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# Negotiating the Conversation: How Journalists Learn to Interact with Audiences Online

Fiona Martin <sup>a</sup> and Colleen Murrell <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Media & Communications, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia; <sup>b</sup>Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how young Australian journalists have developed their knowledge of online interaction strategies and how well they feel they manage the challenges of conversations with audiences in comments sections and on social media platforms. It presents the results of a small snowball sample survey and follow-up semi-structured interviews of recent graduates from six universities, working across print, broadcast and social media, exploring their educational preparation and on the job training for dialogic journalism. The survey and interviews build on a literature review that reveals the need for increased research into strategies for dealing with negative responses and speaking to audience diversity. The findings pinpoint areas of journalism pedagogy that need innovation and transformation to address the normalisation of dialogic interaction on social media.

## KEYWORDS

Dialogic journalism;  
journalism education;  
participatory journalism;  
news commenting;  
conversation; social media;  
trolling

## Introduction

One of journalism's core roles is to spark public debate on significant societal issues, but over the past two decades journalists have faced considerably greater challenges in generating productive, civil online conversations with their audiences. Despite the importance of these exchanges for feedback, quality assurance, innovation, audience development and civic participation (Author forthcoming 2021), many journalists see participating in comments sections as an unpleasant task, due to the incivility or ignorance of some contributors (Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt 2018). Some reporters are denigrated, abused and threatened online, particularly women and those from minority backgrounds (Chen et al. 2018; Gardiner 2018). Others have been dismissed for posting inappropriate social media comments (Lakshmanan 2017; Nwanevu 2018). Online conversation has not only appeared unsafe, but also ungovernable in light of the deliberate disruption of "dark participation" (Frischlich, Boberg, and Quandt 2019). For some news companies in-house comments have been unsustainable due to the cost of moderating incivility, legal and reputational risks and poor quality posts (Huang 2016). While most publishers still maintain branded social media channels, and the majority of reporters in Bossio and Holton's (2018) study of social media interaction said it was a critical part of their work, "this was paired with almost universal dislike, or 'fatigue'" (255) with

constant audience critique, the aggressive nature of communication in platform environments, information overload and security concerns.

From a historical perspective though, it is unclear how well journalists have been trained to talk with their audiences online, and whether there are educative strategies that might help them to better understand and respond to them, particularly to incivility or abuse. Chen and Pain found most journalists they spoke to “received little training on how to respond to commenters or what to say to calm incivility” (2016, 4). Perhaps it has been assumed that because reporters are trained communicators and storytellers, they will also naturally be effective interlocutors online. However, as Michael Schudson (1997) has noted, the ideal democratic, problem-solving conversations of the public sphere are different from everyday sociable talk, and are hardly natural. They are rule-bound, to ensure fair participation and civility, and require skills in consultation, listening, reasonableness and exposition, as well as a commitment to goodwill:

Conversation can be, and without appropriate training, education and social equality, normally is, highly inegalitarian. (1997, 301)

Journalists must also now deal with the challenges of internetnetworked communication, such as the user disinhibition that arises from disembodiment, pseudonymity and relative invisibility (Suler 2004; Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012).

In this paper, we set out to explore the difficulties Australian journalists face in learning to talk with their audiences in in-house comments sections, branded social media channels, via emails and chat. We do this by investigating the context and rationale for their online engagement, how they have been trained and educated for dialogic interaction and what further education they feel they require to cope with critical and abusive audience responses, and mediate more productive audience responses. There are three aspects to our investigation: examining how the challenges of audience interaction manifest in journalism studies literature, in journalism textbooks and in journalists’ own accounts of their training and education. Our conceptual framework is dialogic journalism, in which the creative potential of audience participation is harnessed in sequences of communicative action and response. This framework encompasses crowdsourcing and user generated content management, but is centrally realised through textual exchange, as audiences respond to stories, observations, promotions and callouts for creative assistance.

These encounters not only have creative benefits but also financial ones, where they drive traffic, audience development, loyalty and subscriptions (see Batsell 2015). They may, where they lead to collaboration or transparency in news-making, also engender greater trust in how journalists work (Silverman 2014). Given the potential of audience interaction to influence news production (Lee and Tandoc 2017), and its normalisation in journalism work on social media, it is critical that reporters feel capable of managing its challenges.

Our paper presents qualitative survey and follow-up interview data from journalists educated at six Australian universities, indicating significant gaps in our digital journalism curricula and on-the-job training for dialogic journalism. While the sample is small, we argue it is indicative of trends suggested in the literature review and our conceptual framework, pointing to the need for more representative research in this area.

## Epidictic, Civic & Ethical Accounts of News Conversation

Public journalism scholars were early proponents of dialogue with audiences. Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg (1994, xv) suggest newspaper journalists could build a stronger reader connection and improve their work by “imagining readers as participants in an ongoing conversation”. Heikkilä and Kunelius (1998, 81), foresee the challenges of resourcing that interaction when they argue that “journalism should take seriously its roles both as the initiator and facilitator of public discussion, and that it should commit more resources into being able to cover the ongoing results of the dialogues it has set in motion”.

However the idea that journalists might need to learn *how* to hold conversations with audiences was not a major focus of early literature on participatory journalism, citizen journalism or user generated content. These studies tended to focus on the ways audience participation in news-making might transform journalism work, positively or negatively. As Lawrence, Radcliffe, and Schmidt (2018) indicate, participatory journalism research over the past decade charts a shift from hopes for egalitarian news conversation (e.g., Bowman and Willis 2003; Bruns 2005; Gillmor 2004) to more cautious analyses that often question whether participation will undermine the authority and legitimacy of professional journalism (Thurman 2008; Singer and Ashman 2009; Reich 2011).

