

Tilling the field in journalism education: implications of a systems model approach for journalism education

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Abstract

A 2007 UNESCO paper, Model curricula for journalism education, proposed subjects for journalism courses. The model suggests educators include knowledge structures such as how to do journalism, how to act as a reflective journalist, the importance of journalism in society and several other theoretical ideas that should underpin journalism education. However, there are no suggestions about how to work within the social structure of journalism. This paper is proposing that as part of journalism education, it is important to include more than the knowledge structures. It is also crucial to teach students how to navigate the social structure of journalism.

This proposal arose out of doctoral research that investigated the creative practices of print journalists in Australia.

One finding of the research was how critical the social structure, or field, is to a journalist's production process. In education, an equal emphasis on teaching an understanding of this social field will assist aspirant journalists to appreciate a range of aspects that are critical to their engagement but tend to remain under-emphasised in journalism education.

Continuing to teach the knowledge structures, including practical skills, of journalism is understood by the authors to remain a crucial part of education. But this paper argues that it is also of significant importance to increase journalism students' knowledge of the field. A study has been proposed to analyse journalism education programmes offered in Australia to determine if other journalism programmes see this as important and to what degree – if any – journalism programmes incorporate education about the field.

Introduction

In 2007, UNESCO released a paper to advise journalism educators in “developing countries and emerging democracies” (2007, p. 6) on a model curriculum for journalism education. In the introduction, the authors provided the following summary:

“... journalism education should teach students how to identify news and recognize the story in a complex field of fact and opinion, how to conduct journalistic research, and how to write for, illustrate, edit and produce material for various media formats (newspapers and magazines, radio and television, and online and multimedia operations) and for their particular audiences. It should give them the knowledge and training to reflect on journalism ethics and best practices in journalism, and on the role of journalism in society, the history of journalism, media law, and the political economy of media (including ownership, organization and competition). It should teach them how to cover political and social issues of particular importance to their own society through courses developed in co-operation with other departments in the college or university. It should ensure that they develop both a broad general knowledge and the foundation of specialized knowledge in a field important to journalism. It should ensure that they develop — or that they have as a prerequisite — the linguistic ability necessary for journalistic work in their country, including, where this is required, the ability to work in local indigenous or vernacular languages. It should prepare them to adapt to technological developments and other changes in the news media” (UNESCO, 2007, p. 6).

This description includes how to do journalism, how to act as a reflective journalist, the importance of journalism in society and a number of other theoretical ideas that should underpin journalism education. However, a crucial part of the system of journalism is missing: it does not include how the field, or the social structure of journalism, works. This paper contends that the social structure of journalism and how it works is an important element for journalists to learn in order for them to be able to produce, or create, their work.

This premise arose out of a doctoral research project that examined the creative practices of print journalists in Australia. The research applied the systems model of creativity developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1997; 2003) to the domain of print journalism to examine how journalists interact with cultural, individual and social structures in the creation of their work. The research revealed that a journalist is one part of a system of three elements that converges to enable the production of creative products, processes or ideas: a domain of knowledge that includes the rules and procedures of journalism (cultural knowledge); an individual, with his or her background and experiences, in this instance the journalist, who learns the cultural knowledge and produces an outcome; and, a social field that understands the system and judges the outcome for inclusion in the domain of knowledge. In other words, a creative outcome does not happen in a vacuum but occurs when a journalist interacts with the domain and field of journalism.

