

# Supervision in the 'Hackademy': Reflections on the research journey of journalism practitioners

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## Abstract

The relationship between professional journalists and journalism academics has at times been marked by mutual mistrust and antagonism. Many journalists view academics as 'dreamers', removed from the practical realities of newsrooms. Some academics suggest journalists do not always reflect on their practice and its larger implications, a point recently underscored by the Leveson inquiry. Despite this tension, recent years have seen an increasing number of journalists entering the academy, and taking up scholarly research in various forms. This study aims to provide insights into the supervision of such 'hackademics'. Drawing on personal interviews with research supervisors and journalists entering or wanting to enter the academy, it focuses on the issues that come to the fore as practitioners work with the 'theory people' on scholarly pursuits.

**Learning theory cannot make me better at what I do. Studying at the London School of Economics is not what makes a good business journalist. Everything is on-the-job; practice makes perfect.**  
–A mid-career business journalist

**You academics are half the problem! You over-intellectualise what is happening in the industry. You give it a fancy name, read meanings into it, and before you know it, there is a new ‘theory’.**  
–A senior online editor

## Introduction

The quotations above, both from working journalists, are a good indication of the antipathy that many industry professionals have for journalism scholarship. Their disdain is reciprocated by at least a section of scholars, who believe that unreflective practice and purely practice-led teaching cannot produce wholesome journalism. Studies undertaken in different parts of the world have remarked on this tension. Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch (2009) write of journalists and journalist-turned-educators sharing a relationship of “uneasiness and ignorance” with their scholarly counterparts (2009:14). Barbie Zelizer (2004) notes that “the terrain of journalism’s study” (2004:3) has often resembled a war zone of competing intellectual paradigms, claims and counter-claims; further, some scholarly work “has made things worse” for journalists, contributing to the poor public standing of the profession (2004:7). The ‘media wars’ in Australia (Turner 2000), spurred by journalist and educator Keith Windschuttle’s (1998; see also Bacon 1998) argument that the inclusion of cultural studies theory in journalism curriculum provides a ‘schizophrenic’ view of reality to students, have seen an intense debate on these contradictory positions (see also Thomas 2008, Oakham 2006 and Hirst 2010). Similarly, in the UK, Tony Harcup (2011a) speaks of journalism studies being an “uncomfortable bedfellow with journalism training”, and there being “evidence of a pervasive disconnect between research and teaching, as between theory and practice” (2011a:1).

These challenges notwithstanding, journalism education is burgeoning, as evidenced in the growing number of university-level courses globally and the expansion of scholarly journalism publications and research networks in the last decade (Cottle 2009, Cushion 2007, Franklin 2009, Tumber 2005). This trend has witnessed a steady rise in the number of journalists and ex-journalists entering the academy to teach journalism (Greenberg 2007, Kenny 2009). Many such ‘hackademics’ – a “combination of ‘hack’, slang for journalist, and ‘academic’” (Harcup 2011a:2) – have also begun to engage in research activities. While doctoral-level journalism research in UK universities is still not significant compared to that in other disciplines (Errigo & Franklin 2004, Harcup 2011c), it is indicated that more ‘hackademics’ are now interested in taking up academic inquiries than ever in the past. And it is reasonable to expect this interest will grow in the years to come. The higher education funding structure that favours universities with research-active staff (Kearns, Gardiner & Marshall 2008), and the resultant university regulations for progress in the academy, are significant factors in encouraging this interest. Vigorous arguments from ‘hackademics’ who have bridged the theory-practice divide, too, have been supportive of this, and there appears to be a growing acceptance that research comes with the

territory – that it is part of being in the higher education system – and engaging in it while teaching can, as Light, Cox & Calkins (2009: 42) argue, “integrate the whole of academic practice within the larger context of continuous learning”.

Given this situation, the scholarly process of journalists and ex-journalists studying theory is of particular pedagogic interest. The Practice vs Theory tensions sketched above, it can be argued, are likely to influence the supervisory environment. While the pedagogy of supervision in general has been studied extensively, there is little scholarly work on the supervision of journalism practitioners specifically. What kind of dynamics exist when scholars supervise journalists in their research journey? This study aims to shed light on the specific issues and challenges that come to the fore in such situations.

## Journalism education: pedagogic tensions

Formalised journalism education is relatively new – not much older than a century. When the first journalism courses became part of university and college curricula in the United States in the early 20th century, journalists were “not educated individuals ... and most assuredly not literary people” (Carrey 2006:16). The first journalism school opened at the University of Missouri in 1908 (Cushion 2007). For decades after that start, American reporters continued to be “a rag-tag” bunch, an “unlikely collection of itinerant scribblers ... without much refinement” (Carey 2000:16). Unsurprisingly, the journalism education of that era was far from sophisticated. Carey describes it thus:

What was taught was rather unsystematic – largely the transmission of the accumulated folk wisdom of the craft, organized around the professional and technological separation of the media: newspapers here, magazines there, radio and television somewhere else. The craft was presented somewhat haphazardly without much historical understanding, criticism, or self-consciousness. Despite vainglorious local histories, largely testimonies to self-delusion, this was pretty much the situation at all American journalism schools (Carrey 2000:13).

