Collaboration on a national scale: Journalism educators, students and the 2016 Australian federal election

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Abstract

Journalism is a collaborative process that requires individuals to work autonomously and collectively to produce news and information. In 2016, journalism educators from 28 Australian universities collaborated to provide coverage of the Australian federal election in a project called UniPollWatch. This project involved around 1000 students and 75 staff producing coverage of 150 House of Representatives seats that included 346 candidate profiles, 125 electorate profiles and verdict stories, profiles of 26 Senate candidates, and feature stories on nine key policy areas. The purpose-built UniPollWatch website also hosted two large-scale data journalism projects. This paper describes how the largest Australian student university project was devised and how it attracted and sustained collaborative participation. It also reports on the results of a survey of participating journalism academics about the structure of the project and draws insight from their comments about the management of future projects on this scale. The theoretical perspectives of analysis are drawn from journalism practice as well as governance theory, journalism pedagogy and work integrated learning. This paper argues that the UniPollWatch model offers possibilities for further development and adaptation for universities to collaborate for the benefit of journalism education, students and the practice of journalism.

Introduction

Best practice in journalism education is broadly acknowledged to develop a range of complex skills to produce news and information based in fact that contributes to audience understanding of its social, political and economic context. It is also understood to have the more idealistic objective of "speaking truth to power" and actively promoting democracy through free and un-

fettered critique of decision-making institutions and individuals. Additionally, journalism is a collaborative production process, with autonomous and independent journalists working with editors and producers under pressure and within strict time constraints. Consequently, journalism education aims to develop skills in news identification and production, a sense of broader social purpose, and the capacity to work collaboratively and effectively with a range of people (Cullen, Tanner, O'Donnell & Green, 2014). Journalism educators considered the Australian federal election in 2016 an ideal opportunity to create a national project that would provide a large number of students with a 'real world' learning experience in a contemporary, dispersed, multiplatform newsroom, while adding to the public discourse in Australian about the election. The 2016 election was unusual because all seats in both chambers of the Australian Parliament were contested, including all the Senate seats, and the election fell on a date that was conducive to this sort of coverage by university journalism programs. A designated website was created so UniPollWatch could produce original and useful content that could not and would not be available from established news organisations.

Journalism education in Australia is maturing, and is now included in degree offerings at most Australian universities (Cullen et al., 2014). However, it has also encountered two significant challenges: digital disruption, and with it substantial change to the structure of media organisations and the processes of professional journalism; and a broad shift in emphasis of Australian professional degree education to Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and associated demands by students and institutions for curriculum content and learning experiences with a clear employment orientation (Patrick et al., 2008). UniPollWatch was conceived and developed in part to respond to these challenges, and partly in response to concerns that large-scale redundancies in mainstream newsrooms were leaving gaps in journalistic coverage (Birnbauer, Dodd & Ricketson, 2013). The project aimed to allow journalism students from a range of programs, and at different levels of study, to participate as a means of learning about political reporting in real time. The project required close coordination of staff and students across all states and territories of Australia, in various time zones, and relied on the effective collaboration of all participants to produce content in the time frame of the six-week election campaign. The project therefore met criteria for "open innovation" as described by Felin and Zenger; in particular "the need for organisations to interact with their environment and external stakeholders in more open ways" (2014, p. 914). It also conformed to practices that propose innovation in journalism education and "in the public sphere through the three collaborative steps of co-initiating, co-sensing, and co-creating news" (Heikka & Carayannis, 2017).

The timing of the election campaign coincided with the second half of the first semester of the Australian academic year, but there was no common schedule of courses at participating universities. Commitment to the project by educators had the potential to expose teaching practices to public and peer scrutiny and required participating staff to add to existing workloads at short notice. But UniPollWatch also offered a unique opportunity for journalism educators to work with their students and communities to produce original news and information on an accessible public platform while recording and observing the translation of theory into practice. This paper, written by the editor-in-chief, deputy editor-in-chief and two members of the editorial board, discusses the context of the UniPollWatch project, its organisation and governance, collaborative processes used and educator responses to the project gathered from a post-project survey. The successes and difficulties of specific teaching strategies employed by staff at different universities implementing UniPollWatch activities have been documented in Davies, Dodd, Kremmer and Van Heekeren (2017) and Dodd et al. (2015). This paper seeks to build on, rather than repeat, that content by focusing not on the pedagogical strategies employed within different universities, but rather on the issues raised by the structural organisation of the project as a whole, via examination of feedback from the journalism educators involved.