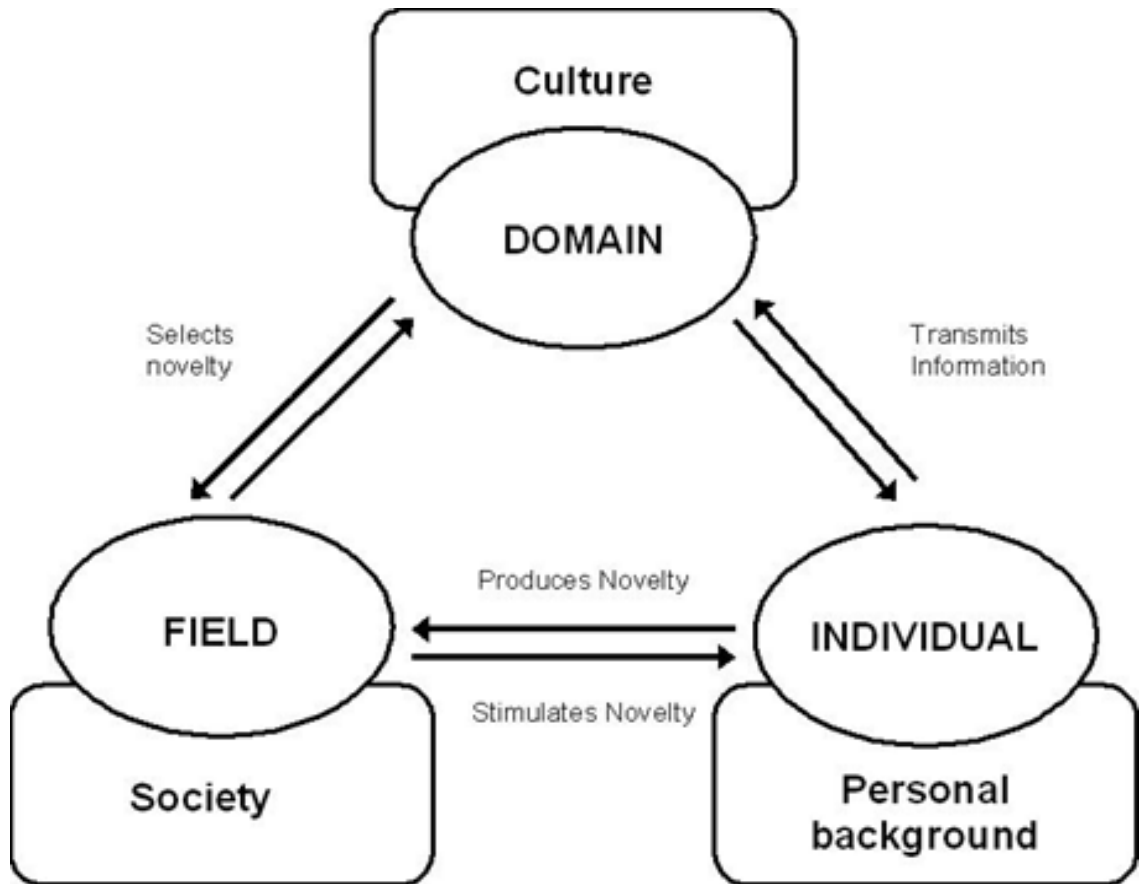


Figure 1 - Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity (2003, p. 315)

To describe these terms further, the domain consists of the knowledge structure journalists need to learn to be able to work in journalism, for example, the rules, conventions, techniques, guides, procedures and previously produced artefacts.¹ The individual journalist brings variables such as talent, genetic predisposition, cognitive structures, personality traits, family background, education, social class and cultural background to the system. The field, in Csikszentmihalyi's usage of the term, is considered to be "all the people who make the decision as to what new product, process or idea is to be included in the domain for other journalists to draw on" (Fulton, 2011b).² Members of the social field that are of importance in this context would include, for example, other journalists, sub-editors, editors, deputy editors, chiefs-of-staff, senior executives and media owners.

A core finding from the doctoral research was that all three elements in the system are necessary for a creative outcome and if a journalist understands the knowledge from the domain as well as "criteria of selection, the preferences of the field" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 47) they are more likely to be more efficient in their work processes; this knowledge becomes part of their tacit knowledge (Schön, 1983). It is this tacit knowledge that enables a journalist to 'do without thinking' with the journalist, as active agent, making creative choices in interaction with these structures.

To apply this premise to this paper, it is sensible that all three components are acknowl-

edged in some form in journalism education. However, one outcome from the research was the finding that in journalism education, there is an emphasis on journalism students learning the domain knowledge of journalism but the social field is not given as much emphasis. In fact, in journalism generally, the importance of the social structure of the field is sometimes overlooked unless it is to state how deterministic the field is on a journalist's agency (Henningham, 1989: 27; Henningham, 1990; Machin & Niblock, 2006: 162; McNair, 1998: 61). The findings from the research project suggest that a curriculum that includes information about the social field would make aspirant journalists better prepared to work in the media environment.

A research project identified in the conclusion of the doctoral research project, therefore, is an analysis of journalism education programmes offered in Australia to ascertain whether there is any allowance made within the programmes to learn about the field. A pilot study is planned to analyse the journalism major in the Bachelor of Communication degree at the authors' university, the University of Newcastle, to ascertain what allowances are made within the degree to instruct students on working within the field's expectations. It is hoped that a broader research project will result from this pilot study to encompass journalism education programmes Australia-wide. The broader study could include content analysis of the subjects offered and their course outcomes and learning objectives as well as interviews with teaching staff, journalism students, university-educated journalists and the senior members of the field who hire journalists to discover how learning about the field can be incorporated more formally into a journalism degree. A further step in the research project could be an analysis of international journalism programmes, including Western and non-Western programmes. The final objective is to develop a more holistic model of journalism education that encompasses the three elements of the systems model.

