Journalism as Research?
Thinking about journalism research in an Australian university context

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By Wendy Bacon, University of Technology, Sydney

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 text books 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 sideswipe, these wars too now seem to be behind us. Compared to when Hartley wrote in the mid nineties that, despite its importance, journalism was under-researched compared to other cultural forms, there is now a steady flow of research outcomes being published in this and other journals. (Hartley 1996, p.32)

Some unfortunate consequences however 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 practice journalism, while developing skills in a range of social science methodologies which they applied in conventional scholarly ways.

The result is that we have played 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 would 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 work). While some journalism
educators may prefer to have been included in the Humanities Panel, it is possible that 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, then 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 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 practice. If academic journalists only concentrate on traditional scholarly work, there is a danger that they will lose a feel for journalism. Journalism is constantly adapting to new technologies and seeking new ways to produce meaning for audiences. Without an active practice, there is a danger of replicating old methods and being constantly in catch-up mode rather than abreast of peers. In my own field of investigative journalism, new research techniques, public relations practices and forms of story telling developed during the ten years after I left full-time professional journalism. To be able to teach investigative journalism, I find 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 to 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 would 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 organization, which actively resists those considerations.

The same tension exists in all professional practice fields. Preparation of a little tourist brochure of 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, nurses and 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 in Sydney where the mundane practice of advising clients spawned court challenges that set new 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 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 test run an example. I have chosen an investigative journalism story because that is what I know from the inside. Others might have chosen an innovative documentary or others a form of in-depth non-fiction or feature. The example I have chosen resulted in a number of newspaper stories that were not able to be counted as research when DEST’s old rigid publication categories were public. My purpose here is to look in a more open ended way at what constitutes research.

Investigating a miscarriage of justice - 2000 - 2006

In 1999, I became aware of the case of Roseanne Catt who had been in prison for nearly ten years for attempting to poison and assaulting her ex-husband, who had been charged and later acquitted of child abuse against his children by another marriage. She was also convicted of possessing a gun which was found in the house where she was arrested. (Bacon & Pillemer, 2000; Bacon & Pillemer 2004) Catt had always pleaded her innocence but after the four month trial in 1991, she was convicted and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. Following her convictions, tabloid magazines adopted the judge’s description of her as an ‘evil and manipulative’ woman and presented her ex-husband’s account as the ‘real story.’ Catt and her story then disappeared from public view. Various Corrective Services professional psychologists interviewed her and declared that she remained manipulative because she would not admit guilt. At this point, there was no chance of early release.

There had been no publicity about this case for 8 years when I met Catt while interviewing women for a Sydney Morning Herald feature on women in prison. (Bacon and Pillemer 1999). After this first brief encounter, an ex-prisoner who was convinced of Catt’s innocence brought me the transcript of the four month trial. Fellow reporter Tracy Pillemer had been a child abuse social worker. I was a non-practising lawyer. We reviewed the evidence, applying previously acquired professional knowledge as well as our journalistic understandings of what was significant. We discerned a methodology in the prosecution case which was built, bit by bit, through the evidence of many witnesses. In 1991, the question a jury may have asked themselves was – could so many people not be telling the truth? Viewed in 2000 from the perspective of the 1995 NSW Royal Commission into Police Corruption which found that NSW Police routinely lied in court,
planted evidence and threatened witnesses in the 1980s and 1990s, it seemed that a miscarriage of justice was possible. We could at this stage have written an article which raised questions about the case, perhaps even a scholarly one, but it is unlikely the media would have been interested. We had already been told by the then editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* that to meet his standards required to insert the case back into the pubic arena, we would need to establish ‘something new’. We interpreted this to mean some fresh evidence that could disrupt the symbolic power of the jury’s guilty verdict. It is now that we shifted to using the distinctive methodologies and professional ethics of journalism – ringing sources and interviewing them on and off the record, constantly assessing their credibility and plotting our next move. It was a long time before we were sure of direction, the research plan shifting as we received new information. (By then, we knew the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s Four Corners was chasing the same story.) As in all investigations, the pursuit involved a myriad of strategic decisions.

We chased a number of leads. Some led to dead ends. We interviewed defence witnesses. While they seemed to be telling the truth, their evidence had already been rejected. For a story that would be acceptable to our editors, something more was needed. A number of other people told us they had not given evidence because they were too scared but they lacked persuasive power because they were close or sympathetic to Catt.

Our research took us in two main directions. The ex-NSW detective Peter Thomas who had arrested Roseanne had become an arson investigator in Queensland. After investigating several of his cases we discovered a pattern of people being charged with arson on the basis of insufficient evidence. This information was buried in separate court records and would normally have never seen the light of day. The case based nature of the legal system disguises patterns of similar behavior by the same witness appearing in the same case. In one case, we found a person who told us Thomas had offered money to give false evidence against a man who he falsely accused of setting fire to his hotel. Others said they felt pressured by Thomas. This added credibility to our interviewees who said they were too scared to give evidence for Catt.