Background

Australian journalism education, like journalism education elsewhere, has been characterised by tension between practice and theory. This tension has been damaging to journalism, both as an academic discipline and profession, as journalism education has transitioned from an emphasis on craft and skill-based training to a multi-disciplinary and theoretically grounded academic discipline (O'Donnell, 2017; Sheridan Burns, 2003; Adams & Duffield, 2006; Hirst, 2010; Lester, 2015). That said, it has also facilitated the development of a strong culture of industry relevance in curriculum design and content, including an emphasis on collaborations between institutions, students and industry. In a contemporary university environment, accreditation and quality assurance require prescribed and consistent theoretical content for all university courses. The challenge for journalism educators is thus to teach journalism that is academically rigorous and professionally relevant, but also respected by the industry it serves.

Journalism programs and courses available in Australia range from general minors and majors in broader undergraduate degrees to discrete and specialist undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. The range of journalism offerings and the issues they face are consistent and similar to those faced by journalism programs globally (Camp, 2012; Tanner, O'Donnell, Green & Cullen, 2014). Deuze argues that there are two responses to this environment. The first is to "close ranks, and put significant effort in bringing coherence and stability (back) to the field" (2017, p. 166), while the second is:

> ... to dive, head first, into the chaos. This proves to be an often exciting and bewildering experience, leading to a wide variety of studies and conceptualisations of journalism in a post-industrial era, often featuring particular work on emerging genres, formats, and types of journalism. (2017, p. 166)

UniPollWatch is an example of the second approach as an optimistic and ambitious project in which journalism educators and students from across Australia collaborated to provide nationwide coverage that the Australian industry now struggles to achieve. But it was also grounded in familiar and tested reporting processes and traditions. The project was enabled by the collegiality of participant educators arising from membership of the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA). Several universities had responded favourably but informally to an invitation by Andrew Dodd, the editor-in-chief, to participate by the time of the December 2015 JERAA conference, when a session was convened to discuss how universities could work together to cover the following year's election. The proposed project was based on the first UniPollWatch project in Victoria (Dodd et al., 2015) in which four universities reported on the Victorian state election. It trialled a unique form of WIL and established a model of collaborative "civic journalism" (Simons et al., 2016) through which journalism students engaged and participated in the democratic process.

Concerns about industry relevance in the Australian university sector have influenced curriculum design across all disciplines. An increasing focus on WIL has exerted pressure on university educators to ensure that educational content and activities are directed toward, or related to, the requirements of professional practice (Patrick et al., 2008). This has coincided with practitioners arriving in the academy who have tended to place a premium on practical skills, learning through doing and ambitious real-world projects as a means to deliver journalism pedagogy (Birnbauer et al., 2013; Birnbauer, 2011). The model of 'teaching by doing published journalism' has been dubbed the 'teaching hospital model'. While it has been widely adopted internationally, the 'perils' of overdoing it and allowing focus on the quality of the publication to narrow the focus of courses have been noted (Mensing & Ryfe, 2013; Newton, 2012). As a national endeavour, with the aim of covering a federal election, the 2016 UniPollWatch project represented a significant advance on anything previously attempted, but was shaped and informed by many previous projects.

The adoption of a collaborative working approach was essential for UniPollWatch because it involved forms of national coverage that no single university could provide. Collaboration was required between academic staff, and between staff and students, at local, state, and federal levels. Collaborative working is consistent with professional journalism practice, both in traditional and emergent contemporary forms (Paterson & Domingo, 2008; Meltzer & Martik, 2017). The approach to collaboration adopted by UniPollWatch was also mindful that models of collaborative working in professional journalism are evolving. Examples of journalism that are dependent on large-scale collaboration include crowd-sourced journalism (Aitamurto, 2016), data-driven journalism (Gray, Chambers & Bounegru, 2012) and citizen journalism (Wall, 2015). While the project did not foster the highly skilled forms of collaborative journalism that Spyridou and Veglis identify as the "super journalist paradigm" (2016, p. 109), it nevertheless promoted and required collaborative working. A form of guided collaboration supported student participation, taking into account not only different levels of experience, but also the diverse environments in which the various academic participants were operating.

This guided form of collaboration allowed the educative purpose of the project to converge with its journalistic intent to provide a contemporary, digital media platform for original news content. Here the notion of collaboration became imperative, as academics performed the dual roles of experienced journalists and academics simultaneously.

Organisation and structure

The ideal of inter-university collaboration

A critical motivation for UniPollWatch was to test the hypothesis that if universities collaborated on large-scale projects they would also achieve positive educational outcomes in line with institutional and professional requirements. However, there are few existing models for such an approach in journalism, and in other disciplines, including education, there are limited case studies. The open innovation approach of the UniPollWatch program was a radical departure from the existing practice of institutions working individually, even as they promote collaborative working and WIL. To the authors' knowledge, UniPollWatch was unique in its scope and breadth. The closest comparable projects we have been able to find are *The Conversation*, the Pacific Media Centre and the Best of SNO, but these offer only limited points of comparison, underscoring the uniqueness of the UniPollWatch model. For example, *The Conversation* (http://theconversation.com/au) aggregates the work of academics and specifically excludes students, while the Pacific Media Centre based at Auckland University of Technology (http://www.pmc.aut.ac.nz) in New Zealand publishes works from professional journalists as well as universities, and the Best of SNO (https://college.bestofsno.com) is designed to showcase content produced through its proprietary School Newspapers Online software.

