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# **Moulding them in the industry's image: Journalism education's impact on students' professional views**

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**Folker Hanusch**, University of the Sunshine Coast

## **Abstract**

Long-running debates over the value of university-based journalism education have suffered from a lack of empirical foundation, leading to a wide range of assertions both from those who see journalism education playing a crucial role in moulding future journalists and those who do not. Based on a survey of 320 Australian journalism students from six universities across the country, this study provides an account of the professional views these future journalists hold. Findings show that students hold broadly similar priorities in their role perceptions, albeit to different intensities from working journalists. The results point to a relationship between journalism education and the way in which students' views of journalism's watchdog role and its market orientation change over the course of their degree – to the extent that, once they are near completion of their degree, students have been moulded in the image of industry professionals.

## **Introduction**

Tertiary education in journalism is enjoying enormous popularity around the world with many countries moving towards either university-only qualifications for journalists, or a mixed model of tertiary journalism education and stand-alone private journalism schools (Deuze, 2006). In Australia, this has led to the emergence of more tertiary-educated journalists than ever before. In the early 1990s, Henningham's (1993) seminal study of Australian journalists had put the number of those with a university degree at only 35 per cent, but more recent work points to this figure having doubled (Brand & Pearson, 2001; Hanusch, 2008). While not all graduates have necessarily studied journalism, a clear majority have (Hanusch, 2008). Thus, the dominant career path today is for students to complete a three-year undergraduate degree, usually followed by a one-year paid cadetship at a media company.

At the same time, journalism education has been dogged by an ongoing debate between vocationally- versus theory-oriented approaches. This debate came to the fore particularly in the late 1990s, during a lengthy and fiery debate between journalism educators and cultural studies scholars (see Turner, 2000) and was recently the topic of discussion in the wake of an independent inquiry into the Australian media (Stewart, 2012). The tension is borne out of the fact that journalism education in Australia “has evolved out of competing Anglo-European and American paradigms – generally framed as a culturist/positivist divide – and now includes a sprawling variety of course titles, job descriptions, and range of discipline areas drawn on” (Deuze, 2004: 133). It is exacerbated by the fact that the news industry demands graduates who are job-ready and can quickly fit into a working newsroom, while the university environment “demands a more intellectual and scholarly approach from journalism educators” (Hirst, 2010: 87).

Yet, despite the surge in popularity for journalism degrees and subsequent discussions over the benefits of either approach, those who are subjected to tertiary journalism education have rarely been examined in much detail. What are journalism students' views of their

chosen profession, and to what extent may their university education affect their views over the course of their degree? While such research has been on the rise in many other countries, few such studies have been undertaken in Australia. In order to shed some light on this issue, this paper reports the results from a pilot study of journalism students' professional and ethical views in six Australian universities. Specifically, it aims to examine the impact journalism education may have on their views, as well as how those views compare to those of working journalists.

### **The influence of journalism education on students' professional views**

Considering its enormous growth in recent decades, the tertiary education of journalists has been of increased relevance for the quality of journalism around the world. Journalism education is believed to matter because it has the potential to shape future journalists' practices, role perceptions and understanding of ethics, among other things. This belief is at the core of the often vigorous debates over how journalists should be educated. As the overview by Obijiofor and Hanusch (2011) points out, the clash between theory- and practice-focused educational models exists in almost every corner of the globe, and at times appears intractable. This has been no less the case in Australia, which even coined the term "Media Wars" in the 1990s (Hirst, 2010; Turner, 2000).

These debates and concerns demonstrate that much power is ascribed to universities in socialising students into journalism and in playing a role in the professionalization of journalism (Skinner et al., 2001). For example, Gaunt (1992: 1) believes that "journalism training perpetuates or modifies professional practices and moulds the perceptions journalists have of the role and function of the media". However, studies have also found journalism education to be only one influence among many on journalists' professional views (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996; Weaver, 1998; Zhu et al., 1997). That is, while journalism education may form and change students' views, providing a "socialisation to the profession" (Becker et al., 1987: 19), they undergo a secondary socialisation process once they enter the newsroom.

