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Universities as media organisations: A panel discussion

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Abstract

The Internet has transformed the possibilities and helped to change the practices for universities as media organisations. This discussion explores two new media initiatives at the University of Melbourne: The Conversation, an online news and information service launched in March 2011, for which the university was a founding partner, and The Citizen, a new online publication to be launched by the Centre for Advanced Journalism in 2013. Jock Given spoke with the director of the Centre for Advanced Journalism, Margaret Simons, and the managing editor of The Conversation, Misha Ketchell, in Melbourne on 25 September.

Introduction

In the Internet age, every organisation has become a media organisation. Universities always were. Academics were supposed to perish if they didn?t publish. University presses were among the most prestigious publishers of scholarly work and university print rooms became prolific publishers once photocopiers and collective copyright licensing arrangements enabled them to produce course readers for individual subjects instead of prescribing text books. Journalism schools published newspapers and operated radio and TV stations.

The Internet has allowed academics to publish faster and more widely and their universities to set up online ?institutional repositories? that keep all their work in one accessible place. University presses have established e-presses for short-run, print-on-demand or e-book monographs on specialised topics. Teachers have shifted subject materials online. Now, social media is providing new opportunities to change teaching practices but it is also requiring university administrators and educators to communicate with students in new ways.

The University of Melbourne has had a publishing company for more than 80 years and a theatre company ? the Melbourne Theatre Company ? since 1953. It was one of the founding partners of the online news and information service The Conversation, launched in March 2011, whose offices are located at the Parkville campus. In 2013, the university?s Centre for Advanced Journalism will launch a new online publication, The Citizen.

TJA editorial board member and Swinburne University media and communications professor Jock Given spoke with Misha Ketchell, managing editor of The Conversation, and Margaret Simons, Director of the Centre for Advanced Journalism, in Melbourne on 25 September 2012.

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Misha?s entire career has been in journalism. He edited the student paper at Melbourne University, The Big Issue Australia and the Melbourne Weekly; worked at The Age for six years as a reporter, feature writer and leader writer; edited Crikey; then spent four years working at ABC TV?s Media Watch as a producer and researcher before joining The Conversation in 2011.

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Before taking up her position at the University of Melbourne, Margaret was at Swinburne University for three years as a research fellow and coordinator of the journalism program. She has been a professional journalist for about 32 years, working freelance for most of the last 20 years and before that at The Australian and The Age.

JG: You have both spent a long time working for mainstream media organisations ? organisations like The Age, the ABC ? but also for organisations that are not so mainstream. Why have you come to work for universities now, and what it is that they enable you to do that you might not have been able to do in a mainstream media organisation?

MK: For me it?s really about a public sector space. Lindsay Tanner released a book last year called 'Sideshow' in which he talked about what he saw as a collapse of quality journalism or serious public interest discussion. My career in journalism has been coupled with a pursuit of, wherever possible, places where I feel the work you do is not compromised by commercial agendas or vested interests, where what you're doing is actually performing a democratic journalistic function or being part of a conversation that?s in the public interest. That?s definitely what I tried to pursue when I was at the ABC and what I enjoyed when I was working at The Age. Because of the disruptive impact of Internet technologies, the conversation is happening less in certain places than it used to ? for example broadsheet newspapers, which are suffering greatly because their revenue streams have decreased. I still see universities as a great public sector location. University academics are, to some extent, publicly funded (also privately funded through tuition fees from students and other sources of funding) but they're essentially set up in a way that they are sort of disinterested contributors to public debate. That was the sort of space I really wanted to work in.

MS: I find resonances with most of what Misha said, but the truth is, my entry into the university was really a bit accidental. One of the main freelance gigs I had from about 2005 onwards was writing about media: a meta-journalist some people have called me. That was largely for Private Media Partners (publishers of Crikey), including the period when Misha was editing Crikey. Through that, I became increasingly interested in the way journalism was changing and needed to change. I also had some sense of dissatisfaction about the ways it?s done at present. So I got increasingly interested and concerned about that and engaged with some of the academic researchers in the field. That led to Swinburne approaching me with the suggestion of a research fellowship which I took up; and that led to being asked to design the journalism program; and then that led to my current job being advertised and me applying for it. So I didn?t at any stage sit back and think, ?now I?m going to be an academic?. In fact I still feel like I?m pretending most of the time. Having said that, I think everything Misha said about the university is true, and also that the notions of academic independence that you find at a good university are not a million miles away from the notions of editorial independence that I was raised to value.