There are over thirty universities teaching journalism practice subjects in Australia. There are substantial cohorts of undergraduate students in specific journalism programs, specialist postgraduate programs, and journalism options offered in a range of programs. Yet even larger universities would struggle to provide comprehensive coverage of a national election due to constraints imposed geographically and administratively and due to program and course requirements and resource availability. While student-produced news often provides original local news coverage, it has not previously been able to provide national news coverage.

Structure

At the outset of the UniPollWatch 2016 project it was necessary to develop a structure to allocate work, power and responsibility. During the 2014 Victorian UniPollWatch project, the organisers convened regular meetings where staff from the four participating universities discussed

problems and made decisions (Dodd et al., 2015). That model worked for the four-university project but was not feasible for 28 universities distributed across the country. Newsrooms are traditionally organised hierarchically with a command and control model of decision-making to enable the regular, rapid production of an unpredictable product. The task of news coverage is typically divided into topics (described as "beats" in the United States and "rounds" in Australia) that individual journalists or teams are assigned, while overall decision-making responsibility rests with the editor. At news conferences, the heads of various teams meet with the editor to discuss the best stories and the needs of their teams. Grubenmann (2017) and Becker, Lowrey, Claussen and Anderson (2000) call this the "beat structure", arguing that, in some contexts, it limits the scope of coverage, while affirming that it continues to be the most common newsroom structure in the Western world.
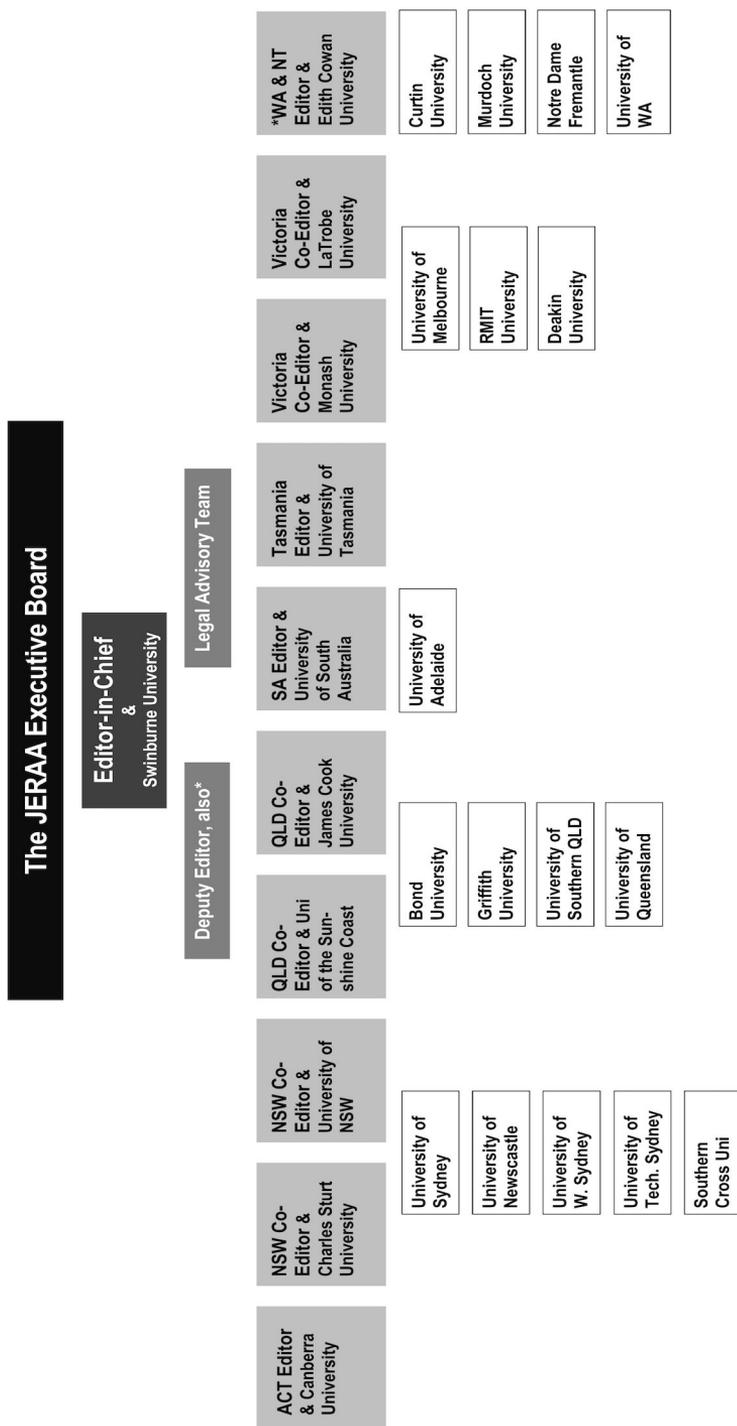
A similar structure was adopted for UniPollWatch's large virtual newsroom. An editorial committee was formed, with 10 volunteer participants, including at least one representative from each of the states and territories except the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory was not represented because its Charles Darwin University does not teach journalism and staff in its politics department were not able to participate. Coverage of the Northern Territory's two electorates was managed by Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. Throughout the project the editorial board held fortnightly phone conference meetings in which decisions were generally made through consensus.