There are journalism degrees in Australia with subjects that include knowledge of the field in their learning objectives. For example, Bond University's Newspaper Reporting course (JOUR12-240) expect students will have "[a]n understanding of the modern newspaper newsroom and the functions of different personnel" (Bond University, 2012) by the end of the subject. There are also degrees that have a compulsory work placement component, which gives students an opportunity to work within a newsroom or magazine office. At the University of Newcastle, for example, third year journalism majors are offered Communication Professional Placement (CMNS3500) as a directed subject but it is not a compulsory course.

There are also journalism textbooks that include brief explanations of a newsroom's social structure (Conley & Lamble, 2006; Maskell & Perry, 1999; White, 2005; Harriss, Leiter & Johnson, 1985; Cole, 2005; Frost, 2001; Niblock, 1996) but there are also many textbooks that merely instruct on how to write as a journalist by focusing on the domain knowledge. To present a slightly different example, Meehan (2001) pointed out that most do-it-yourself freelance journalism books emphasise learning how to write publishable articles with little emphasis on the importance of contacts in the industry – the contacts in this instance would be members of the field. In freelance writing, knowing who to contact in the industry is as vitally important as knowing how to write. The same argument could be made in any journalistic endeavour. Continuing to teach the knowledge structures of journalism, that is, the rules, conventions, techniques, guides and procedures of the domain, as well as theoretical subjects to encourage students to critically examine journalism and its place in society, is a crucial part of journalism education but it is equally important to increase journalism students' knowledge of the field.

Therefore, this paper is suggesting that it is essential to teach students how to navigate the social structure of journalism. As creativity researcher Keith Sawyer contended: “The most successful creative people are very good at introducing their ideas to the field. They know who the key people are, and they know how the selection process works” (2006, p. 309). Teaching an understanding of the field – how the field works, who can assist in accessing information, who selects what is published, who selects what is to be written, as well as identifying who in the field can negotiate entry into journalism – in conjunction with domain acquisition can only assist an early journalist in their career and lead to a more efficient work process. To demonstrate this suggestion, the paper discusses data found during the doctoral research project regarding journalism education. The research project was an ethnographic study that used observation, document and artefact analysis and semi-structured interviews as the methods to gather data. Thirty-six members of the field of journalism, including eighteen journalists, three cadets, one student journalist and fourteen management level field members (editor, deputy editor or owner) were interviewed in 2007 and 2008. Twelve of the fourteen higher-level respondents had been journalists and answered questions about their experience from this perspective as well as from the management perspective. The respondents included seventeen females and nineteen males and they ranged in age from twenty to sixty-two. They worked at a mixture of publications including newspapers (24) and magazines (10) as well as freelance (2). To provide triangulation to the data, three newsrooms were observed in 2009 and 2010: one a weekly community newspaper, one a tri-weekly regional newspaper and one a weekly, metropolitan publication.

While the research project encompassed a broader church than journalism education, education was discussed with the interviewees as one of the structures they interacted with, including positive and negative experiences, and cadetships, internships and work placements, and what this education meant to their work practice.

Undergraduate journalism education in Australia

At university level, twenty-six Australian universities offer journalism programmes. These programmes range from degrees that are a specific Bachelor of Journalism degree (e.g. Griffiths University, Monash University, University of Queensland, Bond University, University of Wollongong), to degrees that include journalism as a major (University of Newcastle, University of Southern Queensland, Deakin University) or as part of a communication or mass communication degree (RMIT, Curtin University). There are also schools that offer journalism via several programmes (e.g. Bachelor of Arts) and schools offer double majors or combined degrees with disciplines such as law (University of Newcastle), international studies (University of Queensland) and sport studies (Charles Sturt University).