Though the London University ran a journalism diploma from 1919 to 1939 (Hunter 2012), dedicated postgraduate and undergraduate provisions arrived in the UK much later. Postgraduate courses came in the 1970s, in the form of programmes at the Cardiff University and City University (Greenberg 2007). Undergraduate courses followed in the early 1990s, and the number of journalism undergraduates increased almost fivefold from 415 in 1994/95 to 2,035 in 2004/5 (Hanna & Sanders 2007). As listed on the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (2013) website, there are 492 journalism-related bachelor degrees on offer in the country. In addition, journalism master’s courses were listed in 160 venues on the Postgrad.com (2013), a popular source for MA programmes. Also listed were scores of doctoral-level research opportunities – traditional as well as practice-based PhDs – in universities with media and journalism departments across the UK.

In the US, journalism education had largely developed in the university environment, thanks mainly to Joseph Pulitzer. With a personal donation of \$2 million, he had persuaded the Columbia University to open its door to journalism in 1912 (Cushion 2007). But in the UK, such education was imparted in the industry – through newsroom apprenticeships – until journalism became part of the university curriculum. This, according to Harcup (2011b:163), led to a situation where there was no tradition of journalism research in the UK until towards the end of the last century. Since then, besides practical training to produce industry-ready reporters and editors, journalism education has expanded to

include scholarly inquiries into the practices of the profession (Hanna 2005). By 2005, the new subject area of journalism studies – as the academic exploration into aspects of the profession has come to be known – had emerged, and journalism itself became an object of investigation (Greenberg 2007). Still too new to have its own subject benchmark statement in the UK's Quality Assurance Agency, the area is listed as part of 'Communication, media, film and cultural studies' (QAA 2008).

Despite its belated birth, journalism studies appears to be evolving fast, witnessing what Bob Franklin (2009) calls a "giddy whirl of expansion, innovation and change" (2009:729), not just in the UK, but across Europe, China, India and Africa. Pulitzer, when he put forward his \$2 million idea of a "College of Journalism" to Columbia, had visualised an institution that taught not just vocational skills but a range of academic subjects, which would "raise journalism to the rank of a learned profession" (Pulitzer 1904 cited in Allan 2010:151). He was thus the first to propose "a method of building established disciplinary knowledge into journalism" (Adams 2001:321), and it is interesting to note that, a century later, when such a discipline did finally emerge, it was, as Pulitzer wanted, interdisciplinary, drawing on subjects such as ethics, sociology, politics and economics – or as Loeffelholz describes it, a "pluralistic, differentiated, and dynamic field of research" (Loeffelholz 2008:15).

While Pulitzer's immense foresight is commendable, his notion of what journalism education should be arguably underlies the suspicion and mistrust that have pervaded the relationship between practitioners and scholars. It is difficult to find fault with Pulitzer's basic premise for wanting an education that imparted a broader knowledge to students – a knowledge that would equip them to practise their craft more efficiently, would make them better journalists, who will make better newspapers, which will better serve the public (Pulitzer 1904 cited in Allan 2010:151). But the multi-subject study and theory-practice mix he counted on to transform journalism into a 'learned profession' – what essentially is being increasingly seen as desirable in journalism education today – have brought about their own set of issues.

Greenberg (2007) argues that besides "negotiating the boundaries between theory and practice", the main issue is a "clash of underlying philosophy" (2007:292-3). As she sees it, one of the two main disciplinary homes of journalism is communications, which focuses on how to 'control' the mass audience rather than serve the needs of the citizens (as required by journalistic values). The other is cultural studies, which aims to deconstruct practices and the tacit theories that lie behind them – particularly using the concept of social constructionism to question the journalistic notions of 'truth', 'reality' and 'balance', and unmask the perceived journalistic belief in objectivity. The more radical forms of constructionism, Greenberg writes, question the very existence of an external reality. She adds:

This often creates a problem for dialogue between those based in journalism practice and their counterparts in cultural studies discipline or one of its offshoots. Any practitioner, however innovative, is likely to value the importance of testing stories against external reality and to see a radical rejection of distinctions between truth and falsehood as being just as its opposite, an unquestioning acceptance of objectivity (Greenberg 2007:293).

Wright (2011) appears to support this thesis when she suggests the arguments about journalism education are because the area lacks a "meta-theoretical structure" to "enable those working in the field to embrace the critical advantages of constructionism" (Wright 2011:156). The dominant ontology guiding theoretical work in journalism is constructionism – which directly contradicts the commitment to realism inherent in most journalistic

practice and training. Harcup (2011c) appears to make a similar point when he describes the tensions in ‘hackademy’ as arising from a clash of two worlds: the ‘familiar’ world of journalism and a world in which journalists feel “like outsiders even after many years” (2011c:47). Wright’s solution for this quagmire is to develop a ‘mid-range’ theory, a third option that stands between the opposites of constructionism and realism. The middle ground she suggests is a version of critical realism (CR), which can serve as an ontological underpinning for journalism studies, as it allows us to “articulate notions of reality, truth, and knowledge in ways which acknowledge the important contributions constructivist work has brought to journalism research” (Wright 2011:167). She summarises her argument thus:

“CR [Critical Realism] offers journalism scholars a model of reality which gives them the theoretical means with which to move from the empirical to the abstract without oversimplifying issues. It enables them to form well-founded “macro” theories about the nature of journalism, as well helping them answer specific research questions about particular kinds of news coverage, journalistic organisations, or even particular individuals ... [It] enables scholars to articulate questions about the decision-making processes which journalists face, with reference to both their agency, and to the social and material restrictions within which they work ... offers journalism researchers a way of using CR to engage in research about changes in journalistic practice without disregarding the variability of production cycles” (Wright 2011:167).

