



DIY Textbook

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Finding the right textbook to fit a practical journalism course can be tough, and is even more difficult for those teaching outside the United States. Often the textbooks are written too much for an American student and culture, even those stamped with the words “international edition.”

In addition to covering digital and traditional journalism skills, a textbook in New Zealand should emphasize our special position as one of the most free media countries in the world, consistently rated higher than Britain, the United States, or other Western nations. Only a locally written book would include that focus.

It is understandable that most English-language textbooks are written for the American market, with its high volume of journalism students and vast number of education providers. The United States has an estimated 485 journalism programs (Lee *et al.*, 2012), while New Zealand has 10. Even our large neighbor Australia has only 21 journalism programs.

The problem with American journalism textbooks is not simply that the examples, terminology and spelling may be irrelevant to other students, or that some facts are limited. Media law varies from country to country, as do codes of ethics.

The real problem is the lack of global perspective. Some textbooks refer to *USA Today* or the *Wall Street Journal* as the largest-circulation newspapers and omit any of the dozen much-larger newspapers, such as Japan's *Yomiuri Shimbun*, with a circulation of 10 million; *The Times* of India with 4 million; and the UK's *The Sun* with 2.7 million.

Some of my students were bemused at an American media textbook that said the first newspaper was published in 1690. The author meant the once-only

newspaper published in Boston, and ignored the 1605 German newspaper that is still printing, and the 1665 British newspaper that is also still printing.

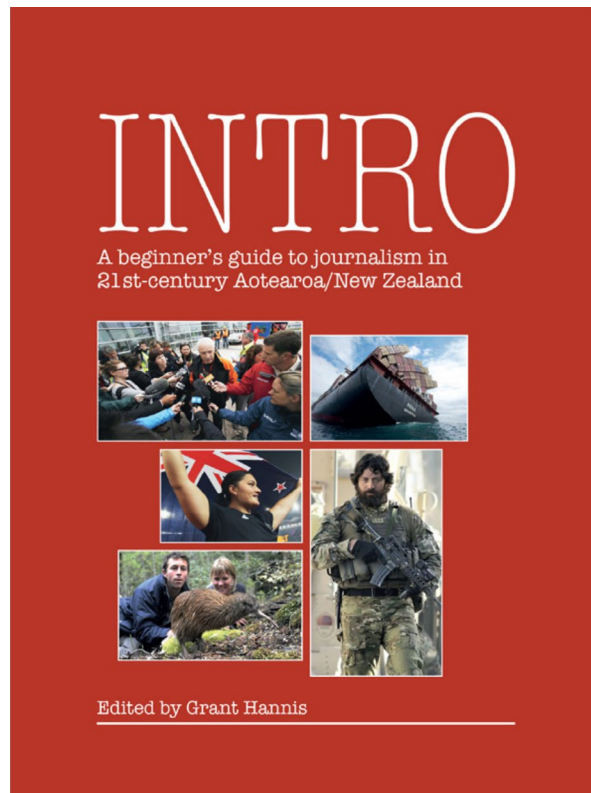
New Zealand had a local journalism textbook published in 2005, but it was outdated. Our solution to this problem was to write our own.

Four journalism professors at Massey University met weekly to plan our textbook, but after six months our only progress was agreement on a book title. We had the journalism, educating and writing ability, but lacked publishing and funding skills. We also seemed to lack enough time to devote to the task. We knew that Massey's 250 students a year would purchase enough books to cover our costs, but printing, designing and distributing all seemed daunting.

The dynamics changed when educators from other journalism schools expressed a similar desire for a local textbook. With this push, we formed a new editorial committee with five professors from four journalism schools. We selected Dr. Grant Hannis from Massey to be the listed author, and the rest would be associate editors. Right from the start, heads of all the journalism schools in the country gave verbal support.

Most meetings were by conference telephone and we quickly divided up the work and set up a detailed action plan with deadlines. I became the contributors editor, otherwise called the writers wrangler, who found volunteers to write each chapter, coached them in our style, and then nudged them to meet the deadline. I also prepared the index, while other associate editors volunteered to design the book in InDesign, to proofread, and to arrange photo releases.

We paid the writers a pittance, a flat \$300, but most admitted they simply wanted to give something back to the industry. The range of chapter authors was



impressive, including the country's top media law academic, the most experienced sports journalist, plus the foremost Maori issues reporter. We aimed for authors who had industry standing, but also teaching experience so they appreciated what students needed to know.

In addition, there were key journalism players in the market who we wanted involved, but who didn't have the time or inclination to write a chapter. Therefore, we interviewed them and wrote up their comments in breakout boxes throughout the textbook. These included executives of the two large newspaper chains, high-profile broadcast interviewers and award-winning investigative and feature writers. We also relied on some of our former students now working in the media to provide photos or comments.

The business side of the project was taken over by the New Zealand Journalism Training Organisation, our accrediting agency that is funded by the industry. The board published the book, marketed it and distributed it online. In return, the board keeps surplus

income.

There were some snags along the way. One of the associate editors dropped out because of work commitments. Several chapter editors dropped out when they realised the work and time required, and we had to find replacements on short notice. Several chapter authors didn't feel competent to provide the exercises that were posted online for each topic. In those cases one of the editors took over.

Ten months and many grey hairs later it is finished—22 chapters, 378 pages. Students will pay the equivalent of \$65 for their textbook. Professors will have information specific to our industry, plus local case studies and exercises.

The launch was November 27 at the annual conference of the Journalism Education Association of New Zealand, where all the country's journalism schools enthusiastically agreed to use the textbook.

Editor Grant Hannis has started receiving kudos for the book. "One leading educator with many years' experience warmly congratulated me on the book, given its breadth and readability. Another educator said he particularly appreciated the online exercises, as resources such as exercises are often time-consuming and difficult to produce," he said.

Three weeks into the academic year more than 350 copies were sold, meaning the publisher has covered cost and is already making a profit. It is too early to know student reaction, but the best news, so far, is that we haven't found any errors in the book.

Catherine Strong teaches journalism at Massey University in New Zealand.

REFERENCE

- Becker, L. B., Vlad, T., Simpson, H., & Kalpen, K. (2012). Annual survey of journalism & mass communication graduates. Retrieved from http://www.grady.uga.edu/annualsurveys/Graduate_Survey/Graduate_2012/Grdrpt-2012mergedv2.pdf