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# **Skill needs for today's television journalists: What Australia's TV news chiefs want most from the new generation**

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Refereed paper presented to the Journalism Education Conference,  
Griffith University, 29 November – 2 December 2005

## Abstract

*Much journalism research focuses on how new technologies will affect practice, suggesting employers will want a new breed of journalists with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. This research asks news managers at free-to-air networks what traits they most desire in recruits and long-term employees. A theme emerges (especially in the commercial networks): they want "hungry" journalists able to generate original stories and extract information from contacts. They are frustrated that most young people seeking jobs in their newsrooms do not have these characteristics. None of those interviewed raised fluency with newsroom technology as a criterion for recruitment. This low priority was also reflected in a quantitative survey piloted with many of the respondents asking them to rank skills for importance. These findings warrant further research to determine if Australia's news chiefs are making a mistake valuing traditional traits above new technology-driven ones. Testing the quantitative survey across all Sydney television journalists could highlight trends across profiles and any discrepancies between management and employee expectations.*

This paper is the first to emerge from a research project that asks what attributes are most sought by hirers and firers in mainstream television newsrooms. It also seeks to test how important it is for young television journalists to have "new" skills such as computer editing and camera operation to attract the interest of television news chiefs. While the data warrants further qualitative analysis, this discussion will concentrate on first impressions.

### Television Journalism Hiring Patterns in Australia

A search of Australian journal databases has uncovered little literature concentrating on the needs of *television* newsrooms. Barbara Alysen has kept a general watch on cadet recruitment policies, including her late 90's study of four journalism cadetship programs: those of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *The Age*, News Ltd's *The Australian*, and The Herald & Weekly Times (Alysen, 1999). In an earlier paper Alysen and Oakham discuss a theme arising in this research - the number of applicants for television news positions who seem more interested in appearing on television than doing the work of journalists (Alysen & Oakham, 1996). Van Heekeren's study of senior journalists' views of the importance of history (Van Heekeren, 2005) identifies another frustration felt by hirers in this study: the poor general knowledge of many graduates.

Alysen's studies have also noted the prevalence of women in journalism courses and applying for television journalism positions (Alysen, 1999; Alysen & Oakham, 1996). This provides stark relief for Cann and Mohr's study of Australian television networks: they concluded that men were over-represented as presenters, reporters and expert sources (David J Cann & Philip B Mohr, 2001). Others have noted the rising number of journalism graduates flooding Australia's shrinking journalism employment market (Alysen, 2001; O'Donnell, 1999; Patching, 1996).

In one of Alysen's most recent papers she has combined study of this graduate "excess" with a look at how new technology is changing the way journalists work (Alysen, 2005). Her predictions about new skills that could be required by journalists in the future are important for all journalism educators. But this paper's findings suggest we should not school our students in "new delivery" skills at the expense of core journalism and investigation skills - at least not before quizzing industry hirers and firers on what they really want young - and not-so-young - journalists to be able to do.

This study uses face-to-face interviews with key personnel operating Sydney's five free-to-air television news rooms. The aim was to get a picture of hiring policy with implications for metropolitan newsrooms across the country: while some of those interviewed only cover Sydney and/or NSW news programs, their decisions - because of the quasi "head office" nature of Sydney for some networks - have a trickle-down effect on other states. Also, the approach was taken to conduct

interviews "from the top, down" so that wherever possible all those with influence on hiring have been consulted.

### The Hirers and Firers

The national heads of news and current affairs at Channel Seven, ABC and SBS (Peter Meakin, John Cameron and Paul Cutler) were among the first interviewed. At the time of writing Channel Ten was seeking a new head of news and current affairs after the resignation of Kel Robards (Dyer, 2005). The new incumbent, appointed shortly before presentation of this paper, is Jim Carroll.

Channel Nine is now operating without a head of news and current affairs after last year's departure of Jim Rudder and without a national head of news after the recent exit of Max Uechtritz. (Under the restructure being overseen by newly-returned Channel Nine chief, Sam Chisholm, these positions were not be filled, reinstating a structure that operated in the 1980s where program executive producers and capital city news directors report directly to him. However, since acceptance of this paper a Director of News and Current Affairs has been appointed: former *60 Minutes* Managing Editor, Mark Llewellyn.)