A more practical issue that needs to be addressed is the way some scholarly work – arguably a product of the ontological gulf discussed above – has ‘belittled’ journalistic practices. There is “distaste among practitioners for the apparently hostile tone in much current theoretical work about practice” (Greenberg 2007:294; see also Zelizer 2004, Harcup 2011b). For their part, some journalists tend to be severely sceptical about the ability of scholarly writings to provide insights into what is happening in the industry. Zelizer (2004), a journalist-turned-scholar, captures this sentiment in *Taking Journalism Seriously* when she says she felt she had entered a “parallel universe” and “nothing I read as a graduate student reflected the working world I had just left” (2004:2). In the same vein, many practitioners believe that theorists are, as Roger Scruton put it, “talentless individuals who can’t get jobs in the media” and “there’s nothing really to learn except by way of apprenticeship” (cited in Peak & Fisher 2000:320). Understandably, such sentiments are unlikely to be productive, and there appears to be an acute need for a culture of mutual respect, which, hopefully, would provide for an environment where reflections on journalism from both sides are possible without one or the other side feeling their work ‘diminished’ or ‘belittled’.

It is unfair to pin the blame for the mutual animosity on ontology alone, however. The separation that existed between journalism training and academy for much of the 20th century can also be seen to have contributed to it. Trainers were distanced from an environment where critical reflection and conceptualisation were the norm; and scholars worked on their own, without access to newsrooms and the practical realities of day-to-day journalism. Consequently, to borrow Zelizer’s (2004) description, both sides existed in ‘parallel universes’, ill-informed about each other’s contributions. For instance, many from the industry – and here I draw from my own experience of transitioning from journalism to academia, as well as anecdotal evidence from ex-colleagues and other ‘hackademics’ – have rarely been exposed to academic literature, and their understanding of what theoretical study involves is at best cursory. This makes it difficult for them to see the relevance of scholarship to their own work; moreover, it often produces a certain defensiveness, a ‘fear of the unknown’, which arguably contributes to an antipathy to theoretical work. Jackie Errigo (Errigo & Franklin 2004) acknowledges this in so many words when she writes she is fearful that any topic a “mere hackademic generates will be

knocked back with scornful disdain” (2004:44). The dynamic, she points out, is between “peers ... and suppose what I write doesn’t cut the mustard with the peer group? Professional humiliation may lurk around the corner” (Errigo & Franklin 2004:45). It is true that many – if not most – academics are also prey to such fear, but for an entrant from a ‘parallel universe’, it can only be more pronounced. Here it is interesting to note the argument that journalists are not “inherently averse to engaging with theoretical discourses” (Machin & Niblock 2006:178). Duffield (2009) believes they would make very good researchers, given the information-gathering and analytical skills required in their profession. In fact, according to Niblock (2007), many practitioner-academics have a “burning desire” to engage in research and connect theory and practice. The problem, however, is that many “are uncertain about how to begin to fulfilling such desire” (2007:21).

It is heartening to note this state of affairs is changing and, as Keeble (2006) observes, the case for journalism as an academic study has gained ground. There is now “a slow, but steady move away from a conservative, skills-based curriculum,” argue Wahl-Jorgensen & Franklin, “toward a more reflective curriculum, taught by research-active academics” (2008:182). Such a move is at least in part driven by different motives. On the part of academic disciplines, the main motivation is a need to attract students with courses that offer vocational or transferable skills training: on the part of the practitioners, it is the recognition that they need to broaden the scope of their education “if journalism is to have a long-term future as a tertiary subject” (Greenberg 2007:294). The expansion of the ‘hackademy’ can also be seen to have contributed to this: the plethora of new journalism courses that universities have launched has placed a significant number of practitioners within the academy, facilitating a much-needed dialogue between the two sides.

With these changes underway, an argument can be made that more practitioners are likely to undertake research – be it traditional doctorates, practice-based PhDs, or other forms of scholarship – in the years to come. There is evidence of a new openness to theoretical study, encouraged as it is by, among other factors, peer influence brought about by the increased interaction among scholars and practitioners, a higher education funding structure that rewards universities producing research, institutional demands spurred by such a funding structure (for instance, research activity is an important factor in guiding pay progression in many institutions), and the new levels of accessibility offered by the internet revolution. There is also a conscious effort on the part of many institutions and scholars – a new academic attitude, so to speak – to be more inclusive, founded on the belief that practitioners have much to offer, not just as vocational trainers but to journalism research as well. In such a scenario, it is important to understand more about the research journey of practitioners.

