

# 4. Investigative journalism in the academy—possibilities for storytelling across time and space

## ABSTRACT

More than thirty universities within the Pacific region are now teaching journalism. Across the sector, there are now hundreds of journalism academics and thousands of students. While students are undergraduates, others are postgraduates who may already have practised as journalists. Considered collectively, this is a large editorial resource which can be partly be deployed in producing journalism in the public interest, including investigative journalism. But while students can play a part, academic journalist involvement is crucial. This article discusses the role that universities can play in building and maintaining investigative journalism in our region. It suggests that global approaches can provide part of the intellectual underpinnings of investigative journalism in universities and explores possibilities for collaborative investigation across time and space and how these might connect to broader innovations in the field of journalism.

Keywords: investigative journalism, research, professional practice, journalism portfolios

*WENDY BACON*

*Australian Centre for Independent Journalism, UTS*

**I**NVESTIGATIVE journalism conferences, both in North America and Europe, are regular features of the journalistic calendar. For 25 years, conferences organised by the Investigative Reporters and Editors based at the University of Missouri's journalism school have been providing opportunities for investigative reporters to workshop exemplary stories and share skills and insider knowledge. Since 2001, Global Investigative Journalism Network conferences in North America and Europe have conducted similar activities with a strong emphasis on international collaboration and exchange. These regular events play an important role in building cultures

of investigative reporting and models of best practice. Elsewhere there have also been similar national conferences but regrettably not, until recently, in our own region.

The Media Investigative Journalism and Technology conference hosted by Auckland University of Technology's Pacific Media Centre in December 2010 was the first such conference in our region. It was there that an earlier version of this article was presented. The second investigative journalism conference will be hosted by the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney, in August 2011. This is a welcome sign that universities in the Pacific region are growing as sites for innovation, discussion and production of investigative reporting as journalists and the public struggle to respond to a decline in old business models of journalism which is starving mainstream journalism of editorial resources, including for in-depth reporting (Greenwald & Bernt, 2000, Simons, 2005; Turner, 2005).

This article discusses the role that universities can play in building and maintaining investigative journalism in our region. It suggests that global approaches can provide part of the intellectual underpinnings of investigative journalism in universities and explores possibilities for collaborative investigation across time and space and how these might connect to broader innovations in the field of journalism.

### **Part 1: The investigative research framework**

More than 30 universities within the Pacific region are now teaching journalism. Across the sector, there are now hundreds of journalism academics and thousands of students. While students are undergraduates, others are postgraduates who may already have practised as journalists. Considered collectively, this is a large editorial resource which can be partly be deployed in producing journalism in the public interest, including investigative journalism. But while students can play a part, academic journalist involvement is crucial.

If investigative journalism is to be a practical option for journalism academics within the scope of their jobs, it needs to be linked to either research or teaching activities or preferably both. There was a time when a decision by an individual journalism academic to produce investigative journalism outside teaching hours would have been relatively straight forward. This was especially true for those working in new universities which had been polytechnics or colleges of advanced education before becoming full universities. As I have

argued previously, for the small number of journalism academics who taught investigative journalism, there was a strong incentive to renew their practice in order to keep abreast with new techniques and practices and to update their experience in ways that were relevant to contemporary students and media (Bacon, 1998; Bacon, 1999).

However, in many universities, continuing financial constraints have led to higher teaching loads and tighter workload management. Meanwhile, governments began to plan schemes which measure and rank universities on their research outcomes. In this context, journalism academics have come under increasing pressure to produce research as well as teach. In many universities, however, research tended to mean conventional scholarly research, both in the form of higher degrees and peer-reviewed work. Journalism academics entering the field were not encouraged to extend and deepen their own professional practice as journalists as a form of research practice. Instead they focused on developing scholarly works in fields that were relevant but different from journalism such as history and politics (Bacon, 1999). While this scholarly activity made a significant and continuing contribution to media and journalism studies, journalism academics believed, and often continue to believe, that their own professional practice and knowledge is not highly valued in academe. This leaves journalism in an unfortunate position of being a popular option which is widely taught in universities but not fully accepted as a discipline with its own methodologies and forms of producing and communicating knowledge—a sort of second class academic citizenship.

It is in this context that the question arose: is journalism to be accepted as research? Although journalism can take many forms, for the purposes of this article, I will discuss this question in terms of Investigative Journalism. Practising investigative journalists might see this question as odd or unnecessary because investigative journalism is characterised by its often painstaking research techniques and emphasis on producing new knowledge of public significance. But for journalists in a university, the question carries a special meaning—does investigative journalism meet the criteria for research set down by the bureaucratic bodies which collate and measure research such as the Australian Research Council (ARC), the United Kingdom Higher Education Funding Councils, the University Grants Commission in Hong Kong, the New Zealand Tertiary Education Commission and other similar national bodies. It also matters how research managers in individual

institutions respond to the criteria established by such outside bodies and how criteria are applied in practice to individual academics.

This is not the place for a long discussion of the definition of investigative journalism. The Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) emphasise that investigative journalism is journalism of importance to audiences that is produced through a reporter's own initiative and work that others would like to keep secret (Protess et. al., 1999, p. 5). The IRE has collected thousands of tip sheets outlining the methods used in investigations. The much newer European Fund for Investigative Journalism draws on the Dutch Association for Investigative Journalism characterisation of investigative journalism as 'critical and thorough'. The word 'critical' is used by the Association to mean the production of new information which would not be available without journalistic intervention. 'This can be done by creating new facts, but also through re-interpretation or correlation of facts already at hand.' 'Thorough' means that one makes substantial effort, either in quantitative terms—much time spent in research, many sources consulted, etc—in qualitative terms—sharp questions formulated, new approaches used, etc, or a combination of both thorough and critical' (European Fund for Investigative Journalism, 2011). While some North American scholars and journalists place more emphasis on normative and narrative dimensions of investigative journalism, they still adhere to core qualities of rigor, depth and inquiry (Ettema & Glasser, 1998). From the point of view of quality, investigative journalism is often seen as a form of journalism which most closely aspires to best practice in journalism (Protess et. al., 1991).