Beyond this epidictic rhetoric, in the 2000s we saw two distinctly normative traditions of analysing journalists’ roles in what by now was often labelled “news commenting”. The first examines the political and civic contexts for conversations (Ruiz et al. 2011; Graham 2013; Graham and Wright 2015; Meyer and Carey 2014). Meyer and Carey, like Dan Gillmor before them, argue that journalists need a visible presence in online communities, and should get involved in comments sections to build social cohesion among their audiences. However, these studies don’t indicate how journalists could best mobilise address or respond to contributors.

The second, participatory journalism studies, considers dialogic interaction as a pursuit of mutual benefit. “Reciprocal” journalism (Lewis, Holton, and Coddington 2014; Holton, Lewis, and Coddington 2016), “social” journalism (Garcia de Torres and Hermida 2017; Jarvis 2014) and “dialogic” journalism (Heikka 2017) show greater interest than earlier studies in how journalists should behave towards audiences and meet their expectations of conversation. Lewis, Holton, and Coddington (2014) examine journalism’s role in cultivating positive relationships of trust, connectedness, and social capital through mutual exchanges. Jarvis (2014) outlines the core skills of social journalism as “listening to a community, hearing and discerning its needs and then thinking about how best to help it meet those needs”. His approach raises questions about how differently people and communities speak, according to their own cultural norms, and how responses might be calibrated to their expectations. Heikka (2017) associates dialogue between audiences and journalists as key to social innovation, and defines it as a reflective process of developing shared understanding. However he does not explore the challenges of managing that communicative interaction, or consider its rhetorical, social or cultural demands.

Possibly the best elaborated research on audience expectations of conversation, and how they conflict with journalist routines, conventions and values, is found in journalism ethics work. Friend and Singer (2007, 151–176) in examining journalists’ roles and responsibilities in responding to user contributions, highlight the tensions between the

traditional concept of professional distance, and audiences' desire to know reporters. They note that reporters conventionally adopt a "dispassionate, analytical tone" (172) and attempt balance in email responses, even though they know *not* exercising their opinions might make them appear disengaged. Writing eight years later about social media, Fincham (2015) notes that journalists still think it risky to express personal opinions, even though transparency is recognised as desirable in an age of declining trust. Yet Garcia de Torres and Hermida later found Carvin's social journalism did reconcile informality, audience collaboration, and transparency with journalistic "values of accuracy, trust and verification" (2017, 190).

Domingo notes that pressures of time and immediacy prevent reporters from interacting more, as does their "reluctance to enter spaces symbolically owned by the audience" (2015, 167). Yet ethical inquiries into participatory power relations are prone to highlight organisational approaches, like comment moderation, to controlling audiences/communities (Almgren and Olsson 2015; Waldman 2013; Domingo 2015) rather than interrogating how journalists might modify their dialogic behaviours. Domingo, for example, highlights the *Guardian's* use of "best practice" guidelines to encourage ideal contributor behaviour. More interesting though is empirical research indicating journalistic intervention in comment sections can improve the civility of debate (Stroud et al. 2014; Ksiazek 2018). It suggests strategic interaction could make conversations more productive.

Domingo's (2015) call for research into how news audiences experience participation could also help to inform journalists' approaches to dialogue and governance of that interaction. Isolated studies suggest that some participants are not happy with editorial control of commenting spaces (Løvlie, Ihlebæk, and Larsson 2018) and have problems with the idea of co-moderation (da Silva 2015). A recent comparative study of user perceptions of in-house and social media commenting argues that we still lack research into how "commenters" view this exchange (Kim, Lewis, and Watson 2018) despite useful studies into contributor motivations (Barnes 2018; Stroud et al. 2017).

Addressing this blind spot may be key to effective interaction with minority communities. Feminist, African- and Asian-American Twitter users have said they do not want journalists to harvest their posts for stories without permission, hold them up as community representatives without discussion, or potentially expose them to surveillance and harassment (Freelon et al. 2018, 79–84). They also note that if journalists do not genuinely engage in contentious public conversations, they risk making errors of interpretation (81). As Guzman (2013, 210) argues, in a time when social media hosts diverse, self-informing communities, it is critical for journalists to learn to report *with*, rather than *to* their audiences.

We argue the lack of research into what the audience wants from journalists in conversation is part of other absences in research on how we train reporters to engage audiences safely, inclusively and productively in public conversations, on diverse platforms, and in different contexts. Even the most recent survey of journalism and social media doesn't mention this as a priority (Lewis and Molyneux 2018).

While dialogic knowledge, skills and techniques are represented in journalism education textbooks and taught in classrooms and workplaces, the literature suggests that there are significant gaps in learning about audience expectations, best practice interaction for inclusivity and diversity, and managing incivility.

## The Pedagogy of Conversation

The pedagogical resources needed by digital journalism educators to teach rationales for online conversation, and ways to undertake it, are certainly expanding. The most recent editions of *Journalism Next* (Briggs 2019), *Multimedia Journalism* (Bull 2018) and the *Online Journalism Handbook* (Bradshaw 2018) all feature more on dialogic journalism than the originals, and focus on social media. Bull promotes Twitter as a conversation (2018, 99), Briggs presents news as a conversation (2019, 101) and Bradshaw proposes that “conversation is king” (2018, 83), the lifeblood of journalism (82). All now teach the building and maintenance of communities.

We can also see an increasing concern with the need to listen to and engage with audiences. Journalists are urged to demonstrate their interest in dialogue by sharing users’ posts, following and listening to them, replying to questions, and serving their audience, not their ego (Bradshaw 2018, 104, 338). Briggs offers “rules of engagement” gleaned from the *Huffington Post* and *New York Times* (2019, 102, 112).

