Recording Lives in Journalism: Reflections on Oral History and Journalism Methods in Life Histories

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This article considers some of the similarities and differences between journalism and oral history interview methodologies that arose in the course of developing and realising an oral history project that focused on the life stories of 60 Australian journalists whose positions were made redundant since 2012 due to digital disruption. As all of the researcher interviewers are former journalists, the article engages with the positionality of the interviewers in the recording of life histories, and the underlying assumptions in oral history and journalism that inform processes involving controversial

and potentially defamatory material. These include the absence of the normative journalism practice of the right of reply within oral history interviewing, a factor that we believe is becoming more problematic at a time when oral history is becoming more accessible due to the increasing availability of recorded material through digitisation.

INTRODUCTION: LIVES IN JOURNALISM DISRUPTED

Over the last decade, thousands of journalism jobs in Australia have been lost due to digital disruption of news media. The depletion of so many roles was initially triggered by steep declines in revenue flowing from the once lucrative 'rivers of gold' of classified advertising in print media as more and more citizens began sourcing their news online, often for free, or at a cost that failed to cover the losses of print advertising revenues.[1] More recently, particularly since 2015, the hard-won gains made by media companies in building digital advertising revenue have also been corroded by the growing dominance of behemoths Google and Facebook, which now receive the majority of online advertising revenue in Australia and have captured more than 80 per cent of growth in online advertising since 2016.[2] At the time of writing, additional revenue losses triggered by the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic on advertising revenue were leading to further job cuts and newspaper closures.[3]

Throughout this period, and especially since 2012, journalist job shedding has become a regular occurrence across all media platforms. While precise numbers remain elusive, in 2017 the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), which is the Australian journalists' union, estimated that 3,000 roles had disappeared in

1 Tim Burrowes, 'The Data is Finally in. Newspapers Aren't Going to Get Enough Digital Subscribers', *Mumbrella*, 17 February 2014. Accessed from http://mumbrella.com.au/data-finally-newspapers-arent-going-get-enough-digital-subscribers-206839?utm_source=DailyNewsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Daily-17-02-2014&utm_content=PostTitle

2 *Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report*, 2019: 119. Retrieved from https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital platforms inquiry - final report.pdf

3 See, for instance, Kellie Lazzaro, 'Mildura's *Sunraysia Daily* and Other Regional Papers Close as Coronavirus Wipes out More Than a Century of Tradition', *ABC Gippsland*, 24 March 2020. Accessed from https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-24/coronavirus-has-impact-on-local-newspapers/12084548; Amanda Meade, 'News Corp Australia Warns of Coronavirus Crisis Job Cuts as Smaller Regional Papers Close', *Guardian Australia*, 25 March 2020. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/mar/25/news-corp-australia-warns-of-coronavirus-crisis-job-cuts-as-smaller-regional-papers-close

the previous six years.[4] By most reckonings this amounts to around a quarter of journalism positions nationally. Our Australian-based New Beats project has developed and published a timeline of media reportage of journalism job losses which is posted on our project blog.[5] In all, around 100 instances of job loss between 2012 and 2020 are represented on the timeline. And according to the 2019 Digital Platforms Inquiry final report conducted by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), 106 local and regional newspaper titles closed between 2008-09 and 2017-18. This represents about 15 per cent of the total.[6]

What has become of those whose jobs were lost? What kinds of careers have they forged since leaving newsroom roles? Have they been able to find meaningful work, in journalism or elsewhere? Since 2014, the New Beats project has been using two main methods to investigate what happened to those who took a redundancy package. The first of these has been through four annual surveys of a group of 225 journalists whose roles were made redundant between 2012 and 2014. Key findings from these surveys were published in the project's 2018 report,[7] and in a number of journal articles.[8] Findings were also incorporated into submissions to two senate inquiries.[9]

4 Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) 'Submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Future of Public Interest Journalism' (2017): 6.

5 New Beats project, 'Redundancy Timeline' (2020). Accessed from https://www.newbeatsblog.com/redundancy-timeline/

6 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, *Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report* (2019): 321. Retrieved from https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital platforms inquiry - final report.pdf

7 Lawrie Zion, Merryn Sherwood, Penny O'Donnell, Tim Marjoribanks, Matthew Ricketson, Andrew Dodd, and Monika Winarnita. 'New Beats Report: Mass Redundancies and Career Change in Australian Journalism', (2018). Accessed from http://www.newbeatsblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/New_Beats_Report.pdf

8 See, for instance, Matthew Ricketson, Andrew Dodd, Lawrie Zion, and Monika Winarnita, '"Like Being Shot in the Face" or "I'm Glad I'm Out": Journalists' Experiences of Job Loss in the Australian Media Industry 2012–2014', *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020): 54-71.