This study has interviewed Nine's new Sydney news director, Tony Ritchie, and his opposite numbers (who report to their heads of news and current affairs) at Seven and Ten, Chris Willis and David Breen. Also interviewed is Executive Producer of SBS Television's World News Australia, Mark Boyd, who operates as SBS "news director".

A number of people in "editorial management" have also been spoken to because of their hiring roles. They are former journalists and news program producers who now form a bridge between management and program making. They include Channel Nine's Editorial Manager, Mary Davison, who operates the network's journalism internship/trainee program, Heather Forbes, ABC Manager of Audience Liaison and Development (and coordinator of the ABC's cadetship program), ABC News Editorial Manager, Michael Gleeson and ABC Head of Editorial Coordination, Alan Sunderland.

Those with "hands-on" program-making responsibility and have been included: Nine's 6pm news EP, Graham Thurston, and chief of staff, John Chouefate, ABC network editor, John Mulhall, Ten's news editor (at time of interview), Jason Morrison, and Seven's 6pm news executive producer, Geoff Dunn, have all been spoken to. There is also scope to interview new incumbents when vacant positions are filled at Seven (Sydney Deputy News Director) and Ten (Head of News and Current Affairs and Sydney News Editor).

## Qualitative Questions

Each person has been asked open-ended questions to establish what is foremost in their minds when deciding whether to hire someone as a journalist. The research has focused on the needs of news without including current affairs or other information programs. The first two questions asked were:

- (1) What do you see as the most important qualities in a TV journalist, especially when deciding whether to hire or retain someone?
- (2) What's often missing in the abilities or characteristics of new recruits – and even old ones – wanting to pursue a television journalism career?  
Of those things that are missing, is this a new trend?

Some supplementary questions were asked to pick up on points made by previous interviewees, to cover some key skills not mentioned or to clarify points made. Intentionally, the subject of technological ability and software familiarity were not in the initial questions: to test if respondents would raise these traits unprompted. This was to remove any chance of false emphasis from the researcher's own fixation on this area.

A question was also asked about the aims of the respondents' news programs and how these aims related to hiring criteria. Another question asked which attributes help recruits sustain a *long-term* career as television journalists. The last two questions asked about the respondents' roles as hirers and firers and their own career histories – to put their views in context.

## What the News Hirers Want

The main attributes hirers and firers sought included characteristics journalism graduates might have before entering university, a few they were expected to develop while there and other abilities that would probably need a combination of both personality and learned behaviour. These attributes include the ability to work contacts and break stories, a passion for news, an ability to write for television, an enquiring mind, good grammar, a good general knowledge and good on-camera presentation. Interestingly – and this is a major point that this paper intends to make – there appears to be little concern at any of the networks for recruits to have skills related to new technology such as desktop video editing, reporter-operated cameras or bulletin software.

## News Gathering Skills: Breaking Stories

Senior news room operators and managers at the free-to-air networks say they want "hungry" journalists. Some stipulated they should be able to break stories and work

contacts. As if with one voice, the head of news and current affairs at Channel Seven, Peter Meakin, Seven's Sydney news director, Chris Willis and Seven's 6pm News Executive Producer, Geoff Dunn, said they rated story-generating ability above writing, voice and on-camera presentation:

"The ability to write something is not important 'til you've got it. Some of the best journalists I've ever worked with have been shocking writers... it's the ability to hunt down information that's paramount." (Meakin, 2005)

"Well firstly they have to have a curiosity about *getting* stories... Secondly, they've got to be able to tell stories." (Willis, 2005)

"..it boils down to just being a good journalist... if you've got good ideas and ... good story leads and you're generating stories... then... you're going to get ahead. And that, as far as I'm concerned, is the most important thing." (Dunn, 2005)

The Nine network's Chief of Staff, John Chouefate, also placed story-breaking at the head of his list: "the most fundamental thing that I look for in a journalist is someone you can rely on to have the contacts.. to... find their own stories." (Chouefate, 2005) David Breen, the Ten Network's Sydney News Director, also wants his journalists to come up with "new material", to have "news sense", a basic idea of "how to gather that news" and to "bombard us with ideas." (Breen, 2005)

