

# **Journalism education in the United States and the implications for New Zealand**

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## ABSTRACT

*In the second half of 2010, Dr Grant Hannis spent six months in the United States as a Fulbright Senior Scholar, teaching and researching journalism at San Francisco State University. He also attended two major conferences of United States journalism educators. This paper will discuss Grant's impressions of journalism education in the United States, and what it tells us about journalism education in New Zealand. There are several similarities between the two countries. For instance, journalism is popular with students (but issues of students' motivation, grammatical skills, and unrealistic career expectations can arise), staff must juggle the demands of teaching and research, and finding the resources to teach convergent journalism is challenging. But there are some striking differences between the two countries. Journalism educators in New Zealand have a much closer relationship with industry, for instance, and only about a quarter of journalism schools in the United States are accredited to the relevant body, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications. Grant will also speak about opportunities for Journalism Education Association of New Zealand members to apply to Fulbright to spend time in the United States.*

## **Introduction**

In the second half OF 2010, I spent six months in the United States teaching and researching journalism, as a Fulbright Senior Scholar. I also attended two major conferences of United States journalism educators.

In this paper I will discuss my impressions of journalism education in the United States, and what it tells us about journalism education in New Zealand. There are some remarkable similarities between the two countries, but some telling differences.

I will also provide advice on applying for Fulbright scholarships.

## **San Francisco State University**

During my time in the United States I was based at the Journalism Dept of San Francisco State University (SFSU). I conducted research on depiction of Chinese gold miners in 19<sup>th</sup> century Californian press. I also designed and taught a business-journalism course.

I presented papers at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (the US equivalent of the Journalism Education Association of New Zealand) conference in Denver, the National Communication Association (the United States equivalent of the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association) conference in San Francisco, and the Californian World History Association conference in Sacramento.

SFSU is a state university. It is highly regarded, but not in the Berkeley league. The faculty at SFSU were incredibly welcoming and it was a great honour to work at the university. I became a member of staff and made good friends. The staff had strong journalistic backgrounds. There were some older staff but many young adjunct professors.

There was little focus on research in the department (indeed, journalism schools in universities in the United States are still dogged by the stereotype of being trade schools). The lack of research was odd, as research is needed for tenure. The impression I had was that many of the young adjunct professors were simply too busy teaching large journalism

classes. This situation is similar to the competing demands of teaching journalism and meeting the requirements of the PBRF in New Zealand.

At SFSU, undergraduate journalism papers are very popular and have large classes. Similarly, Massey has introduced undergraduate Journalism Studies papers and there are also very popular. But many SFSU journalism students have no great desire to be journalists (indeed, our Bank of America personal banker was, by coincidence, an SFSU journalism major). Indeed, few SFSU graduates obtain jobs as journalists. Many do other work or do postgraduate study to obtain a journalism position.

Likewise, in NZ the numbers of students doing journalism at postgraduate level may be dropping off, in part because students are happy just to do communication degrees.

At SFSU, many students lack motivation and knowledge, and miss deadlines. The department is keen to address that, but there is a tension between maintaining standards and retaining students. In the end, the department has introduced select entry, reducing the annual freshmen intake from 600 down to about 200. While I was there, the department brought in an educational consultant to help further. She suggested the students be given a handbook (which, among other things, would set out the department's expectations of them), along with more intensive teaching. The consultant told the faculty that they should not assume students know what is high quality – projecting model answers in class is a good way to show all the students what is possible. I was surprised to hear all this being offered as advice, as such pedagogical techniques are customary for New Zealand (especially at postgraduate level). The United States clearly does not have all the answers when it comes to journalism education.

In my class I found the lack of intensive training meant the standard of the students' work was not high. Their work contained poor English and was poorly structured. Some of the students were highly challenged. Perhaps the focus on postgraduate journalism training at NZ universities is a good idea.

The focus at the SFSU journalism department is on teaching print and online journalism. Incredibly, due to historical decisions at the university and university politics, broadcast journalism is taught in a different department (broadcast students are required to do the

journalism department's media law paper, however). While this situation is odd, it is not unlike the situation in New Zealand where most of the journalism schools focus on print and online (with some time on broadcast), with the Broadcasting School the only journalism programme to focus solely on broadcast.

SFSU students have opportunities to work at newspapers (including the *San Francisco Chronicle*), as well as on the student magazine. Also, industry speakers come into the SFSU journalism department for seminars with students. This is all similar to the New Zealand model. But, nevertheless, the links between industry and journalism schools are not as close in the United States as they are in New Zealand. There are no industry liaison committees, field trips, or even an industry-based accrediting agency. The accrediting agency for journalism schools in the United States, the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, is dominated by academia, whereas that for New Zealand, the New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, is an industry body (Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, 2011; New Zealand Journalists' Training Organisation, 2011).

SFSU students typically focus on the most attractive side of journalism. The department had recently established a blogging course, which was oversubscribed. By contrast, the department had no business journalism paper. During my time at SFSU I designed and ran one, but it attracted only a few students and only one student had a business. This is despite the fact there are many jobs for young business journalists. The situation is not much different in New Zealand. Certainly at Massey, the only way I could get our postgraduate students to study business journalism was to make it a compulsory part of the course. New Zealand journalism students share their American counterparts' lack of interest and self-confidence when it comes to studying and writing about the economy.