9 Lawrie Zion, Andrew Dodd, Tim Marjoribanks, Penny O'Donnell, Matthew Ricketson, Merryn Sherwood, Monika Winarnita and Robin Harper, 'New Beats Submission #37 to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Future of Public Interest Journalism' (2017). Accessed from https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Future_of_Public_Interest_Journalism/PublicInterestJournalism/Submissions and Penny O'Donnell, Lawrie Zion, Matthew Ricketson, Andrew Dodd, Tim Marjoribanks, Merryn Sherwood, Monika Winarnita and Robin Harper, 'Senate Select Committee on the Future of Work and Workers Submission 140', (2018). Accessed from https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Future_of_Work_and_Workers/FutureofWork/Submissions

The second method has been through 60 'whole of life' oral history interviews with a subset of the survey group conducted in collaboration with the National Library of Australia (NLA), as well as with several interviewees who did not complete the surveys. Unlike the surveys, which mostly focused on the challenges faced by career transition over time following journalism job loss, the main mission of the recorded interviews was to curate a collection for future Australians of the lives of journalists whose careers developed prior to digital disruption. So while all the interviews would include discussion of the experience of the subject's departure from roles in newsrooms (often after several decades in the same workplace), this was, by design, to be only one component of the life histories that would also include extended discussion of childhood, education, the early stages of journalism careers, and other work undertaken both before and after the journalism roles that they left. In this respect it is worth noting that these life histories all include a mix of recent and early memories. Further details of the process of selecting interview participants are provided below. The main themes that emerged from the life interviews are the subject of a book that is in production. In this article we focus not on those themes, but on some of the cross currents between oral history and journalism practice that were brought to life through the process of preparing and conducting the interviews.

ORAL HISTORY AND JOURNALISM PRACTICE

The genesis and recording of these life history interviews has led us to reflect on and engage with the similarities and differences between the methodologies of two kinds of storytelling: journalism, which draws extensively on a range of interviewing techniques to develop content deemed to be reportable and in the public interest, and oral history, where the interviewing methodologies, while sometimes overlapping, are not primarily directed towards producing stories for a daily or weekly publication, and are conducted according to a series of protocols, some of which differ from standard journalism practices.

Accordingly, before focusing on the methodology of the interviews themselves, we will consider how oral history methods might be seen to align with or diverge from conventional journalism interviewing practices. In doing so, we recognise that neither oral history, nor journalism, can be seen as static or discrete sets of practices.

Oral history, as Alistair Thomson has noted, has also gone through four paradigm transformations since World War Two: 'the post-war renaissance of memory as a source or "people's history"; the development, from the late 1970s, of 'postpositivist' approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s'.[10]

Since Thomson's article was published, digitisation has further affected how oral history is produced and disseminated. Previously, those wanting to gain access to an oral history interview normally needed to listen in the same location where it was physically stored, or rely on typed summaries of the interview. Today, many oral history interviews can be accessed remotely by anyone, and can be searched by keywords or names, without the need to listen to the whole interview. Segments of online interviews can then be easily shared with others through websites or social media. Podcasts, in particular, have provided another platform to popularise and extend the reach of oral recordings. As an article posted on the website of the Oral History Association recently enthused:

> Lots of oral history institutions are getting into podcasting – talking about and featuring their material. It's a great opportunity to have the content reach broader and more diverse audiences. It gives our collections longer lives and a wider geographic and demographic scope. Our interviews become more flexible and versatile if shared in this way.[11]

One effect of this shift to digitisation is to loosen the neat, tight ties on the accessibility of oral history, which, we will argue, sharpens the need for oral history practitioners to consider issues that are commonplace to journalists, namely right of reply and defamation.

10 Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2006): 49.

11 Molly Graham, 'Oral History & Podcasting/Radio Storytelling', Oral History Association website (2018). Accessed from https://www.oralhistory.org/2018/06/13/oral-history-podcasting-radio-storytelling/

Oral historians have acknowledged some of the issues generated by technological innovation. Commenting on the challenges they present for practioners, Elinor Mazé has argued that, 'We must often be the first to see possible ethical and legal consequences, as well as historiographical ones'.[12] And in his 2011 'status report' delivered to the International Oral History Association, Donald Ritchie said that 'providing sound along with transcripts poses new problems for those projects that permitted interviewees to edit their transcripts'. Ritchie questioned what oral historians should do if the transcript was revised and didn't match the recording. 'Should the entire sound recording be made available if the interviewee deleted portions in the transcript?' he asked, noting that 'some projects have steered around this problem by depositing only audio excerpts rather than the entire interview'.[13] But despite new debates over method and theory, he argued that basic interview techniques had not changed:

> Interviewers need to prepare themselves thoroughly, know how to use their equipment, treat interviewees with respect, establish rapport, ask meaningful questions, listen carefully, follow up with further questions in response to the interviewees' answers, and oversee the final treatment of the interview, whether transcribed or preserved in audio form. At its core, oral history depends on the human relations between the interviewer and interviewee. It rests on mutual trust and a desire to capture and preserve memories of the past.[14]

In concluding, Ritchie said that 'as a technologically driven-methodology, oral history has constantly undergone transformation, but the interview process itself has remained consistent'.[15]

Over the last decade journalism has been visibly transformed by the digital revolution on both industrial and practice levels, with once settled questions such as 'what is

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12 Elinor Mazé, 'Deconstruction Without Destruction: Creating Metadata for Oral History in a Digital World', in Douglas A. Boyd and Mary A. Larson (eds) *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 155