Once formed, the editorial committee ratified a structure in which board members became state editors (or co-editors in the case of Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland) responsible for supporting, and approving and publishing stories from, universities in their own states. Their role was to represent those universities' interests and to communicate information from the editorial committee to the relevant campus editors. Initial communication between the editorial committee and participating universities was managed through a weekly emailed newsletter, written by the editor-in-chief. This detailed all the latest decisions and distributed useful teaching materials, such as guides for writing electorate and candidate profiles. While it was a useful communication tool initially, as more questions arose from participant universities and students a closed social media (Facebook) group was created for all campus editors and the editorial board. This resource had three key benefits: first, any participant could offer an answer; second, the collaborative approach to problem solving meant that answers could be provided faster; and, third, all participants could raise issues with the project leaders and take part in decision-making.

The combination of the "beat-structure" hierarchy and a consensus decision-making process was dubbed by Felin and Zenger a "consensus-based hierarchy" (2014, p. 917) in their model of six distinct governance forms. They wrote that "a distinctive feature of hierarchy is its capacity to more effectively facilitate the flow of knowledge" (2014, p. 919), which was evident in the editor-in-chief's ability to communicate decisions and information via the board and the newsletter. But Felin and Zenger also note that the focus of consensus-based hierarchies on "rich horizontal communication channels that support knowledge exchange among peers" (2014, p. 919) makes them ideally suited "to solving the most complex, non-decomposable problems, where widespread knowledge sharing is critical" (2014, p. 919). They argue that the hierarchical model works well when there is low individual reward for effort, compared to the rewards that can be gained via the larger endeavour prospering, as was the case with this project.

State editors (and co-editors) were also responsible for checking for quality and legal concerns, and approving and publishing stories from their delegated universities on the UniPollWatch website. Difficult editorial matters, including concerns that articles may include defamatory or other legally questionable content, were referred to the editor-in-chief. A team of three journalism academics with legal qualifications volunteered to provide legal advice about contentious stories. Although it was vital this mechanism was in place, it was not called on during the project.

The JERAA Executive Board

Editor-in-Chief
&
Swinburne University

Legal Advisory Team

Deputy Editor, also*

ACT Editor & Canberra University

NSW Co-Editor & Charles Sturt University
- University of Sydney
- University of Newcastle
- University of W. Sydney
- University of Tech. Sydney
- Southern Cross Uni

NSW Co-Editor & University of NSW

QLD Co-Editor & Uni of the Sunshine Coast
- Bond University
- Griffith University
- University of Southern QLD
- University of Queensland

QLD Co-Editor & James Cook University

SA Editor & University of South Australia
- University of Adelaide

Tasmania Editor & University of Tasmania

Victoria Co-Editor & Monash University

Victoria Co-Editor & LaTrobe University
- University of Melbourne
- RMIT University
- Deakin University

***WA & NT Editor & Edith Cowan University**
- Curtin University
- Murdoch University
- Notre Dame Fremantle
- University of WA

Another key characteristic of the hierarchical structure was that only two people were author-ised to unpublish (remove) any story from the site. Under the structure, student work was upload-ed and approved at the university level, and checked and published at the state level. However, in some cases the state and university editors were the same person, and therefore, as a necessary check, in case of a disagreement, the editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief were authorised

to remove any story across the site. The potential for conflict over the publication of contentious material was based on the collective lived experience of newsroom arguments about publication and legal risk that form the basis of standard journalism school curricula on journalism ethics as documented by Saldaña, Sylvie and McGregor (2017).