In-depth research into journalism students' views of their chosen future occupation is still relatively rare. Following some early studies in the US (see, for example, Boyd-Barrett, 1970; Bowers, 1974), the first major international study was undertaken in the early 1990s (Splichal and Sparks, 1994). In this groundbreaking, and so far only major comparative project, Splichal and Sparks analysed the views of around 1800 first-year journalism students in 22 countries, arguing that universal ethical and occupational standards were emerging, pointing to a professionalization of journalism across the globe. While some scholars have criticized this conclusion, noting the absence of questions on journalistic roles or ethical dilemmas in the study (Weaver, 1996), it nevertheless paved the way for paying closer attention to the views of journalism students.

As a result, there have been comprehensive studies in diverse places such as Britain, China, Greece, Russia, Scandinavia, Spain, and the US (Bjørnsen et al., 2007; Frith and Meech, 2007; Hanna and Sanders, 2007; Hovden et al., 2009; Nygren et al., 2010; Plaisance, 2007; Sanders et al., 2008; Spyridou and Veglis, 2008; Wu and Weaver, 1998). A number of studies have found some evidence that tertiary education impacts journalism students' views. For example, in the US, Becker et al (1987) found a significant relationship between journalism students and their views on journalism, while Plaisance (2007) found that students' journalistic values changed over the course of a media ethics course. In China, university experience proved a more powerful influence than demographic backgrounds on students' views, although their existing values interacted with the education socialisation process (Wu and Weaver, 1998).

Such conclusions have not been supported by all research, however. In the UK, a study following journalism students from before they started university to graduation found they had similar opinions and ideals, having changed little over the course of the degree (Hanna and Sanders, 2007). A similar finding emerged from a survey of Norwegian students, where few differences could be found in professional ideals from first to final year (Bjørnsen et al., 2007).

### **Journalism education in Australia**

Journalism education at universities has a long history in Australia, where the idea began to attract a lively debate when first introduced in 1912. While the American approach of providing specialised practical and theoretical training in universities was the dominant guiding principle, it was fought strongly by some, with the view that journalists are born, not made, persisting to this day (Sheridan Burns, 2001). Nowadays, journalism is taught in 30 universities around Australia (North, 2010), and ongoing debates over the balance between theory and practice in journalism education have been visible most recently in the wake of the independent inquiry into the media and the reaction it provoked among news organisations and journalism educators (Stewart, 2012). Specifically, one of the accusations by some in the industry has been that students are not taught in ways that make them job-ready.

Yet, while much scholarly debate exists over the way in which journalists should be educated, and despite the particular ferocity with which the debate has been held, comprehensive empirical studies of journalism students' views are still rare. Australia participated in Splichal and Sparks' (1994) seminal study, but only 24 students from the University of Technology, Sydney, were part of the sample. The mid-1990s saw a survey of Deakin University students, which examined their motivations for studying journalism, as well as how realistic their preconceptions and expectations were (Alysen and Oakham, 1996). In a follow-up study, Alysen (1998) re-interviewed the students in their graduating year, in an attempt to examine the extent to which education had altered their views. She found that by the end of their course students were more likely to be following the news, less sure of their chances in securing a job, more optimistic about pay rates in their chosen career, and less likely to be concerned about ethical issues in journalism. At the same time, however, they also held on to some of their misconceptions about journalism, an indication that journalism education may not have played a substantial role in affecting some of their views.

In 2001, O'Donnell (2006) conducted in-depth interviews with 20 journalism students and graduates about their educational and employment experiences. While not concerned directly with students' professional views, she examined the potential for a university education to be instrumental in intergenerational change in journalism, arguing that there was "more to professional education in journalism than workforce reproduction through socialisation to the profession" (O'Donnell, 1996: 36). More recently, a cross-institutional team have been exploring the ways in which a practical reporting project about Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander affairs impacts on journalism students' views of indigenous issues (Stewart et al., 2010). They argued that the course "provided students with real-world situations where their problem-solving skills were tested and refined, contributing to their development as citizens who understand not only their disciplinary and professional knowledge and requirements, but also the societal context in which they will perform their professional duties" (Stewart et al., 2010: 69).

Few studies have engaged with the way in which university education may affect Australian journalism students' professional views, and it is therefore crucial to investigate in more depth these aspects, in order to provide empirically grounded knowledge. Further, it is important to examine the extent to which students' views reflect those of working journalists

in order to assess whether large gaps exist between the two groups' perceptions, particularly once students are towards the end of their degree.