13 Donald A. Ritchie, 'What in the World? A Status Report on Oral History', *Words and Silences* 6, no. 1 (2011): 2.

14 Ritchie, 'What in the World?', 4.

15 Ritchie, 'What in the World?', 5.

journalism?' or 'who is a journalist?' now activated by the impact of technology and the digital economy in profound ways, raising questions about whether an array of practices by non-professional journalists could be seen as journalism.[16] In the 2000s, an early manifestation of this debate centred on whether blogging could be understood as journalism.[17] Since then, massive job losses, along with the rapid evolution of social media, online comments, practices of verification by citizens and automated reporting have all challenged the notion that journalism is a practice primarily conducted by professionals in newsrooms. As Carlson and Lewis note, journalism is 'a constantly shifting denotation applied differently depending on context. Whatever is distinct about journalism must be continuously constructed'.[18]

Moreover, journalism has never been about just one kind of output. In the case of journalism interviewing, for instance, pinning down a set of norms is complicated by the large variety of genres, styles and forms which deploy interview material. Interviews can be designed to produce information, to hold those in power accountable for their actions, or to explore themes and ideas, as well as combinations of all of these. As former ABC broadcaster Peter Clarke has noted:

> We should acknowledge many 'interviewings' across all the many variables that shape the character of a specific interview, including the medium, the genre and the audience as well as the differences of approach, skills and 'weight' of the interviewers themselves.[19]

In the case of oral history, perceptions differ between the popular realm, where it is seen as being as expansive and wide-ranging as journalism, and in the academic

16 See, for instance Seth C. Lewis, 'Journalism', in Tim Vos and Folker Hanusch (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0001; Sally Young and Andrea Carson, 'Who is a Journalist?', *Journalism Studies*19, no. 3 (2019): 452–472.

17 Alan Knight, 'Who is a Journalist: Journalism in the Age of Blogging', *Journalism Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008): 117–131.

18 Matt Carlson and Seth C. Lewis, *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices and Participation* (London: Routledge, 2015): 2.

19 Peter Clarke, 'The Contemporary Journalistic Interview: A Hollow Dance Looking for New Moves?', in Matthew Ricketson (ed.), *Australian Journalism Today* (South Melbourne: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012): 64.

realm, where it is more clearly defined 'and has been painstakingly studied across many disciplines that use it in research'.[20] It is perhaps due to these perceptions that Studs Terkel, who popularised oral history on the airwaves and produced the highly praised books *Hard Times* and *The Good War*, based on interviews, claimed to be uncomfortable with the 'oral historian' label. On receiving the 1997 National Humanities Medal from President Clinton, which honoured him as 'America's oral historian', Terkel was asked what it meant to be one of the great oral historians of the century. 'I don't know what it means,' Terkel told Alan Harris Stein. 'I call myself a "guerrilla journalist", that is I know my terrain'.[21]

In addition to Terkel's prodigious outputs, oral history approaches have long been crucial to the genre of long-form feature articles in magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, as journalist Keith O'Brien explains: 'Since 2000, the magazine has published lengthy oral histories on "The Simpsons," Guantánamo, and the birth of the Internet, among other topics, building them out of detailed interviews and writing them in the voices of the characters themselves'.[22] The oral history/journalism seam has also been dramatically extended through podcasting, a platform that has proved popular with journalists.[23]

For all this overlap, attempts to investigate the connections between journalism and oral history have been sporadic. Mark Feldstein's 2014 article 'Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History' notes superficial similarities between the two – namely, both record information, are concerned with accuracy, and rely on interviewing. But the most visible difference between them is that while the journalist is concerned with current events, oral historians focus on the interpretation of events after they have occurred. So even though both deal 'with parallel issues of empathy, ethics,

20 Ashley Wright, 'An Assessment of Applications from Oral History Interview Methods to Journalism' (Masters Thesis, Carleton University, 2011): vi.

21 John de Graaf and Alan Harris Stein, 'The Guerrilla Journalist as Oral Historian: An Interview with Louis "Studs" Terkel', *The Oral History Review* 29, no. 1(2002): 88.

22 Keith O'Brien, 'The Power of Oral History as Journalism', *Nieman Storyboard,* 5 March 2016. Accessed from https://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/the-opposite-of-writing/

23 See, for instance, Siobahn McHugh, 'How Podcasting is Changing the Audio Storytelling Genre', *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* 14, no. 1 (2016): 65–82.

and evidence', the difference between them 'is more than just a matter of time. Ultimately, the two have different purposes, different standards and norms, different techniques. Yet at the same time, each has much to teach the other'.[24]

For their part, journalism scholars have certainly reflected on the potential of oral history to inform journalism practice. For example, Bonnie Brennan argued in 1996 that oral history has long played a crucial role as a methodology in journalism history, pointing out that oral histories can shed light on the working conditions, expectations, and the pressures that rank and file news workers confront in their social and economic existence. At the same time, she argued that oral history methods had tended to focus on press elites 'such as owners, publishers and editors of the media, and they have been used to support, maintain, and reinforce the dominant ideological perspective'.[25]

Ashley Wright recommended that journalists could augment their skills 'by borrowing techniques from oral history methodology that involve shared ownership (or "shared authority", as it's called in oral history studies) of the story they're covering'.[26] This more collaborative approach, she suggested, could offer the interviewees a greater stake in the narrative, resulting in more meaningful interviews. But the limits to this approach for everyday journalism are also acknowledged:

> In oral history interviews, the weight attributed to the narrator's version of events is elemental, whereas in journalism the concept of balance would prevail in many cases. Also, a journalist's independence from influence, as well as their ability to present the story in a fair and impartial manner, would need to be considered before partaking in any form of shared ownership. In controversial stories, or in situations that involve reluctant interviewees, this concept would not apply.[27]

24 Mark Feldstein, 'Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 31, no. 1 (2004): 5.

25 Bonnie Brennan, 'Toward a History of Labor and News Work: The Use of Oral Sources in Journalism History', *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 571.

26 Wright, 'An Assessment of Applications', 164.

27 Wright, 'An Assessment of Applications', 165.

This example, especially its closing caveat, points to significant differences between the conventions of oral history and journalism. Much emphasis has been placed in oral history scholarship on assessing potential issues with how events are recalled. To quote Thomson:

> As historians we need to interrogate our interview sources critically, as we do any historical source, and to understand the ways in which memory stories have been shaped by the particular circumstances of the event and the complex processes of remembering.[28]

But memory is not the only issue when the opinions or events recalled involve others whose reputations might be affected by a singular interpretation. In the case of journalism, a single voice is not normally meant to tell the whole story: the right of reply is built into much of how journalism is practiced. ‘Do your utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply’, is one of the edicts in the Code of Ethics published by Australia’s Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, to cite one of many possible examples.[29] Where alternative voices have not been sought in an initial interview (such as in live-to-air broadcast interviews), it is commonplace to provide mechanisms to challenge controversial statements, especially when reputations are at stake. In life history interviews, however, where interviewer and ‘narrator’ might spend days together, interrogating statements that reference other people must be undertaken without seeking direct responses from those named in interviews.

Given the absence of built-in right of reply mechanisms, how well placed are oral history practitioners when it comes to dealing with notions of fairness and balance, not to mention potentially defamatory material? While oral history codes of practice and oral history scholars acknowledge a range of legal and ethical issues that can arise while interviewing, the focus tends to be more on whether to erase or withdraw questionable material, rather than to instil a sense of how to navigate potentially defamatory terrain that might arise in the course of an interview. For instance, on its website, the United Kingdom’s Oral History Society offers the following advice on dealing with defamation and libel:

> They should record these instances (with time codes) on an Interview Sensitivity Review Form as the interview is being summarised (or transcribed) and then subsequently bring any concerns to the attention of interviewees and project leaders so that everyone involved can weigh up the likely risks of disclosure involved. This ensures that risks have been assessed and that decisions made resulting in the closure or partial closure of the interview have been properly documented.[30]

The *Oral History Australia Guidelines for Ethical Practice* also draw attention to the need to be aware that what is said in interviews could have legal consequences. The guidelines state the importance of 'being aware of defamation laws and the implications, for all parties concerned, of recording potentially defamatory material'.[31] Not evident in these codes, however, are suggestions as to how historians might approach such material in interviews or how, as a practice, it might engage with ways to provide a right of reply to those who are discussed in interviews. With oral history collections now increasingly digitised and accessible globally, how do oral historians deal with the fact that those mentioned in interviews may want to challenge the recorded version of events? We will return to this issue through our discussion of the interviews recorded for this project.

THE INTERVIEWS

A critical component of the development of this project was establishing whose stories would be told. Out of a pool of more than 150 survey participants who were willing to be interviewed, we applied a range of criteria, in close consultation with NLA staff, to develop a proposed list of 60 interview participants. The initial list was subject to revisions both before and during the interview process, which commenced in 2015 and continued until 2019, due to a number of factors including the availability of interviewees.

30 Oral History Society, 'Is Your Oral History Legal and Ethical?'. Accessed from https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/ethical-and-legal/4/

31 Oral History Australia, 'Guidelines of Ethical Practice' (2007). Accessed from www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/guide-ethical-practice/

While mindful of the demographic characteristics of the survey participant cohort, we did not seek to directly replicate these in our selection of interviewees. For instance, while 58 per cent of the participants in the first of the four annual surveys were male, we sought to achieve equal gender balance in the interviews. In selecting potential interviewees, we were also keen to ensure that we had strong representations that covered a broad range of geographic locations, age groups, specialty rounds, and a diversity of newsroom roles, including subeditors, photographers, cartoonists, regional newspaper editors, and specialty magazine writers and editors. To achieve these aims, in a number of cases we went outside the survey population and invited journalists whose roles had been made redundant to be interviewed. These include at least three journalists who became redundant after the completion of the surveys in 2017. At the point of writing, two of the sixty interviews have still to be completed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

We also ensured that while some of the interviewees were high profile, journalists whose career achievements were not as publicly known were also included, in order to provide as broad a cross-section as possible of journalism roles and careers. In this sense we aimed to take a different approach to the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA)'s online collection of interviews with ten high profile TV journalists. The blurb accompanying these interviews on the NFSA website begs some questions in asserting that 'these interviews highlight the importance of preserving news coverage and their recollections underline the value of journalistic integrity in a digital age'.[32] Absent in this statement is any reference to the potential value of stories of any of their off-screen news-workers. From this, one could infer that it is the stories of familiar presenters that should be privileged over those of their behind-the-scenes colleagues who might play critical roles in upholding journalistic integrity, such as editors, producers, researchers and others whose daily contribution to the news cycle are essential for quality programming.

32 National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, 'Oral History – TV Journalists', nd. Accessed from https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/oral-history-television-journalists

The assumptions behind the development of the academic/industry collaboration 'Press Photography in Australia' are more closely aligned with the aims and methodologies of the New Beats project. Both projects have involved collaborations with the NLA, supported by the Australian Research Council Linkage Grants scheme, to record the life histories of around 60 participants. The Press Photography project, which predates the New Beats project, was established to focus on 'changes and continuities in how the Australian press has used photographs over time, including examination of the impact of technological change on news photography and the ethical and editorial issues surrounding news photography'.[33] The selection of its interviewees encompasses a broad range of participants, many of whom would have little previous public recognition of their contribution to the news-making process.

Sky News Australia outside broadcast, photographed by Bidgee. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

POSITIONALITIES

In developing the protocols of life history interviews in association with the NLA, a decision was made that the interviews would be conducted by researchers who were themselves former journalists, because this approach was more likely to foster deeper and richer conversations, including the posing of contextual and follow-up questions to develop themes that emerged in the recollections. The authors of this article, plus another member of the research team, Penny O'Donnell, have all worked extensively as journalists, including for periods alongside some of those who took redundancy packages, sometimes in the same newsrooms. These former associations also proved helpful in recruiting prospective interviewees. The approach of commissioning people with intimate knowledge of a subject area over trained interviewers is common to several oral history projects auspiced by the NLA. This reflects the NLA's view that interviewers with inside knowledge will steer deeper conversations and, in the process, provide future listeners with more revealing and useful content. As such, interviewers for this project had both intimate knowledge of the subject and were trained interviewers. In some respects, therefore, the authors of this article might be characterised as 'insiders'. But such a designation also has its complexities and limitations. As Christina Chavez noted in 2008:

> The insider positionality, the aspects of an insider researcher's self or identity which is aligned or shared with participants, has gone without definition, since to date no single articulation exists that describes what configuration or degree of social experience warrants the designation of insider.[34]

There were clear benefits for the project team of having deep background knowledge of the profession and, in many cases, the interviewees' workplaces and careers while the audio recorder was rolling. That knowledge inevitably influenced the line of questions and the tenor of responses throughout many of the oral history interviews. The interviewers' familiarity with the subject matter can be seen in this exchange, in which the interviewee is explaining how, as a young journalist, he found himself suddenly having to cover a wide range of topics.

A I knew nothing about it, I'm a city boy and suddenly I'm writing about cows and understanding it and going to Eisteddfods.

34 Christina Chavez, 'Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality', *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 3 (2008): 475.

Q: That's one of the things about journalism isn't it, you get this daily education on the job and you learn about anything and everything.

A: Yeah that's right. You become an expert on a few things but you know a little bit about everything by the end of it.

Q: You might have already had this moment by this stage but there's often a moment or there's usually a moment for journalists in their early years when it's a kind of light bulb moment when you realise "I can do this, this is something I can do and do well". Was there a particular moment or story or incident when you suddenly thought "yeah, this is me"?

A: A couple of things yeah. Well when I realised that I was the court roundsman myself, that I wasn't being overlooked, there wasn't someone overlooking my shoulder. This is in my first year, so I'm covering Magistrates Courts and District Court, and this is pretty technical stuff and I wasn't making mistakes, I could do it. And there was a moment that said "hey, I think this is starting to work for me here".

However, this approach also created the requirement for researchers/interviewers to consider any specific issues that may have arisen due to their positionality, especially whether they have worked in the same office or for the same company either contemporaneously or at different stages of their respective careers. While positionality, or the consideration of the differing and respective subjectivities of the interviewer and interviewee is a central preoccupation in the oral history literature, in journalism there is little consideration of the respective subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee in the crush of daily news reporting, partly because there is little time for it, and in part also because in news reporting the positionality of the interviewer isn't normally considered to be part of the subject matter of the story. When journalists write longer feature stories, or conduct extended audio or video interviews, there is greater awareness of the respective subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee, on the part of both, and a more developed academic literature about it.[35]

In the New Beats project, one way of dealing with the legacy of such previous interactions in the interview context was for the researchers to declare any such work connections during the recording, offering, for instance, that they also recalled a certain incident while working at the same publication at the time as relevant incidents were discussed, sometimes using such interjections to further develop (or politely challenge) the recollection. On some occasions, interviewers were invited into the discussion by the interviewee, as occurred in this exchange:

A: [I] took along my folio and I was interviewed by [name withheld]. Do you remember [name withheld]?

Q: I do. He interviewed me for a cadetship about three years later.

A: Okay.

Q: For a journalistic cadetship.

A: Okay yes. So I was interviewed by [name withheld] and…

Q: Many people have been interviewed by [name withheld].

A: Oh I know, I know. The stories you hear about it are quite enlightening.

Yet such disclosures, while offering a degree of transparency for future listeners, did not address all the issues that arose in these contexts. On a practical level a recurrent issue was that interview subjects, recalling their stories to interviewers with considerable knowledge of their life histories, might need to be reminded more frequently that the interview was designed for an audience of non-journalists decades in the future who would be unfamiliar with the names of editors, co-workers, and even publications referred to in their answers. In a similar vein, interviewers sometimes

35 For a more extended discussion of these issues, see Matthew Ricketson, *Telling True Stories: Navigating the Challenges of Writing Narrative Non-Fiction* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2014), 87–115.

prefaced a question or interjected with a clarifying comment so that a listener, at some future time, could better understand the interviewee's story.

This happened on occasions when interviewees made references that might have seemed obvious to current listeners, as can be seen in this exchange after an interviewee made the comment: 'Funnily enough, I got an offer from the *AFR* and *The Australian* at the same time'. In response, the interviewer noted: 'We should just say "*AFR*" is *The Australian Financial Review*'. It also happened in cases where even current listeners might struggle to follow the thread of an interviewee's answers without some intervention. However, it was sometimes difficult to provide clarifying comments because interjecting would adversely affect the flow of the interview.

Another positionality factor in play was the awareness of both interviewer and interviewees that while those asking the questions had moved from roles as journalists into academia well before the major redundancy rounds of 2012, those being interviewed were often still dealing to varying degrees with the often chaotic aftermath of exiting long term jobs. So while they might previously have shared space in the same newsrooms, working under broadly similar conditions and occupying commensurate degrees of seniority within the ranks of their organisations, their current professional circumstances now differed in substantial ways. While all four interviewers were tenured, middle-aged, full-time academics at the time the interviews were conducted, findings from our project surveys (from which the group of interviewees was predominantly drawn) showed that in the years following their departures from newsrooms, those who had taken redundancies, while also predominantly middle-aged, were likely to be earning significantly less, to be undertaking irregular work,[36] and to be dealing with issues relating to professional identity.[37]

While this juxtaposition was not raised overtly in the recordings, we were aware that many of those being interviewed were still coming to terms with disrupted careers

36 Lawrie Zion, Andrew Dodd, Merryn Sherwood, Penny O'Donnell, Tim Marjoribanks and Matthew Ricketson, 'Working for Less: The Aftermath for Journalists Made Redundant in Australia between 2012 and 2014', *Communication Research and Practice* 2, no. 2 (2016): 117–136.

37 Merryn Sherwood and Penny O'Donnell, 'Once a Journalist, Always a Journalist? Industry Restructure, Job Loss and Professional Identity', *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 7 (2018): 1021–1038.

while telling their life stories to former professional peers who had successfully embarked on new career trajectories in a different sector. So if the interviewers were in some respects 'insiders', they were also simultaneously 'outsiders' too, though both frames are limited by the fact that all those involved in the interview process could be seen to have multiple positionalities in their professional (and personal) lives, with the common denominator being at least some of that time spent working as journalists. However this varied in significance from one interview to the next.

Whatever the extent of our prior knowledge and engagement with interview subjects, as interviewers we sought to distinguish between offering corrections to errors relating to names or dates and attempting to challenge the meanings that interviewees ascribed to events in their lives while recalling them. We note also the observation made by oral historian Lynn Abrams that 'the interview is a process that involves the dynamic interaction of subjectivities' and that interviewers, like interviewees, draw on their pasts and their own contexts to project particular 'selves', which interviewees respond to in turn.[38] This inter-subjective, dialogic characteristic of oral history interviews has particular pertinence to a range of interview-based journalism genres, most particularly the profile interview with the important caveat, discussed below, that journalists, unlike oral historians, typically provide a right of reply when it appears reasonable to assume that the account of the interviewee could be challenged.[39]

In the case of the New Beats project, the 'interaction of subjectivities' began well before the recordings themselves through the routines and procedures leading to the face to face interview. Interviewees were extensively briefed in advance by the researcher conducting the interview, usually by phone and/or email, and were also provided in advance with relevant participant information sheets and ethics forms. They were reminded of the overall aims of the project and the context of the oral history interviews within the project was explained. The researchers told the interview subjects that they were free to rule in or out any aspect of their career and lives,

38 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 58.

39 See, for instance, Sue Joseph and Richard Lance Keeble, *Profile Pieces: Journalism and the 'Human Interest' Bias* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

while being encouraged to talk candidly and openly about any areas they did want to discuss. In some cases, a no-go area was acknowledged in advance because interviewees could identify an aspect of their lives or relationships that they considered off limits. In other cases, interviewees signalled during the interview that they were uncomfortable discussing a particular topic.

A purely journalistic methodology might, at this point, lead to questions to test the resolve of the interviewee's reluctance to discuss something. But the oral history method, as well as the ethics protocols that we, as researchers, upheld, necessitated greater acceptance of the interviewee's wishes. That's not to say the topic in question might not be re-raised by the interviewer later, from another angle, to gauge whether the interviewee was prepared to discuss a different aspect of the same issue. But ultimately the interviewee's wishes were respected and honoured. In this regard there is an obvious difference between these interviews and those conducted for some forms of journalism, where a subject's reluctance or refusal to answer a question could itself become a line of enquiry by the interviewer, who might see their role as a representative of the audience seeking to hold power to account. The interviewer's ethical obligations in those sorts of encounters are more closely associated with finding and reporting the truth and acting in the public interest.