The majority of journalism educators are ex-journalists or are still working professionally (Sheridan Burns, 2003; Hirst, 2010; Bossio, 2010) with up to 95% of staff teaching into journalism courses having experience in the mass media (Patching, 1997). This provides university students with valuable practical knowledge. In fact, a University of Newcastle alumnus interviewed for the doctoral research named a journalist who taught into his degree and pointed out how valuable it was to have a teacher with experience in the industry:

“Probably Alysson Watson [currently Features Editor at the Newcastle Herald] who used to teach me at uni. I’d probably say she had a huge influence on me actually, when I come to think of it,

because I probably learnt more about being a journalist than anyone from her ... I'd probably say she had quite an impact" (J7, i/v, 2007).⁴

One editor from the study works as a part-time tutor at an Australian university and in the New South Wales TAFE system⁵ and believes it is her job in that capacity to encourage promising students: "I mentor most of my students; anyone who shows promise, willingness and enthusiasm gets my time as a teacher" (E13, i/v, 2008). However, she is also in a position to provide valuable work experience. Working as the editor/journalist on a privately owned publication that depends on a high amount of freelance contributions means she can offer students the opportunity to publish work. This gives practical experience as well as a way for students to build a portfolio of published work, thus providing an example of a way a member of the field can provide support both as a teacher and an editor.

Journalism education perceptions

There remains a well-established and ongoing pedagogical tension between university-based journalism educators and the journalism industry (Hirst, 2010), with Ricketson (2001) noting that much of this tension centres around perceptions of an oppositional polarity occurring between theory and practice. While the focus in such debate centres around the differences between pedagogical approaches that are "doing" journalism and those that are "about" journalism, some of the debate emerging from industry involves argument about the credibility and worth of courses, programmemes and journalism educators. Many media outlets demand students who are "work-ready" and many students place high importance and value on practical skills.

The discussion in the interviews on the value of tertiary education differed between the journalists. Three respondents specifically noted how university education was not helpful in their practice with 'on-the-job' experience listed as more valuable in learning how to write in a journalistic style:

"I mean you think you can pick it up at Uni and know what it is you're doing but I don't feel that I was in any way taught particularly well what to expect" (J1, i/v, 2007).

"Just stylistically they've [colleagues] taught me how to write more than university" (J13, i/v, 2008).

"Learnt a bit at school, nothing at uni, and mostly on the job from other journalists" (E15, i/v, 2008).

One reason for the disparity between what a journalism student learns during education and what happens in a working newsroom could be the difference in expectations students have to what actually happens when working in journalism. An Australian study done by Grenby et al. (2009) into secondary school students' perceptions of journalism as a career found students' ideas about what journalists do differed greatly to the reality. While the high school students understood certain aspects of a journalist's lifestyle, for example the students identified journalism as "deadline and current affair focussed (sic), time-consuming and potentially stressful" (Grenby et al., 2009, p. 13), other answers indicated a reliance on popular perceptions of journalism (the second highest response stated that journalism was "full of travel opportunities" (ibid.)).

Contrary to J1, J13 and E15's experiences with journalism education, E11 found her experience with university beneficial but also recognised the importance of work colleagues and continuing to engage with the domain, a point agreed with by J24:

“I learned a lot at Uni, I had some good lecturers, but then just working with an editor and them saying to you, ‘No we don’t do this’ or ‘Put that up there’ that’s the (pause) I think you learn the most from reading other journalists’ work” (E11, i/v, 2008).

“I’d say a third learnt through uni, a third on the job from superiors/sub-editors, and a third learnt from simply reading” (J24, i/v, 2008).

One major point that can be elicited from E11’s and J24’s comments about education is how both of them have mentioned the importance of the field (other journalists, editors, sub-editors) and the domain (other journalists’ work, reading) illustrating the significance of each of the elements in the systems model: learning the rules, procedures and previously created products in the domain as well as the preferences of the field means an individual is more likely to produce a creative outcome. E15’s earlier response supports this contention: he learnt the most from other colleagues, thus reinforcing the argument that knowledge about how the field works could be beneficial in a journalist’s learning process.