JG: Can either of you give a specific example in commercial media where there was something ? a story you were working on, a story you might have worked on ? where you felt pressure to take it in a certain direction or not ask particular questions? An example where you think someone working within a university might be able to handle the story in a different way?

MK: I?ll give you an example, not an example of an incident where I was asked to do something, but of where commercial imperatives direct the coverage. An academic at the University of Technology in Sydney did some research into the impact upon infants of sitting in a pram which is facing forward. For her research, she strapped a camera to a pram, took it through a shopping centre, and got evidence of all the kinds of stimulus the child will be exposed to. Basically her argument was that because of the developmental stage of the infant brain, if you're in a shopping centre and you're getting a lot of stimulus, the child could be over stimulated, and it?s better for a child to be facing the parent than not. This academic gave the story to a journalist from the Daily Telegraph in Sydney and she said: 'Look I don?t want to make parents feel guilty, the research is tentative at this point, but this is the conclusion, that probably on balance it?s better for the infant to be facing the parent'. And the story came out and it was: ?Academic slams cruel parents for putting their children in their prams?. It turned it into a massive fight. That academic got threats, somebody came and left a leaflet on her car, she had a very traumatic experience. Now her agenda in trying to communicate that research was just to try to explain what her research findings were.

The journalist?s agenda in a commercial media outlet like the Daily Telegraph is to attract readers, to attract eyeballs, to entertain people. That?s part of what you do and it?s part of what you do in any media organisation. That agenda is still there at the ABC or The Age or anywhere else. But in a particularly commercially oriented organisation, that agenda can overwhelm what you do and it can mean you present information in certain ways. I would just prefer to be in environments where that?s not the predominant thing in your mind when you think about how you structure a story.

JG: Can you explain what you're trying to do with The Conversation and what is different about it from other media enterprises?

MK: Andrew Jaspan, who founded The Conversation, was talking to Peter Doherty, the Nobel Laureate here at Melbourne University. Peter was saying how difficult he found it working with journalists, in particular, because of the adversarial style and the way his work was represented. He said: ?Look I?m just sick of talking to journalists. I do an interview and I go home and just before I go to bed I think: how bad is it going to be, how much are they going to get wrong? And I wake up in the morning and I look in the paper and I think: Oh God here we go again.? So he said: ?What if the journalist came and sat by me and helped me express my ideas and explain my research in a clear way rather than saying I?m against you?? That?s really the idea behind The Conversation. It?s pretty much that simple, it?s saying there?s all this wealth of expertise in academia. The university is structured very much like a newsroom. You?ve got a law faculty, an economics faculty, an architecture faculty. Similarly in a newsroom you?ve got a law reporter, you?ve got an urban affairs reporter, there?s straight corollaries between the two, they sort of match each other.

So the idea is to turn the academics in the university with all their expertise ? people who spend 10, 20, 30 years on a subject ? into a newsroom and use them as reporters to communicate direct to the public. Rather than trying to filter it through a journalist who is in that adversarial mode, have somebody sitting with the academic helping them, subbing, rewriting, putting a headline on the story. But the key thing we do is ensure the academic has final sign off. Their research will be presented accurately, they communicate to a wide audience, the headline is not going to misrepresent them, they're not going to be quoted out of context. That?s basically the idea.

JG: How does the commissioning process work and how many people do you have contributing?

MK: Academics register to be on our site. There are more than 3000 academics registered to write. That doesn?t mean they're all active authors, but a significant proportion of those are. We work like any newsroom. In the morning at 9 a.m. we have a news conference. We all read the papers. There are editors in each section ? health and medicine, science and technology, business and economy. They're across their areas and they say: OK this is happening, we?ve got a piece on this, can we do something on?? You know when Fukushima happened, can we get an expert on the impact of radiation on the human body? Is there something interesting that happened on Lateline last night that we need to pick up? How are we going to respond to Cory Bernadi?s comments equating homosexuality and bestiality? Do we get Dennis Altman from Latrobe, who wrote that famous book Homosexual? Who is the right person to write on that? So a lot of what we do is commissioning academics in the way any editor in a newsroom would commission a reporter to write the piece. That means sometimes getting an academic to write very quickly. People said to us initially that?s not going to work, academics can?t write quickly. And we found that that?s just not the case. We can get people to write within two hours if we need to. Sometimes we?ll help them, like we might conduct an interview, write some notes, send it back to the author. The key thing is because we?ve got a sign off process they see the final version. We can?t publish, our system doesn?t let us publish, unless the academic actually clicks a button saying they approve every aspect of this story.

