical reflections. It is vital to recognise that while there are strengths to this journalism education program, there are also gaps in the preparation provided to students for their profession. The interview responses reflect that true understanding and complete socialisation come only through immersion within a professional newsroom and the demands of full-time work. As Hanusch et al. (2016) found, university education is a first step in journalism socialisation, and in this project it is clear further valuable socialisation occurs in the newsroom. One of the most glaring aspects was workload management, including local government content. Almost all of the participants – across each medium – felt unprepared for the number of stories required daily. Crucially, university policy constraints around contact hours and assessment make it increasingly difficult to attempt to replicate newsroom workloads. At the same time, there appears to be a greater need to introduce students to the possibility of working on multiple articles a day covering a variety of issues. This could be achieved through changes in coursework offerings to concentrate on greater story output or through greater engagement during internships or project courses (see Mensing, 2010).

As newsrooms shrink, senior journalists leave (see O'Donnell, Zion & Sherwood, 2015) and resources are increasingly limited, graduates can be without the leadership or mentorship traditionally associated with a newsroom. This reflects the growing importance of university educators in preparing students for greater self-sufficiency in their employment. In local government reporting this is particularly relevant, with the round being such a prominent part of regional media (Bowd, 2015; Hess & Waller, 2008), and a key focus for traditional journalistic functions such as watchdog reporting. Although there has been evidence of the dilution of the watchdog role in participants' responses in this study, it is essential that contemporary education reinforces this approach in more than theoretical ways. For example, greater practical advice on dealing with sources and situations in which conflict may arise would be beneficial, particularly in work-integrated learning environments such as internships. University coursework and newsroom placements could place greater emphasis on teaching students how to produce publishable, "high-risk" stories. This would help to fulfil their journalistic responsibilities to their audiences. Changes such as these could provide a smoother transition from the "safe" space of university to the real world.

At USC, the journalism program focuses on the theory of traditionally important norms of journalism, including watchdog roles, ethics and objectivity, along with practical classroom applications and expanding work-integrated learning opportunities to socialise graduates (see Mensing, 2010). In this study, through the interview respondents and critical reflection, it is evident the program benefits the students' journalistic socialisation, providing them with opportunities as regional journalists even if they are not quite the finished article when they graduate.

Finally, there are limitations in this study that need to be acknowledged. First, it is a pilot project and the purposive sample of in-depth interviewees is relatively small, focusing on employed graduates from one regional university. The study also examined only those working in regional newsrooms. Further research analysing graduates unsuccessful in gaining employment, or who had left a newsroom to pursue another career, would be beneficial in providing a comprehensive overview of university socialisation, professional expectations and preparation. An examination of how local government reporting is taught across Australian journalism programs would also be valuable. Future scholarship could involve large-scale surveys of graduates across multiple universities to understand their perceptions of being educated for local government reporting in metropolitan and regional areas in a rapidly evolving industry.

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Authors

Peter English is a lecturer in journalism at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, Jane Fynes-Clinton is a lecturer in journalism at the University of the Sunshine Coast and Renee Barnes is a senior lecturer in journalism at the University of the Sunshine Coast.