There is rather less in this literature about understanding different audience expectations of news talk. Bradshaw urges journalists to find out “what they are doing or what is important to them” (106). He notes that most publications will have several different communities, but then tends to speak of the definitive “community” with which journalists will interact. Briggs argues that much of dialogic conduct is “common sense to digital natives who grew up interconnected with one another’s thoughts and opinions” (2016, 123). Yet ways of interacting with vulnerable or marginalised communities are not covered in his or the other texts.

There is much in these textbooks about what to talk about, but far less about how to say it in context: questions of tone, address, formality, and style appropriate to audience expectations. Bradshaw invokes columnists’ flair as a guide to expressing personality, but the example of Susie Boniface’s sharp tongued feminist style (107) may not be appropriate in many contexts. The three texts lack solid coverage of the different communicative cultures and conventions on Reddit, Twitter and Facebook, although Bradshaw does warn journalists to be aware of how emojis might be interpreted. Vanessa Edwards’ research text is more useful, in offering advice about adjusting the tone and content of requests for different platforms (2016, 51).

The three main texts briefly note the tendency for audiences to make nasty or abusive remarks (Bradshaw 2018, 338; Briggs 2019, 114; Bull 2018, 274), but there is little useful instruction in how to react to online attacks - when to interact, when to publicly dismiss, or report threats to management or police. Rhetorical strategies for addressing negativity, anger, fallacious arguments, or misinformation are absent. As negative comments can reduce the authority and significance of articles they appear alongside (Waddell 2017), it seems important to elaborate on how journalists – or community managers – might respond to them. Instead participatory guidelines or moderation are proposed as the key tools of conversational control (Bradshaw 2018, 337; Briggs 2019, 112; Bull 2018, 273).

There is good attention to legal issues in dialogic journalism, to the problems with using personal social media accounts, and to the importance of error correction. However, given the personal and professional risks journalists are now exposed to on social media, more attention should be paid to exploring digital security issues.

Edwards raises salient points about risk management: that journalists should know their social media guidelines and be aware of personal safety when disclosing details to audiences (2016, 52).

Aside from the notion of reciprocal journalism, which is mentioned by Bradshaw, and the general rubric of “news as conversation”, there is no cohesive theoretical approach in these texts to developing educational strategies for dialogic journalism. With that in mind we now propose a framework for thinking about its development.

## Dialogic Journalism

It is indicative of the triumph of old media thinking over participatory impulses that journalism academics study news “commenting” (Barnes 2018; Wright, Jackson, and Graham 2020), rather than talk or conversation. This label fits with the oppositional history of objectivity and dialogism (Soffer 2009) which positions journalism as the authorised monologue, and comments as addenda, generating a separate public dialogue.

To counter this reductionism, our study proposes “dialogic journalism” as a future framework for analysing news conversation’s complex dynamics online, and the dynamics of cultivating communicative interaction and response. Unlike Heikka’s interpretation of this term, our approach is grounded in the work of writer and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986), whose concept of the dialogic draws on sociology and narrative theory. His work encourages us to think about news conversation in terms of the behaviour of actors, the interactional setting, rhetorical factors and the relational aspects of exchanges, as well as their temporality and flow. For Bakhtin, dialogue involves “utterances” or speech which:

- is addressed to an anticipated listener and an expected response.
- is relational: shaped by the rationale for interaction, the expectations of the imagined Other, historical connections to literature and speech, and the political, social and cultural contexts for expression.
- involves multiple speakers/perspectives and chains of meaning.
- involves processes of negotiation over time and are future-oriented (Author 2021, forthcoming).

Understanding the challenges of dialogic interaction for journalists first requires us to explore the subject’s experience of relational speech, including the rationale and context for interaction, imagined audience and expected responses. Context analysis could begin by acknowledging much news involves conflict as a central news value, and that news that is discussed more actively demonstrates characteristics of uncertainty, controversy, and negativity (Ziegele, Breiner, and Quiring 2014). In these respects negative audience responses are both predictable and important to mediate productively.

A dialogic journalism research agenda could in turn probe audience expectations of interaction and appropriate response, as well as the problems created by othering and being othered – particularly the feelings of difference, marginalisation, tension, aggression and hate that arise, and how they can be addressed in public debate. There is also further value in exploring the shaping and governance of chains of meaning in communal discussions, and the processes of negotiation around who speaks, when, in what

contexts, for how long and with what permission to be published, excerpted, and legitimated.

This is a rich field of exploration, to which we offer an initial contribution, focusing on understanding the rationale and context for journalists' conversations, their expectations regarding negative audience interactions and the extent of their education and training for dialogic interactions, particularly their capacity to deal with incivility and abuse.

## Survey and Interviewing Methodology

Given that there are potential gaps in both the research and educational literature about how journalists might conduct and manage news conversations, we hypothesised that journalists might be able to articulate the nature of that gap if we investigated the extent of their educational and workplace training for dialogic encounters, and placed it in a specific context – that of managing abusive interactions. So we sought to do an indicative study to test our hypothesis and to answer our primary research questions: What was the context and rationale for Australian journalists' dialogic interaction? What were the types of education and training that underpinned it? And finally, what forms of education and training do they need to better manage negative audience interactions and foster productive responses, such as community building?' We focused on journalists' experience of responding to negative interactions as incivility and abuse have been identified as a deterrent to participation for both journalists and audience.