But that?s only really half of what we do, because I always say to the editorial team I work with, that if all the ideas are coming from me, then every idea we?ve got is already out of date. All my ideas come from reading the newspapers and listening to Radio National and other media outlets. What I want is also for the editors that work in The Conversation team to be talking to academics and researchers and discovering what they're doing that isn?t being reported currently and bringing that to light. So a significant proportion of what we do is bouncing off the news agenda, but a significant proportion is also trying to find the most interesting research, the most interesting things going on in universities and sharing that with the larger public.

JG: Margaret, The Citizen?

MS: The Citizen isn?t launched yet of course. We just hired our editor, Simon Mann; in fact his first day was yesterday and so quite a lot of key decisions are still in development and they will be his decisions, not necessarily mine. But the idea of The Citizen is to serve four distinct but interrelated purposes. First off, it?s a teaching tool, so our students in the Masters of Journalism will enrol in a subject called Applied Professional Practice. This is a highly flexible subject that will be run in every semester across the year. There?s a number of things they might be involved in under that heading, but the main one is working for The Citizen, being assigned by the editor in a real newsroom environment with real deadlines, real assignments and so on. Simon and the other editor and staff will be bringing to bear real editorial judgements, saying: ?You need to make five more phone calls,? or ?Get the other side,? or ?What the hell is that apostrophe doing there?? ? all those real disciplines you need as a journalist.

Purpose number two is an action research project or as the foundation for some research projects. My particular area of interest ? and I think an urgent area of research ? is changing journalistic methodologies and forms. We?ll be using The Citizen as the foundation for experiments. I?ve got a number of those that we?ll be doing in our first year of operation. They will include things like trying to use social media to crowd-source information, and discover ways of verifying that as reliable journalism. We?ve got an application in at the moment around the idea of the journal of record. That is an idea which has largely gone by the by as commercial media have lost their resource base, and yet the technology is there to potentially do it much better than it?s ever been done before. We will be deliberately innovative and experimental and we?ll be reporting on the results of those experiments both in scholarly publications and The Citizen itself.

Thirdly and not least, it?s a serious publication aimed at an intelligent general public and while we won?t be trying to do everything, we will tackle particular projects and issues with the idea, similar to The Conversation, of advancing debate through good journalism and advancing the spread of ideas and engaged citizenship. That?s where the name of the publication comes from.

Lastly it will be a flagship for the Centre, so you'll be able to read in The Citizen about the public events we?ve held. It will host debates that might arise from those public events and through social media. We may well kick on things that happen as a result of a big public event and also of course we?ll be reporting on our research and our other activities.

JG: How big are these organisations? How many paid staff do you have now and how many would you expect to have?

MK: At The Conversation, in editorial, we have 13 or 14 full-time editors and roughly the equivalent of four full-time web developers, and some administrative and back office staff too.

MS The Citizen has one full time editor, a half time editorial assistant and of course the part-time efforts of the rest of the teaching staff, which at the moment is myself and Dennis Muller and a raft of casual sessionals. We will have a small contributor budget; we?re still working on that at the moment, and in the long term ? and this certainly won?t be happening in the first couple of years ? we would hope to hire a journalist in addition to the editor.

JG: But most of the writing will be done by the students?

MS: Yes.

JG: And the administrative structures: are they separate companies or is it the university that employs the staff?

MS: All the staff are employed by the Centre, which is part of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences which sits within the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne. So that?s a three-tiered structure. This is something the vice-chancellor is interested and involved in. The University Council has endorsed a Charter of Editorial Integrity for the publication.

MK: The Conversation is set up as a not-for-profit company [The Conversation Media Group, a not-for-profit educational charity owned by The Conversation Trust]; it receives funding from the university sector, CSIRO and some government money.

JG The university money doesn?t just come from the University of Melbourne?