Provided research definitions included practice-based forms of research as well as traditional scholarly ones, the case for including investigative journalism in university research appeared strong. However, nearly all university administrations and even some senior journalism academics were reluctant to accept this. It was not unreasonable to expect that creative and other practice based practitioners would articulate the particular methodologies and conceptual frameworks that underpinned their production of knowledge and in response to the debate about what constitutes research, a body of literature emerged in the fields of music, design, writing, journalism and other professional fields such as nursing and teaching which explored these issues. (This will be reviewed in a forthcoming publication.) In Australia, at least, scholarly discussion about the nature of practice-based research and advocacy efforts by academics including musicians, designers, filmmakers

and journalists and a refreshing openness on the part of the ARC helped to resolve the issue in terms of inclusion of high quality journalism (Chass, 2009; Seares, 2009; Herbert, Bacon, 2006).

In 2008, the ARC produced the new Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) framework. Its definition of research encompassed 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of humanity, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise applications' (ARC, 2008, p. 1). Practice-based and practice-led research in the creative and performing arts are explicitly included. This definition and the ARC's list of possible research outputs which included articles, documentaries and websites meant that investigative journalism would be included along with other forms of innovative and in-depth forms of media practice in ERA submissions.

In the first round of the ERA, a number of Australian universities put forward journalism portfolios which included radio documentaries, print investigative journalism, videos and web documentaries and collections of columns and analysis. Portfolios consisted of either groups of works (e.g. a series published in a mainstream publication around a miscarriage of justice) or as individual works, as in the case of radio documentaries. Each portfolio was accompanied by a statement describing methodologies used and how the research contributes to the development of new knowledge.

The discipline rankings range from 'Five' which is 'well above world standard' to 'One' which is well below. Overall, the 1903 code which includes Journalism and Professional writing (it is not clear what was submitted here but forms of non-fiction, analytic essays, portfolios of opinion pieces and some other forms of professional communication across the broader communications sphere were presumably included) ranked 2.8 slightly below 'Three' which is considered to be 'of world standard'. Of 12 universities which submitted in this code, seven were ranked 'Three' and one was ranked 'Four'. While little explicit feedback is provided about how portfolios fared, we know that some of the eight universities ranked world class or above included investigative journalism in their submissions. (ERA, 2011, p. 155-7). While journalism can only be seen as an emerging field of research in a university context, it is clear that forms of journalism will be accepted under this research regime. This is a landmark in Australian academic journalism. Although more work needs to be done to clarify how and by whom

## INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM

journalism will be evaluated, the new Council of Journalism Professors is encouraging the development of portfolios and a number of universities are planning a dual strategy of professional practice research and peer-reviewed research. Instead of being threatened with becoming teaching only academics, as is happening in some institutions, journalism academics without long conventional research records should be encouraged to contribute journalism research to interdisciplinary projects or work on professional journalism research projects.

While each system is different, the ERA was developed after similar schemes in the United Kingdom and New Zealand. The UK Research Assessment Exercise defines research as:

original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding. It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce and industry, as well as to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances and artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction. Practice-based research is accepted. (RAE, 2001)

For the purposes of New Zealand's Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF), research is original investigation undertaken in order to contribute to knowledge and understanding and, in the case of some disciplines, cultural innovation or aesthetic refinement:

It typically involves enquiry of an experimental or critical nature driven by hypotheses or intellectual positions capable of rigorous assessment by experts in a given discipline. It is an independent, creative, cumulative and often long-term activity conducted by people with specialist knowledge about the theories, methods and information concerning their field of enquiry. Its findings must be open to scrutiny and formal evaluation by others in the field, and this may be achieved through publication or public presentation. In some disciplines, the investigation and its results may be embodied in the form of artistic works, designs or performances. (TEC, 2011, p. 22)

The New Zealand scheme explicitly allows for professional practice research, providing it is not simply routine professional practice (PBRF 2011,

p. 21). It is different from the Australian scheme in that it ranks individual researchers rather than institutions and Journalism rather than being grouped with creative research in writing and other forms of media, is grouped with Communication and Media. Nevertheless, the research definition and Australian experience provides a strong argument for why in-depth professional practice of the kind presented at the AUT 2010 conference should be encouraged and included in individual submissions (TEC, 2011, p. 23).

Just as the ERA process has injected new vigour into discussion about the possibilities for sustained investigative research by Australian journalism academics, developments in journalism education also favour increasing production of investigative journalism.

While the media still tends to project an image of journalism education as undergraduate and entry level, universities are steadily building their post-graduate programmes, both at a course work and higher-degree level. In North America, masters level programmes such as those as the well known ones at the University of Berkeley, California, or Columbia University have existed for decades. In our own region, the earliest of the course work programmes, such as those at the University of Technology, Sydney, are already twenty years old. Although these have often been designed for entry level journalists with degrees in other disciplines, they nearly all included investigative journalism as an elective and a major portfolio of professional practice is usually a degree requirement. However, an increasing number of journalism graduates and experienced journalists with many years of high level experience are enrolling in course work Masters. These applicants take advantage of the flexibility now offered by universities which accredit experience in the workplace.

