

JOURNALISM  
MATTERS  
50 YEARS OF  
JOURNALISM  
AT RMIT

*Edited by*  
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# PREFACE

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## Journalism matters

*Anecdotes, facts and images from the field*



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An 18-year-old student enters an RMIT University lecture hall for the first time. Another student's voice becomes more confident with each iteration of "this is the Triple R Midday News". In the university broadcast studios, another student lets out a slight smile as they scramble to keep up with the autocue.

Alexandra Wake looks up from an open book as a curious student knocks on her office door. Years earlier, Michelle Griffin updates the typewriters in her office of *The Melbourne Times*, lugging a 90s PC onto her desk.

Hari Raj dodges tear gas while covering protests in Hong Kong. Nasya Bahfen speaks out about anti-Muslim media bias in the aftermath of the New Zealand mosque shootings. Patricia Karvelas brushes her fringe behind her ear and stares directly into the camera lens as a student

journalist for RMITV's *Smartline*, and 27 years later takes the lectern for a professorial lecture at her alma mater.

A whistleblower gives their trust to Drew Ambrose, speaking out against authorities in a documentary that leads to a raid on the Al Jazeera Malaysia headquarters. Years before, Nick McKenzie takes to a public phone box to make a confidential call to a source.

Britt Clennett embraces a Ukrainian woman — her son dead and her house in ruins — as warzone reporting brings humanity to the fore. Rachael Hocking sits with Stolen Generation survivors and listens, deeply, to their stories.

Mark Doman monitors satellite data over “re-education” camps in western China. Simon Love stands alongside the media pack as a lockdown is announced by Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews.

The Global Financial Crisis changes journalism. Digital news changes journalism. Covid-19 changes journalism.

Transformation creeps into newsrooms and university departments, welcoming a wider diversity of faces, accents and histories across increasingly varied media platforms.

In 2023, final-year journalism student Mackenzie Heard wonders, “what have I signed up for?”

These images and more grace the pages of this book, which is composed of reflections from RMIT Journalism alumni, staff and students. These are real experiences, collated across lives, decades and continents to be delivered to us on the page. The common factor is that each contributor studied or taught journalism at RMIT (and sometimes both).

This collection was envisioned by Associate Professor Alexandra Wake, one of many tireless Program Managers of Journalism at RMIT, who had a vision of celebrating

our 50-year anniversary with a book of reflections from RMIT Journalism alumni. Alex's introductory essay to this volume gives a glimpse of the importance of the journalism program, a legacy she's extended by setting up a scholarship fund linked directly to sales of this book. Alex entrusted the task of editing this book to me, and along with the contributors and editorial team at the Bowen Street Press, I think we've developed a collection exemplifying the spirit of RMIT Journalism: inquiring, true and always focused on real-world lives and issues.

It is 2023 and we are celebrating 50 years of journalism education at RMIT University. For the past half-century, since 1972, RMIT Journalism has been synonymous with practical training and thorough investigation. While we commemorate our achievement as a university department, the events detailed in these essays are indivisible from the key events of Australian journalism. As you turn the pages of the timeline of *Journalism in Australia 1803–2023*, you'll follow shifts in media ownership, technological advancement and see a national press develop its ethics, tone and personnel. Within these changes you'll note the beginning of journalism education at RMIT, with the Diploma in Journalism introduced in 1972.

The Diploma was primarily for cadet journalists, and in their first semester students studied courses on shorthand, typing, knowledge of the library, and the tantalisingly vague "Journalism 1A" and "Journalism 1B". No doubt these courses required students to report on current affairs (as our coursework still does). Records show that the first journalism cohort, under the tuition of Lyle Tucker, interviewed key figures in the Max Stuart case, as the incarcerated Indigenous man (Stuart) applied for parole in the early 70s. In 1978, the Bachelor of Arts (Journalism) was introduced as the first graduates of journalism at RMIT

started making their way into the field. In the 80s and 90s, student radio and newspaper were established and RMIT was confirmed as *the place to go* if you wanted to learn journalism. The Bachelor of Arts (Journalism) became the Bachelor of Communication (Journalism) in 2003 and was soon accompanied by a program for postgraduates, the Graduate Diploma in Journalism.

In 2008, as an 18-year-old fresh from high school, I wandered into this history. I came to a journalism degree at RMIT with, like many of the students who fill my tutorials, a desire to write. To be a Writer: capital W, steaming black coffee, burning fireplace, oak desk. The concision and (to my mind) restriction of hard news style frustrated me — for I was a poet! — but in hindsight, the skill of clear expression is fundamental to great writing (as key to the news report as it is to the essay and, yes, even the poem). While it was painful to corral my desire for creative and florid language into an inverted pyramid, I'm grateful to have learned this skill as a young journalist.

Stumped by the in-class task of writing one's own obituary — a task too existential for undergraduate me — I pushed out a hasty and vague tribute to Stefanie Markidis, the illustrious travel writer. The assignment was returned with one major edit — the lecturer had marked a red line through each appearance of “writer” and beside it, offered the variation “journalist”, at times with an exclamation mark to emphasise the point.

Yet journalism study is an excellent training ground for a writer. Practising the art of reporting, I learned to listen, note and articulate with clarity. Since graduating from the Bachelor of Communication (Journalism), I've worked on magazines, edited books and completed a PhD in creative writing, which led to my work as an academic at RMIT. There's tension between the titles “writer” and

“journalist”, but if you want to write truth, in non-fiction or reporting, learning to focus on research, exploration and articulation will only sharpen your pen.

The contributors to this collection tell their stories with recourse to the powerful putty of the journalist-writer: the image, fact and anecdote. *Part 1* of this collection reflects on *How we got here*. Michelle Griffin assesses the unchanged DNA of journalism, the still-exhilarating buzz of seat-of-your-pantsuit reporting. Hari Raj cautions readers: don't study journalism – *do* journalism, and Nasya Bahfen casts an eye back over much-needed diversity shifts within journalism and journalism education. *Part 2* considers *Where we are* as a field of work and study, with Patricia Karvelas calling for cultural change in reporting institutions and Drew Ambrose reflecting on international journalism and its influence on everyday people. Nick McKenzie instructs young journalists to keep their word amid the pressures and trials of source protection and Britt Clennett gives us a clear message through the rubble of war reporting: stay human. *Part 3* turns attention to the future and *Where we are going*, as Rachael Hocking calls for a reckoning in the mainstream media and universities' integration of First Nations histories and critical thought. Mark Doman muses on the promise of digital reporting and Simon Love draws a collegial line between politics and journalism. Current students voice their hopes for journalism in the epilogue, as Mackenzie Heard and his peers tell us that journalism must rise above the noise and strengthen its commitment to truth.

The accounts within these pages create a reel of images that come together to indicate this moment, the history of journalism in this country that precedes it, and what we hope for the future. If there's a thread to be woven across the 50 years of journalism education at RMIT

University, and the essays in this book, it's this: journalism matters.

Journalism matters are events and issues of real importance to everyday people.

Journalism matters are questions of voice and representation.

Journalism matters to the student journalists who file stories on hyperlocal, local, national and global events.

Journalism matters to a true and healthy democracy.

Journalism, across its many forms and mediums, matters.