MK Not at all no, there?s about 39 universities in Australia and I think about 18 or 19 are funding partners of The Conversation. All 39 contribute, in that we commission academics to write from any university. We are totally agnostic as to whether they are our funding partners or not editorially. Each of those funding agreements has a clause saying nobody will interfere with our editorial independence.

JG One of the strengths of large media organisations is that, in their fourth estate role, they can ask hard questions, they can publish stuff that people might not want to see published, and then stand behind their journalists and editors. What's the expectation about universities? Do you think the university where you are located is comfortable with the idea that material might be published which opens them to new forms of legal liability?

MS This is obviously a key question. I think I?m fortunate in being in a particularly media savvy university. Both my dean and vice-chancellor are political scientists. They understand journalism and where it fits and I think that?s absolutely key. Likewise the charter of editorial independence. I was certainly planning to raise it and suggest it, but in fact my dean suggested it to me before I got to it. In terms of preparedness for controversy, I think that?s certainly here. I think this university sees itself as a cultural player. I think there?s evidence of that in its strong support for The Conversation as well. The vice-chancellor absolutely understands why this kind of thing is important and gives it his personal backing. Defamation? We are subject to that just as anybody who publishes anything at all is. We have to be careful and prudent. Exactly what it means we will find out if and when we run into trouble! But obviously it?s important to have professional editors who are across the risks involved and that?s what we have.

JG: Misha, have you had any difficulties with that sort of thing so far?

MK: Not really. I think it remains to be tested. I think there is a different culture between journalism and academia. Academia is by its nature slightly less robust about the slings and arrows of being engaged in public debate. I know for example that there?s a very interesting academic at Latrobe called Ken Harvey who?s run some campaigns about the Therapeutic Goods Administration. He did a campaign about a drug called SensaSlim which is allegedly a diet nasal spray. I heard him give a talk about the issues and how the university deals with somebody who is campaigning in that way and whether academics get support. Latrobe has, as most universities do, something written down that guarantees a level of academic independence, but it generally tends to come with a caveat that you have to be speaking within your area of speciality.

MS: Anybody in a newsroom knows that these issues come up and nobody can really anticipate the pressures. At Swinburne, I tried to put forward a research project about hyper-local journalism and of course the pressure was there for me to go for an ARC Linkage. It seemed to the other researchers that a natural partner would be a local government body, which of course is the last person you want funding a hyper-local journalism operation. I had to explain that and people were saying ?oh yes but we do research all the time with Linkage partners and our research is always independent.? But it was clear to me that nobody in that environment actually understood what the pressures are like when you publish something very prominently, something very controversial, and it gets picked up by other media and it?s all over the front page. All of which is what you aspire to do as a journalist. People in academia who haven't been through that firestorm don?t understand what it?s like. You only really know whether you?ve got editorial independence when you're in the middle of one of those shit fights.

MK: At The Conversation we have a disclosure statement for all academics who write for us. They have to answer three questions about any funding and conflicts of interest. The practice in academia is different to what you get in journalism. For example when we?re commissioning people to write (say) about flu vaccine, it?s very hard to find academics who haven't received some funding at some point in their career, whether it be matched funding or whatever, from companies that produce those vaccines. Our attitude is that, at the very least, you need to declare it and let readers make up their own minds, but obviously it?s preferable to avoid situations where those potential conflicts exist.

MS: Yeah I think that?s right, but it?s an issue for ARC funding, which, as we academics know, is the lifeblood of these institutions. Whenever you?ve got a research project the pressure is there to try and frame it as an ARC application and Linkage is the flavour of choice. And I do think that the ARC is set up in all sorts of ways which probably don?t tend to support journalistic projects. That?s a concern, because we at the moment have an industry which is in desperate need of innovative research and is itself not equipped to resource it. Legacy media is basically going broke, and emergent media is emerging; neither side has any money and the ARC structures make it hard really to apply for research grants about journalism. My submission to the Finkelstein inquiry suggested that an informed and active population or informed citizenry or some such form of word should actually be adopted as one of the national priorities for ARC funding. As far as I know that idea has gone nowhere.

The pressure for Linkage is understandable; I understand what the government is trying to do with that. They're trying to say we want to make sure academics are doing relevant research that other people care about outside the academy, and I support that as an aim. But I think it does tend to mean that certain areas of research where there simply is no industry partner with money are neglected and I think journalism is one of those. Not the only one I?m sure, but it?s one I?m aware of obviously.