## Method

Owing to the nature of this exploration, which required insights from supervisors and practitioners who have experienced supervision, personal interviews were chosen as the method for this study. Twelve semi-structured interviews were carried out during a two-year period (2010-2012) by the author and a research assistant – six with supervisors and six with current or recent supervisees. Eight of the interviews were face-to-face, while four were carried out over the telephone. The interviews lasted 45 minutes on an average, and were taped and subsequently transcribed. All participants were affiliated to UK universities. All were guaranteed anonymity.

All six supervisors interviewed were overseeing doctoral research of practitioners or had supervised journalists to completion. Supervisor A was working with his first PhD

student. Supervisors B, C and E were experienced supervisors, who had overseen multiple doctoral completions, while supervisors D and F were former journalists who had made the transition into academia.

Of the six supervisees, Supervisees 1, 3 and 5 were close to submission when interviewed. Supervisee 2 was roughly midway in his research journey, while supervisees 4 and 6 had recently received their PhDs when they spoke to the interviewer. All supervisees had considerable journalism experience, having worked in the industry for at least five years.

## Findings and discussion

The semi-structured interviews focussed on the supervisory process. The interviewees were asked about the issues that arose when they interacted with their respective supervisor or supervisee during the research journey. The themes that emerged are discussed below.

### Fear of the theoretical

Even for a student straight off a master's or undergraduate course, a PhD is a big step-up. Many find it quite daunting, particularly in the initial months, which can be, as Supervisor E described it, a "period of confusion". This appears to be true in the case of the journalism practitioners interviewed, who, though confident in their practice, found the transition quite unnerving. Coming as they are from a "parallel universe" (Zelizer 2004:2), it would appear the fear of "personal humiliation that may lurk around the corner" that Errigo & Franklin (2004:45) noted was quite pronounced in their case. Supervisor A commented explicitly on this "confidence issue":

"They are very confident about their own work, but as soon as you take them out of the domain... They are perfectly capable of understanding it and engaging with it critically, but there is a period in which this unknown conceptual and theory of work does seem alien and there is a confidence issue."

The confidence issue came to the fore in the interviews with supervisees, who expressed it in different ways. Supervisee 3, a PhD student nearing completion, said he felt "like a duck out of water" and for a long time, it made him "despondent" to work in an unfamiliar area. Others spoke of the process being "very different", "taking time to get into it", and about the critical feedback they received from their supervisors initially. Supervisee 1, who was preparing to submit her thesis, shed more light on this, looking back at the time when she first entered academia, fresh from the journalism industry:

"I was a little bit intimidated. Some of the academic teachers, saying the academic language, some of the academic theories ... it was all a little bit intimidating. My vocabulary was completely different at that time. And the way that I approached things was very different. It was definitely challenging. I was probably more worried about it than I needed to be, I think. I was really worried about making the transition."

While not unexpected, it is interesting to note the strong sense of journalistic identity that the practitioners bring with them. The above respondent, despite having been fulltime in academia for four years now, and having undertaken a master's in journalism studies before starting a PhD, still identified herself as a journalist – as she put it, "once a marine, always a marine; once a journalist, always a journalist". This potentially has implications for the way practitioners approach their research. One aspect of this – in tune with the theory-practice divide highlighted in the works of, among others, Cushion (2010), Green-

berg (2007), Harcup (2011a, 2011b, 2011c) and Wright (2011) – is a hesitancy – if not reluctance – to engage with theory. There is, as both supervisors and students remarked, an insufficient understanding of what constitutes theory, and how it can inform practice. Supervisee 3 spoke about this:

“The supervisor was talking about things I hadn’t thought about in those terms. He was going on about it in a clinical, precise way – it was about news values, I remember, about Galtung and Ruge – and I couldn’t understand a thing. I had just come from being a practitioner... in journalism, we work with rules – when you are subbing a copy, you do this, this and this, when you are reporting, you do this. Not with theories. So I was thinking this was all bull.”

It took him a long time to see where the rules of journalism intersect with theory, he said. Supervisee 1 put across her bias against theory, saying that initially she found the prospect of engaging with the theory unnerving, as – and here we hear support for Wright’s (2011) argument that journalism practice is driven by realism – “journalists work in concrete and theory in journalism studies is abstract”. Supervisee 4 elaborated:

“Theory is the academic Bible. But interviewing and being able to write and knowing what a story is and having that old cliché of a nose for news – that’s what you need as a journalist, and theory doesn’t come into it. So, yeah, that was a really difficult transition.”

Supervisors, too, spoke of this, of “academic work not being valued” sufficiently, and having to inculcate in their supervisees an interest of such work over a period of time. Supervisor C, a professor who has overseen a number of PhD projects, summarised this sentiment:

It does take a while for them to get past their own initial scepticism of the value of a PhD, before they really get into it. But once they really get into it, the transformation is wonderful. And here I am not saying wonderful in the sense that I want everybody to be an academic – I don’t ... but wonderful in the sense that it encourages people to think differently about themselves, about the world, so that they have the benefit of contemplating – really getting into the issues that are of interest to them.