Australian journalists are largely tertiary educated and commonly receive workplace training, so they made an ideal group with which to explore these questions. As this was an exploratory study we used a snowball sampling approach to survey a small group of Australian graduate journalists from media and journalism programs in which we had taught, or at which we had colleagues from the Journalism Education and Research Association (JERAA) teaching, and so could verify the curriculum to which they had been exposed. Following the survey we conducted interviews with half the sample to explore issues and themes raised in the survey.

Our targeting narrowed the search field to three universities in the state of Victoria and three in the state of New South Wales. Approaching potential survey recipients in this way meant that the respondent field was smaller than if we had sent surveys to journalism workplaces, but it enabled us to be more confident of the reliability of the results. Given the incidence of survey fatigue we also reasoned that a targeted approach to former students would be more successful.

Following our ethics approval, we made a Qualtrics survey available to 90 contacts. We received 32 complete responses from journalism graduates from six universities, working in legacy print and broadcast or digital born media, a completion rate of 35.55%. There were 13 male and 19 female respondents, so a slightly larger proportion of women (59.37%) than is evident in the profession, as of 2018 (55.5%) (Hanusch and Tandoc 2017). Respondents were overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon, with only two from Asia and one Southern European. This proportion, while disappointing in diversity terms, reflects the lack of plurality in Australian news media (Viyas 2018).

Most respondents worked for different local, regional and national broadcast and print outlets that are now collectively managed by Nine Entertainment, including Nine television and the legacy newspapers the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* (11), with others

working at different local, regional and national news publications owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (9), at the two public service media companies, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Special Broadcasting Service (8) and three "other" publications, including two independent digital-only platforms. Twenty five were journalists, three were digital content producers, two were broadcast presenters, one a radio producer and one a communications professional.

The year of graduation showed that we engaged a mixed group, with four graduating pre-2006 (4); two cohorts of nine graduating 2007–2010 and 2011–2016; and the largest number being recent graduates, 2017–2018 (13). Over half of the respondents would have been educated after the widespread professional adoption of social media.

The survey had 26 questions, the first ten of which dealt with consent, identifiers, demographics and the platforms on which they interacted. We explored journalists' rationales for interaction, the extent of their university and workplace preparation for dialogic interaction, the degree of workplace encouragement for interaction and where they got the most positive responses to their work. Because of the deterrent that online abuse presents to interaction, we probed their experience of this, and asked to what extent they felt prepared for dealing with aggression and abuse. We also asked what training they felt they needed in the future to deal with abuse. Three open questions were asked about responding to abuse in order to gather qualitative information on differences in gender and workplace approaches. Due to the small scale of the survey, the intent was not to produce quantitatively robust analysis of variables, but rather indicative tendencies.

After the completion of the surveys, we conducted 16 semi-structured interviews of 40 minutes each in Melbourne, Sydney or via phone or Zoom video chats. The interviews explored in more detail respondents' and their businesses' context and rationale for conversations, their strategies for dealing with online violence and with diverse communities and the training they would like to receive to deal with audiences more productively. These interviews were later transcribed before being analysed thematically, with initial coding for relevant keyword/phrase incidence in response to qualitative questions, and then theme development (Herzog, Handke, and Hitters 2019). Themes extracted included interaction, abuse, and diversity and the datasets were examined and checked by both authors.

## Survey Findings

When asked to nominate the three most relevant reasons why they interacted with audiences, respondents' most common responses were: it is part of everyday journalism work (22), and I learn more about the subject matter I'm covering (15). Thirteen respondents said it helped them to build a personal following, over a third that they enjoyed talking to their audience and a third replied that it was expected of them. Only six said it helped their organisation to build engagement. Just three respondents saw interaction as a civic duty, and three did not interact at all.

When asked how much they were encouraged to interact with audiences the majority, 17 of 32, opted for "a moderate amount". Five were asked to interact "as much as possible", but a surprising almost third of respondents selected "not at all". This could suggest a lack of interest at managerial level for dialogic strategy, or alternatively, delegation of interaction to specialist social media teams, which was indicated later in interviews.

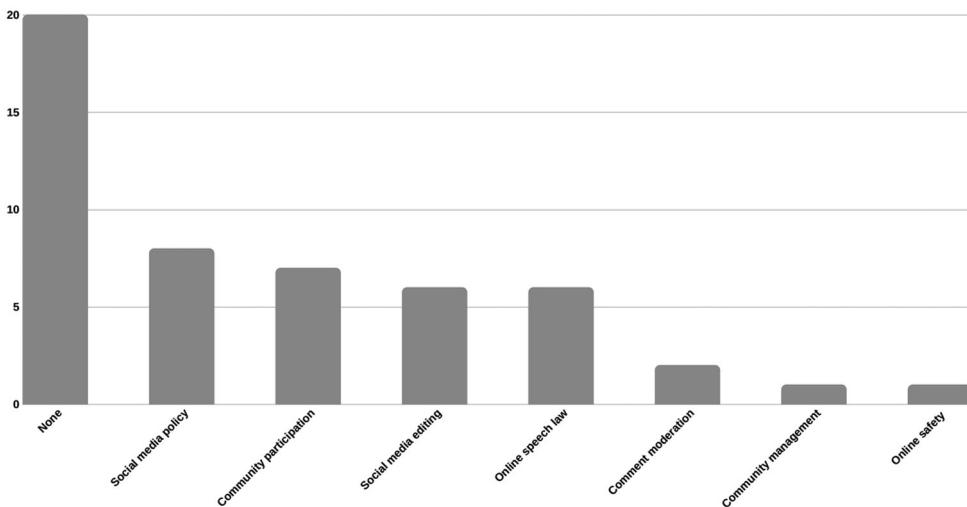
In response to the question “on what platform do you interact most?” the answer was overwhelmingly social media, although respondents also mentioned comments sections and email. All respondents interacted on Twitter, with the majority using Facebook, half using Instagram, nearly a third using WhatsApp, 5 using Reddit, 2 each respectively for Snapchat and LinkedIn.