All these people said they had noticed a lack of story-generating ability among television journalists. Chris Willis at Seven and David Breen at Ten - who have both moved to Sydney from smaller states - say this might be characteristic of Sydney newsrooms: "The basic thing that drives me crazy about journalists, especially in a place like Sydney... is they don't think they have to break stories... So... they don't really know how to go about getting a story." (Willis, 2005)

The shift from newspaper cadetship to university training was also blamed: "You're getting students coming from university that have no grounding in journalism, they have no contacts, they stick to a text, and they go through the basics." (Chouefate, 2005) "Unfortunately, I do meet some people going through courses who are really on the understanding that the job of a journalist is to come into the office, be assigned a story, go out and put it together and... that's the job." (Breen, 2005) "...It's usually... people who have gone to college or university who say 'I want to be a presenter' or 'I want to be an overseas correspondent' without really understanding what it is about journalism I suppose." (Willis, 2005)

### The X-factor: Curiosity, a Passion for News, "Front" and a Drive to Succeed

News-sense, a passion for news and curiosity to find the truth were listed as paramount by many news managers who had not raised story-generation specifically as a skill they sought. This was a theme strongly put at Channel Nine:

"The first thing I would look for is passion. Without that there's nothing ... we want someone who lives and breathes the news, and who can't get through a day even when they're on holiday without knowing what the news of the day is and wanting to impart it." Mary Davison, Managing Editor, Channel Nine News, Sydney (Davison, 2005)

"Off the top of my head... enthusiasm for the job. ...that... drives the way you tackle each... assignment... to be inquisitive... to look behind everything... to be sceptical about everything." Graham Thurston, Executive Producer of News, Sydney, Nine Networks. (Thurston, 2005)

Tony Ritchie, Nine's new Sydney news director, used the term "the X-factor" involving persistence, ambition, maturity and even knowing when to ask a question in a newsroom and when to leave busy journalists alone: "It's the enquiring mind, it's the ability to interpret what's going on and not stumble and bumble in... it's just a personality thing ... And I suspect they probably make a better journalist because they've got the ability to get someone's confidence." (Ritchie, 2005)

Drive and enthusiasm were also the first attributes raised by both senior news managers interviewed at SBS:

"I want people hungry for a story. I have to have high energy levels of people who want to always be enquiring... And I'd like someone who really has no bounds on ambition, who really is quite pushy..." Paul Cutler, Head of News and Current Affairs, SBS (Cutler, 2005)

"The most important thing is energy - energy and curiosity... You're going to care about finding out what the truth is and that's really what journalism is all about." Mark Boyd, Executive Producer, SBS World News (Boyd, 2005)

ABC News Editorial Manager, Michael Gleeson, also put curiosity top of his list: "...they are people who don't accept answers that are given to them at face value ...they should have a sense of drive and sense of determination to get to the bottom of things." (Gleeson, 2005)

Those who listed story generation as the most important skill they sought in recruits, wrapped instinctive attributes of "passion" and "curiosity" in as a necessary part of story-generation ability (Breen, 2005; Dunn, 2005; Meakin, 2005; Willis, 2005).

### A Passion for Telling Stories and Story-Telling & Writing Ability

For some news managers, such as John Mulhall at ABC, the desire to tell stories is bound up in a journalist's passion to find information: "The chief characteristic... common to all journalism... is a desire and interest, a real need to actually tell stories. ... We want to see people who have a passion for finding out stuff, ... and then how to present it in as clear, concise and brief a way as possible": John Mulhall, National Network Editor, ABC Television (Mulhall, 2005).

Heather Forbes, the ABC's chief journalism recruiter and coordinator of its internship and cadetship programs, rates writing ability most highly: "First of all they must be able to write well, clearly and concisely." (Forbes, 2005) Under Ms Forbes' stewardship of the broadcaster's recruitment program, grammar-testing has shifted from the last stage of ABC cadetship screening (Alysen, 1999) to its first method of culling cadetship candidates (along with general knowledge testing) (Gleeson, 2005). The limitation this process imposes on the range of people the ABC recruits warrants a separate discussion. One outcome is to force journalism educators to include basic grammar in their course curriculum. If we don't, we risk seeing most of our students – deprived of grammar tuition in primary and secondary school - rejected by the ABC before they get to interview stage.