Our other direction led us towards people who had worked with Thomas after he left the NSW police force. Finally two ex-business partners told us “off the record” that Thomas had told them that he had planted a gun on Catt. Both these sources were adamant that they would be in danger if they spoke “on the record”. We needed to assess the credibility of their claims. It was on the basis that they knew very little about the Catt case before the interviews that we decided that although they hated Thomas, they were likely to be telling the truth. Such judgements are the stuff of journalism but our reasoning drew on broader notions of evidence in fields beyond journalism and are not unlike judgements about evidence that lawyers and doctors make everyday.

The articles ‘Fire Trail’ and ‘Should this woman be in the jail’ went through a number of drafts, were checked and were subject to legal scrutiny. (Bacon & Pillemer 2000a; Bacon and Pillemer 2000c) This process could be compared to a peer reviewing process, although unlike blind refereeing, it was an open dialogue between those involved in the production process. The *Four Corners* program that was broadcast at the same time
would have gone through a similar process of scrutiny.

Together, these publications prised open the lid that had shut tightly on the case and shifted power relations in favour of a possible reopening of the case. In themselves however they were not sufficient, particularly as there was little response from the rest of the players in the media field. The case was eventually reopened in 1991 when one of the two confidential sources decided he would be prepared to give evidence at a fresh appeal. Eventually a judicial inquiry found that it was likely that Catt had been framed and the NSW Court of Criminal Appeal dismissed seven of her nine convictions in 2005.

So is this research? Much of what we did resembled accepted methods of historical and legal research. In reflecting back now, I am struck by the interdisciplinary nature of the work but the critical factor that established the fresh evidence depended on a well established methodologies of professional journalism, including the use of confidential sources. In fact, it is possible that the praxis of journalism was one of the few means by which the new insights into the case could have been achieved. The capacity to move between time periods, apply methods flexibly and to investigate official notions of ‘truth’ characterised the production process.

Indeed, if one takes Bourdieu’s strictures that all theory is a product its own fields of epistemological praxis, then any field of praxis producing new knowledge must be recognised firstly as its own field and secondly 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 probably agree that the production of these stories met 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 Kingdom RAE and proposed Australian RQF terms, assuming of course, it was accepted that a peer reviewing process had taken place. But were the results of our investigation “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 the results were unable to be tested because the sources were anonymous, but in this respect, journalism is no different from other fields of research that use anonymous interviewees under ethically constrained conditions. I think it can be argued that the stories provided fresh insight into the under-researched areas of how NSW police corruption works in rural NSW, the techniques of arson insurance investigators and the methodologies of miscarriages of justice but I would have to admit that these strands of interpretation were embedded rather than explicitly argued and were probably revealed better by the whole series of articles rather than these two pieces.(Bacon 2004;Bacon 2005,Bacon 2006)

Eventually an inquiry was set up into the case that led me to do a number of shorter reports on the inquiry evidence. While each of these involved the careful decisions about what was significant that are associated with court reporting, I would not argue that each of these pieces would qualify as research because they largely reproduced evidence that
was given in court. So should criteria for establishing journalism as research require 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.

Amongst these later Roseanne Catt articles, there was one that carefully pieced together evidence around a conviction for attempted poisoning. This report only drew on evidence that was already on the public record but by using a computer document analyser to draw on hundreds of days of hearings as well as thousands of exhibits, it went far beyond what can be achieved in daily reporting and presented existing knowledge in a way that arguably produced new insights. (Bacon. 2004). This article was published by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism’s Reportage rather than the Sydney Morning Herald which at this time was interested in following news events around the Roseanne Catt case rather than looking for fresh material on the case. The major points in the report on the attempted poisoning conviction closely resembled those adopted by the NSW Court of Criminal Appeal when it later quashed Roseanne Catt's conviction on this charge for which she had already served several years in prison. (Regina v. Roseanne Catt [2005] NSWCCA 279)

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, are ones that can be explored through dialogue between university based journalists and other academics and 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.

**Learning from debates about other forms of creative and professional practice**

In Australia, Humanities faculties have tended to be more accepting of other forms of creative practice such as novels and films than journalism. This maybe because of a hangover of prejudices about ‘high art’ as opposed to popular culture, or perhaps the routine, daily contact with journalism simply tends to overshadow its more experimental and investigative forms. It is also possible that creative practitioners have better organised themselves to lobby to defend their practice as research, through screenwriters and other organisations. 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 the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology’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 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 that 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 ways in which the work of Schon on reflective practice of professionals. (Schon.1983;Schon 1987: ) In the last ten years, Sheridan-Burns, Pearson and others have applied Schon’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 reflective practice have been applied both to 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. (Taylor 1999 :Mantzoukas&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 become 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 and also reflected upon. 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 professional 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 diarizing, 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. 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.

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Author
Wendy Bacon is an Associate Professor of Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney.