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Global Innovator

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I started as a journalist just as hot metal printing was being banged out of publishing companies in the late 1970s — an era now referred to as the Golden Age of journalism. Over the ensuing 40 years, the world of journalism has largely been kind to me, but with all the good has been much bad. I've had ringside seats for much of the worst that journalism has had to offer: Fleet Street malpractice and corrupt journalism of the type that led to the phone-hacking revelations.

I could use this opportunity to regale you with stories that would make your hair stand on end. But these yarns only reinforce what we all already know: that journalists are seen as somewhat less trustworthy than used car salesmen. Worse, they tend to obscure deeper structural problems facing journalism, the ones we really should be talking about, but media companies generally don't.

Most readers by now will be familiar with the story of how the internet has destroyed the profitable advertising businesses that paid for well-staffed newsrooms (mostly by allowing news businesses to poach the massive classified advertising revenue streams). As the money dried up over the past decade, many once powerful newsrooms have closed or been 'hollowed out' and partially dismantled. Along the way, many newsrooms have been unable to maintain their commitment to the type of quality journalism that relies on expertise, experience, rigour, professional pride and care.

It's a devastating loss that has been poorly reported, largely because it has not been in the interests of the media to do the job properly. But make no mistake: in the past 15 years, journalism has been utterly transformed. Much journalistic expertise has been lost, and the way journalists do their jobs has changed forever. Not always for the worse.

Harvard University's Tom Patterson has written perhaps the best account of how journalism was diminished through this period in his book *Informing the News* (2013). In it, Patterson comprehensively chronicles the decline in standards and trust in journalism. He is damning: with a few exceptions, he indicts the media for misinforming, corrupting and polluting civic debate and the public space. The combined effect has been to leave the public baffled and powerless to make rational decisions. Who can blame so many for simply switching off the media? As Patterson notes: 'Without agreement on the facts, arguments have no foundation from which to build.'

Let's start with expertise. As the profits shrank, specialist reporters were among the first to go. To the best of my knowledge there are now only two specialist science editors left in major Australian newspapers.

Newsrooms are largely drained of journalists with knowledge, experience and wisdom. In their place are lower-cost general reporters who at best do some elementary Google desk research, place a couple of calls and write up 'the story'. Then they move on to the next 'job', the next story. Those left are stretched thin, and at best can only provide a shallow offering. And who's going to pay for that? Paywalls are going up, just as the best have left. It's a case of closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Most canny readers aren't fooled and can spot they are being short-changed. They are starting to look elsewhere for the deeper analysis or knowledge that can help them make sense of an increasingly complex world. Yet nature abhors a vacuum, so while journalists were being dispatched (with 40% of newsroom staff

gone within five years), the number of public relations jobs in Australia rose by nearly 63% between 2000 and 2010.

A natural consequence is the blurring of the line between journalism and public relations. 'Branded content' has now been given a sexy new digital savvy sounding name: 'native advertising'. But please don't be fooled. Here are the writing instructions in Sparksheet for our new 'native' PR adversaries: 'Go directly to your audience. Journalists are no longer the primary conduit between PR people and the public. Be quick on your feet. In the internet age, PR specialists must be quicker than ever on their feet when it's time to post news and announcements.'

There is no place in this new PR-information eco-system for the responsibility of the Fourth Estate to scrutinise, hold those in power to account and to 'keep the bastards honest'. And because branded journalism is very good, you wouldn't even know that what you are reading is a marketing message. It's a seamless new service, picking up the ball from where the media dropped it. In very few cases the media will help the reader — *The New York Times*, for example, promises to label branded content as advertising. But elsewhere, as an analysis in 2010 by University of Technology Sydney's Australian Centre for Independent Journalism (ACIJ) found, nearly 55% of stories came from PR press releases.

It's a troubling picture, especially for someone who believes, as I do, that quality information is as important to functioning democracy as quality (or clean) water is to health. When you have fewer journalists in smaller newsrooms with diminished resources — but many more public relations operatives — the line between editorial and advertising is easily blurred. Not only is there more misleading information out there than ever before, it's increasingly difficult to know what you can trust.

This problem has preoccupied me for the best part of the past 10 years. I wanted to find a way to produce high-quality content written by those who really understood their subject and could

offer context, interpretation, explanation, and verification of what's right and wrong. I stumbled on an answer while a guest of the University of Melbourne's President and Vice-Chancellor, Glyn Davis.

Davis introduced me to around ten of his senior academic colleagues to get their views on how to improve the university's public engagement or sharing of knowledge. They all said they see their role partly as public intellectuals, which means engaging with the public to help them be better informed. Without exception, they'd tried to engage with the gatekeepers of public information, the media, but found the experience unsatisfactory and at times damaging. One said that at the end of doing each interview with a journalist he'd ask himself: 'I wonder how bad that will turn out to be? Just a fact or two wrong or gross distortion?' Most said it was safer and easier to just withdraw if the media remained the main channel to the public arena.