When we then asked “What types of training did you have at university for interacting online?” we found that most survey respondents said they had had no training in audience interaction (Figure 1), with their year of graduation having little discernible effect regarding how they answered. In the survey, we proposed a set of skills they might have been taught, based on our knowledge of their curricula, current journalist texts and workplace practices: social media policy, social media editing, online speech law, online community participation, comment moderation, community management, and online safety strategies. Social media policy, which governs their own professional performance in a conversation, was the second most popular response. Smaller positive responses were noticed for community participation, the act of interacting in a community; for social media editing, which involves posting of stories, some moderation and curation of comments; and for online speech law— vital knowledge given Australia’s strict defamation and discrimination provisions.

We found in contrast that the overwhelming majority of respondents said they had had *some* dialogic training at work. Again, this was chiefly in understanding social media policy, as well as in doing comment moderation and in taking part in online communities. Very few indicated they had had training in community management, with its key role of

## TRAINING AT UNIVERSITY

62.5% of respondents said they had no training in the selected forms of dialogic journalism skills



**Figure 1.** Survey results: dialogic interaction training at university.

encouraging and managing interaction, and few said they had had digital law or safety training (Figure 2).

In reply to the question “Have you experienced personal abuse from the audience online?”, we found two thirds of respondents said they had been abused “sometimes” or “a lot”. When adjusted for sample bias, there was still a noticeable difference in terms of gender, with women being more likely than men to answer they had been the subject of online negativity “sometimes” or “a lot”. When asked which was the platform on which this abuse occurred, respondents reported this happened most often on Facebook, a platform which has a real user name policy, and then on Twitter, their company’s website in comments sections, or by email. This raises the question of whether abuse is necessarily correlated with anonymity or pseudonymity. Despite the incidence of abuse, when respondents were asked if they understood how to address aggressive comments, the majority of respondents said they had no, or only some, understanding (Figure 3).

When we asked what they thought were the best forms of preparation for dealing with abuse, most said their strategy was to ignore it, and one (male) indicated journalists needed a “thick skin” to do so. The phrase “they need to be taught to have a thick skin” and “thickens your skin” were part answers to the next open question “What should universities be doing to train journalists to deal with online abuse of journalists?”, suggesting journalists should simply brush off online attacks.

Around a fifth of respondents indicated they were resigned to negativity, calling abuse inevitable and arguing it was important to understand it was not personal. However, over a quarter recommended active responses like blocking the abuser, reporting the abuse to

## TRAINING AT WORK

Dialogic journalism skills are most often picked up on the job. 53.1% of respondents said they had training in social media policy. 31.2% had community or forum participation and content moderation skills.

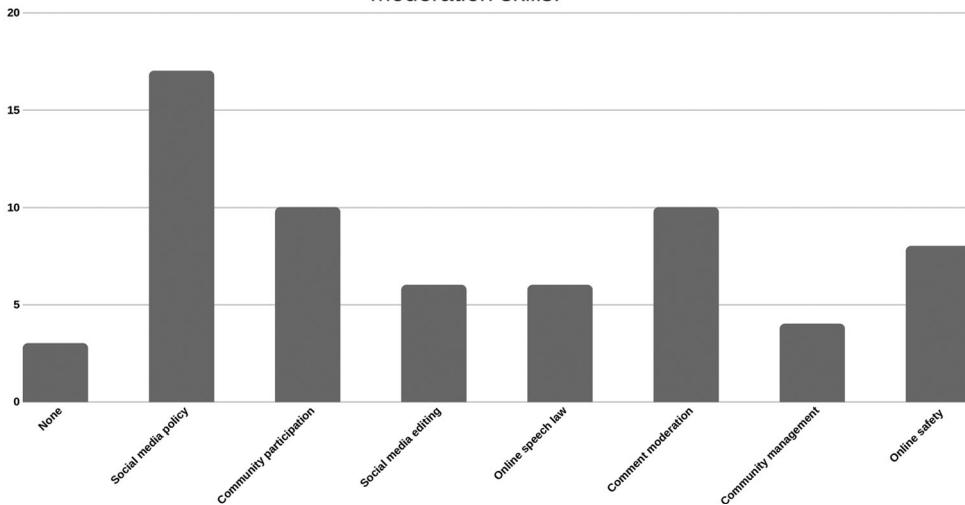
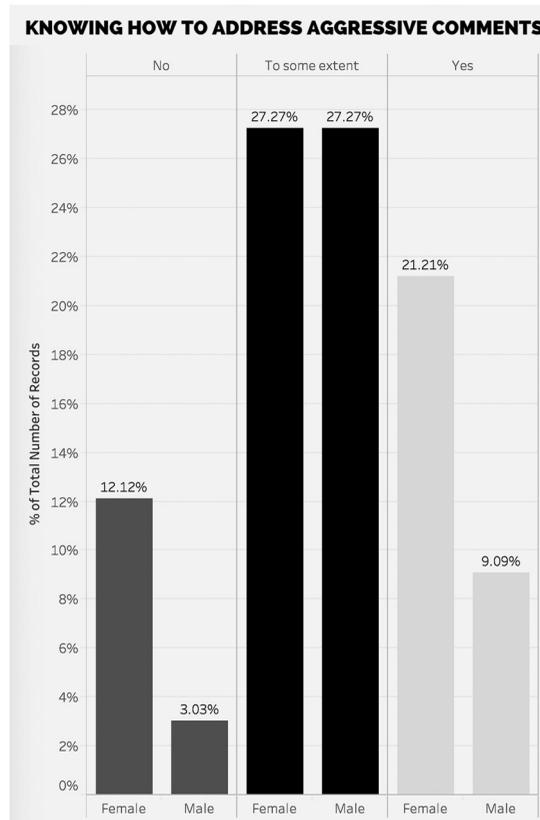


Figure 2. Survey results: dialogic interaction training at work.