### **Methodology**

From the review of the literature on journalism students' professional views, three research questions were developed.

RQ1: What are the role perceptions of Australian journalism students and how do they compare with journalists' views?

RQ2: What are Australian journalism students' ethical views and how do they compare with journalists' views?

RQ3: Do Australian journalism students' professional views change over the course of their degree?

In order to answer the research questions, journalism students at six Australian universities across four states were surveyed. To allow for comparisons of journalism students' views with the most recent data on Australian journalists (Hanusch, 2008), the conceptual framework around journalism culture developed by Hanitzsch (2007) was adopted. It views journalists' professional views as existing along three dimensions of institutional roles: Interventionism (the extent to which journalists intervene in the political process and society in general), Power Distance (ranging from adversarial to loyal positions toward centres of power) and Market Orientation (the extent to which journalists focus on audiences as consumers or citizens). In order to gauge students' ethical views, a list of items presenting respondents with a variety of ethical scenarios, which has been applied widely in other research (Weaver et al., 2007; Henningham, 1996; Sanders et al., 2008), was used.

Questionnaires containing 40 closed and open-ended questions were administered in-class at Edith Cowan University, Griffith University, Monash University, Queensland University of Technology, University of South Australia and University of the Sunshine Coast. The selection of universities was based on achieving a geographic spread as well as on finding willing collaborators who would administer surveys in their classes. As such, the data gathered here present the findings of a pilot study. As a next step, it is proposed to replicate the study across all journalism schools in the country.

Journalism students were defined as all those enrolled in undergraduate journalism courses at Australian universities. Postgraduate students were excluded from the study. Students from across all years were surveyed, allowing for comparisons between students who had little or no exposure to academic journalism programs to those who had undergone a substantial socialisation process at their university. Questionnaires were printed and administered by teaching staff during lectures or tutorials early in Semester 2, 2011.

A total of 320 valid questionnaires were received, with 82 (25.6 per cent of the sample) from ECU, 56 (17.5 per cent) from Griffith, 40 (12.5 per cent) from Monash, 19 (5.9 per cent) from QUT, 45 (14.1 per cent) from UniSA and 78 (24.4 per cent) from USC. Two thirds of the respondents (66.9 per cent) were women, confirming widespread evidence of journalism schools being dominated by female students, both in Australia (Alysen and Oakham, 1996; Grenby et al., 2009) and overseas (Becker et al., 2008; Densem, 2006). Journalism students were also a reasonably homogenous group, with almost four out of every five (77.2 per cent) born in Australia. The median age was 20 and students' educational backgrounds were split down the middle: 49.5 per cent had attended a public high school, with the remainder having gone to a private high school. When asked about their parents' education, almost half (49.4 per cent) responded neither of their parents had completed university, demonstrating a very large number of first-in-family students. Both parents had a university degree in 22.1 per cent of cases. Respondents were split relatively evenly across the years, with 40.3 per cent in first year, 27 per cent in second year and 28.3 per cent in third

year. In line with evidence from studies of the political views of journalists, the majority of students identified as left of centre (40.4 per cent), while 25.5 per cent identified as right of centre.

## **Results**

### Role perceptions

The journalism students surveyed for this study display views broadly in line with an Australian tradition of journalism, favouring an adversarial approach concurrent with ideas of journalism as the fourth estate (Table 1).

*--- Insert Table 1 about here ---*

Only a small minority favour a loyal approach in supporting official policies on national development or conveying a positive image of business or political leadership. In terms of their views on interventionism, a mixed picture emerges, with 59.7 per cent believing it to be important to advocate for social change, while 55.9 per cent also think it is important not to intervene and instead be a detached observer. Other interventionist role perceptions, such as influencing public opinion or setting the political agenda are favoured only by a minority of students. When asked about their views on market orientation, a majority (70.4 per cent) favoured a citizen-oriented approach while at the same time believing that audiences needed to be provided with the most interesting information, an approach that addresses audiences as consumers rather than citizens.