Universities in Australia and New Zealand have also already been incorporating professional work into non-conventional doctorates and research Masters. This provides an avenue for established journalists who often lack opportunity in the workplace to build their knowledge and skills in critical and reflective forms of production. Australia's largest university, Monash University will soon introduce a Doctorate of Philosophy—PhD (Journalism)—that will comprise a major piece of non-fiction in any medium as well as a scholarly exegesis.

The ERA requirement for background statements justifying research claims and scholarly exegeses required for honours and postgraduate work may also enhance the conceptual understanding and produce a more dialogic relationship between journalism studies and practice. An example is the work

of Curtin University researcher Bonita Mason who won a Walkley award for her investigation into the death in custody of aboriginal woman Janet Beetson, *The Girl in Cell 4*. This story was produced as part of a Masters by coursework. At the 2009 Journalism Education Association (JEA) conference, Mason spoke of her ongoing reflective investigation into the methodologies used to research and write the story of Janet Beetson:

In this sense it is practice-led research, and an attempt to bring journalism theory and practice closer together. It is also an attempt to make explicit the assumptions and theories (and understandings about the world) embedded in journalism so that they can be understood. My intention is, via this reflective analysis, to understand more about what I have done, how I have done it, and what, if any, implications there are for journalism practice and education. I ask, whether, by working outside the structures, routines and practices of the mainstream news-room and working differently with sources, a more complete, perhaps more human, story can be told. I ask too, if a different way of working can contribute to journalism and perhaps extend its boundaries. (Mason, 2009).

## **Part 2: Collaboration**

The production and publication of Investigative Journalism and research into investigative journalism within universities can take many forms, some of which are explored in other articles in this issue of *Pacific Journalism Review*. Mason (quoted above) leads us to ask what universities might contribute to public interest journalism that is different or fills gaps left by mainstream media organisations. At a time when international networking is being encouraged in universities, one advantage is the capacity for collaborative investigative research by two or more institutions both within national borders and between regions.

There is nothing new about collaborative storytelling through journalism, indeed most journalism involves teams working together, either in different roles within a team or feeding smaller reports into a larger single narrative. Since the advent of wire services, reporters in different locations have filed copy which has been collated into a single story. International news anchors take footage from various sites to build an ongoing narrative.

Global journalism, however, is much more than this. In his epilogue to *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, Ward (2005) argues that ethical journalism in

the 21st century requires a global understanding and consciousness. He defends the retention of the notion of objectivity in journalism but suggests that both the use of interactive relationships to build the truth and a reconception of the relationship with audiences needs to be part a radical rethinking of what the concept implies for the ethical aspirations of journalism:

If contemporary journalism is to seek to represent the truth, there must be a reconception of journalism's social contract and its public.... the new social contract requires that we add what I would call the 'claim of humanity' to the principles of journalism. The claim states that journalists' primary journalists' allegiance is to truthful, independent informing of a global public humanity. When considering one's journalistic duty, a reader's place of birth, residence, race or cultural group is morally irrelevant. (Ward, 2005, p. 328)

This conception of journalism is so far from the daily practice of journalism as we know it that its relevance might seem doubtful. However, when we think of the global economy and environmental issues in which the cause may be in one place but the brunt borne elsewhere, its relevance is more apparent. If the issues and processes of environmental change are transnational, but the products and their consumption are local, journalism needs to transcend and encompass both dimensions. The failure of the mainstream media to achieve this is one aspect of the crisis in journalism. For instance, a study of how 19 countries covered COP 15 in 2009 showed how national newspapers, especially in the developed countries, underrepresented sources from developing countries and framed their stories through a national paradigm which overshadowed international perspectives (Eide & Kunelias, 2010). In this context, it is possible that by exploring possibilities for producing collaborative journalism that is both local and global, we may produce insights into how we might contribute to overcoming these deficiencies in journalism produced outside the university. Through exploring how universities can become involved in collaborative journalism that is both local and global, we may also produce insights into how we can contribute to journalism produced in independent and mainstream professional settings.

In 2008, nine tertiary institutions in Australia and Europe which teach and research journalism formed the Global Environmental Journalism Initiative. The goals of GEJI are to develop curricula, reportage and research in environmental journalism. The project is underpinned by the notion that journalists

and journalism need to contribute to a global understanding of environmental change if our planet is to have a sustainable future.

The European Commission and the Australian government's Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations are funding the project for three years between 2008 and 2011 through their Cooperation in Higher Education scheme (ACIJ, 2009). Nearly all of that core funding is dedicated to international student exchanges. More than 120 students have been provided the opportunity for sponsored travel in Europe or Australia, which in many cases they could not otherwise afford. Hundreds of local students who were not going on exchange have also been involved in GEJI activities in 2009 and 2010. Hong Kong Baptist University joined as a partner in these activities.

International students at the Danish School of Media and Journalism undertook practical news reporting at Cop 15 and features on renewable energy; international students at the Swedish School of Social Sciences at Helsinki University produced environmental videos; students at City University in London, University of Technology, Sydney, Monash University and Hong Kong Baptist University in Hong Kong carried out research and comparisons on plastic bag usage; and students at Monash, Helsinki and UTS conducted online debates on questions around the ethics of reporting on climate change. The task of collaborating around a single story or investigation across more than one location which is the focus of this article is more challenging however.