It struck me as shocking that this valuable public resource, with nearly 50,000 academics at Australia's 39 universities who receive around $15bn a year in government funding, wasn't being shared with the wider public. To me this represented market failure on a grand scale, and with the public being short-changed on access to information and knowledge (which they largely pay for), it is very much in their interest that a solution be found.

I wanted to find a way to connect these smart people, this huge knowledge resource, with the public. This would mean turning the university into a giant newsroom, one filled entirely with academics with subject matter expertise in every possible area.

And why not? After all, the methodology of a journalist and an academic are remarkably similar. Tom Patterson acknowledges the parallels between scientific inquiry and reporting. He quotes Philip Meyer, who argues that academics do what 'we journalists like to think ourselves best at: finding facts, inferring causes, pointing to ways to correct social problems, and evaluating the effects of such corrections'.

The key difference is, as Patterson argues, that the slow speed of primary research conflicts with the fast pace of daily journalism. It would need to contend with the tyranny of deadlines, time and space limitations, and the need to attract and hold the audience's attention.

But, why should there be an either/or? Why not take the best of both worlds and collaborate on something truly different? This was the germ of the idea that is now *The Conversation*, a global information platform in which professional editors work with academics and researchers to share their ideas and expertise with a large audience.

Our editors use their journalism skills — setting deadlines, turning pieces around quickly, making prose understandable, fact-checking, and structuring arguments. But they are also drawing on the primary knowledge of the academic researcher. And we are skilled at building audiences for that copy. It's neatly summed up by our motto: Academic Rigour, Journalistic Flair.

So, how does knowledge-informed journalism work? In our global virtual newsroom, we have 100 professional journalist editors in Australia, the United Kingdom, United States, southern Africa and France, who work in collaboration with 35,000 academics to ensure that we obey the basic rules of journalism.

Before anything else, though, we had to find a way to rebuild trust between journalists and academics, and in turn rebuild the public's trust in the information we offer. So we needed to demonstrate clearly that what we do is quite different from other offerings, especially the copy provided by PRs, branded content merchants, native advertisers, lobbyists and those paid to get points of view into the public arena. We have to be transparent about our working practices and how we are different. And we have to codify our behaviours in ways that are demonstrable, transparent, and open to scrutiny and to a code of practice.

So, let me explain a little how we work, our practices, our methodology.

First, to write an article for *The Conversation* the author must be from a bona fide university or research institution. That excludes so-called experts from lobby outfits, PRs or think-tanks. They all have many other outlets to which they can peddle their wares.

Then we go through a short verification process. This includes asking each author to detail their published papers, educational background and qualifications, and of course that they are a registered university academic or researcher. They must also provide contact details (phone or email) so that anyone reading, but especially the media, can follow up the article for more information or an interview.

Each academic author must sign an agreement to our General Principles for Authors. This includes disclosing relevant knowledge or expertise of their subject because, unlike in other newsrooms, only people who really know what they are talking about can write for *The Conversation*.

We also ask each contributor to disclose who funds their research and whether they have any conflicts of interest, either potential or real. A conflict exists where an individual's interests clash with their professional responsibilities such that an independent observer might reasonably conclude that the author has been unduly influenced by their own interest. Editors are also subject to codes of conduct, including detailing any potential conflicts.

We think the reader has a right to all this information before deciding whether to read or not an article. It's all about transparency.

We also have an editorial board comprising senior members of the academy, which has responsibility to ensure authors and editors adhere to the charter. The board has the final say over the general principles and codes of conduct. It is also the last court of appeal in the event of a dispute by either an author or reader.

The board comprises senior academics recommended by the Vice-Chancellors or Presidents of our partner universities. Finally, we have very strict community standards for readers who

want to engage with authors and readers. We simply ask for people to be polite and respectful, and promote good and safe public conversations.

So how does it work in practice? Our day starts much like that of any newsroom. The editors check the news when they wake up, and on their commute to work check their specialist websites, listen to any radio talkback, and scan online. At 9 am we hold a daily ideas conference. Each section goes through the articles they are working on, which usually involves articles on new research. Those are in effect our news stories, explaining new findings and research breakthroughs.

We then hold an open discussion on what's happened overnight that we should consider commissioning on that day. We aim to ensure that we only commission analytical content that will provide greater context and explanation that is missing from the broader media. If we feel a statement has been made that is open to question or interpretation, we might apply a FactCheck. Our FactChecks are quite different to other services in that we ask a specialist on the subject to carry it out, disclosing again their expertise to do so.

We then ask a second academic specialist to conduct a 'blind peer review' — we send him or her the finding of the first reviewer, without revealing their identity, to avoid any conflicts of interest.