When the student responses are compared with journalists surveyed by Hanusch (2008), there are some similarities in the general hierarchy of roles. Students and journalists have the highest regard for providing citizens with the information they need to make political decisions. They also clearly favour an adversarial approach in their support for being watchdogs of government and business. There are some significant differences, both in terms of the order in which items are ranked, as well as the extent to which individual roles are seen as important. Firstly, journalists displayed a much stronger belief in the adversarial approach, with 76 per cent seeing it as important to act as watchdog of the government, as opposed to only 57.2 per cent of students. Further, 67 per cent of journalists believed it was important to act as watchdogs of business, compared with only 49.4 per cent of students, a finding that echoes evidence on British journalism students (Sanders et al., 2008). Conversely, items at the high end of the power distance dimension (supporting official policies and conveying a positive image of political and business leadership) were favoured significantly more strongly by students. Students displayed much stronger support for the interventionist approach of advocating for social change (59.7 per cent compared with only 37 per cent of journalists) as well as influencing public opinion (45.6 per cent vs. 25.3 per cent).

While there were some similarities in terms of the ranking of market orientation items, students displayed a more consumer-oriented approach overall, with significantly more of them believing it was important to concentrate on news of interest to the widest possible audience (50.6 per cent compared with 40 per cent of journalists) and significantly less supporting the role of providing citizens with the information they need to make political decisions (70.4 per cent as opposed to 79 per cent of journalists). In addition, students ranked the item 'to provide the audience with the information that is most interesting' second overall, while journalists ranked it fifth.

### Ethical views

Journalism education often places emphasis on ethics, and this is apparent in students' ethical views (Table 2).

--- Insert Table 2 around here ---

The largest number of journalism students supported the use of hidden microphones or cameras, with almost half agreeing this action could be justified on occasion. A further 42.1 per cent believed it could be justified to badger unwilling informants to get a story, while just over one-third thought the same about paying people for confidential information or using confidential business or government documents without authorisation. On the other end of the scale, only one out of ten students believed it could be justified on occasion not to protect source confidentiality, while only marginally more thought it permissible to claim to be someone else. Less than one out of five thought it potentially justifiable to make use of personal documents such as letters and photographs without permission.

Compared with Henningham's (1996) study of Australian journalists' ethical views (Hanusch (2008) did not ask these questions), students are considerably more restrained. While Henningham found 79 per cent of journalists thought it was justifiable to use confidential business or government documents without authorisation, only 36.5 per cent of students thought so. Similarly, more than double the number of journalists (39 vs. 18.2 per cent) thought it was potentially okay to make use of personal documents. Badgering unwilling informants in order to get a story was also favoured by more journalists than students (55 vs. 42.1 per cent). On the other hand, more students thought it was justifiable to pay people for confidential information (37.9 vs. 31 per cent) as well as to not protect source confidentiality (11.1 vs. 4 per cent). Claiming to be someone else received equally low support from both students and journalists.

#### The impact of journalism education

One major aim of this study was to examine whether journalism education made any difference to students' role perceptions. For this purpose, first-year students' responses were compared with those from third- and fourth-year students. T-Tests comparing students' mean scores show there is some statistically significant difference in students' role perceptions across first and final years. This relates particularly to the adversarial approach, where students in their third and fourth year of studying journalism were much more likely to favour an adversarial approach than those in their first year. Three items that measured the power distance dimensions displayed significant differences in this regard. Specifically, more third- and fourth-year students believed it was important to act as watchdog of government ( $M=3.83$ ,  $SD=1.17$ ) than first year students ( $M=3.52$ ,  $SD=1.16$ ),  $t(228)=2.037$ ,  $p<.05$ , two-tailed,  $d=.266$ . Similarly, more third- and fourth-year students viewed it as important to be watchdogs of business ( $M=3.59$ ,  $SD=1.20$ ) than first-years ( $M=3.29$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ),  $t(228)=2.008$ ,  $p<.05$ , two-tailed,  $d=.264$ . In addition, first year students thought it was more important to actively support official policies on national development ( $M=2.76$ ,  $SD=.98$ ) than did third- and fourth-year students ( $M=2.49$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ),  $t(227)=1.977$ ,  $p<.05$ , two-tailed,  $d=.261$ .