This raises the issue of whether journalism students have realistic career aspirations. Anyone can be a blogger and, whereas, blogging is becoming an undeniable part of the job description of many journalists, surely business journalism has greater career prospects? Indeed, at Massey we frequently have to disabuse of students of the notion that soon after graduation they will be feature writers, foreign correspondents, or television newsreaders.

We spend the first part of the year inculcating them with the reality that most of them will begin their careers as general reporters on provincial newspapers.

SFSU does not have a postgraduate journalism programme, although the department is seeking to establish one. Plans for this have been delayed due to disputes between the department and the broadcast journalism faculty over (1) whether the journalism department will establish its programme alone or in tandem with the broadcast faculty, and (2) what such qualifications would comprise. Again, there are some parallels in New Zealand. Although Massey and Canterbury have *de facto* postgraduate journalism programmes (in that both only accept graduates onto their programmes), the Massey and Canterbury programmes actually comprise undergraduate papers. Only AUT University has a programme that is strictly speaking postgraduate. No New Zealand university offers a Master of Journalism.

### **Conferences**

The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and National Communication Association conferences revealed similar themes. At both conferences, which attracted thousands of delegates, papers on the academic study of journalism and multimedia dominated proceedings. There was no Journalists' Training Organisation-type day, akin to that offered prior to the annual Journalism Education Association of New Zealand conference in New Zealand.

By coincidence, the AEJMC conference had a session on establishing business-journalism courses. Very few delegates attended the session. Nevertheless, the very fact the session was held indicates the idea of offering business-journalism courses is gaining some traction.

### **Funding and Completion Rates**

Government funding of tertiary institutions is a pressing issue in the United States. The public sector generally is facing demanding severe budgetary constraints – SFSU could literally hire no new staff in 2009, and 20 in 2010! The journalism department is also

struggling with finding sufficient funds to meet the demands of teaching online journalism. Coupled with this are concerns about student completion rates. In the United States, only about 50 per cent of those who start university study complete their qualification, compared to an OECD average is about 70 percent (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). In New Zealand too, government funding of universities is tight and the Tertiary Education Commission is focussing on completion rates (Massey did poorly, as did many of the polytechnics). In 2010, the median completion rate at New Zealand universities is 69 per cent, Massey was 48 per cent, and the figure for polytechnics was 57 per cent (Tertiary Education Commission, 2011).

Accreditation by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications is a problematic issue. Only about a quarter of United States journalism programmes are accredited. Although some see it as important (including SFSU, which is accredited), others see it as straitjacket. The dispute is being played out in the papers of *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* (Ceppos, 2010; Seamon, 2010).

## **Fulbright**

Finally, I would like to say a few words about Fulbright. There are a range of opportunities available to New Zealand journalism scholars, from shorter visits to lengthy stays attached to an institution. Details can be found at [www.fulbright.org.nz](http://www.fulbright.org.nz). Click on “The Awards”, then “for New Zealanders”.

Fulbright also offers funding available for New Zealand educational institutions to host United States scholars. To learn more, again go to [www.fulbright.org.nz](http://www.fulbright.org.nz). Click on “The Awards”, then “for NZ Institutions”.

If anyone would like advice or more information on Fulbright and opportunities, please feel free to contact me: [g.d.hannis@massey.ac.nz](mailto:g.d.hannis@massey.ac.nz)

## Conclusions

My experience teaching, researching and attending conferences in the United States in 2010 as a Fulbright Senior Scholar revealed striking similarities and differences between journalism education in that country and New Zealand. There were several main similarities:

- The pressure on faculty both to teach and conduct research. Teaching an intensely practical discipline as journalism inevitably means it is difficult to find the time to conduct research, despite the clear importance of research to academics' careers.
- The popularity of journalism at undergraduate level, even though most students do not intend to become journalists. Indeed, the popularity of courses such as blogging and the lack of popularity for a course on business journalism indicates students' lack of strong career aspirations in journalism.
- The split between print and online journalism on the one hand and broadcast journalism on the other. In part, this simply reflects historical legacies, but also reflects the high resource demands of teaching one or other of these forms of journalism.
- The pressure on funding and completion rates. Understandably, governments want to maximise the return they make from investing in tertiary education. The high cost of delivering quality journalism education means providers have to ensure most students complete the qualifications satisfactorily.

The main differences were:

- The focus on (effectively) postgraduate study of journalism in New Zealand universities. This ensures high-quality students and sufficient teaching resources to ensure these students are work ready. Many of the pedagogical techniques used in postgraduate journalism education in New Zealand appear to be unknown in the United States.

- A greater focus on workplace internships for students in New Zealand. Although these did exist to some extent in the United States, the opportunities available to students paled in comparison to those available to their New Zealand counterparts.
- Differences in accreditation. Whereas the accrediting agency in the United States is dominated by the academia and only accredits about a quarter of journalism schools, in New Zealand the agency is industry-dominated and accredits all schools.

Is one system better than another? No. Journalism education in the United States is simply done differently than in New Zealand. Seeing the similarities and differences first hand has certainly improved my journalism teaching competencies. I would encourage my colleagues to approach organisations such as Fulbright to obtain funding to do likewise.

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