ABC national head of news and current affairs, John Cameron, also has grammar and writing at the top of his skills list: "My particular passion and bent for - anyone will tell you - good English, good grammar, good conversational broadcast writing..."(Cameron, 2005b). At Channel Nine, cadetship recruiter Mary Davison fears her concern for good grammar is rare: "Poor grammar makes me weep. It distresses me no end. It alarms me that nobody else is concerned about it. Obviously there are pedants around who are concerned about it, but we're depicted as pedants and that irritates me because I still think it's important."

Davison spent her formative years as a journalist at Britain's ITN before later becoming Sydney newsreader Brian Henderson's producer during the nineties. "I rate writing abilities very highly, and I know that's not terribly fashionable these days, but I still think you need to be able to write, and to communicate effectively." (Davison, 2005) Similarly, Davison's Nine colleague, Sydney news director, Tony Ritchie, rated television packaging as most important: "I'm looking for a skilled writer, and skilled interpreter of pictures - the ability to use, in television terms, the least number of words to tell the maximum amount of story. Writing is absolutely a key part of what (the best journalists) do. It separates the men and women from the girls and the boys" (Ritchie, 2005). He mentioned this ability ahead of "the X-factor".



Although passion for news and story generation were most sought by the Seven Network, lean television writing is also a focus: "...we had a staff meeting at the end of last year and (Peter Meakin, Head of News and Public Affairs at Seven) said that anyone who wanted to use an adverb or an adjective had to get written permission from me in future... we're trying to keep it really simple... So yeah, packaging is important." (Willis, 2005).

### General Knowledge

The ABC, as said earlier, tests grammar and general knowledge to cull cadetship applicants before interviewing. ABC News and Current Affairs head, John Cameron, listed as one of his frustrations - along with poor grammar and poor writing ability - how few journalism graduates and junior journalists understand Australia's parliamentary and judicial structures or have knowledge of history or current affairs.

"(H)aving been involved in the cadet selection programs for about 10 or 15 years within the ABC, ...the most ...disappointing common thread is: even though... almost all the applicants have... been through universities, a surprisingly sad number of them lack understanding of the basics of broadcast journalism.. coupled with ...sometimes *incredibly sad lack of knowledge in general basic news and current affairs.*" (Cameron, 2005b)

For John Mulhall, now ABC Television news network editor but with previous involvement in cadetship selection, it's an important criterion: "We want them to have the ability to understand the wider world... The way politics works, the way the judicial system works, the way the executive arm of government works right down from all the levels of federal through state to local councils..." (Mulhall, 2005)

Ten's Sydney News Editor (until recently), Jason Morrison, feels strongly: "I thought it quite staggering that I have twenty-one, -two and -three-year-olds come in here, who have never set foot inside a court room, who have never walked into Parliament House, who have no idea really about the difference between a State and Federal Minister, and why we have the two." (Morrison, 2005).

Morrison's boss, David Breen agreed: "It's ranked up there fairly highly with news sense... a good basic understanding of State politics, good basic understanding of Federal politics, that they know who the Ministers are, they know who is expected to win the next election..." (Breen, 2005)

At SBS, Mark Boyd, values life experience: "...the best people to become journalists or do journalism training are people who have a degree of maturity... have knocked around a bit if you like..." (Boyd, 2005)

At Channel Nine, News EP, Graham Thurston, talked about the “enthusiasm, that breadth of knowledge” needed to enable a reporter to explain a story so that “tens of thousands are going... to understand it easily.” (Thurston, 2005) It appears that Thurston's view of knowledge, by coupling it with enthusiasm, is that such an attribute comes automatically with a passion for the job and for news and current affairs. This appears to be one of the benefits perceived by others also who desire “passion” and “enthusiasm” in their recruits.

### Voice and On Camera Appearance

Nearly everyone interviewed for this research conceded that a voice and camera presence are important (Dunn, 2005) for on-camera reporters but stressed that they are not the most important attributes: “People like Laurie Oakes, they're the best journalists in Australia, but look Laurie's not a pretty picture on television...” (Choueifate, 2005) “It's not the most important thing ... and we have reporters who are not the best presenters in the world but they are great reporters.” (Davison, 2005) “Yes, appearance is important. Yes, style - delivery is important, but only to the extent that it serves the purpose, which is clear and precise and accurate communication.” Alan Sunderland, Head of Editorial Coordination, ABC (Sunderland, 2005).