First-year students also displayed a higher market orientation than those in the third or fourth year of their degree. Significantly more first year students said it was important to provide the audience with the most interesting information ( $M=3.84$ ,  $SD=.81$ ) than third- and fourth-years ( $M=3.61$ ,  $SD=.91$ ),  $t(228)=2.008$ ,  $p<.05$ , two-tailed,  $d=.267$ . They were more likely to support concentrating on news of interest to the widest possible audience ( $M=3.66$ ,  $SD=.95$ ) than third- and fourth-years ( $M=3.40$ ,  $SD=1.01$ ),  $t(228)=2.035$ ,  $p<.05$ , two-tailed,  $d=.265$ . While these differences are all statistically significant, the Cohen's  $d$  scores indicate that the year of study only has a small effect. Nevertheless, the influence remained statistically significant even after accounting, through multiple regression, for other potential

influences such as gender, political views and whether students had attended state or private high schools.

In terms of their ethical views, year of study was only related to differences in students' views on protecting source confidentiality. Here, first-year students were significantly less likely to justify this, with only 4.3 per cent agreeing, while 16.1 per cent of third- and fourth-year students agreed,  $\chi^2(1, N=208)=8.212$ ,  $p<.01$ , with Cramer's  $V=.199$  indicating a small effect. Other determinants such as gender, political views or school background did not play an important role after taking into account the stage of students' degree.

## Discussion

The results demonstrate that, overall, journalism students display some broad similarities to working journalists in terms of how they rank various journalistic role perceptions, but there are significant differences in terms of the intensity with which they hold them. Students generally appear to be more interested in playing an interventionist role and display a higher market orientation, while not holding the staunch watchdog views that working journalists have and which have a long tradition in Australia. However, the analysis also finds a significant relationship between journalism education and the formation of some views about journalism's role. In particular, this occurs in the dimensions of power distance and market orientation. Here, third- and fourth-year students display a much stronger identification with the watchdog role and more emphatically reject a loyal stance. At the same time, students who are near the completion of their degree display significantly less support for a market-orientated role. What is more, when we compare third- and fourth-year students' views on five specific items related to these roles (watchdog of government and business; actively support official policies on national development; concentrate on news of interest to the widest audience; provide the audience with the most interesting information) with those of journalists surveyed in Hanusch (2008), all the statistical differences disappear. This demonstrates that once students complete their degree, their views on the market orientation and adversarial role of journalism have changed to an extent that they are now more similar to working journalists. Hence, we can assume that journalism education is having an effect on shaping students' views in this regard.

In terms of ethical dilemmas, the evidence is not quite as clear cut. Arguably, ethical views may be affected much more in the newsroom than they can be during the course of a journalism degree, due to the specific work circumstances which are difficult to simulate at university. Students are likely taught high ethical ideals synonymous with aspirations of journalistic professionalization, yet, as anecdotal evidence shows, it is often much more difficult to hold on to these once in a newsroom where the realities of various influences may make ethical dilemmas more contracted and require a more pragmatic approach. Further, the comparisons with Henningham's (1996) figures are difficult, as that survey was conducted more than 20 years ago. Nevertheless, we can see that students are generally more restrained in their ethical views, which may be related to the fact five of the six journalism programs analysed here include a compulsory course on journalism ethics. Incidentally, the finding here is also in line with evidence found by Sanders et al. (2008) in their comparison of British journalists and students.

The only difference where the year of study was related to student's views on ethical dilemmas relates to the protection of source confidentiality. The result is surprising as it appears that final year students are more relaxed about source confidentiality than those in first year. In fact, when comparing the figures to Henningham's data, it appears that first-year students are actually more similar to working journalists. While surprising, the result does support Alysen's (1998) finding that once they reached their final year, journalism students



were less concerned about ethical issues. It also supports evidence elsewhere that journalism education lowers students' level of idealism (Hovden et al., 2009; Plaisance, 2007; Spyridou & Veg, 2008). The majority of journalism programs examined here provide a vocationally-oriented degree, in addition to the fact that the vast majority of journalism academics in Australia are former journalists (Bromley & Neal, 2011), who might be – even if subconsciously – instilling in students the values and ideas of journalism from the time they worked in the industry. While this study could only examine whether students' views changed during their degree, providing an empirical base for *what* happens, it is important to examine *how* this happens. This would mean accounting more precisely for the main drivers in these changes, taking into account the specific profiles of teaching staff as well as the relevant journalism programs overall.