An important requirement for cooperation and collaboration is demarcation. A national election presented a significant opportunity for a large-scale collaboration because elections provide defined boundaries around which coverage can be assigned. When a university was allocated an electorate, no other university was able to duplicate or compete for coverage. The reporting remit for each university was clear, and within the assigned electorates the staff could further define tasks so that no two students – or teams of students – approached the same candidate or reported the same story. This requirement was further refined at some campuses where students preparing electorate profiles were encouraged to do so without approaching candidates. If they needed information they were asked to liaise directly with their fellow students who had been assigned the task of profiling the candidates concerned. This demarcation worked remarkably well in allowing many students to participate without candidates being approached multiple times. However, there were some cases of multiple contact when students covering policy matters sought comment from a minister or shadow minister who had already been contacted in their capacity as a local candidate by different students, perhaps from a different university. While this repeated contact could be regarded as inefficient, such duplication can emanate from any media organisation with several staff working on an election campaign. It was also useful in raising student awareness about the dual roles of some candidates and emphasised the authentic nature of the project.

Auspicing and insurance

Fundamental to the success of the project was the involvement of JERAA. The 2014 Uni-PollWatch project was published informally, without a properly constituted legal structure and without an organisational sponsor. In the lead-up to the 2016 election, it became apparent that the project needed an auspicing body prepared to underwrite the risk of publishing the work of 1000 inexperienced student journalists during a fast-moving and highly contested election campaign. It was perfectly reasonable that Swinburne University declined the editor-in-chief's request to accept liability for defamation actions that might arise from the work of students at other universities, and the prospect of obtaining liability assurances from every participating university in a limited time frame was not feasible. While university administrative staff had these concerns, the journalism educators who were actively involved in teaching media law to their students, and who were members of JERAA, were confident about their capacity (and that of their peers) to eliminate legal risks in uncontentious stories and to proceed with caution and good guidance in cases where risk was identified and deemed to be in alignment with best practice journalism. When the concept of working together under the UniPollWatch banner was discussed at the 2015 JERAA conference, it was suggested that JERAA could assume legal liability for the project. This proposed solution was supported overwhelmingly by the JERAA members who voted at the meeting. This decision was significant because it signalled the organisation's willingness to extend its remit as a publisher and to engage in real world, current and civic journalism as a means to serve a public good and enhance journalism pedagogy.

The publication model

JERAA also agreed to collect a standard fee of $A1500 from participating universities to support the creation of the project website. Heads of journalism programs were given information about the project with which to make the case within their own institutions for support. For many, this support was readily gained, while others made business cases, emphasising either the pedagogical benefits of this form of WIL or the promotional opportunities of such a large-scale

civic engagement project. The collaborative nature of the project was extended to the publication model which gave each participating university equal representation as a project partner regardless of the number of staff and students participating.

Although collaboration and collegiality were cornerstones of the project, UniPollWatch also engendered healthy competition. University journalism schools tend to be competitive as they operate in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Marketing departments aggressively promote their own institutions and their points of difference and often celebrate students who win awards or break important stories. It was a reasonable assumption, therefore, that universities, when placed together, would seek to promote their best work. UniPollWatch encouraged this practice and ensured that each university's electorate pages were branded as the product of that university. The organisers believe this led to a greater sense of ownership, accountability and pride in the content produced.

The website

The 2014 Victorian UniPollWatch website was built on WordPress by a Swinburne University academic. It worked well for the smaller project, but showed signs of stress as students and academics at four universities uploaded material. The new website was commissioned and designed to allow for many more entry points and a scaffolded and hierarchical system of access and approval, to reflect the organisational structure described above. The 2016 website also included more embedded information, including electorate and candidate profiles, statistics about previous elections, and interactive electorate maps. In the case of WA and NSW, the maps identified how electorate boundaries had changed in recent redistributions. In some seats, this feature proved helpful in explaining results.

While the website architecture provided sufficient functionality, it also presented challenges. Construction and testing had to be brought forward when an early election date of July 2 was announced. This meant less time for training participants, resulting in some difficulties with the management of content as campus editors learned how to use the website. Some failed to learn, and their uploading work was done instead by state editors, who later reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work involved.

The website was integrated with social media accounts created for the project, with capacity for stories to be shared on social media via Facebook and Twitter as they were published. It was anticipated that students would use social media to create multi-university teams and initiate discussion groups as well as for call-outs for assistance, effectively collaborating by doing what Grubenmann (2017) called "cross beat work". While this happened to varying extents within universities, inter-university communication was limited due to staff having insufficient time to facilitate these connections. However, there was one notable exception: Charles Sturt University's Margaret Van Heekeren managed students in five states to produce over forty stories on election day. One student even filed from a polling station in Kuala Lumpur (Engelhardt, 2016). This highlights the potential for this type of reportage, alongside the difficulties of producing it.

The survey

Method

In order to document the strengths and weaknesses of the project as a case study, a questionnaire was administered. As the authors of this paper include the editor-in-chief and deputy editor-in-chief of the project, the participating academics and their contact details were identifiable. In order to access their views, a Qualtrics questionnaire was prepared and a link and explanation were emailed. Responses were received from 26 of the 28 "campus editors" from participating universities. One of the two who did not respond had made minimal contributions and the rel-

evant staff member at the other was no longer working for the university. This, therefore, represents a functionally complete dataset from the campus editor participants.