JG: Misha, what do you know about people who read The Conversation?

MK: Quite a bit actually; there?s a detailed survey. Gender is pretty much 50/50; the geographic mix is slightly skewed towards Sydney and Melbourne; but otherwise it is what you'd expect given the distribution of population across Australia. The Conversation is clearly going to be read by a reasonably curious, reasonably well educated sort of readership. At the very least it is going to be the sort of people who listen to Radio National and maybe read the broadsheet papers and read Crikey and are reasonably engaged. Our big plan though is to spread out from that, is not to stop there, but to try and find the widest possible audience we can. One of the things we do is that in the software in which academics write on our site, we have a readability index which measures how readable the article is. We encourage academics to write for a reasonably well-educated 16-year old, so that the language is as clear as possible, so that it can get to a broad readership. And we do things like explainer pieces, explanatory journalism where we get, for example, an economist to explain the difference between an ETS and a carbon tax. Or we did an explainer that was incredibly successful in the US; it was an explanation of Einstein?s theory of relativity which got a massive audience.

JG: Are people accessing the site from outside Australia and inside Australia?

MK: They are. Some stories obviously get more domestic readership than others, but the big stories, big developments in physics, astronomy, those sorts of things, they can get massive international audiences. Tens of thousands of people will read them all over the globe. That Einstein piece got something close to 100,000 readers and most of them were in the US ? and that?s actual page views, so you can measure people that have actually clicked on the article and spent three or four minutes reading it.

JG: That?s a kind of ?explainer?. What about something that is more news driven?

MK: There was an environmental story about soil that went very well. It?s the science, maths, technology type pieces. In fact our technology coverage is a really good example. There?s a writer from the University of Western Australia called David Glance who writes a lot about things like commenting on the flaws and strengths of the latest iPhone. That sort of information has a global audience. It?s a really important point; one of the things we?ve learnt is that there are two audiences, there?s a domestic audience and a global audience and you can actually try to access both. Science, technology, health and medicine, we can get global audiences for those stories. Obviously for political commentary on whether Kevin Rudd is challenging Julia Gillard ? we try to steer clear of that horse-race style of journalism, but when we do it, when we get political scientists to delve into those areas ? the audience is an Australian one.

JG Margaret: who do you think is going to be reading The Citizen? Is this a project for Carlton and Parkville residents?

MS: No. I imagine it will be read by Carlton and Parkville residents, but it?s not primarily aimed at them. It?s aimed at the same sort of general population that might read The Age online or another broadsheet newspaper, with the difference that we can?t possibly do everything The Age at its height did. We simply don?t have the resources. I might aspire to starting a new news organisation at that size, but we will be doing particular projects in depth, probably on a semester to semester basis, and they will both find a particular readership, because there?s interest in that particular issue or whatever, and regular readers in that sort of general demographic.

JG: Do you imagine it will have a similar kind of daily, news-driven focus that Misha has talked about with The Conversation? Or do you think that, given the constraints of students doing semester-long courses and that sort of thing, there?ll be less focus on what's the story of today, and more on letting students write about something they choose to write about?

MS: In the long term I think we?ll certainly try and be on the news as much as possible. It is a developing project and our student numbers will rise. This is the first year of the program and next year we?ll have at least twice the students we have this year and that?s going to continue to grow. So we won?t do all of these things at once, but certainly, at least during semester, I would have an ambition that we would be updating the site at least daily with some new content that would be on the news.

JG: Is your primary focus going to be text or will you be doing audio and video as well?

MS: We certainly will have video and audio on the site as well including podcasts and broadcasts of our public events. Students are all using video and audio equipment, so we will certainly aspire to have all that as part of the site. But just as important I think is the use of social media. We all know social media is good for marketing, but as an actual core methodology for journalism, it?s one of the most exciting things that?s happening right now ? people like Andy Carvin using Twitter to report the Arab Spring. I think it?s becoming clear that social media is one of the things the Internet does best and is actually for.

MK: We?re doing some video in collaboration with SBS and we did some explanatory videos for our Olympics coverage with SBS. But my personal feeling is that I like text and I feel that online people prefer text, because it gives them so much more control. Even a two-minute video, you?ve got to actually click and then commit for the two minutes and you can?t decide to skip a paragraph or go to the point that you want. So I really like mostly expressing ideas clearly in a text form with pictures. Yes we?d like to do more podcasting as well; it?s so intimate and it?s such a beautiful way of communicating. You really need to get the technology right; the sound quality is really important, but if you do it well it?s such a wonderful technique for conveying information. So yes we want to use those technologies, but I?m not obsessed by them.