In considering what might be possible, I reviewed a number of international investigative projects. These included work done by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), the Global Investigative Journalism Network, Project Censored and the work of Mark Schapiro, senior reporter at the Centre for Investigative Reporting in San Francisco.

### **International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.**

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), which was formed in 1997, is a project of the Centre for Public Integrity. It includes one hundred of the world's best reporters (including Bill Birnbauer, now an academic journalist at Monash University in Melbourne) from 50 countries and focuses on investigations that cross national borders. While it presents a level of investigation that is hard to achieve in media education, it is perhaps closest to what we are trying to achieve.

In 2003, the ICIJ looked for a relevant theme that would allow for an

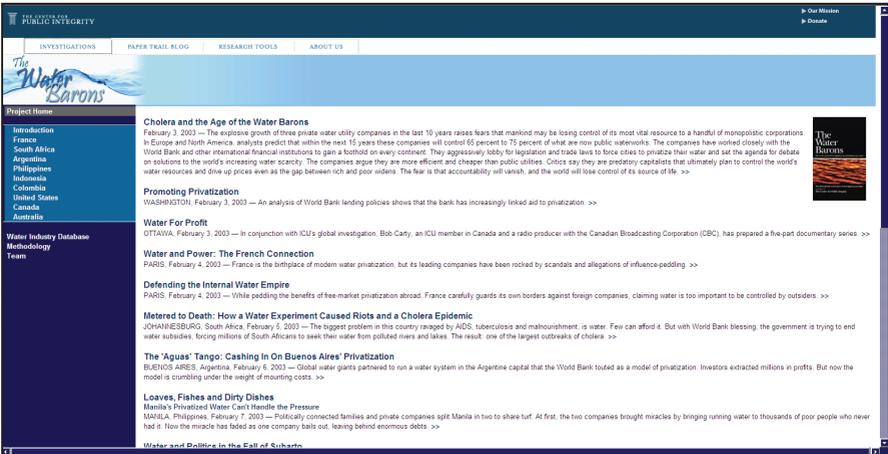


Figure 1: The Water Barons investigation, 2003.

investigation requiring global collaboration. The theme it chose was the privatisation of water. *The Water Barons*, which involved 15 journalists from United States, Canada, Australia, Philippines, Indonesia, France, Colombia, Argentina and South Africa, published by the Centre for Public Integrity, was the result (Figure 1). Canadian journalist William Marsden, who coordinated the project, wrote:

In the era of globalisation, what happens in our backyard often is happening (or having consequences) throughout the world. Certainly there are common threads of behaviour to be found as centralised corporate and political power structures work together to impose systems, ideologies and strategies worldwide. It seemed clear that journalism needed to create new and strategic approaches to reporting these global stories. (Marsden, 2005)

As with much strong investigative journalism, the project was driven by multiple smaller narratives and detail through which a narrative emerged. ‘The story of water at its essence would offer a revealing look at international corporate and political intrigue and the internal machinations of world power elites,’ wrote Marsden (2005). While each country developed a unique story, the process of analysis allowed a global pattern to emerge which showed that the world’s then largest water companies—Suez, Vivendi and Thames—after capturing their own national markets, extended into the rest of the world.

The final report consisted of reports from around the world, an overarching story and a database of the big Global Water companies.

Communication between reporters mostly occurred through the internet. Every fact was footnoted while lawyers hired to work on the project reviewed original documents. Marsden noted how a multimedia approach facilitated the emergence of a range of perspectives from the emotional to the hard-edged factual which resonates with Ward's view that interactive internet-based journalism enhances the possibilities of developing comprehensive and nuanced information and therefore, he argues, more 'objective' stories (Ward, 2005, p. 325).

Some of the journalists involved with the project were able to compare their experiences. While some found that they had to struggle against corporate interests with an interest in secrecy, others operated under threat of imprisonment. The award-winning Indonesian journalist Andreas Harsono later wrote that while it was easier for him to get leaks than reporters elsewhere, the project led him to put more effort into getting sources to talk on the record, which was a learning process for both him and his sources (Harsono, 2005).

*Water Barons* and other ICIJ investigations on carbon credits and the fossil fuel lobby set a very high and apparently well resourced standard for collaborations across space which would be hard for university based projects based around student involvement to emulate. One element is however missing. This is the potential of the internet to capture the dynamism of global production and consumption through on-going projects. Eight years later, *Water Barons* still stands out as an outstanding investigation but there is little to match or update it for audiences who come to the issue afresh today.

Professional journalists may think this sounds a little naïve. Journalists after all are always moving on to the next big story. The ICIJ project was never intended to continue and the journalists involved could not have committed to it in an ongoing way. The disappointing fact remains however that if you google 'water privatisation' today, there is little substantial on this topic that is new. Interestingly, much of the best investigative work done on the topic of water privatisation in the intervening period has been done by non-government organisations, including unions (Ranald, 2010).

Compared to ad hoc networks of reporters, universities have the potential to produce investigations not only across space but also time. If suitable story themes were selected, a global partnership of academic journalists and their students could pick up threads of an investigation and update a story from

time to time. While lacking the narrativity of *Water Barons*, another Centre for Media and Democracy project, *Sourcewatch* ([www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org)), which uses wiki technology and journalists based in different locations to constantly update stories and information on the public relations industry, is an example of how an issue can be tracked over time. Another university-based organisation which also monitors the coverage of issues and stories is *Project Censored*.