### **Conclusion**

The most recent debate in Australian journalism education has centred around a feature article in which some industry figures argued a chasm exists between journalism academics and journalists, highlighting fears that graduates were not prepared well enough for their career (Stewart, 2012). This study has found, however, that students' and journalists' professional views are ranked in similar fashion, even if some significant differences exist in the importance with which either group views various role descriptions, such as students' stronger commitment to an interventionist role.

More importantly, the findings show that when nearing the end of their degree, students' are significantly more like working journalists, in particular in that their commitment to the watchdog role increases, and they are more likely to want to address audiences as consumers. Past research has found that students become more similar in their professional views to working journalists, arguably because they may perceive that the industry wants followers (Spyridou & Veg, 2008). Hence, the results of this study can be interpreted in different ways: On the one hand, journalism schools are, contrary to some commentators' assertions, actually moulding students in the image of the industry. On the other hand, if tertiary journalism education's goal is to do more than just reproduce existing professional views, it may need to take a closer look at what is actually doing.

Finally, there are some important limitations to this study which need to be pointed out. Firstly, the data presented here is based on a pilot study which investigated only a sample of Australian journalism programs. While care was taken to include programs from across a variety of institutions, a more comprehensive study still needs to be undertaken across preferably all journalism schools. Further, the study was not able to follow the same students' views through their degree, in a way that Alysen's (1998) study did, and it also did not follow students into their employment. Ideally, future studies should attempt to track the way in which students' views change from before their journalism degree all the way to the end of their first five years in the industry, in order to better ascertain where and in what way socialisation processes are taking place. Nevertheless, this study, despite its limitations, has been able to identify some important trends that appear to be taking place in the way journalism education may shape students' views of the profession.

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**Table 1: Australian journalism students' and journalists' role perceptions**

	Students			Journalists <sup>1</sup>			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Very/ extremely important	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Very/ extremely important	
To provide citizens with the information they need to make political decisions	3.89	1.03	70.4%	4.19	1.16	79.0%	**
To provide the audience with the information that is most interesting	3.77	0.85	65.0%	3.76	1.00	61.6%	
Advocate for social change	3.67	0.96	59.7%	2.98	1.17	37.0%	***
To act as watchdog of the government	3.65	1.19	57.2%	4.07	1.19	76.0%	**
To be a detached observer	3.62	0.89	55.9%	3.88	1.00	71.4%	**
To concentrate on news that is of interest to the widest possible audience	3.58	0.98	50.6%	3.26	1.06	40.0%	**
To motivate people to participate in civic activities and political discussion	3.52	0.91	53.3%	3.50	1.12	52.0%	
To act as watchdog of business elites	3.46	1.13	49.4%	3.79	1.20	67.0%	**
To influence public opinion	3.40	0.97	45.6%	2.83	1.13	25.3%	***
To set the political agenda	2.69	1.10	20.8%	2.75	1.19	25.0%	
To actively support official policies on national development	2.64	1.03	19.1%	2.28	1.11	15.0%	**
To convey a positive image of business leadership <sup>2</sup>	2.62	0.99	17.5%	1.85	0.98	6.0%	***
To convey a positive image of political leadership	2.55	0.99	15.0%				

\*\*p<.01; \*\*\*p<.001

Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 being "not important at all" and 5 "extremely important".

<sup>1</sup>Data on journalists taken from Hanusch (2008)

<sup>2</sup> In Hanusch (2008), conveying a positive image of business and political leadership were asked in one item. T-tests reveal a significant difference to both of the split items.

**Table 2: Australian journalism students' ethical views**

	Students		Journalists <sup>3</sup>	
	Justified on occasion	Would not approve	Justified on occasion	Would not approve
Using hidden microphones or cameras	49.4%	50.6%	n/a	n/a
Badgering unwilling informants to get a story	42.1%	57.9%	55%	45%
Paying people for confidential information	37.9%	62.1%	31%	69%
Using confidential business or government documents without authorization	36.5%	63.5%	79%	21%
Making use of personal documents such as letters and photographs without permission	18.2%	81.8%	39%	61%
Claiming to be someone else	14.9%	85.1%	13%	87%
Not protecting source confidentiality	11.1%	88.9%	4%	96%

<sup>3</sup> Data on journalists taken from Henningham (1996)