I absolutely agree with Margaret?s point about the importance of social media. It?s something that we work on incredibly actively. We have quite a big team of editors, but we also have lots of interns in our office and part of the job we allocate them to do it is to be engaged in two-way conversations online all the time. Yes we?re broadcasting and marketing our content, but we?re also trying to get feedback and engage in those conversations. We also discovered that that makes a significant difference to the quality of conversation we can host as well. So for example when I worked at the ABC I did some work on The Drum, which is the ABC opinion site, there was a real problem in that at the end of every article, no matter what the topic was, you?d get 250 people saying that climate science is nonsense and 250 other people defending it. They?d be the same people on every story. The quality of debate was very poor. Similarly we found on The Conversation that we can publish articles and get people who are quite ranty and aggressive and make contributions that aren?t very valuable. Once you get the academic who?s written the piece to engage in the comment stream to actually talk back, people change their tone instantly. Like someone says you're an idiot, why do you do this? And the academic is there, saying: Oh look I?m sorry you feel that way, there was this report in 2005 that said blah, blah, blah, have you had a look at it, what do you think? The person immediately comes back and says: Sorry about that and the whole conversation changes. You start to get a really good quality of conversation.

We?ve built a dashboard for academics. When they sign up to our site they can go to it and it?s a one stop shop for their engagement. They can see any comments on any of their stories in the last week or two weeks. They can set it so they can go into those comment streams and respond, they can see any recent tweets and they can respond to them, they can see any recent Facebook mentions, those sorts of things. It?s basically to give people an opportunity to engage in two-way conversations with their audience. A part of it obviously is promoting the articles they?ve written, Tweeting them or saying I?ve written this piece, do you want to have a read? But it?s also about trying to create a better online conversation.

JG: Do you think you get a genuine response from the academics, something that might shape what they do in the future? Does it actually change what they're doing or is it still a kind of broadcast medium? The expert comes down from the mountain to tell the non-expert reader the way the world really works?

MK: It absolutely changes the way they think about their own work. We ran a piece by a Deakin academic who was talking about Type 2 diabetes and the way people with obesity are stigmatised. At the end of the article there were dozens and dozens of very very aggressive judgemental comments about people who are overweight, which is what you always get when you write about obesity. And that?s now led to a new research project where they're actually going to look at the role these attitudes play in stigmatising obesity and how that plays into the way health authorities work with Type 2 diabetes. That?s a direct response to that comment stream.

We had another academic very early on who wrote a piece; he argued that bike helmet laws were flawed, because they actually decreased the participation rate in cycling. He argued it was very good for other health reasons that we shouldn?t have bike helmet laws. A fantastic conversation ensued with academics from all over the world coming in and talking about different studies that actually led to new things. One of the things that?s really important is not just having the academic who wrote the piece in the comment stream, but other academics, other people who are knowledgeable who have something to offer. As an editor it?s absolutely thrilling when you see one of those conversations happen, you're like, My God here it is, you actually can do it, you can actually have a real conversation where people are respectful and they're bringing knowledge to the table and you can see people getting somewhere and learning new things, rather than just shouting at each other. It?s wonderful.

JG: Sources often have agendas. What role is there for your editors working with academics where an editor might feel the academic?s research doesn?t quite stack up, or might think this academic is a bit of a zealot on this topic, or they're reading too much into their findings? Are there situations like that where you feel you need to help reshape an agenda that an academic might have?

MK: I?ll answer that in a different way. One of the things people often say about The Conversation is they're very surprised that there are so many opinionated academics and they're surprised that we allow so many opinions to flourish on the site. And there?s a bit of an attitude I think that people want to use academia in a way that?s non-threatening. They want it to be like a shop, like a mall for ideas. So if you're a car battery manufacturer in Williamstown and you want to build a better car battery, you can come to a chemist or somebody that?s working on that area and pluck a bit of knowledge off the shelf and use it to make a better car battery. That?s all safe and wonderful and it helps you and then that?s it. My attitude is that good academic work is also challenging and destabilising and engaging in other ways. One of the things that encourages people to write is actually the capacity to express their views about something. I think the views would come through anyway. Ultimately whether or not somebody comes out and says ?this is my opinion?, if they?ve spent 20 years researching an area and they know it back to front, they will form views and conclusions about it. You could either have them [the opinions] operating on a subterranean level or you could have somebody saying: This is my opinion. So my attitude is that you should let academics have their opinions, they're actually inherently valuable, they're much better out the front than hidden.