### **Project Censored**

For 34 years, *Project Censored* based at Sonoma University in California has been using student and experienced academic media researchers to identify important stories which have not been sufficiently covered by mainstream media. The project has grown to include 30 institutions, 200 academics and more than 1000 students each year. Using a peer system of evaluation, the project identifies, verifies and updates significant under-covered stories. In recent years, the project which includes elements of journalism practice and media studies has been extended to include more discussion and research about the reasons and context for this so-called ‘censorship’. This project, which is mostly based across Canada and the United States, represents a huge media education collaborative effort. It uses social science methods for its investigative research that is underpinned by the notion that public universities should play a role in ensuring media is accountable. Director Peter Phillips writes in an open invitation to other universities:

Public colleges and universities have a role to play in building media democracy and the full transparency of what the powerful are doing society. Universities are institutions founded on scientific factual research and on sharing the results of this research with others, both within specific disciplines and outside the academy. As the corporate media continues on the path of entertainment, declining support for investigative reporting and instead engaging in watered down news reporting, an opportunity for colleges and universities is emerging to take a role in validating independent news and doing investigative research for publication in independent media news sources worldwide. (Phillips, 2009)

### **Global Investigative Journalism Network**

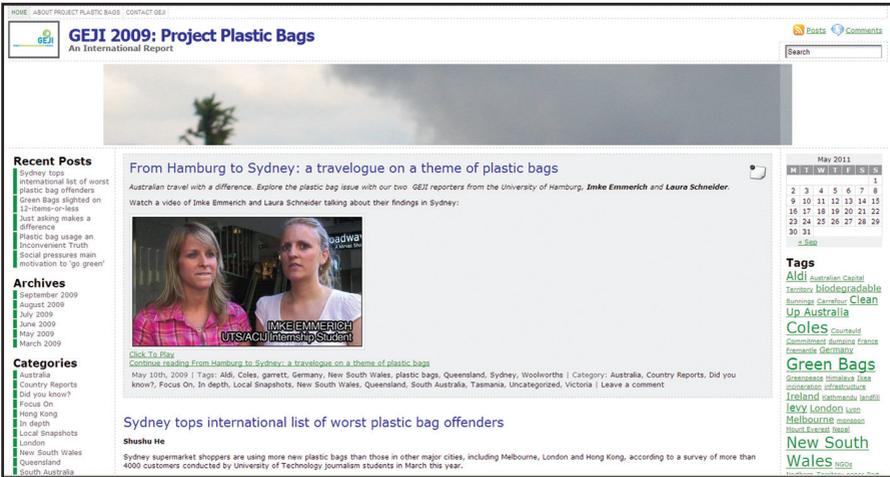
The Global Investigative Journalism Network (GIJN), which was formed in 2003, provides further examples of international collaboration. Its biennial conferences also highlights projects produced across national borders.

For example, an investigation of the asbestos stripping of a decommissioned United States ship in the Ukraine by a United States and Ukrainian journalist won an award at its 2008 conference in Lillehammer attended by 500 journalists from 86 nations. Not all the GIJN conference award winning stories involved journalists from more than one country but they do provide further examples of cross border investigations. The Daniel Pearl award for cross-border investigations, named after a *Wall Street Journal* reporter who was killed in Pakistan in 2002, was awarded jointly to a Swedish TV4 investigation into Russian overfishing in the Barents Sea and a *New York Times* investigation into Chinese counterfeit drugs. (GIJN 2009). Another GIJN award winner, who also won a Pulitzer prize and IRE medal, was freelancer Loretta Tofani whose *Salt Lake Tribune* series tracked cheap goods for sale in the United States back to manufacturing plants in China where workers with no basic safety protection were exposed to toxic carcinogens (Pulitzer Centre, 2007; Tofani, 2008).

The book *Exposed* by San Francisco-based Centre for Investigative Reporting's Mark Schapiro is a sustained investigation into how apparently distinct national or regional environmental and regional systems can alter global production practices (Schapiro, 2007). *Exposed* describes how multinational corporations aiming to thwart tighter environmental and health guidelines in the US are forced to meet new demands by the European Union to improve their products. He concludes that there has been shift in global economic power from the European Union placing 'Brussels, not Washington, in the driver's seat' (Schapiro, 2009). The Centre used an interactive map to demonstrate how regulations were affecting the different levels of exposure of citizens around the world to toxic chemicals. (*Exposed: A World Tour*. <http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/articles/exposedaworldtour>).

The challenge for the GEJI collaborative investigative journalism involving students is this: How could students in different locations learn collaboratively by gathering and analysing information from different sources and working cooperatively to produce a final or ongoing project or story? How can we develop a journalism practice which reveals and analyses a range of cultural and social perspectives but also exposes the consequences of different experiences of consumption and production around the same issue or product?

The original aim was to involve journalism students in direct observations, interviews, verification of claims and analysis which could feed into



**Figure 2: Project Plastic Bags, the first GEJI investigation.**

an overarching report. Students would identify questions to research, fact-checking each other’s work. Individual stories and smaller projects, surveys and interviews conducted by more junior students would be synthesised by advanced students to produce key findings and narrative lines. These reports would be fed into a collaborative and ongoing wiki and the stories published on a project website or by other university-based publications or in external media outlets.

The first GEJI theme was plastic bags (Figure 2). Journalism students at City University in London and the University of Technology, Sydney, investigated and fact-checked reports on plastic bags, especially how their usage was affected by regulation. Students from UTS, Monash, HKBU and London observed plastic bag usage outside supermarkets and made the unexpected (by staff and students) finding that customers in Sydney appeared to be using far more plastic bags than those in Hong Kong. Two Hamburg University interns at the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism were horrified to discover the unregulated use of plastic bags in Sydney, especially as the German media had reported that Australia had banned plastic bags. They produced a plastic bag travelogue along the Eastern coast of Australia. The results were published on a project website ([www.gejiweb.org/plasticbag/](http://www.gejiweb.org/plasticbag/)), while Channel Nine in Sydney, yahoo.com and other media websites published a story about the survey results.