DEFAMATION AND RIGHT OF REPLY

Career journalists tend to have a good understanding of defamation law as most have grappled with its complexities throughout their careers. Media law is commonly taught in journalism degree programs, and most of Australia's large media companies conduct in-house training about defamation so that reporters are aware of its existence, and the potential risks of being sued by people who are either named or otherwise identified in stories they write. Losing a defamation action can prove costly for a media outlet; damages awarded, not to mention the costs of defending an action, can run into hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars.[40] Journalists tend to have a keen interest in the subject, along with other aspects of media law, such as contempt of court, because the more they understand, the better they are at telling complex and controversial stories. In-house training and key media law manuals stress when to flag an issue with a lawyer

The Age Headquarters, Melbourne, 2010, photographed by Elekhh. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

and when to get a story 'legalled'.[41] They understand how to truly de-identify someone or, conversely, why it is important to be forthright and precise about naming the subject of a highly critical story. They understand that truth is the principal defence against an action of defamation, but that truth is something they, as a journalist or a defendant in a legal case, must be able to prove. And they know that this is often far from simple, especially when proof might require testimony from an anonymous source whose identity the journalist has promised to protect. They also understand that other defences are available, even in cases where a story ends up being wrong, but many of those defences rely on being able to demonstrate that the story was written within the norms of responsible journalism, including whether a right of reply was granted to a person who has allegedly been defamed.

In consenting to take part and be on-the-record, the interview subjects were participating in the publication of content. The fact that this content had many end uses was explained. As well as being searchable on the NLA's oral history catalogue, the

41 Mark Pearson and Mark Polden, *A Journalist's Guide to Media Law: A Handbook for Communicators in a Digital World*, sixth edition (Crows News: Allen & Unwin, 2019).

interviews could also be used for academic journal and media articles, and in one or both of the books generated by the project. The subjects were given options to opt out of any of these non-NLA outputs, although very few did. The subjects were also allowed to place restrictions on public access to the oral history recording within the NLA's database. This last point is significant because it changes the nature of publication and because it allows for material to be suppressed until after the interviewee or the subject of the criticism have died. Under Australian defamation law, a deceased person, or their estate, generally can neither sue nor be sued.[42]

However, with so many potential end users, the interviewees would have been acutely aware that they needed to observe the laws of defamation, although interestingly this was not explained in the 'Interviewer's Introduction to the Interview' provided by the NLA, which was read to the subject at the start of each interview. Instead of caution, the preamble said: 'We hope you'll speak as frankly as possible knowing that the interview material will not be released without your authority'.[43]

Nevertheless, as people with at least a working knowledge of defamation law, the interviewees knew they needed to exercise caution if they said anything that ridiculed others, brought them into disrepute, caused them to be shunned or avoided, or damaged them in their business or trade. Each of these is a separate basis for the tort of defamation. But rather than having a chilling effect on conversations, the interviewees' familiarity with the rules may have emboldened them to speak out. Indeed, many opted to say critical things about former managers or editors or colleagues. The targets of this criticism were often not named, although on several occasions the people concerned could be identified due to the small circles in which the interviewee was operating. Criticism of 'a senior editor' on a named publication, for example, narrows the list of potential candidates down to perhaps a handful. This also underscores the importance of specificity, as defamation law allows each of

42 '*Defamation Act 2005* (Victoria) Section 10, clause a and b': 'No cause for action for defamation of, or against, deceased persons' with equivalent clauses in each Australian state and Territory except Tasmania. Sighted 5 September 2020 http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/da200599/s10.html

43 National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore unit's 'Interviewer's Introduction to the Interview', read to all interviewees 2014-2020, and recorded and transcribed with each interview.

those senior editors on that publication to take actions for defamation as they may be perceived to be the editor being criticised.

On several occasions people were identified by name and openly criticised by the interviewee. And in many cases publications or companies were also described in unfavourable terms. Criticising institutions is generally not controversial for journalists, as most professional reporters are familiar with the provisions of Australia's uniform defamation laws, which since 2005 have allowed for criticism of for-profit or large civic organisations.[44] Working journalists are also generally aware that there are defences which allow for the expression of robust views. The 'honest opinion' defence, for example, permits direct and strong criticism of individuals if there is supporting evidence and the capacity to substantiate whatever claims are made. It is also necessary to demonstrate that the opinion was honestly held at the time it was expressed.[45]

At the end of the interviewing process the interviewers, as part of a larger research team, sought to group material garnered from the life histories around common themes for a book on the lives of journalists before and during digital disruption. The book's chapters are based in large part on the interviewees' rich anecdotes, which reveal the lived experiences of newsrooms and the craft of reporting, as well as the emotional and often wrenching stories of redundancy.