After morning conference, the editors get on with commissioning for the day. Every commission starts with a conversation between the editor and the academic author, and once there is broad agreement on structure, word length and deadline, a brief is generated to record what is agreed.

The authors then write on our 'safe writing platform', which includes tips on how to write and a form of media tutorial. The content also goes through our 'readability checker'that we developed based on the Flesch-Kincaid index, which is set at the reading age of an educated 16-year-old.

Once completed, the article goes back to the editor for a final edit, and photos, headlines, captions, links and graphics are added. A second editor then checks it. Then — and this is critical for our process — the full article is sent back to the author to be double-checked and approved for publication. What then appears under the author's name is what they have checked and approved. That rule should apply in every newsroom — the author/writer should have final approval.

This may seem very detailed, but these are our methods of working, our safe writing platform. And despite the detail I have given you, we work fast, producing more than 50 articles a day across our global network.

If you want to rebuild trust in information, we believe we need to demonstrate, and be transparent, about how we create content. It simply doesn't wash anymore, in the polluted media space, to assert 'trust' the content. That trust needs to be earned. And we closely police those rules, with help from our crowd, our readers. If a reader alerts us that an author has failed to disclose a conflict, we put that to the author, and unless we are satisfied that it's a genuine oversight we will deregister that author so they won't be able to write again.

Unless we are vigilant, our high standards will take a fall. That will damage our site, and in turn damage the reputation of the authors and universities that contribute to the service.

This deliberate and detailed process of content creation aims to tackle the new global disease of infobesity — the pumping out of low-grade content that is being gobbled up all over the world because the good stuff is hard to get or costs money.

What is needed to combat this disease is 'clean' information: information that has been verified, checked, authenticated. Access to that on an equitable open source basis is one of the greatest challenges in our digital information age.

Emily Bell, Professor of Professional Practice and Director at Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, argues

that 'the most exciting and transformative aspect of the current news environment is taking advantage of new forms of collaboration, new analytic tools and sources of data, and new ways of communicating what matters to the public'.

That is what we do at *The Conversation*. Yet, our 21st century journalism still has no formal name — there is no lingua franca for what we do. Quite simply, we want to be a new source of trusted information that has gone through a stringent verification process and been subjected to the blowtorch of disclosure and transparency.

The Conversation has not been set up to be the solution to the media deficit or failures. It is simply an attempt to source new specialist voices at a time that newsrooms elsewhere are being decimated, or worse. And we are more than just a publisher of high-quality content, because we disseminate all our content under Creative Commons rights to 22,000 sites worldwide, which republish our content for free. We simply want as many people as possible to have access to this 'good stuff'. Good information must flow freely, and be accessible to all.

The Conversation is a contribution to the debate about the crisis of journalism — a crisis not just of business models or technologies, but also of ethics, practice and trust. We believe a new kind of journalism is evolving that in time will have a transformative impact on our profession and its practices.

We believe in empowering the reader with high-grade information, to allow them to use that information in their work and daily lives, to help them understand complexity, and hopefully allow them to be better informed when it comes to decision making.

We are sure that many more new sites will emerge that add to the sum of public good.

We also position *The Conversation* as a media resource or repository of information, ideas, and people to contact for follow-ups. So, our ideas and authors are permeating throughout the global media eco-systems.

And yes, we do hope to launch elsewhere. Why? Not out of some mad global domination mania, but because our digital world is global. Ideas and knowledge are global and so is the world of the university and its academics and researchers. They seek the best ideas wherever they are, not just where they happen to live.

In time, we hope that our global newsroom can work together to tackle the big global problems and offer solutions. Think food and water security, communicable and non-communicable diseases, human rights and data protection, and so on.

So, how do we pay for it? We have no paywall as we believe information needs to be free. We believe academics want to share their research and knowledge with the wider public for the public good.

We do not charge for republishing and we do not carry display advertising, banner advertising, or sponsored or branded content. We take the view that to do so opens the site to possible influence by advertisers, or can lead to editorial timidity in the face of a powerful advertiser. It also distracts from the integrity of our site.

Instead, our business model is based on funding contributions from universities, research institutes, foundations, businesses though their corporate social responsibility budgets. We have also had support from the Higher Education Departments of the United Kingdom and the Victorian State Government in Australia. Every one of our partner contracts includes a commitment by the funder to editorial independence. We will not allow any interference in the editorial decision making of the site. We curate it, and the editor's word is final.

Universities are increasingly being asked for metrics to demonstrate they are good public citizens. That's also why universities see real value in receiving their institutional performance metrics.

The Conversation is a small but significant contribution to fixing the real problem facing journalism: the loss of trust. This is especially true at a time when the business model of advertising, which served and paid for journalism for 150 years, is falling

apart. That has led to short-term stresses, but it has also forced a radical rethink about the role and conduct of journalism and the importance of finding new models that can provide information we can trust. This in turn helps us make sense of our world and become informed and empowered citizens.