**Figure 3: Tracking the origin of the plastic in water bottles in Australia.**

While the first project had investigative elements, we aimed for something more in-depth and probing for a second theme. In 2010, bottled water was chosen as a second topic (Figure 3). This omnipresent product is part of the daily lives of students who observed that behind their marketing campaigns, bottled water companies were reluctant to reveal even basic facts about their production. The project was named *Pure Plastiky* by GEJI reporters to reflect the companies’ unwillingness to discuss the source and manufacturing of the petroleum products which made the plastic bottles.<sup>1</sup>

From the point of view of an ongoing investigation into a global industry, from fashion item to lifesaving measure, bottled water has the advantage of being produced, consumed, marketed and perceived differently in various markets. It is linked to the critical global issue of the control and safety of water and raises interconnected issues of waste, greenhouse gas emissions, oil,

toxic chemicals and ‘greenwashing’. While significant work has been done by several NGOs and individual researchers (Royte, 2008; Gleick, 2010 ) and there is some coverage of waste issues and campaigns against bottled water in the mainstream media, coverage of the production and consumption chain is mostly restricted to occasional stories in business publications. (This statement is based on google news and blog alert monitoring over a six-month period.)

Undergraduate students in Sydney, Hong Kong and London carried out initial investigations into how bottled water was perceived and used in their communities in 2010. Building on these results, further surveys and interviews have recently been conducted which are still being processed. Most of the in-depth investigation has been conducted by advanced student reporters, including international postgraduate students from India, Poland, Germany and Brazil and recent graduates in Sydney.

Launched at the end of April 2011, *Pure Plastiky* includes an investigation which tracks the origin of the plastic in water bottles in Australia back to global companies in Thailand, Saudi Arabia and Canada (Gooch, 2011). While this may not sound difficult, this information was not easily available in Australia and was regarded by some companies as ‘commercially in confidence’. The project also includes slideshows documenting plastic waste in Greece, Turkey and Sydney, and a Google map of actions to restrict the use of bottled water. A wiki is being developed for background reports on the bottled water industry ([gejiwiki.org](http://gejiwiki.org)). *Pure Plastiky* is open to collaboration with journalists, students or academics anywhere.

Some of *Pure Plastiky*’s more newsworthy stories are being published by other news media, the first being an expose of how bottled water companies in Australia are using the word ‘organic’ in trademarks and company names to get around national standards on labelling, which was recently published by *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Dalley, 2011).

At time of writing, these efforts at global collaborative journalism can best be described as experiments which will inform future practice. I will highlight some of the preliminary achievements as well as difficulties.

There are a number of practical issues which make collaboration difficult. Northern and Southern semesters and academic calendars mean that while one lot of students are nearly finished, others are just beginning. Set curricula and workloads limit academics’ capacity to join new initiatives. While students have worked on different tasks which are then drawn together, it is more

difficult to achieve collaboration on the same group task across locations. This needs careful structuring into projects. There are also differences in pedagogical style and journalism practices that are not necessarily foreseen. Working through these difficulties, educators get a deeper understanding of cross-cultural educational and journalistic norms. While this is healthy, it needs time and patience. As well, considerable resources are needed for editing, publishing and verification which has mostly be done after the end of semester, reducing educational benefits for students.

A more serious shortcoming in our project is that GEJI does not have partners in developing countries. Yet, the impacts of global production are felt most keenly experienced in developing countries which is also where also market for consumer products like bottled water are expanding most rapidly (RNCOS, 2009; Frost & Sullivan, 2010). In a very limited way, this was addressed by involving international journalism students in researching stories in their own language. For example, Chinese students in Sydney and Hong Kong prepared reports on a plastic bag ban in China, testing negative Western reporting about waste policy in China against more informative material in Mandarin. This is no replacement however for on the ground reporting and observation. Any thorough implementation of the ideas put forward in this paper would need to be extended to include universities from the South.

From an educational point of view, the strengths of project, as revealed in reflective statements by students, are that they valued investigating an issue encountered in their daily lives. They appreciated discovering the complexity of issues and the ways in which they were interconnected. Students were surprised that when they asked what at first appeared to be simple questions about the source of water or plastic, commercial organisations often became resistant. Those students who were able to follow project to publication experienced the excitement of making a valuable contribution to the media sphere. Students also came up with ideas for use of social media including the use of twitter to document the location of public water fountains and the Google map of bans on bottled water. Through database searching students realised limitations of existing media coverage and how the boundaries around the production of knowledge (e.g. business knowledge from environmental knowledge) are encouraged through the separation of distinct sub-fields of journalism.

## Conclusion

The key point I have sought to demonstrate in this article is that the time is ripe in the Pacific region for universities which teach and research journalism to organise themselves to make a solid contribution in the public interest to investigative journalism. In this context UniMuckraker, a proposal by Bill Birnbauer, the Australian member of the ICIJ who is now an academic at Monash University (see pp. 31-50) is timely. As universities build research cultures which hopefully foster practice based innovative research and more highly experienced journalists move into the academy, individual contributions will be significant. As well, staff will work with students to produce work around individual stories or through themed topics. While there are undoubted difficulties, the university sector has the capacity to work between institutions and over time that others lack. This article has focused on international environmental projects but this is by no means intended to deny other initiatives, including the ACIJ/*Crikey* 2010 Spinning the Media investigation into public relations and journalism between ACIJ and the online news publication *Crikey* (ACIJ/*Crikey*, 2009), the *Crikey*/Swinburne University *Brumby Dump* series on Victorian parliamentary reports and *Dangerous Ground*, an investigation of Victorian contaminated sites by students at Monash University, some stories of which were published in *The Age*. It is a good omen that all of these and the first regional investigative conference occurred in 2010.