**Figure 3.** Survey results: Knowledge of how to address aggressive comments.

platforms or managers, and protecting personal information. Two also said it was important to understand how to manage the problem, and to prepare yourself for it mentally, while another recommended it was key to respond to legitimate criticism. Only one suggested it was critical to learn “why abuse happens, what can be done about it and who the best people/agencies are when faced with it”. Women were nearly twice as likely as men to either ignore the problem, or conversely, to take action of some kind. Men were far more likely to say that abuse was unavoidable.

In reply to the question “What can universities teach journalism students in order to interact better with audiences?”, the top request was ways to deal with aggression and abuse, followed by “resilience” training, to help people manage the emotional toll of being unfairly or constantly targeted. Other responses, ranked by frequency of themes, were requests for basic training in how to interact most productively, in strategic use of social media and in digital safety and law.

### Interview Findings

After analyzing the survey data, we formulated 22 questions for the qualitative interviews to further probe the rationale for conversation with audiences, including its context as part of a work and business strategy. Participants were also asked about the specific kinds of

training they had had for conversational interaction and what other experiences they drew on in learning to interact. A number of questions were asked about their experience of online abuse and how to deal with it, including probes about themes from the open survey answers, suggesting journalists should simply “grow a thicker skin” to respond to audience negativity, and that they might find value in resilience training. We asked participants to indicate whether or not they considered the diversity of their audiences when they were interacting online. Finally, participants were invited to reflect on what kind of training would help them to create and maintain more productive relationships online.

Following thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, we have grouped the common responses by interaction rationales, interaction contexts, responses to abuse, responses to diversity and training needs.

### ***Interaction Rationales***

There was a general consensus among those who did interact with audiences, that they would do so when it was useful for their work (e.g., for responding to feedback, sourcing quotes, following up on a story or staying in touch with their community). They would also respond to comments when the conversation was “respectful”, “constructive” or “reasonable”, or when people had genuine questions which they could answer. Only two indicated they would interact in response to negative posts, to try and change the commenters’ thinking or to address a problem that had been raised online.

Nearly half thought dialogic interaction was a good way to promote their “content”, and boost their personal profile, their following or their “brand”. However only three of the interviewees interacted as part of a deliberate business strategy. One said she wanted to “connect with and maintain loyalty with our current readers” as well as finding new readers to “expand the reach” of her publication and build its community, ensuring it remained competitive. One said if he wrote a piece on real estate, he would be encouraged to send the story to real estate agents, new home buyer groups and to family and friends on Facebook. The most specific reference to a business rationale came from a journalist at an ABC local radio station:

We’re always being told from management that [the business strategy] needs to be a focus of your day ... So, we all have individual agreements that we sign as to performance levels we need to meet and every single person in the organisation, that is a “content creator”, has to adhere to an individual engagement with social media.

### ***Interaction Contexts***

While reporters would interact on their own social media accounts, the size of their organisation and its workflows for managing interaction determined the degree to which reporters responded to audience comments or posts on branded channels. Most journalists working for large organisations like the ABC, Nine Entertainment (including a range of Fairfax newspapers and platforms) or SBS did not have to respond personally on branded social media as there were specialised teams to do this – suggesting that dialogic journalism could be emerging as a social media specialism. At larger newspapers, junior reporters were generally not required to reply to comments. One interviewee told of a “three strike” rule at a “big newspaper organisation in Melbourne”. A friend had made

the mistake of replying to a comment and was given “the first strike right there”. He was told, “You don’t have the authority, you’re not entitled to do so”.

At smaller news sites and regional newspapers, journalists were more involved in responding to audience members and either responding to comments, taking them down or sending them up to editors. Some were expected to monitor comments on their own stories even after they left work. This had contributed to burn-out for a couple of local newspaper respondents who decided to change jobs in between answering the survey and attending our interview.

One interviewee (Nine/Fairfax) said cost-cutting had done away with a focus on audience interaction:

We used to have monthly meetings with our manager ... and he would run through how to communicate better with our audience and try to get our digital stats up higher and all of that. But since the end of last year we don’t do that anymore because resources have been cut back really immensely.

### ***Responding to Abuse***

All but one of the people we interviewed had received online abuse or angry comments, of various degrees of seriousness. Interviewees who worked for local or regional press said the lack of subeditors and the speed of online publication led to mistakes, which then prompted adverse comments and they felt their editors did not back them up. One said she would thank punters for pointing out mistakes, but that with worse abuse, “it can be really hard not to have a go back at them”.

Most interviewees thought the idea generated by survey answers, that journalists should grow a thicker skin, was wise advice, although one interviewee rejected it as a “privileged perspective” which was not empathetic with people’s experience of abuse and how it affects them. Several women indicated they tended to dwell on negative responses more than the men they worked with, finding abuse hard to shake off. One female reporter on a regional newspaper said news companies should look out for negative impacts on staff “way more”:

... when it’s constant, something really small can affect you and it’s not about growing a thicker skin, it’s a matter of the industry upping its game to better cater for people.

Most of the men suggested that they would take bad comments in their stride but one acknowledged he was less a target than some colleagues:

I’m also conscious that being a white male I’m not exactly hugely susceptible to trolling online in the sense that some of my female colleagues certainly have been and people who are from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds certainly have been.