Although the interviews were commissioned by the NLA, the book, which is in preparation at the time of writing this article, was always an intended additional outcome. And this is where at least one of the methodologies of long-form journalism seems at odds with the practices of oral history, namely how to deal with potentially defamatory material through the granting of a right of reply. The NLA operates with a longer time lens in that it can and often does lock contentious material away from the public for extended periods of time, thus avoiding the threat of an action for defamation and reducing at least the legal imperative for rights of

44 *Defamation Act 2005* Section 9 Certain corporations do not have cause of action for defamation. Accessed from https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/vic/consol_act/da200599/s9.html

45 *Defamation Act 2005* Section 31 Defences of honest opinion. Accessed from https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/vic/consol_act/da200599/s31.html

reply. But this was not an option for the book's editors. Accordingly they knew they needed to be vigilant in identifying material that might prompt legal action. When content of that nature was included in the book, it was assessed in much the same way contentious material is dealt with by news media editors.

The process for that assessment was relatively straightforward, although it often involved complex decisions. The starting point was generally to determine whether there was public interest in what was being said and therefore whether it was important to include a contentious anecdote in the book. If it concerned a matter of public concern or revealed important insights about the nature of the media industry it was generally determined to be of sufficient importance to warrant inclusion. Then came the question of whether the person who might be potentially defamed should be identified. The editors sometimes concluded that the story could be told with integrity without naming or identifying anyone. On other occasions they decided it was important to identify the people concerned because the anecdote was as much about those people as the environment in which they worked. Then came a question about the veracity of a contentious claim, which was where complexities might emerge. This was especially so in cases where there was no corroborating evidence or witnesses to ensure two-source verification.

Every journalist knows that it is highly problematic to publish contestable material without the most basic elements of verification. Media outlets would be taking considerable risks in publishing such a story. However, journalists also know that this problem can sometimes be addressed by granting the person who has allegedly been defamed a right of reply. And defamation laws determine that this must be given in good faith by explaining the nature of the allegation being made, and by giving the person concerned ample opportunity to respond and then by treating their response with respect.

This is good practice in a legal sense, and also ethically because it provides balance and ensures fairness, both of which are considered central tenets of good news-writing. This concept is drilled in to news reporters in journalism courses, textbooks and within newsrooms.[46] Most reporters also know that in matters of defamation, providing a right of reply can help demonstrate that the journalism was produced 'responsibly in the circumstances' which can be used to bolster several defences in defamation proceedings. The Defamation Act states that it can form part of a defence to an action of defamation if 'the matter published contained the substance of the person's side of the story and, if not, whether a reasonable attempt was made by the defendant to obtain and publish a response from the person.'[47]

The book's editors dealt with such cases in the way professional journalists would, by taking the allegation to the people who might potentially be defamed and by recording and faithfully representing their views. In such cases – known as 'he said-she said' exchanges – a journalist is often content to leave the reader to make up their own mind about what really occurred. This is common practice for journalists and serves the added purpose of ensuring there are no nasty surprises after the book is published.

CONCLUSION

The life history project conducted by this research team revealed both similarities and tensions between the practices of oral historians and journalists. As former journalism practitioners who have embarked on academic careers, the process of interviewing former journalists, whose professional milieu the authors once shared, raised questions of positionality in the way that the interview process was approached. The authors' close proximity to the subject was considered an asset by the NLA because it provided insights that could further illuminate the topics under discussion and because it invited the prospect of deeper questioning and greater reflection. But such close proximity also challenged some of the foundational precepts of journalism, especially the idea that in most forms of journalistic interviewing the positionality of the interviewer should not factor in the recorded discussion because the interview is meant to be about the interviewee, and that the person asking the questions is

46 See, for instance, Denis Muller, *Journalism Ethics for the Digital Age* (Brunswick: Scribe, 2014): 47-53.

47 *Defamation Act 2005* (Victoria) Section 30, clause 3 (h) and in all other Defamation Acts in Australian states and territories. Accessed from http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/da200599/s30

there to act as a conduit to the audience and not as a subject in their own right. Yet while this was observed by the researchers as noteworthy, they did not consider it onerous, in part because the interviews lent themselves to greater interaction, and partly because the craft of interviewing is not static and requires constant adaptation and multiple approaches.

The longstanding practice in oral history of imposing restrictions on public access until affected parties have died has had the effect of avoiding the need to consider the right to reply for anyone criticised, or defamed, in an oral history interview. The more that digitisation extends the ease of accessibility and expands the reach of oral history interviews, the more urgent the need for practitioners to consider questions about the right of reply and potential defamation actions. Further, the process of gathering oral histories and then archiving them for future public access has at its core a potential ethical bind for journalists who are trained to seek rights of reply from those who are criticised. Under this model of gathering oral history material, the criticised are not given that right, while what is said about them is preserved in perpetuity. That certainly challenges the first clause of the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance code of ethics which, as noted earlier, calls on journalists to do their 'utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply'. In the book that will be based on the interviews, the authors will address this by extending the journalistic necessity of a right of reply to people who are criticised and identified. To not do so would seem to journalists unethical and could pose the risk of a defamation action against the publication. Given the increasing popularity and accessibility of oral history interviews, we believe it is timely to draw attention to these issues which perhaps oral historians can consider afresh so that the narrator's privilege does not occur at the expense of fairness to those others who are recalled in interviews without a right of reply.

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