There appeared to be a consensus that the “resistance” to theory was, as Supervisor D – a former journalist currently supervising a practitioner – put it, based on a “misunderstanding” of what theory is seen as in the “parallel universe” (Zelizer 2004:2) of journalism. Supervisor E attempted to explain this in terms of the cultural differences that exist between the journalism industry and academia:

“They [journalists] have been shaped by a professional culture which says, ‘Concentrate on facts. All that academic stuff is not important. Just go for the story and don’t get too distracted by high faluting intellectualisations about it.’ So, some may be wary of theory ... largely due to having been socialised as a journalist, having their core professional identity as a journalist and therefore having been shaped by that culture.”

Supervisor D made a similar point, attributing the suspicion about theory to the “culture shock” that most practitioners undergo when they begin academic research.

“[Journalists] enter from a world where there is no systematic kind of approach to knowledge. So when they move into academe, they find it to be quite a culture shock, I think. It will change over time, people will realise the importance of theory over time. There is tension between academics and practitioners, but at some point people recognise they need this kind of theory, especially if they want to go into academe.”

Supervisee 4 shed further light on the extent of this “culture shock”. The pressure from supervisors to engage with theory can be particularly stressful and had led to several “existential crises” in her case:

I had a panel of three supervisors, and I had one who was a methods man, big into discourse analysis, and theoretical frameworks. “Are you Fairclough, are you Foucault, Van Dijk? What

theoretical frameworks do you use?” And I ended up bursting into tears. I walked into my [main] supervisor’s office and said, “I have no theory, I have no theoretical framework.” And she said, “Yes, you do.” “I have no research questions.” “Yes, you do.” “I have no argument.” “Yes, you do.” “No, I really don’t!” And she was like, “Yes, you do!” It was crazy, but there were a couple of times like that where my inadequacies about doing a PhD, or being a journalist doing a PhD, came over.

As scholars have noted in earlier studies, despite the uneasiness about theory, journalists are not “inherently averse to engaging with theoretical discourses” (Machin & Niblock 2006:178), but are quite often not sure how to go about it (Niblock 2007). Supervisee 4 appeared to exemplify this situation, in that she was unsure about how to conceptualise her research and attained clarity only later in the research process. She seemed to acknowledge this when she goes on to say:

“But at the end of the day it didn’t really matter, because I had it all there, and I did have a theoretical framework, and I did know where I situated myself discourse analysis-wise. But it was my own feelings of inadequacy as a journalist, and not being part of the academic club that kind of nearly derailed the entire train.”

Supervisors felt how long it takes for a student to feel “part of the academic club” – in effect, make the “wonderful transformation” that Supervisor C mentioned – was dependent on the individual, on their educational background, what they hope to get out of the research degree, etc. This, and the related issue of being in an ‘alien’ environment, could mean in general the supervisory support needed for practitioners could be different from those coming via the traditional academic path. Observed Supervisor B:

“A traditional student would come in with a research question. So a lot in the initial stage is guidance towards reading, advising on building a conceptual framework. With someone coming in from the industry, it is much more about exploring the questions they want to raise. Because they would come with a lot of issues and grievances within practice, but not necessarily coherent questions that are PhD-worthy.”

Supervisee 5 appears to be touching on this need for supervisors to approach practitioner supervision differently when she remarks on how her own approach to her supervisors had to be changed midway. She felt her supervisors treated her like a “young academic colleague” before she was ready, rather than someone from a different work culture, used to functioning in a vastly different way:

“My supervisors understand I came from journalism, but they didn’t quite understand. I thought I could work with them more as editors. But it is more like “Give me your chapter whenever you are ready.” Who knows when it’s ready? So the first years it was, like, yeah, whenever it’s ready. But that didn’t work. So I told him, “You know what, what about if you give me a deadline?” And he looked at me and said, “Okay, so when do you want to hand it in?” And I was like, no, no! This is not working! It was very hard because I know as a journalist I needed to have an iron hand, to tell me, “If you don’t hand in this, you’re out!” My supervisory team, they didn’t quite see that. They viewed me more as a young colleague, as starting an academic career. They didn’t see, “Oh, you come from a journalism world, therefore...” Now that we’re reflecting on it, it would have helped if they actually see your background. I mean, your routine, your rhythm, your way of work.”

### **Critiquing own practice: difficulties**

An important aspect that emerged in the interviews is the journalists’ initial inability to consider their own practices in a dispassionate and neutral manner. Supervisor A pointed out:

“They could be very defensive of the traditional, established values of journalism. So when you start talking about critiquing that, they often see that as a personal attack, rather than a way of looking at things critically in order to understand things differently.”

While this is possibly related to the strong sense of journalistic identity (and the culture of animosity towards journalism scholars that that identity has arguably cultivated), the fact that they are ‘fresh from the field’ and still ‘too close’ to their own practice need to be considered as well. The same supervisor appeared to touch on this when he said, “being able to step back from the practice they have been doing can be difficult”. He elaborated:

“Many a time, when you are discussing newsroom dynamics, there are assumptions about what is actually taking place. It is those taken-for-granted procedures that they don’t even see. Or they might not think it is actually worth noting, because it is day-to-day practice, and they can’t see why it should be important. But for the scholarly study of journalism it might be incredibly important.”