SBS news executive producer, Mark Boyd, Channel Seven's Sydney head of news, Chris Willis, and Ten's Sydney news director, David Breen, included voice and on-camera presentation as part of their response to the researcher's first question on “the most important qualities in a television journalist” but as secondary to news-gathering abilities:

“In order to (tell the story to the viewer) they've got to... have a voice that can communicate to people... and they've got to have a presence on air... the combination of voice and physical presence that can keep people's attention, which also means they've got to be able to tell a story. It doesn't mean they've got to be beautiful people..” (Willis, 2005)

“To present well on television ... they don't have to look like fashion models, like some people on commercial television do, but they need to be presentable... then you go for a reasonable broadcast voice..” (Boyd, 2005)

“...there are many factors that contribute to the overall picture – one is voice, and second is appearance - like it or not, television is a medium where appearance does matter ... but most importantly ... tenacity ... and the understanding of what news is.” (Breen, 2005)

The Sydney head of news at Channel Nine, Tony Ritchie, did not raise voice or on-camera appearance at any point in the interview with him as criteria for selecting newsroom journalists. But in the absence of a specific question put to him on this

matter it would be foolhardy to suggest he would not take these factors into account when hiring on-camera reporters.

It's clear that hirers are frustrated recruits place too much emphasis themselves on the role of on-camera appearance: "There is a bit of tendency among young people to think that being a television journalist is about being on television and as long as they look OK, then that's what's important, but it actually isn't." (Forbes, 2005) As Seven's Peter Meakin puts it "...journalism is in danger of becoming a branch of the performing arts ... the motivation is to appear rather than perhaps having something to say" (Meakin, 2005). It's a frustration that appeared more consistently than any other throughout the interviews:

"..the ones I speak to that come here on you work experience ... all want to go down that one path: they all want to be Ray Martins, Jana Wends.." (Thurston, 2005)

"..A journalism student needs to understand... this is not about putting makeup on and getting in front of the camera and looking glamorous.." (Gleeson, 2005).

"I'd like to think that all the colleges doing journalism would educate people to understand the complexity of television, that it's not just about standing in front of a camera." (Davison, 2005)

Interviewees seemed exasperated by those who would like to skip the reporter stage: "I quite often get resumes from people saying, Dear Mr Boyd, I've just done a journalism course and I would love to be a presenter. And I never throw them in the bin, but they go to the back of the file.." (Boyd, 2005)

This "Jana Wendt factor" (Alysen & Oakham, 1996) and news hirers' reactions to it is worthy of a separate paper. It would also be interesting to test presumptions from some in public broadcasting that commercial television pursues "looks" in its hiring of journalists over "substance". It would also be valuable to further examine the view expressed by some interviewees from both commercial and public broadcasters that, while appearance is important, excessive beauty can be a minus in presentation of news and current affairs.

### Multi-skilling

There's been much discussion about new skill needs related to technological change in television newsrooms: the video journalist and one-person crews, desk-top video-editing and bulletin software. It is important not to confuse the argument about which skills will best serve journalism graduates seeking starts in these broadcast newsrooms with the arguments put to give our burgeoning numbers of journalism graduates (Patching, 1996) a broad range of skills to find a job *somewhere*. Researchers such as Alysen argue journalism graduates need a bigger range of skills to gain jobs

on offer in areas such as online media (Alysen, 2005). But it appears hirers and firers in free-to-air television news are not interested in new computing, camera or editing skills when deciding which graduates show greatest potential to perform as television journalists of the future: Not one television news manager interviewed for this study raised technological skills – camera operation, computer picture editing or even familiarity with bulletin software such as ENPS or I-News – as a criterion for selecting either experienced or junior journalists.

Some interesting results have come out of a quantitative survey of nine of the people interviewed for this research (as a pilot for a much larger survey planned for the end of the year). Respondents were given a list of 25 attributes and asked to rate their importance in recruitment decisions. Most of the attributes listed – such as judgement, interviewing, writing, story-telling, investigation and presentation – scored “5” and above (out of a possible “7” for “crucial”). “7” was the most commonly circled number across the sample.

