

Author: Associate Professor Anne Dunn, President Journalism Education Association of Australia.

The editorial, “It depends who you talk to”, in *The Weekend Australian* of March 10-11, is just one of the recent intemperate spate of newspaper commentary that has greeted the report of the Independent Inquiry into the Media and Media Regulation (known after its chairman as the Finkelstein Report].

It is understandable that the press should be concerned to protect freedom of speech and a free media. It is a pity that the various commentary pieces do not make a case for press freedom but instead have been in the main ill-informed attacks on the report and, in the case of “It depends who you talk to”, a splenetic verbal assault on the discipline of media studies, “media studies lecturers” and “media academics”. The column was also an attack on the Finkelstein report that used its content and methods with such irresponsible selectivity as to render it almost unrecognisable. The only references to the actual content of the report were quoted from Jonathon Holmes on *The Drum* and are not even accurate about what Holmes wrote, giving the impression that one section is representative of the whole report. The writer ignores that there are examples of both good and bad journalism on practically every page, all footnoted and available in the extensive list of references. The report spends over 30 pages considering “the democratic indispensability of a free press” (pp.23-54). Over a further 22 pages it considers oral and written submissions from the media (including editors), and data from 21 surveys and polls (only one by an academic) of voters *and journalists* conducted between 1966 and 2011 (pp. 103-112). Where it includes a specific critical report, it also includes the responses of the relevant newspapers (or media outlet) (e.g. p.113). The Report includes many paragraphs that praise the work of journalists and the press, and emphasises the importance of free speech (see, for example, pars 4.53 & 4.54, pp.113, 114). None of this is remotely ap parent from this opinion piece, nor indeed from others published since the report was released.

But for selective quoting, that from the submission of Professor Wendy Bacon really takes the biscuit. A few lines from a two-part submission totalling 26 pages can hardly be expected to represent Professor Bacon’s case. And there is a smart-arse reference to her arrest as a student editor barely out of her teens; what this has to do with her current qualifications to speak on this issue is a mystery. I would have thought her long and continuing career as a respected investigative journalist was more to the point. But of course Professor Bacon is a target for attack because she is one of those dreaded “media academics” – except she would call herself a journalist and journalism academic; a distinction the opinion writer might usefully have made. The other accusation by the writer of this piece is that most academics teaching journalism either have no newsroom experience or failed careers in journalism. But a quick glance would have revealed that Bacon and *all* her colleagues listed under “Journalism academic teaching staff” on the website at UTS in Sydney are experienced media practitioners, whether in mainstream news reporting or in other information-based media. And UTS is far from atypical among the journalism, media and communication degrees available in Australia. Far from carrying “the scars of unsuccessful careers”, the media and journalism academics I know include in their number award-winning documentary makers, feature writers and investigative journalists. Most have current professional networks through whom they

keep abreast of changes in “working newsrooms” and in the industry more broadly. A university level degree with a major in journalism or media production will seldom “claim to be vocational” – except in the sense that they give graduates the skills and attributes they need for entry to work – because a university degree is widely understood to offer something more than the purely vocational. The great majority of journalism and media degrees in Australia teach “practical skills”, sometimes in labs and with digital media equipment as good or better than graduates will find in their workplaces. The majority of these programs offer (usually unpaid) work placements or internships; all encourage their students to seek usually unpaid work experience while they are studying. Many a media outlet in this country does very nicely thank you out of the unpaid labour of some of our brightest and keenest young minds. There are few complaints from editors and supervising producers. I don’t think they’re just being polite when they keep asking for interns year after year. I don’t think young people are so starry-eyed about working in the media that they would keep competing for entry to courses the grapevine tells them are useless; clearly that’s not what they are hearing. Nor do they appear to be put off despite the “ideological bias against the mainstream media” to which your writer claims they are subjected by media academics. Writers of editorials and opinion pieces are entitled to the view that the recommendation to establish a taxpayer-funded News Media Council to regulate the media “is alarming”, an assault on democracy and the like. It is unfortunate that so many such pieces have expressed their views while demonstrating some of the poor journalism criticised in the Report, lacking in evidence, attack people not arguments, and just plain inaccuracy.

[NB: For over 25 years the Journalism Education Association has held an annual conference at which current and former media practitioners are often invited speakers. The conference covers a wide range of issues from journalism studies through to reports of successful teaching projects around the nation and around the world. The 2012 JEAA conference will be held in Melbourne in early December and plans are already under way to devote adequate time to a discussion of the Finkelstein report, the convergence review and related issues of free speech, media regulation and the future of journalism. The conference organisers are currently devising an agenda and seeking to invite guest speakers, including senior writers and editors from *The Australian* and other media outlets.]