The other supervisors interviewed, too, commented on this. Getting practitioners to take a step back is part of the initial process of supervising such PhDs. But this is easier said than done. Supervisor F spoke of this:

“In journalism, there is a no-nonsense approach. Journalism tends to simplify rather than to problematise things; academics tend to do the other way around. So I can see a lot of journalists being too close to what they used to do because a) it was very successful, and b) it’s a practice they’re used to. That has a knock-on effect in the way they assume and receive criticism from their supervisor.”

For their part, the supervisees interviewed appeared to agree with this thought. Supervisee 3 spoke of this:

“Had I not been a journalist, I would not have had too much ‘baggage’. I would have been more open-minded, more receptive, and my own response to supervision would have been more proactive than reactive. I had to fight to keep my baggage out before I could accept what my supervisors were trying to tell me.”

Supervisee 1 provided further insights, linking the inability to be critical to a ‘different’ notion of objectivity that journalists have. What academics see as dispassionate, she said, is very different from what journalists define as objectivity, and part of the problem is shedding this idea of objectivity and understanding that a scholar is allowed to have a ‘voice’ and is in fact expected to offer an analysis, an argument in their work. She expanded:

“I felt I needed someone else’s voice to critique on my behalf, that my own voice was not enough. And that’s what we do in journalism – even if you are doing an analysis piece, you are using someone else’s views to get your point across. You are taught to distance yourself ... be ‘objective’. When you are critiquing in journalism, you are getting others to do it for you. So I didn’t feel my own voice was appropriate. And I really, really struggled with it.”

### **Issue of style**

Academy has its own vocabulary, its own style of writing, and adapting to this was a “big struggle” for all the researchers. All supervisors interviewed spoke of this, as did all supervisees. Despite their time in academia, three of the six interviewed said they still ‘struggled’ with academic writing. Supervisee 3 spoke of the “sense of despondency” he felt when what he wrote was repeatedly critiqued as “too journalistic”. When he began, he couldn’t “think of a single sentence” that could be seen as academic writing, and it was a “spar with my supervisors for about 3-4 years”. Supervisee 6 spoke about how his first few chapters were critiqued and he was told “this is not the way to write”.

Supervisee 2 appeared to be making the same point when he said, “last summer I produced quite some PhD work. But the supervisors raised their eyebrows and said it might have to be completely rewritten.” The problem, he continued, is that as a journalist he tries to write in simple, clear prose, accessible to the layman, which is not always appreciated in academia. “When I talk to my supervisors I will use the word ‘epistemological’,” he said,

“but if I’m talking to a journalist about my PhD I’d not use that term – because I think it would alienate them and they’d think I was bullshitting.” Supervisee 3 added: “Words like ‘systemic’, ‘indicative’, ‘endemic’, these have now become part of my writing!”

Supervisee 4 described that the most common criticism that she received throughout her PhD was that her work was not “academic enough”. As she put it:

“I can remember there were a few times where she [supervisor] and I got into ... where I was like, “What do you mean by it’s not academic enough?” She finally had to break it down, and said, “You need to have longer sentences. Your sentences need to be longer, they need to be waffly, they need to have at least three or four commas and clauses.” She was going over the top when she was saying it but it really hammered it home.”

The issue of writing style appeared to be a topic of intense debate in many supervisory sessions. The supervisees interviewed came across as passionate about the way they expressed themselves in their research writings and reluctant to adopt the alien style of academia, which they saw as verbose and aimed at – as one of the interviewees put it – “profoundising things”. Supervisors felt this sensitivity about refashioning what is a well-established and successful writing style in journalism into something more formal and fitted for a doctoral submission could be an impediment in the successful completion of a PhD by a practitioner. Supervisor E, who criticised “some of the shibboleths of academics scoring style” as “worse than useless and part of the mystification of academic knowledge”, provided some insights into the issue:

“There have been occasions where I have said, ‘well, no, I think that’s not appropriate’ because ... it may trail a set of assumptions or preconceptions that isn’t appropriate, you know, in a scholarly work where you need to be dissecting and deconstructing. There’s also something about the casualness of vernacular expression. It’s not just because it’s slang and you can’t use that; it’s not that there is an absolute rigid dogma about it. It’s that the use of vernacular expressions can suggest a kind of slackness of thought. Now if there’s a kind of vernacular expression that does not do that, it’s fine. But it’s where the vernacular may associate with a laziness or glibness of thought that I would be unhappy with it ... that’s the kind of thing that can creep in under or as part of a journalistic style, I think.”

There appeared to be a consensus among the interviewees that the transition from a journalistic to academic style – or to be more precise, a writing style acceptable in academia – is part of the PhD process. Supervisor D, a former journalist himself, said it took time and patience, and required constant reminders from the supervisors to achieve this. But the exercise of writing a thesis might not always achieve a complete conversion from the part of the practitioners. As three of the supervisees pointed out, it was about finding a ‘compromise’ style. Supervisee 4 gave voice to this sentiment, articulating her reservations about the “highfalutin’, mumbo-jumbo” of academic writing. As she put it:

“It was difficult, but I like to think now that I’ve reached a bit of a medium. I can write academic, highfalutin’, mumbo jumbo, but I can give it a bit of an edge. I want someone to enjoy what they’re reading, and the majority of stuff I had to read for my PhD, I didn’t enjoy. It was horrendous, absolutely horrendous, and it’s supposed to be a creative process, a structured creative process, and you’re supposed to have something valid and reputable at the end of it, but it doesn’t mean that you can’t enjoy it! So for me it was a happy medium, and that has actually served me quite well because when I let people read stuff now that I’ve written, I’m able to break it down into easy concepts that people can understand.”