One man who had come out as gay had received a lot of online abuse, which he said he mostly managed to ignore, but it had made him delete his Twitter account. He likened using Twitter to “giving someone your home phone number”.

Women interviewees indicated several ways in which negative audience responses had affected their work. They chose to write about topics that were less likely to attract vitriol, were less likely to voice an opinion on Twitter, more likely to disconnect from social media and indicated they were inclined to step back from interaction.

## Responses to Diversity

Overall, few of our interview respondents indicated an awareness of what marginalised communities might expect of productive dialogue online. In response to the question “How much do you consider the diversity of your audience in your interactions?” most interviewees said they did, but then half the sample proceeded to outline how they addressed many audiences in reporting and news selection, rather than in dialogue online. Three women and one man gave examples of thinking about the implications of speaking with multicultural, Indigenous or LGBT+ audiences. One spoke of the need to “tap into” communities that were not currently part of their core audience, while another ABC journalist said she avoided using contentious hashtags:

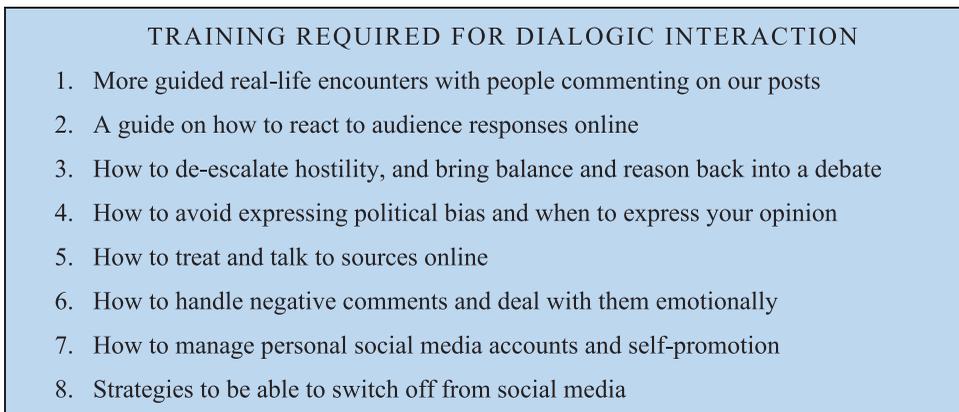
... like around Australia Day ... I'm making sure I don't use that hashtag anymore because I don't want to offend the Indigenous community following me. Trying to think a little bit too about transgender and LGBTQI ... all those sort of people too that may be following because I wouldn't think that I would personally ever say something that would offend them.

Most interviewees saw no problem with re-purposing audience posts without permission, believing them to be firmly in the public domain.

## Training Needs

Over half the interviewees claimed to have had no training in dialogic skills and others could only refer to vague or superficial social media training concerning “planning and scheduling posts”. Yet there was a strong, underlying belief in “learning on the job”, either because there was so much change in the workplace that skills lost currency quickly or because it was felt it was “common sense”.

All but one interviewee supported further training to encourage more productive dialogic interaction. Common answers to the question “What training would you like to receive in how to interact most productively with audiences” are grouped thematically in [Figure 4](#). Most suggestions have an ethical and/or procedural dimension, and as a whole suggest an interest in how to react more appropriately to audience responses, particularly to negative or hostile talk. One woman raised the need for training in how



**Figure 4.** Training required to improve dialogic skills for news conversation.

to respond to sexual abuse online. The ethical debate about the challenges of framing and expressing opinion mentioned in the literature review is reflected here, as is the desire to disconnect from social media. Only one point relates directly to a business strategy, and that is self-promotional.

Following on from the survey respondents' proposal that resilience training might be useful to journalists coping with the effects of critical audience responses, we asked interviewees what they thought resilience meant and how it might be taught in universities. Overall most regarded resilience as a personal characteristic which was acquired through experiencing adversity, rather than a way of thinking constructively about negative experiences that could be taught. As we discuss in detail elsewhere (Author and Author 2020) there was skepticism from a number of interviewees that such an "abstract" concept could be learnt formally, but it was generally regarded as a positive concept, and one that several interviewees thought could assist journalists to improve their mental health.

## Discussion

Our questions about the context and rationale for dialogic journalism suggest that while this cohort of Australian journalists interacts with audiences largely because it is a normalised, metricised aspect of their work, personal brand development, pleasure in dialogue and the desire for self-education are more important motivators than business rationales. This correlates with the centrality of autonomy to journalism work, and the relative lack of emphasis on online conversation in participants' business strategies. Our participants interact primarily on social media or by email rather than in comments sections, although branded channels and comments sections in larger organisations tend to be managed by specialist teams, confining those reporters to dialogue on their personal digital accounts. As such, future dialogic journalism analysis could explore how practitioners best derive satisfaction from relational encounters, whether this differs when they interact on personal or branded channels, and how this impacts the types and nature of dialogue they engage in, as well as the characteristics of the relationships they build with audiences.

Our next two research questions sought to establish what training and education journalists have received for news conversation, and whether journalists concurred with the educational gaps we had perceived in the literature, or whether they had further interactional or rhetorical training needs that we had yet to establish.

In response to RQ1 most survey respondents said they had had no formal university education in talking with audiences, although some noted they had been exposed to social media policy and editing, community participation and online speech law. Cross-checking with lecturers at participating universities suggests that while dialogic skills are mentioned in textbooks, and sometimes discussed in class, they are generally not a focus of weekly modules or assessable work.