The questionnaire

Brevity was a key requirement in construction of the questionnaire, as journalism academics are time-poor, and the questionnaire was concurrently gathering data about the pedagogical techniques the academics employed, the results of which have been published in a separate paper (Davies et al., 2017). The number of questions relevant to this article was limited to nine, and the impact of this on the depth and clarity of the data gathered is acknowledged. The section of the questionnaire focused on collegiality asked:

1. What were the benefits, if any, for you of being involved in UniPollWatch, over and above your usual practice? Answer options: collegiality and the fun of collaboration; benchmarking our performance against others; sharing ideas and information; other/comment.

2. What were the benefits, if any, for YOUR STUDENTS of being involved in a big national project? Answer options: "real world" journalism experience with sources and deadlines; the experience of being subbed to publication standard; being published to a national audience; building their portfolio of published work; seeing the quality of work being produced by other students; exposure to stories from other places; other/comment.

3. Did the organisational structure of UniPollWatch, with the editorial board made up of state reps, work for you? Answer options: yes; no; comment.

4. Did your university feel consulted and involved in decision making about the project? Answer options: yes; no; comment.

5. Did the editorial model (in which each university produced electoral and candidate profiles for designated seats) work for your university? Answer options: yes; no; comment.

6. Did the funding model (with each university asked to contribute $1500 to meet production costs) work for you? Answer options: yes; no; comment.

7. Did you cooperate in new and interesting ways with other universities during the project? Answer option: comment.

8. What changes would you recommend for the way the project was run? Answer option: comment.

9. In your view, how can the UniPollWatch model best be utilised in the future? Answer option: comment.

The questions were arrived at via consultation with the editorial board, with the aim of capturing positive and negative perceptions of the process in order to inform the design of future initiatives. Every question allowed an open (comment) response so the questionnaire design did not limit the scope of responses. The first two questions asked about perceived benefits of involvement, with suggestions and a comment option to allow for dissent and complaints. Question one asked if the educators had benefited and question two if they thought their students had benefited.

Assessment of student perceptions of the project was beyond the scope of this study, as many students had graduated and moved on after the project; however, the participating educators were asked about the benefits to students. Given that educators will decide whether to be involved in future iterations of the project or similar collaborative endeavours, their perceptions about its educational benefits were considered critical. The next six questions asked about the financial, organisational and collaborative structure, and elicited further information. The final question sought to gauge interest in involvement in similar projects in the future.

Results

Benefits

Asked to nominate the benefits for them of being involved in UniPollWatch, three-quarters (73%) ticked "collegiality and the fun of collaboration", almost two-thirds (62%) ticked "sharing ideas and information", and over a third (38%) said they benefited from "an opportunity to see how their course and students benchmarked against others". In addition, 13 added comments. Seven of these reiterated the fun aspect, with comments like "it was fun to be back in the journo environment of election coverage/deadlines", five stated they had gained insight into their students and courses that would be used in developing them, and one mentioned that the work had won him a $2000 Dean's Award for Programs that Enhance Learning. On the more critical side, one acknowledged the benefits and challenges for collaboration, saying that it was "a big logistical beast to wrangle but it's a real pointer to what journalism schools can produce when they come together", while another wrote, "I don't want to be negative but for me it was a headache. I had to pick up the pieces when collegiality broke down. I wouldn't do it again, but I can see the value of the concept". These affective responses are important because they are indicators of the willingness of participants to engage in future projects. Taken together, they indicate that most of the key university staff found the project to be enjoyable and useful and that while the experience of a perceived breakdown in collegiality was rare – it happened in one instance, when communication broke down between a campus editor and a state co-editor – it may have lost the project a future participant and should be considered in future iterations as a risk that should be managed by ensuring that unhappy campus editors can contact the editor-in-chief or the deputy.