The precision that is required in academic writing – which, supervisees felt, could at times be frustrating – also came up for discussion. “In journalism you don’t have the time to negotiate every word, every comma,” Supervisee 1 said. “But here sometimes the process of negotiating one single paragraph might take 20 times more time than I took to write it.” This was good in a way because it made her think more about her writing, “take ownership of it”. But it was also “very difficult” to come to terms with.

## Expert versus expert

Being practitioners, experienced in the ‘real thing’, journalists are capable of bringing a wealth of knowledge into academic research. However, this expertise could also create tensions in the research environment. Supervisor A spoke about this “potential for conflict”:

“You could have a situation where the supervisee says, I am the expert because I am the professional here. And the supervisor says, I am the expert, because I am the academic here. The journalists need to realise that their expertise lies in the profession. And the PhD, when they are entering into that realm, is an academic undertaking, which in effect the supervisor is the expert in. So yes, they have the subject-specific expertise, but I have the expertise in how to conduct research, how to conceptualise or theorise what they are going to be studying. There needs to be that realisation.”

Supervisee 3 acknowledged this tension. He admitted he wasn’t initially convinced about his supervisor’s ability to oversee his research project:

“I was coming into academia after 25 years in journalism. I had a lot of ego – ego as a journalist who had done a lot of things. I looked upon my supervisor as a non-journalist. He hadn’t been there and done the things I had. How could he handle my project?”

It took Supervisee 3 almost a year to get over his “false sense of superiority”. He added, “the conflict resolved itself when I understood the role of the supervisor. It went away once I realised that this was my project, and the supervisor was only there as a guide, to advise me on it.” Supervisor F, a practitioner-turned-supervisor, explained this tension in terms of a general perception among journalists that academics do not understand the difficulty of their practice – it is an “easy shot”, “easy to criticise from the outside”. As he put it:

Journalism is a very difficult practice, in which you have to struggle with different elements of power in order to produce articles in very little time. The main criticism you get from practitioners of academics, or practitioners towards their supervisors is, “you may think this is easy, but you have months, years to write an article or a book. I have a day to produce two or three articles. How dare you criticise my work? You should be under such pressure before you try to make any criticism.” And I think that argument underpins the general views of a lot of practitioners towards academia.

Supervisors appeared to be mindful of this potential area of tension. Supervisor C spoke of the “need to be sensitive about this expertise”, as did Supervisor B, who spoke with enthusiasm about the “passion that practitioners bring to research” and the need for giving them credit for their experiences. All three seemed to be of the opinion that academics need to be more sensitive in the way they dealt with practitioners. Supervisor C spoke more about this:

“The important starting point, I find, is to tell journalists that they are already researchers. The idea that they are here to get a completely brand new identity of an academic, it is false. They are already researchers. Every good journalist knows how to find information, where to look for it, how to interpret it and understand it, say something about it. The same goes for theory. They are theorists already. But they might just not think of it in those terms.”

The willingness to acknowledge journalistic expertise is interesting to note and is arguably part of the new thinking that has come about in recent years. At least in part, it has been brought about by the increased interaction between scholars and practitioners, and also the recognition that both have important lessons to learn from each other. The new attitude is helpful in negating the feeling of ‘belittlement’ that scholars such as Greenberg (2007) and Zelizer (2004) have noted.

## The problem of delayed gratification

One aspect of the research process that appeared to frustrate the supervisees interviewed was the pace of output. Used as they were to by-lines or other forms of editorial products every day, they found the slow nature of academic work quite trying. Supervisee 2 touched upon this issue:

“Unlike doing a news story when you can take notes and then fashion a story, the breakthroughs in a PhD tend to come after you’ve absorbed a lot of complex ideas and then allowed them to stew. So it is like using a different part of the brain to regular reporting.”

Supervisor C spoke about how different the two work environments are and the lack of “instant gratification” in academic research. For journalists who are always “on the go, on the telephone, jumping into cars and so forth, every day sitting in front of the computer for hours and grinding away” is very different. And this can go on for months, even years, “with nothing to show for their effort but – if they are lucky – a pat on the back from the supervisor”. Missing is the sense of recognition that journalists had in their profession almost on a daily basis, a “reaffirmation that they are good at what they do”.

Supervisor E saw this as a more universal issue, which all doctoral candidates experience:

“I think this frustrates quite a few people. Even for those who are quite happy to be academics, it can still be frustrating. It’s such a long road, and that by the time anything comes out of it, you’re so annoyed with it you can hardly be bothered to send off the article for publication. I can imagine that there will be a particular sharpness to that frustration for some journalists, but it’s a common experience.”