Internships and work placement

As part of journalism education, many courses offer work placements but students can undertake formal internships in a newsroom or at a magazine as a training option. Traditionally, print journalists learnt on the job via cadetships that consisted of three or four years⁶ of on-the-job training. Cadetships are not as prevalent as they were with Barbara Alysen’s (2005) study into entry level employment in journalism finding that News Limited Sydney appointed ten cadets in 2001 and one cadet in 2005. However, at the time of the interviews for this research, Rural Press⁷ newspapers still offered cadetships to school leavers with university graduates joining the company as final-year cadets. On the other hand, Fairfax newspapers, including Sydney’s Sydney Morning Herald and Melbourne’s The Age, currently offer traineeship programmes that last for one year (Fairfax Media, 2011) while News Limited offer cadetships that are also one year long (Herald Sun, 2012). Within this study, magazines that interviewees worked for offered university students internships and work placement opportunities. While cadetships and traineeships are paid positions, internships and other work placement opportunities are generally unpaid and offered to university students to provide job readiness when the student is finished university. Work placement and internships are typically undertaken by students during their university degree and give the opportunity to experience a working newsroom. Amy Forbes (2009) noted how a key feature in Australian journalism schools is that graduates need to demonstrate their knowledge of journalism but they must also be workplace ready. Forbes contended that although many employers look favourably on degrees, students also need newsroom experience and this can be achieved through internships and work placement during university education. These training opportunities are a way the field can encourage young people into the profession and, as Sawyer has noted, having formal training structures in place to identify promising young people means a higher chance of creativity in a sphere of production (2006, p. 308).

While the field offers these training opportunities to provide entry-level print journalists with desirable practical skills, it also gives student journalists an opportunity to observe first hand how the field works. Perhaps more importantly than observation, participation gives interns the opportunity to engage with the field at a deeper level than mere observation provides, an opportunity these training opportunities afford. As Aldridge’s (1998)

perceptive study on the mythology of British journalism discovered, participating in a workplace provides a clearer understanding of that workplace and its structures, including the field and how it works. While studies such as Hanna and Sanders (2007) identified that journalism students sometimes decided not to enter journalism because of their workplace experience, respondents in this study claimed internships and other training opportunities strengthened their desire to enter the profession. It is important to note, however, that the explosion in student numbers in journalism courses and the recent loss of many journalism positions in Australia have provided a fertile ground for potential exploitation of those seeking internships. A recent report into unpaid work and internships in Australia has identified journalism as an industry with a high incidence of unpaid work with students often working months without payment “in the hope of impressing the right person” (Stewart & Owens, 2013, p. 54).

During the interview process for this research, one student (J22) had just completed a five-week magazine internship. J22 found the training provided by the field helpful in her practice but found the older staff intimidating and appreciated support from another young journalist:

“There was a young girl there who was only a year older than me but she’d been working there for two years and she came beside me and showed me a lot, which is good because a lot of them were a lot older than me” (i/v, 2008).

J22’s comment demonstrates how important the field is to provide support and encouragement to an early career journalist. Internships provide a chance for undergraduates to apply university’s formal learning to practise, to network and to impress an employer. The senior staff member who supervised J22 talked about her experience with this particular intern:

“And we’ve just recently had one [an intern] and she was just brilliant. I think this girl, she’s a Uni of New South Wales communications student, I think she’ll go a long way” (E14, i/v, 2008).

Just as important, though, is that internships give the opportunity to not only learn and apply the rules of the domain, but the preferences of the field. As Forbes pointed out: “Through this interaction with journalists in the field, learning revolves around discovery, analysis and integration of information leading to deep-level learning” (2009, p. 1). J22’s experience at the magazine proved invaluable as she interacted with the field:

“And the people in the office knew a lot as well. So for me, not knowing much about the industry or journalism at all, going, ‘Is this worth writing about?’ they’d go, ‘Yep, I think it’s great, go for it, you can get some good information from here or here or you can call this person or this person’. So it was really handy having people around who knew what to do” (J22, i/v, 2008).

A further path into print journalism is work experience and J3 remarked how work experience in the Press Gallery during his university degree not only helped in his understanding of journalism but also led to his first job:

“I was really lucky to do work experience at the Press Gallery for [publication name deleted]. That was in my second year, the beginning of my second year of Uni and then a month later I got offered a job as an editorial assistant so doing things from clipping papers to holding the microphone to record sound to just doing office stuff, filing, that sort of thing so I did that through second and third year Uni but also all the way through I filed stories when I could, just basic stories that they didn’t have anyone else to do or whatever.” (J3, i/v, 2007).

Barbara Alysen contended that this kind of work experience in a newsroom often leads to permanent work because employers, as members of the field, show a “clear preference to the ‘known commodity’” (2005, p. 12) and cited the Sydney Morning Herald which, in 2004, hired trainees who had already worked as casuals or interns on the publication. As

journalist Sam de Brito wrote:

“Who you know is just as important as what you know in the media and work experience gives students the chance to make the contacts that often get them the jobs once they’ve finished their studies. After a student has been in a workplace, made friends, proved themselves reliable and amiable, they are far more likely to land a gig than a stranger who’s never interacted with the newsroom.” (2009, p. 36).