Figure 2: Number of editors from the 26 campuses that indicated each of the benefits for students
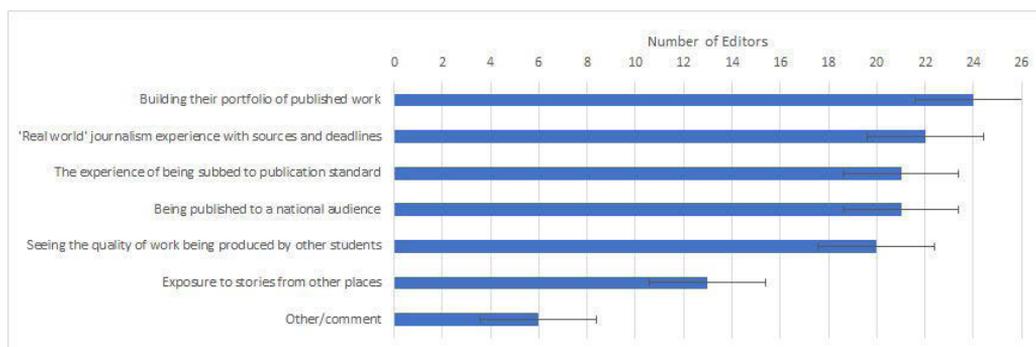
Asked how the project benefited their students, more than 80% of the academics listed building a portfolio of published work, getting "real world" experience, being published to a national audience, and being edited to publication standard. These are clear indicators that UniPollWatch worked as a WIL project. Three-quarters (76%) listed seeing the quality of work produced by other students, which is also relevant to WIL, as the media is a competitive business and the universities involved are from geographically disparate locations, making benchmarking difficult. One respondent saw the project as an "opportunity to reflect on their own level of skill and enthusiasm". Half of the respondents indicated that exposure to stories from other places was valuable in knowledge-building and one added that students "also looked more critically at political coverage in mainstream media".

Structure

Asked about whether the organisational structure, with the editorial board made up of state representatives, worked for them, the majority said 'yes' [88% (23), 'no' 8% (2)]. Comment responses were left by 12 academics: of these, eight included praise, such as, "I found the state reps very responsive to any questions or concerns I had, and it was good to have an extra pair

of eyes to look over the work I submitted". The other four mentioned the extra work for the state representatives, referring to them as overloaded or to a bottleneck of work in the last few days.

The diverse level of engagement of campus editors is evident in responses to the question: "Did you cooperate in new and interesting ways with other universities during the project?", with over half (14) responding 'yes'. This result indicates that the potential for cross-institutional benefits was inhibited by the project's allocation of institutional responsibility for specific electorates, which required no interaction with other institutions. However, support for the editorial model, in which each university produced electoral and candidate profiles for designated seats, was more positive, with 91% (24) responding positively, while 4% (1) said 'no' and one did not answer. Similarly, on the question of consultation and involvement in decision-making, 85% (22) said 'yes' and 8% (2) 'no'. Asked if the funding model (with each university asked to contribute $1500 to meet production costs) worked for them, 73% (19) said 'yes', 2% (2) said 'no' and five did not answer.

Changes

Asked what changes to the project they would recommend for future iterations, 35% (9) of the campus editors said nothing needed to change. The remaining 17 made suggestions, with some making more than one. The two issues raised most frequently (each by four campus editors) were the timing of the project and individual workload issues. The timing comments included "more preparation time" and "longer lead time (although obviously we have no control over the election date)"; the workload comments included "negotiating workload for academics" and "maybe a subs' desk would be good". Both of these issues were identified and discussed at the outset, and both are difficult to manage because the timing of elections and the workload pressures academics face are beyond the control of the editorial board. These results, however, confirm that a national collaborative project of this nature requires refinement to its management and better understanding of the time required to implement it successfully.

Two related issues, each raised by three campus editors, were streamlining the website processes and commitment to the project by universities. Comments about the website included requests for "a more functional upload system" and "smoother/faster editorial approvals for publication", as well as a more general comment about the rigidity of content management. Comments about project commitment included concerns about other universities that did not "do the work they promised" which "meant that other unis had to step in and do more work than they had initially anticipated", and about student commitment, including a proposal that only students who were aware of the commitment required be included.

Two campus editors suggested more party-based coverage "so that we can fill holes where candidate profiles have not been written", while issues raised only once were "find a mainstream media partner … willing to collaborate on stories", and "give more attention to social media, so that more stories reach bigger audiences". The final two comments, categorised as broad and general, were "there is scope for streamlining and improving what was a big and cumbersome process to manage" and "expand and continue and make university journalism the force it can be".

Future of the model

Asked how the model could be best used in future, a quarter of the campus editors [24% (6)] suggested continuing to use it for future state and federal elections. They suggested refinements such as marketing it as a "voters' local guide", focusing the coverage to make it a unique contribution, and pursuing more data journalism projects. One suggested continuing with election coverage but limiting it to state elections as "attempting to cover it at a national level left a lot of holes". Another added: "by all means, stick with the longer form (text-based) approach, but allow for audio clips and even video (provided they are of publishable standard)."

Some responses to this question addressed issues that had been raised in answer to the questions about improvements that could be made to how UniPollWatch ran. Some of this feedback indicates that not everyone involved was fully briefed on the structure and the range of approaches being used to implement the project. This is perhaps not surprising, given the hierarchical organisational structure and the flexibility it allowed. One suggested that commitment might be increased by adding "some sort of hurdle, in the form of a test or meaningful pay-to-play component to weed out the time-wasters and non-contributors". There was a fee involved that worked in most, but not all, instances to secure a commitment to participate. Improving its efficacy is an issue for consideration in future iterations. One suggested that the project needed workload allocation and another that "it would be good to incorporate UniPollWatch stories into assessment for a particular unit" – a practice that was standard among many of the participating universities. As documented in Davies et al. (2017), two-thirds of the campus editors in the 2016 iterations effectively received workload recognition by embedding some or all of the work in units they were teaching. It is hoped that the publication of information about the range of strategies used will empower academics to find ways to incorporate the work into existing academic and student workloads.