Investigative journalism is a required community resource in a democratic society. Simons was correct when she wrote that ultimately investigative journalism cannot be a gift (Simons, 2007, pp. 228-231). It is time-consuming work, most of which will require payment. The Pacific region faces the difficulty that we do not have the wealthy foundations that are sponsoring much of the public interest journalism in North America. My point is that journalism academics are paid to research and their students, although they are more likely to pay than be paid to study, are required to produce work. It is appropriate that this work should be directed to the public service goals of journalism and universities. At a time when the public relations industry is growing and traditional media is shrinking, university-based investigative journalists can be part of the solution, both in partnership with media organisations and through their own publications.

**Note**

1. *Pure Plastik* was supported by a UTS Teaching and Learning Grant. The author would like to acknowledge the contribution of the GEJI partners to the work and ideas behind this article, particularly Anna McKane at City University in London, Judith Clarke at the Hong Kong Baptist University, Jenna Price at the University of Technology, Sydney, Chris Nash and Philip Chubb at Monash University and Asbjorn Jorgensen at the Danish School of Media and Journalism. Hundreds of students have contributed to GEJI projects but reporters Elise Dalley, Paul Farrell, Nicole Gooch, Hannah Temby and Patrick Wright are especially acknowledged.

**References**

Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (2009). Global Environmental Initiative. Retrieved on 29 April 2011, from [www.acij.uts.edu.au/geji/index.html](http://www.acij.uts.edu.au/geji/index.html)

Australian Research Council (2008). Glossary. Retrieved on 30 April 2011, from [www.arc.gov.au/general/glossary.htm#research](http://www.arc.gov.au/general/glossary.htm#research)

Australian Research Council (2011b). ERA 2010—National Report. Retrieved on 30 April 2011, from [http://www.arc.gov.au/era/outcomes\\_2010.htm](http://www.arc.gov.au/era/outcomes_2010.htm)

Bacon, W. (1997). Shifting notions of the public in journalism. *Culture and Policy*, 8(2) 65-91.

Bacon, W. (1998). Engaging theory and practice in journalism education. *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 1(1), 144-152.

Bacon W. (1999). What is a journalist in a university? *Media International Australia*, 92(1) 79-90.

Bacon, W. (2006). Journalism as research. *Australian Journalism Review*, 28(2) 147-157.

Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (2009). Humanities and creative arts: Recognising esteem factors and non-traditional publications in Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Initiative. Advocacy paper. Retrieved on 25 October 2009, from [www.chass.org.au/papers/PAP20090820HH.php](http://www.chass.org.au/papers/PAP20090820HH.php).

Crikey/Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (2010). Spinning the Media—A joint Crikey-ACIJ Investigation. Retrieved on 12 November 2010, from [www.crikey.com.au/spinning-the-media/](http://www.crikey.com.au/spinning-the-media/)

Crikey (2010). The brumby dump. Retrieved on 10 March 2011, from [www.crikey.com.au/the-brumby](http://www.crikey.com.au/the-brumby)

Dalley, E. (2011). Bottlers tap into muddied springs with organic-water claims. *SMH Online*, April 11. Retrieved on 12 April 2011, from [www.smh.com.au/environment/water-issues/bottlers-tap-into-muddied-springs-with-organicwater-claims-20110421-1dq3m.html](http://www.smh.com.au/environment/water-issues/bottlers-tap-into-muddied-springs-with-organicwater-claims-20110421-1dq3m.html)

Eide, E., Kunelius, R. & Kumpu, V., (eds.) (2010). Global climate—Local journalism. *Global Journalism Research Series*, Vol. 3, projectverlag

European Fund for Investigative Journalism (2011). What is investigative journalism? Retrieved on 30 April 2011, from [www.journalismfund.eu/investigative\\_journalism](http://www.journalismfund.eu/investigative_journalism)