The purpose of the journalism education research project

Keeping the above discoveries in mind with regards to the equal importance of the different elements of the system of journalism, it is appropriate to examine how each of these elements is incorporated in journalism education. While the pilot study at the authors’ university is an analysis of the course and learning outcomes in journalism subjects to ascertain what, if any, field elements are included, it is expected that in the Australia-wide research project some degrees will already have some components of field learning within their course structure. According to the systems model, an outcome of the broader study should be that learning how the field works and what the preferences of the field are is an important element in the education of journalists and should be included in a model curriculum for journalism education. This could be done in several ways: including a course in the degree that includes an element of producing news such as a student publication; ensuring a work placement is a compulsory component in a journalism degree; and, attempting to involve journalism professionals within the course delivery.

However, the wide variety of offerings from the different universities as noted earlier presents a methodological issue for the project. A decision needs to be made by the researchers as to which subjects within the degrees to include for analysis so there is uniformity across the project. This can be done in several ways: include journalism specific subjects; include all subjects offered to journalism students, including core/compulsory courses that are not journalism specific; include all subjects offered in each degree. The pilot study conducted on the University of Newcastle offering should provide some direction to ensure a methodologically sound decision.

A further consideration is to keep in mind the state of the journalism industry with media platforms and tools continually evolving. It is highly likely that journalism students will not be working in a traditional journalism environment (Koutsoukos & Biggins, 2010). What will the field of journalism look like in future journalism domains? One discussion point in the doctoral research was that while employment in traditional print journalism may be declining, journalism in the online environment is increasing and this can be shown by the training opportunities on offer to new practitioners. Alysen (2007) noted that in 2007, while entry training positions in traditional journalism had dropped, online media cadetships were increasing. Allowing for these newer opportunities and ascertaining how the field is important in these offerings may also need to be part of the broader project.

Conclusion

Continuing to teach the knowledge structures of journalism, that is the domain, is a crucial part of journalism education, but it is equally important for a practitioner to have knowledge of the field. Sheridan Burns defined a journalist as (1) someone who earns their living from practising journalism, and (2) has mastered the technicalities of the profession, and is accepted by other journalists as having done that, and (3) who believes in journalism as social responsibility (2002, pp. 16-17). The second point made by Sheridan-Burns emphasises the importance of the field.

G. Stuart Adam suggested some twenty years ago that it was time the creative process is taught within journalism research and education (1993, p. 48), a suggestion that the authors emphatically agree with. But Adam claimed that works of journalism are based on templates that “reside in the culture” (1993, p. 20) and are “single products of the imaginations of single individuals” (ibid.). While this last claim can be considered contentious. It could be argued that Adam’s claim covers both the domain and the individual. This paper argues that the creative process that should be taught to journalists is a process that incorporates the domain, individual and field equally. In other words, developing a model that provides a more holistic approach to journalism education than the UNESCO 2007 model can only improve an aspirant journalist’s work processes.

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Endnotes

- 1 For a more detailed analysis of the domain see, for example, Fulton (2008; 2009; 2011a).
- 2 For a detailed analysis of the field of journalism see, for example, Fulton (2009; 2011a; 2011b).
- 3 Information retrieved from <http://jeaa.org.au/courses.htm> - accessed 11.1.11
- 4 Each journalist and editor was allocated a code to ensure anonymity – J1, J2, J3, etc. for journalists and E1, E2, E3, etc. for editors.
- 5 TAFE stands for Technical and Further Education and provides vocational education and training. Qualifications earned at TAFE are usually of a Certificate or Diploma level rather than a tertiary qualification.
- 6 There is some conflicting information about how long cadetships lasted for. Henningham, J 1998, 'The Australian journalist', in W Wu & DH Weaver (eds), *The global journalist: news people around the world*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, New Jersey, pp. 91-107. and North North, L 2009, *The gendered newsroom: how journalists experience the changing world of media*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, New Jersey., for example, said cadetships lasted for four years whereas Alysen Alysen, B 2007, *A strategy for vocational education in the news media at a time of industrial change: bridging the contradiction in Journalism education*, AARE 2007 International Educational Research Conference. Fremantle, Western Australia. stated that cadetships were typically three years. Green, K & Sykes, J 2004, *Australia needs journalism education accreditation*, Jour-Net international conference on Professional Education for the Media. Newcastle. provided some clarification when they stated that cadetships could be three or four years depending on the industrial award journalists are hired under.
- 7 The interviews were done with these journalists before Rural Press and Fairfax merged.