A third of the campus editors [36% (9)] suggested expanding the project to cover topics other than just elections. Edited for brevity and to exclude repetition, these included:

▶ "I want to see more national projects using the central publishing model."

▶ "… many possibilities for other pop-up projects linked to elections and other topics."

▶ "This can become an alternative media on its own merit – for publishing student journalism work."

▶ "Would it be possible to use it for a national investigative reporting project, or a data journalism project, or as a national hub for localised journalism."

▶ "It could also be used for other big-issue topics with national or large-state impact."

▶ "… for stories of national or state interest where combined reporting would deliver a better product."

▶ "… a loose network of campus publications or course convenors that join forces for big projects."

▶ "I would suggest some specific projects be done that a smaller number of journalism schools could work on, and/or that UniPollWatch develops a particular area of interest that it covers in depth across the country and over time builds real expertise and a body of journalistic work.

In addition, two campus editors suggested making the website available either all year round "as there are political and election-related issues occurring all the time, by-elections, Electoral Commission inquiries, challenges to election results, new parties being formed, state elections, pre-selection contests, etc", or as "an annual project, so it could be built into subjects early. This could be allocated to elections or other known upcoming events".

All of these responses indicate a level of enthusiastic engagement with the future development of the UniPollWatch project or something similar.

Conclusion

It was a testament to the collegial culture of journalism education (O'Donnell & Van Heekeren, 2015) that the project was embraced so warmly. By collaborating, journalism educators

and students produced a nationwide endeavour, while benefiting from work-integrated and authentic experiential learning. Student reporting was available to a larger audience and educators were given opportunities to work with colleagues across the country. With around 1000 students involved, UniPollWatch became, arguably, the largest newsroom in the country. The project provided active coverage of 125 of 150 House of Representatives seats, 346 lower house candidates, 26 prospective senators and nine key policy areas, much of which was under-reported in mainstream media. UniPollWatch, as described by the survey participants, can in part be explained by the fact that it allowed universities to work collaboratively in a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002), while providing opportunities for student and academic participants to innovate and apply emerging approaches to journalistic practice.

The survey of participants demonstrates that collaboration and collegiality are achievable at a national level, as well as desirable and perceived to be advantageous to academics and students. The organisational structure was devised along industry lines. This was intuitive to the editorial team because, as seasoned practitioners, they knew the strengths of of the traditional newsroom structure. The resulting hierarchy was similar to a "beat structure" (Grubenmann, 2016; Becker et al., 2000), and it was mostly accordant with the governance style described by Felin and Zenger (2014) as a consensus decision-making hierarchy, with an element of authority, for use in the case of conflict. Felin and Zenger's model predicted that this style of governance would work with this type of task and the survey results confirm that the consensus decision-making hierarchy fostered collaborative working, collegiality and support for the project into the future.

The UniPollWatch projects also hint at the enormous potential for future journalism work as a component of journalism education. The involvement of JERAA solved the problem of legal protection and provided a means for collecting and administering the funds needed to undertake creative collaboration from a neutral location, not dominated by any one university.

The two iterations of UniPollWatch have also revealed some of the barriers that still need to be overcome in order to sustain future teamwork. The 2016 project enjoyed widespread support due in part to its novelty and perhaps because some universities feared missing out when it started gaining momentum. It is not clear whether the buy-in would be as great, or greater, in future years. There are vagaries associated with unfixed election dates, which make planning difficult. And, whatever the nature of the project, there is always the risk of staff burn-out if the journalism work does not fit neatly within existing curricula, and if assessment tasks cannot be fashioned around the project's requirements. But, several universities have trialled interesting methods to deal with the challenges of workload, assessment and the integration of the work within curricula (Davies et al., 2017).

With all this in mind, the authors argue the next iteration of nationwide collaboration might best be based on the development of a standing publication, which all universities could access and where groups of campuses could work together to create compelling journalism projects. A model for just such a publication is now in development and is based on many of the lessons detailed in this paper. A central publication could pick up some of the key attributes of UniPollWatch, such as its editorial structure and diffuse entry points for uploading and approving content. Additionally, its outward-looking focus and national reporting reach may be useful for the creation of a publication that enhances pedagogy and which stands alone in its own right so that tertiary journalism courses can move beyond their dependence on mainstream publishers to achieve true impact.

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