Ettema, James S. & Glasser, Theodore L. (1998). *Custodians of conscience*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Frost & Sullivan (2011). Increasing urbanization and demand for safe water spur bottled water market in Indonesia. Published on EIS World News Report on 26 April 2011. Retrieved on 30 April 2011, from [www.einnews.com/pr-news/392853-frost-sullivan-urbanization-and-need-for-safe-water-spur-bottled-water-market-in-indonesia](http://www.einnews.com/pr-news/392853-frost-sullivan-urbanization-and-need-for-safe-water-spur-bottled-water-market-in-indonesia)
- Gleick, P. (2010). *Bottled and sold—the story behind our obsession with bottled water*. Washington: Island Press.
- Global Environmental Journalism Network (2009). *New York Times* and Swedish TV4 wins first Daniel Pearl award. Global Investigative Journalism Conference Lillehammer. Published on conference website. Retrieved on 1 March 2011, from [www.gijc2008.no/awards/347](http://www.gijc2008.no/awards/347)
- Gooch, N. (2011). Bottled water footprints. *Pure Plastik*. Retrieved on 30 April 2011, from [www.gejplasticbottles.com](http://www.gejplasticbottles.com)
- Greenwald, Marilyn S. & Bernt, J. (2000). *The big chill: Investigative reporting in the current media*. Ames: Iowa State University.
- Harsono, A. (2005). When water and political power intersect—A journalist probes the story of water privatisation in Jakarta, Indonesia. Nieman reports. Retrieved on 20 April 2011, from [www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101044/When-Water-and-Political-Power-Intersect.aspx](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/101044/When-Water-and-Political-Power-Intersect.aspx)
- IRE (IRE 1975-85). Retrieved on 15 April 2011, from [www.ire.org/history/30years/decade1.html](http://www.ire.org/history/30years/decade1.html)
- Mason, B. (1997). The girl in cell 4. *HQ magazine*. March/April. pp.56-61.
- Mason, B. (2009). Deaths in custody and hostage journalism. Unpublished paper for Journalism Education Association Conference, 2009, Perth.
- Marsden, W. (2003). *The water barons*. Centre for Public Integrity. Retrieved on 20 November 2010, from <http://projects.publicintegrity.org/water/default.aspx?act=team>.
- Marsden, W. (2005). A network of international journalists produced multimedia reports on the consequences of privatising water. Nieman Reports. Spring 2005. Retrieved on 20 November 2011, from [www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitemprint.aspx?id=101038](http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitemprint.aspx?id=101038)
- Monash University (2011). Dangerous ground—The EPA's toxic legacy. Retrieved on 15 April 2011, from <http://epadangerousground.com>
- Niblock, S. (2007). From 'knowing how to being able. *Journalism Practice*, 1(1), pp. 20-32.
- Philips, P. (2009). An invitation to colleges and universities to conduct investigative research for independent media and human betterment. *Project Censored: California*. Retrieved on 15 November 2011, from [www.mediafreedominternational.org/an-invitation-to-colleges-and-universities/](http://www.mediafreedominternational.org/an-invitation-to-colleges-and-universities/). [www.rae.ac.uk](http://www.rae.ac.uk)
- Protess, D. L., Lomas-Cook, F., Doppelt, J.C., Ettema, J.S., Goron, M.T., Leff, D.R. & Miller, T. (1991). *The journalism of outrage*. New York & London: The Guildford Press.
- Pullizer Prize Centre (2008). Loretta Tofani—American Reports Chinese Deaths. Retrieved on 15 March 2011, from <http://pulitzercenter.org/people/loretta-tofani>

- Research Assessment Exercise 2008. (2008) Annex B.( ii) p.22. Retrieved on 20 April 2011, from [www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2005/03/rae0305.doc](http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/2005/03/rae0305.doc) - 2005-06-28
- Ranald, P. (2010). *Dead in the water*. Sydney: Australian Services Union
- RNCOS (2009). Promising growth forecasted for Indian bottled water market. 18 September 2009. Retrieved on 1 April 2011, from [www.free-press-release.com/news-promising-growth-forecasted-for-indian-bottled-water-market-1253256964.html](http://www.free-press-release.com/news-promising-growth-forecasted-for-indian-bottled-water-market-1253256964.html)
- Rikhtum, T. B. (2007). The United States of America and its asbestos traces on the Sevastopol shore. *Sevastopolskaya Gazeta*, July 12-18. Republished in *Scoop* (2008) Retrieved on 30 April 2011 from [www.iscoop.org/index.php?id=24&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=277&tx\\_ttnews\[backPid\]=4&cHash=1d94bc8ff1](http://www.iscoop.org/index.php?id=24&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=277&tx_ttnews[backPid]=4&cHash=1d94bc8ff1)
- Royte, E. (2008). *Bottlemania: How water went on sale and why we bought it*. New York: Bloomsbury
- Schapiro, M. (2007). *Exposed: The toxic chemistry of everyday products and what's at stake*. Chelsea Green Publishing Company
- Seares, M. (2009). A new era for creative arts research. Retrieved on 30 March 2011, from [www.chass.org.au/articles/ART20090430MS.php](http://www.chass.org.au/articles/ART20090430MS.php).
- Simons, M. (2007). *The content makers*. Sydney: Penguin Australia.
- Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) (2011). Performance-based research fund –quality evaluation guidelines 2012. Section D: What counts as research? PDF p. 22. Retrieved on 30 April 2011, from [www.tec.govt.nz/.../PBRF---Quality-Evaluation-Guidelines-2012/](http://www.tec.govt.nz/.../PBRF---Quality-Evaluation-Guidelines-2012/) -
- <http://www.swinburne.edu.au/chancellery/mediacentre/media-centre/news/2010/10/the-brumby->
- Toflani, L. (2008). How I got the story. Centre for Investigative Reporting. Retrieved on 15 November 2010, from <http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/blogpost/20080107howigotthestory>
- Turner, G. (2005). *Ending the affair: The decline of television current affairs in Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press
- Ward, Stephen J. A. (2005). *The invention of journalism ethics: The path to objectivity and beyond*. Montreal. McGill Queen's University Press.

*Professor Wendy Bacon is a media educator and journalist with the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism of the University of Technology, Sydney. A leading Australian investigative journalist and non-practising lawyer, she publishes with The Sydney Morning Herald, Crikey.com and Reportage Online and is on the editorial board of Pacific Journalism Review. This article is a later version of a keynote address she gave at the inaugural Media, Investigative Journalism and Technology (MIJT10) conference hosted by the Pacific Media Centre at AUT University on 4-5 December 2010.*  
[wendy.bacon@uts.edu.au](mailto:wendy.bacon@uts.edu.au)