

Big Dreams, small towns:

Perceptions of first-year journalism students at
two Queensland universities

Year 1

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Background

- “Nurturing communitarian citizenship entails at a minimum journalism committed to justice, covenant, and empowerment.” (Christians, Ferré and Flackler, 1993)
- Journalism occupies a unique position to empower and create change in communities.
- This is evident in rural areas where media and newspapers as social institutions continue to be valuable in contributing to the production of social capital (Beaudoin and Thorson, 2004).
- Putnam (2000) suggests that social capital is still more likely to be found in small towns and rural areas.

- As small regional universities, both the University of the Sunshine Coast (Sippy Downs) and James Cook University (Townsville) target students from mainly regional areas who have not yet travelled, or lived outside of their communities.



Some questions that inspired the study

- Where do our students come from?
- What are their aspirations vis-à-vis becoming journalists in the big cities versus remaining in the region?
- What motivated them to attend USC/JCU in the first place?

Some questions that inspired the study

- Do they feel disadvantaged by their choice to attend a small, regional university?
- As they train to become journalists, what changes, in any, in their perceptions of themselves, the university they attend, and their aspirations for the future might there be?



Key Research Question:

What changes in attitudes and perceptions of journalism students about their chosen profession and field of study occur, if any, over their three year study at university? What may account for these changes in attitudes and perceptions?

Methodology

- The study is envisioned as a three-year longitudinal study tracing the progress of the 2012 journalism student intake.
- A survey instrument comprising of questions asking about student background, perceptions and expectations of the university experience, views and perceptions of the journalism profession as well as individual aspirations was developed.
- The survey was undertaken during O-Week before any formal lectures or exposure to university-level study of journalism.

Methodology

- At USC, a total of 35 students participated in the survey.
- JCU had 25 students participating in the survey.
- The research has ethics clearance from the respective universities.
- It is envisioned that the same cohort of students will be re-surveyed in their second and third year of study to determine changes, if any, in the students' perceptions of themselves, the university and their program of study, as well as their views of their future after graduation.

Findings

(N=60)

I. Demographics

		N	%
1. Sex	Female	49	82
	Male	11	18
2. Age	15-18	41	68
	19-20	12	20
	21-25	5	8
	26-30	1	2
	over 30	1	2

3. Location/area classification

	N	%
Metro/capital city	1	2
Rural capital city	5	8
Regional city	36	60
Town	13	22
Semi-rural area	5	8
Remote area	0	0
Total	60	100

II. News Consumption Habits

1. Time spent consuming news per day	N	%
More than four hours	3	5
At least two but less than 4 hours	15	25
At least one but less than 2 hours	24	40
Less than one hour	18	30

2. Through which medium do you receive your news?

Television	57
Print	41
Radio	40
Social Media (e.g. Facebook)	34
Blogs (newspaper affiliated)	21
Blogs (independent)	15
Others (podcast, email newsletter)	14

3. Tool used to consume news? (top three responses)

Laptop 50

Smart phones 34

mobile phone 6

4. How do you find news that you think is reliable?

Reading the newspaper 51

Tuning in to TV 45

Tuning in to radio 33

Check news sites 30

Social media 14

Word of mouth 14

III. Perceptions about the profession of journalism

	SA	A	N	DA	SD
1. Without journalists, society would be ignorant	20	28	11	1	0
2. Without journalists, governments would not be held to account	18	26	13	3	0
3. By consuming news, I feel I am able to develop opinions on issues that affect my life	33	26	1	0	0
4. Journalism is a noble, ethical profession	6	20	23	1	0

5. The public's opinion
of journalists is

Very high	High	N	Low	Very low
1	14	27	18	0

6. Journalists' salaries
are

0	9	41	9	0
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IV. Perceptions about attending university

	Yes	No
1. I feel apprehensive about studying journalism at this university	21 (35%)	39 (65%)
2. I feel hopeful about the whole university experience	60 (100%)	0
3. I am the first in my family to attend university	17 (28%)	43 (72%)

4. I enrolled in a journalism degree because
(multiple answers allowed)

I was good in English 45

I am curious about the world 45

I am a good communicator 40

I want to inform and entertain
the public 39

I want to write for a living 34

I like talking to people 23

4. I chose this university because

It is close to home 39

Journalism program has a good
reputation 29

I wanted to attend a small university 18

I know someone who studied
here and enjoyed it 15

It was the only one I qualified for 9

V. University Expectations (or what I should learn)

	VI	I	SI	NI
Getting to know my classmates	17	27	15	1
Getting to know my tutors	30	27	3	0
Developing good study habits	44	16	0	0
Getting into a weekly rhythm	39	20	1	0
Expanding my knowledge	45	14	0	0
Developing qualities of a good journo	47	12	1	0
Learning how to write news style	44	15	1	0
Learning how to generate story ideas	43	17	1	0
Developing own writing style	41	16	2	0

VI= very important I= Important SI= Somewhat important NI= Not Important

V. University Expectations (or what I should learn)

	VI	I	SI	NI
Learning what makes news	33	26	1	0
Getting a job after graduation	47	10	3	0
Becoming more aware of news and current affairs	37	23	0	0
Learning to be an ethical journo	40	17	3	0
Understanding legal issues relating to journalism	43	16	1	0

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VII. Perceptions of employer's expectations

	VI	I	SI	NI
Attractive physical appearance	3	30	23	4
Possess self-confidence	39	20	1	0
News gathering skills	46	13	6	0
Expertise in use of technology	41	13	6	0
Ability to convey personality	37	22	1	0
Engagement with social media	20	32	6	0
Personal grooming	38	17	4	1
Strong voice quality	32	25	1	0

VIII. Aspirations (The Future)

1. 90% of students surveyed said they definitely plan a career in journalism.
2. 74% said they have as much chance getting a job in journalism as a student attending a metro-based university.
3. Over a third (66%) of students said they have a very good to excellent chance of finding a starting-level position in journalism on graduation.
4. 75% said it was important that they contribute to their region's media.
5. 62% of students said they hope to work in a metropolitan rather than a regional media outlet for their first job.

Conclusion

Our students are predominantly school leavers, female aged 16-18 who are from regional cities. They are motivated to come to university and take up journalism because they perceive themselves as being good communicators who received excellent marks in English in high school.


Their main motivation to attend their respective universities is proximity (close to home).



Our students are not great consumers of news which is a worry. A majority reported consuming one hour or less of news per day.

Their main source of news is television but said that newspapers are the more reliable source of news. A significant number of students reported using social media (e.g. Facebook) as their news source.

They reported laptops and smart phones as their top tools for receiving news.



They have a realistic view of journalism as a profession, believing that while it is an important contributor to social good, it is not the noble and ethical profession that it has historically claimed to be.

Our students realise the role they can play in regional media but almost three quarters said they would like to work in metropolitan-based media.

They neither think that journalists' salaries are particularly high or low, and more than half acknowledge that the public's perception of journalists ranges from neither high or low, to low.



An eye on the future

The survey will be conducted in 2013 among the same cohort of students.

It is planned that the research include a focus group interview in the second year and an exit interview in the third year to yield qualitative responses to any changes noted during the course of the research.