Five of the six supervisees interviewed said they struggled to come to terms with the issue of ‘writing but not publishing’ (Supervisee 6 worked part-time as a journalist during his PhD, so had opportunities for publication elsewhere and appeared not to be affected in the same way as the others). Supervisee 5 compared the processes in journalism and academia:

“If you submit a paper to a journal, it takes like a year to see it printed and you’re not even sure if it’s going to be printed. All this process of submitting the abstract and then the paper and then they send you feedback and if it’s accepted, it takes six months to a year to see it printed, and when it’s printed, nobody cares! It’s not like journalism! I started journalism when I was 18, studying for my Bachelors. I remember the first time an article of mine was printed. Everybody came to congratulate me, and I was a celebrity for a day ... when you see it printed, it’s there!”

Acknowledging the lack of an immediate sense of achievement, Supervisee 5 spoke of her way of coping with it:

“In the beginning what I did was, of everything I read, I wrote up a one-page synopsis. That helped me to feel that I was accomplishing something, because at the end of the day I had two or three sheets of little reports. As I got further into my PhD, I began doing conference papers and stuff like that, and those became my achievements.”

Supervisor F, who had struggled with the same issue during his transition from a practitioner to scholar, provided another perspective: journalism, while providing instant gratification to the author, is more transient; academic articles, however, are capable of engaging a readership years after being published. The first journal article he published, he said, didn’t bring him much satisfaction, as he didn’t really value the importance of peer-reviewed publication then. He noted:

“The satisfaction came, I remember, when I got two emails from colleagues I didn’t know, one from Australia and one from Germany, and they wrote asking me for additional information about the paper, and I thought that was actually brilliant. Then I saw that one of them cited the work in a book, and that was a breakthrough ... in the case of academic work, yes, it is going to be read by

far fewer people, but it is going to be more far-reaching in terms of time. Any of the stuff I wrote 13 years ago when I was still working as a journalist, that's all disappeared. Nobody quotes it, not even on the internet. Academic work is more permanent in time."

Supervisee 4, though missing the instant responses and gratification that journalism provides, appeared to make the same point when she said:

"In journalism, it's instant. You see it instantly, but at the same time you see the mistakes, and it's like, oh, I would wish I had more time, and then you move on. But with the PhD I know what I'm publishing. The rhythm in academia is quite different, slower ... but perhaps the gratification is more."

Supervisor D felt this was an issue supervisors needed to be mindful of, and help supervisees with by placing them in the "right context". He saw it as an "issue of motivation", one of the responsibilities of a supervisor. He noted:

You have to get your student to kind of know where they are. I know many PhD students lose interest because, you know, it's a long process, sometimes a very lonely process, so it could be very demoralising. So it's a matter of motivation and of warning people from the beginning. They need to be warned... not scared off but cautioned about the process. You have to keep them motivated throughout the process.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to throw light on the supervisor-supervisee relation in the 'hackademy' – essentially, to bring to the fore the challenges that arise when journalism practitioners embark on academic research. The interviews recorded for this study indicate that journalists undertaking scholarly pursuits struggle with a series of issues. Many tend to experience a "culture shock" and find it intimidating to work in an unfamiliar environment. Misconceptions about the nature of the theoretical work they are expected to undertake, and a lack of confidence in their own capability to engage with its unfamiliar demands, can be seen as possible reasons for this uneasiness. The cynicism that some practitioners seem to harbour about theory, and their belief that it has no value for practical journalism, arguably accentuate this state of affairs.

Another concern that came to the fore was an initial inability, if not reluctance, on the part of the practitioners to step back and look at their own profession in a critical manner. Some journalists are likely to be defensive about established newsroom practices and find it difficult to critique them in a dispassionate manner. There also appeared to be a related egotism about their expertise in practice — a sense that they had practiced journalism while scholars had only studied it – among some practitioners, which made them less receptive to feedback from supervisors and brought with it the potential for conflict in the supervisory environment. Adopting the academic style of writing, which is starkly different from the style of journalism, was a major challenge for the practitioners interviewed. They were passionate about the way they wrote, defending it strongly against the language of academy, which they saw as verbose and confusing. Often they required time to come to terms with the demand of academic writing, or to negotiate a middle ground that suited scholarly expectations. Their progress was further marked by a sense of frustration at the slow process of academic research in general, used as they are to the gratification of seeing their writing in print very quickly.

For their part, the supervisors interviewed found inculcating the value of theoretical work in a hands-on practitioner to be often challenging and time-consuming. Much pa-

tience was required on their part, particularly in the initial period of a research journey, to help practitioners get over their scepticism about theory and see its significance for journalism practice. Also required of the supervisors was a heightened sensitiveness to enable a productive relationship with their supervisees and ensure that their critique and approach did not 'belittle' the practitioners or their practice. This was particularly true of the journalistic style of writing, which needs to be viewed as part of the professional identity of the practitioner. Constant reminders and flexibility are required from supervisors so that compromise solutions can be negotiated where needed, and the matter of style does not become an impediment in the research journey. Admittedly, some of these issues are applicable to other supervisory environments as well. For instance, it is usual for many researchers to find the PhD journey quite daunting, and many practitioners – not just journalists – find it hard to adopt the academic style of writing. However, given the troubled relation that journalism practitioners have with their scholarly counterparts, it is conceivable that they would feel these issues more acutely.

The author wishes to thank Nicolette Barsdorf-Liebchen for her research assistance on this project.

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