Survey responses noted that workplace training in dialogic skills was more common, and around a fifth of the interviewees suggested that some of these techniques were more effectively developed on the job, through practical experience rather than in classroom exercises. However, given that a number of interviewees were restricted from replying to in-house comments, or posts on masthead social media channels, experiential

learning is likely being gained through personal accounts. This exposes journalists directly to negative responses without the benefit of training in how to deal with these. Overall these results suggest more study is needed of journalists' capacity to anticipate diverse interlocutors and unexpected responses to their dialogic overtures.

In response to RQ2 both survey and interviews indicated that the majority of our cohort believe more education in aspects of dialogic journalism would be advantageous as part of tertiary journalism courses. Chief among the topics they want to study are how to respond to aggression and abuse, and how to cope with its impacts on their psyche and professional credibility. This indicates a rich field of dialogic study in mediation and negotiation of chains of meaning, and positive re-orientation, arbitration or closure of negative threads.

These are areas in which our study indicates there may be gender differences that deserve further exploration. Are women journalists, for example, interacting to different degrees and in different contexts to their male colleagues, and with different strategies for addressing "trolling"? While we know that both women and men attract negative interaction, Jane's (2018) work on cyberhate suggests it is more likely to silence women and constrain their abilities to function productively in the digital public sphere. Our study suggests more work is needed on how women are "othered" in dialogic interaction, and how they can orient their responses to combat marginalisation and hostility.

There was an undercurrent of concern in both the survey open responses and interviews about privacy, data protection and personal safety, with the women in our sample demonstrating more concern about these issues and how they are managed than the men. This tallies with other research conducted by one of this study's authors suggesting that women journalists require gender dedicated digital safety training, in light of the tendency for them to be subject to more attacks, and more sexualised, graphic violence online than their male counterparts (Author 2018).

A few participants indicated a broader desire to expand their knowledge of dialogic interaction strategies, although they did not use terms associated with rhetorical competence, like tone, style and address, to discuss their needs. Rather they said they wanted "ways to respond to", and information on "when and how to defuse, react, or ignore" angry posts, guidance on how to respond to criticism or how to avoid sounding biased. There were several mentions in surveys and interviews of the need for role-playing at dialogic encounters, an indicator that rhetorical training could be taken up through gamification.

Importantly, in the interviews we see the spectre of shrinking resources raised as a reason for lessened focus on dialogic interaction. This suggests an evident need for dialogic prioritisation and productivity strategies, such as identifying which types of posts to reply to, and what types of responses will generate sustained, productive discussion.

Our proposal that there might be a gap in journalists' understanding of audience diversity, and how to address difference effectively in dialogue, was not clearly borne out in the interview responses. However, this could be because our question about "considering" diversity in interaction was not clear enough. In this respect, future research needs to focus on understanding how dialogic strategies can improve recognition of audience diversity and collaboration for inclusivity, in order to minimise the othering or silencing of respondents from minority backgrounds.

There are several limitations to this study, the most obvious being self-selection bias—as journalists who do not interact online would have been less likely to complete the survey or agree to be interviewed. Further, due to the small sample size of this study we cannot generalise about the types of interaction, contexts or approaches that require most attention in journalism curricula, and cannot present generalisable gender trends. However, we can recommend that these concerns deserve further representative study and international comparison, to understand how reporters are being trained for dialogic interaction in different national and cultural contexts.

## Conclusion

Rather than being a natural phenomenon that journalists are easily equipped to undertake, we have argued that news conversation online is a new field of communicative creativity and challenge. Current research tends to focus on how journalists can maintain their professionalism and credibility in online dialogue, and how the media can enforce civility online, rather than exploring how journalists might derive relational satisfaction from this interaction, and how they might approach and shape dialogue while addressing critique, incivility and attacks through their interactive and rhetorical practices. Journalism textbooks encourage reporters to build community online, but need to offer more ideas about how they might recognise and bridge cultural difference, or address unexpected and hostile responses.

In this study, we theorise Bakhtinian dialogic journalism as a framework for understanding the new knowledge and skills required of journalists when they talk with audiences. In analysing how the rationale and context for interactions might affect conversational dynamics for Australian journalists we have found them largely interacting for personal and professional gain, with some structurally constrained from responding, while others struggle to keep up with audience demands or develop dialogue as professional specialism. As dialogic journalism becomes increasingly tied to social media, it is essential that journalism education better addresses the distinct contexts and rationales for conversation or community building, and their basis in different interpersonal experiences and structural conditions, to ensure these practices are both sustainable and mutually enriching.

This study also foregrounds the need for reporters to better understand the diversity of audiences and their dialogic expectations, in order to improve the possibilities for debate and negotiation of meaning across cultural divides. Our findings indicate it could be useful for researchers to develop ways that young journalists can explore through role play different approaches to response, tone, address, and style in online conversation, and audience reactions to these. In particular, there is an important opportunity to investigate alternative approaches to audience negativity, other than ignoring or being resigned to it, in light of increasing strategic harassment of journalists (Reporters without Borders 2018). Dialogic journalism could provide a framework for studying more productive rhetorical strategies that address and de-escalate or otherwise combat online violence, and for understanding gender and cultural differences in the experience and mediation of this problem.

As a whole, this study indicates that journalists themselves are only just beginning to question their normative understandings of how conversations online might be best

conducted. It confirms the need for more targeted journalism education and training to aid interactions with audiences, and to better respond to negative interactions. In these respects, journalism educators have a vital role to play in questioning the historical opposition of objectivity and dialogue, and in studying how dialogic journalism knowledge can assist professionals to work more effectively and inclusively with the people they talk to in the everyday.

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## ORCID

Fiona Martin  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4591-823X>

Colleen Murrell  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4865-1745>

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