The picture is different for the two technology skills listed (computer video-editing and familiarity with bulletin software). Not one respondent gave either skill above “5” for importance. They were the only skills to get “1” from respondents. In fact they were the only skills to get a rating of less than “3” from anyone. They scored lowest in mean average by at least two points – and in most cases more – against every other attribute listed. Unfortunately, camera operating skills were not listed in the pilot questionnaire. This will be corrected in the survey planned for distribution to all journalists in Sydney television newsrooms. This should shed further light on newsroom attitudes to technological ability.

While this small sample is inconclusive, the qualitative data is compelling: All those asked specifically about technological skills appeared to give them little importance in selecting journalists. SBS Head of News and Current Affairs, Paul Cutler (formerly of CNN Atlanta and Hong Kong), exclaimed (off tape) when asked about the impact of new technologies: “Oh I think technology is an old crock!” He says video journalism has helped reporters on SBS program, Dateline, to get into hard-to-access places, but has limited application: “I don’t necessarily think that in day-to-day news journalism that the video journalist is the way to go, because I think there are too many demands on the journalists about... getting the story right.” (Cutler, 2005) It’s interesting to note his long term view given the confidence held by his predecessor at SBS, Phil Martin, in the potential for the VJ model becoming widely used (Van Heekeren, 2004).

At Channel Seven and Nine the Quantel editing system has been introduced onto every journalist’s desktop (Dunn, 2005; Ritchie, 2005). Both Seven’s head of news and 6pm news executive producer say journalists don’t need to bring understanding of bulletin software or Quantel editing skills with them because they are easy to learn:

"It took me 3 days to learn the basic stuff... Technology shouldn't drive the journos...in the end that's just another system of delivery." (Willis, 2005)

"Technology really isn't an issue ...we have got what's called the Quantel system. And that's easy to use... I mean, I am not a tech-head at all and I can do it, and believe me, if I can do it anyone can do it – really". (Dunn, 2005)

The view is similar at Channel Nine: "...most of the technology is ... semi-child-proof in the sense that you should be able to pick it up fairly quickly... I found a crusty old journalist within 15 minutes was able to use (the Quantel video editing system) to at least view things, to make basic cuts.." (Ritchie, 2005)

### Conclusions

From an early appraisal of the interviews conducted with these news managers several conclusions can be drawn. Hirers and firers in Sydney's television newsrooms want recruits to have "old-fashioned" skills in news gathering – even to the extent of breaking stories not covered elsewhere – and a passion for news itself. They want thinkers with inquiring minds. They want personality traits including drive, ambition and confidence so that their recruits will get results. They want journalists to know how to write for television and some – especially in the ABC – want them to understand grammatical rules. There is also an expectation that journalism graduates – having been to university – will have a general knowledge that includes the Australian court system, levels of government and recent history. News managers say they want on-camera reporters to have good broadcast voices and a non-distracting authoritative presence on air. But they definitely do not want students of journalism to be overly concerned with appearance or with being on-camera. They are tired of job applicants wanting to be "presenters".

At the same time there appears little interest in what knowledge graduates or experienced journalists have of bulletin software, desktop editing or camera operation. This appears to be because the new technology is designed to be easy to "pick up." It's also possible that the new generation of people entering news rooms are so computer literate that it is an area of training universities can afford to neglect. The teaching implications of the "digital native" are examined in a paper David Cameron is presenting to the November JEA conference - but he concludes that universal computer literacy enabling the "net generation" to operate sophisticated programs such as video editing without training should not be assumed yet (Cameron, 2005a). Nevertheless, familiarity with production software certainly "isn't an issue" (Dunn, 2005) in television newsrooms for whatever reason. If it were, perhaps then it might be considered of great importance alongside the writing and news gathering skills which news hirers say are often missing in journalism graduates.

The implications of these findings for technological training within journalism education need further analysis - especially against predictions of where the most journalism jobs are going to be in the future. We also need to check if the views of these hirers are the views of a "pre-mouse" generation about to be usurped by one embracing new modes of news delivery requiring new skill needs.

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