What's important to me is that the academics are passionate, but disinterested, that they are not subject to conflicts of interest. They might have formed views or ideas, but those ideas are informed in an honest way from engaging with the subject matter. I would never try to influence somebody to change their views, that?s not what our role is. I guess the point at which we would say maybe this piece shouldn?t run or shouldn?t air is really about what it adds to the debate. So if it is just a view, well that?s not enough. You?ve got to bring something to the table, you?ve got to bring some knowledge, you?ve got to bring some expertise, you?ve got to tell me something I didn?t already know. But if you're making a contribution and there?s an opinion with that, then that?s fine as far as I?m concerned.

JG: Mainstream media industry codes of practice often refer to terms like ?balance?. Is ?balancing? a conscious part of The Conversation?s commissioning?

MK: It is a little. I don?t think everything is equally valid, so I don't subscribe to that idea that everything has two sides. I don't think that if you run something on climate science, you need to run a climate science denial. But I do think that sometimes you notice gaps in your work and you think OK there's an area here where there are valid arguments to be made that haven't been expressed and they should be given an airing. So yes, you need to be a little bit careful about just interrogating your own prejudices or your own ideas or your own way of seeing the world. You need to make sure you don?t get a closed feedback loop where people who think like you start feeding you things. You do need to seek out things that challenge your own ideas a little bit. But again it needs to be done in a context of understanding that underneath it all, there has to be a core level of quality and contribution. There?s got to be substantive knowledge and evidence and something to say.

MS: I think, as you say, most of the codes of ethics and so on talk about various words; objectivity, balance, fairness are three of the most common, all of which actually mean slightly different things and some of them it?s not clear what they mean at all. I really think this is something the profession as a whole hasn?t thought through sufficiently. In most newsrooms you'll hear words like objectivity and balance and fairness thrown around fairly loosely without anybody ever really asking what they mean and how we might bring that to bear on our practice. And that?s something which there is quite a lot of literature on, which I think is quite important. But really what you're talking about is the ability to search out the evidence on the topic and to search it out in a broad fashion, not just looking for that evidence which backs up your pre-formed conclusion. And then to relay that with some integrity to the audience and that may mean you end up with a result which is actually not balanced in that you may research climate change and come to a conclusion about the balance of the evidence. That?s my definition of objectivity; it actually lies in the method, not necessarily either in the individual journalist or in the final result.

MK: I agree with that. One of the things I think we risk losing in this whole proliferation-of-voices online media world is professional information handlers, journalists as people who professionally handle information. I think that?s massively important. Margaret?s definition of what that is, is absolutely right. It?s about an honesty of process, it?s about coming to a story, being ready to let the cards fall where they may, being prepared to just report what you find, even if it doesn?t meet with your preconceptions. But it doesn?t necessarily mean you tick off having two sides of politics or two sides of a debate. That?s such a clich?d and actually meaningless and ultimately distortionary way of approaching journalism.

Because notions of balance and objectivity are so much in the eye of the beholder, as soon as you set yourself up to try to do it, you're actually setting yourself up to fail in many people?s eyes. Yet I still believe that sort of doomed endeavour is fundamentally worth it and incredibly valuable. But it?s not what The Conversation does. The Conversation offers something else, which is a real use of academic expertise, which often comes with opinion. But that journalist as professional information sorter, as investigator, I think it?s one of the key things that?s at risk from the collapse of the journalism business model. The honest broker journalist is still utterly valuable.

MS: I also think the definition of objectivity as being in the process of the research and the relaying is something an academic should understand. It?s actually quite close to the ideal academic method. Of course researchers choose research areas that match their interests and they may well start out with an opinion about it, but a good academic goes out and does the conscientious academic work of finding out what's been done before, then establishing new knowledge and then relaying that. Well that?s close to the ideal journalistic method.

MK: There's been this whole thing that digital media sort of pushes aside the gatekeeper, this idea that the gatekeeper got in the way and the gatekeeper kept people out of conversations. That?s true, but what that?s led to is a sort of antipathy towards journalists and their role. In any new journalistic scene that emerges after the massive disruption of digital technology, it?s really important that we find ways of preserving the journalist as an honest information broker, whether it be what Margaret is doing with The Citizen or broadsheet newspapers or whatever.

JG: Margaret, you're training journalists who might go on to work in other media organisations and you?re also running a media organisation. Is there a possibility that the media organisations you're training people for, who you will want to support the work you do, are going to see what you?re doing at The Citizen as competition?

MS: Inevitably, yes that may happen and what can you do about it? On the one hand the industry tends to have two, both in my view relatively ill-informed, criticisms of journalism education. One is that it shouldn?t happen, because journalists are born and not made. The other is if you are going to train them you shouldn?t teach them all this academic theory, you should actually get them doing practical exercises. Well I don't think journalists are born rather than made; and we think the courses we are offering are going to give them practical, real world skills which hopefully will be slightly ahead of the curve, because we?re not aiming our graduates at The Age or The Australian or the Herald Sun. We?d be nuts if we did, or certainly doing them no favours. So yes they may see it as competition; but we?re not directly setting out to compete. We can?t possibly aspire to do everything a big media organisation might do, but we are out there, we are publishing and we are training the journalists of the future, so we make no apologies for that. I think Mark Scott faces this sort of criticism a lot about the ABC. The Drum was criticised by Crikey, I think, at one stage. And his response is there have always been private sector and public sector solutions to things. The fact that we have a national art gallery doesn?t mean there?s no commercial art galleries, any more than commercial art galleries should mean that the government shouldn?t be in that space as well. Now you can debate the particular lines, but every journalism school in the world worth talking about has a publication on which the students work. It?s hardly a new idea; I am hoping to do some new things with it, but it?s not a new idea in itself.

JG: Can you imagine a time when the kinds of media organisations the university has established, The Citizen, The Conversation, Melbourne University Publishing, continue to exist, with the strength of the University of Melbourne behind them, but a commercial media organisation like The Age doesn?t?

MS: Very easily, sadly. But if The Age ceases to exist, other things would replace it, there would be different things and they may be doing different collections of things. There?s been some interesting research out of New York City University on this just recently taking real advertising sales figures, real audience figures in the City of Boston, which is comparable to Melbourne in many ways, and assuming that all the newspapers are gone, and then asking what new media business models would be available in this environment. What they hypothesise is not a replacement for The Age, but a whole load of other little things and I think that?s a likely future. None of us knows for sure of course.

MK: I was talking to Ray Gill, the former arts editor of The Age. I was saying basically that with the broadsheet newspapers cutting so many staff and paring back, there?s whole swathes of work that aren?t being done anymore, including areas of cultural commentary, arts coverage. Ray said it?s still going on, it?s just going on in different spaces. Look at the Wheeler Centre, for example, and the level of conversation that that is hosting now. Look at the blogs and other spaces in which these things occur. I think the types of things broadsheet newspapers used to do will continue to be done. And yes absolutely I see a role for The Conversation to take many aspects of what I think old broadsheet newspapers used to do and do them well online with academics. I might love to do much more literary criticism and cultural commentary and better, stronger coverage of education. There?s whole areas of intellectual life that aren?t catered for as well as they used to be by traditional media and I think they will create opportunities.

MS: I endorse everything Misha said earlier about the importance of journalists as brokers, but there are some things which actually are being done quite well on an amateur model or by bloggers. The best cultural criticism is on blogs, the best restaurant reviews are on blogs or through social media and they are certainly as good as the run of the mill stuff that?s in the broadsheet press and better. Likewise political commentary; there?s terrific examples of that done on blogs and so on. What isn?t done, or won?t be done consistently anyway, is the disinterested research effort. You might get it occasionally, but generally speaking a citizen journalist is passionate about their subject. And that?s both wonderful in many ways, but also a risk in that they're not going to do that hard yakka of challenging their own ideas and seeking out other ideas. I?m not saying that will never happen, but it won?t happen consistently enough or often enough and I think it is probably the core of the journalist?s ongoing usefulness. But things like arts reviews and opera reviews and so on, I?m open to the idea that that might actually be done better by the interested and informed citizenry.

JG: That?s terrific. Thank you both very much for your time

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