



Roundtable

The importance of Fact Checking and verification as core journalism curriculum

RMIT University for the World Journalism Education Council with support from
UNESCO

Wednesday 24 November 2pm to 5.50pm

The focus of this UNESCO- World Journalism Education Council roundtable at RMIT University in Melbourne Australia was on the importance of Fact Checking and Verification as core journalism curriculum, with an emphasis on Australia and the Indo Pacific. The multi-stakeholder roundtable involved journalism scholars, educators and civil society organisations in the Asia Pacific concerned with fact checking and verification as part of journalism education. The round table sought to capture information about what is currently being taught across the region

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The following is a very brief introduction to the conversation that occurred on the day. Bios of all speakers have been included. More than 60 people from around the Asia Pacific registered for the event. Those interested in the Fact Checking and Verification as Core Journalism Curriculum roundtable are encouraged to watch the full video recording of the event. <https://youtu.be/C-VZQxgEm0s>

Alexandra Wake, programs manager for journalism at RMIT University in Melbourne Australia, and the President of the [Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia](#), opened the roundtable. RMIT University has mandated a course, Fact Checking and Verification, for all students majoring in journalism in their first year. The subject is also an open elective to anyone within the university. Alex said the focus of the Roundtable was journalism education within universities, but it would also discuss challenges and opportunities for journalism students, and discuss ways journalism educators could help the industry and the public deal with misinformation and disinformation. The round table responded to the vision of UNESCO's International Programme for the Development of Communication for strengthening global journalism education. Three questions were posed: what are universities already doing in the fact checking and verification space? What are the issues surrounding fact checking and verification not currently captured within curriculum? What do employers want graduates in the Asia Pacific to know about fact checking and verification?

Tanya Notley, from the Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University, Adult Media Literacy in Australia, discussed her team's research around [Adult Media Literacy in Australia](#). Adult media literacy was now firmly on the government agenda for the first time in Australia, but also in many other countries around the world. There is no longer just a focus on young people's media literacy but on adult literacy, driven by the Covid-19 pandemic. She asked, how do we ensure that citizens are not being manipulated by misinformation actors? How do we ensure that they are asking critical questions about information and sources?

Kieran McGuinness, from the News and Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra, spoke about verification behaviours: how do we solve the problem of passive engagement with news? He drew on a series of [Digital News Reports](#) done by the University of Canberra. He spoke about Australian audiences, trust, and concern misinformation and verification behaviour. He reminded everyone that journalism existed in relation to its audience, and that students, were like other news consumers. Interest in news was generally declining in Australia, interest in politics was low and less than half say of those surveyed said they trusted most news. Many Australians were passive news consumers. When encountering misinformation online, the most common response was to do nothing.

Jane A Wardell, the Global Desk Editor at Reuters, spoke to the importance of instilling fact checking and verification skills in student journalists, and veteran journalists, saying it was absolutely critical in the current environment. The news industry was undergoing a radical transformation, with 24 hour news, digital innovation, mobile consumers and a fake news business model. The Reuters' principles of speed, accuracy, impartiality, and freedom from bias were more important than ever. She said when Reuters issued a news alert for a story, it had to be trusted which meant it had to be accurate. Trust was earned with vigilance and hard work by the reporting team. Reuters had 3,000 employees around the world writing 2.4 million stories a year, but their work was still dwarfed by information

circulating on social media. She noted that attacking professional journalists had become a political strategy around the world, particularly by populist leaders who could use social media to establish a direct link to potential supporters, with no fact checking and no balance checking and no questioning of the message when it is disseminated. Jane said fact checking needed to be considered a key skill, and near the top of any curriculum list, undertaken by journalism students.

Eoghan Sweeney, Founder of [OSINT Essentials](#), spoke to a presentation called *Pre-empt and Protect: Verification and the Editorial Process*. He specifically addressed his passion for embedding the essential skills of fact checking and verification with journalists and media organisations across the globe. Eoghan said newsrooms needed to clearly appreciate that their work stood not only on the quality of their reporting, but also on the ability of their audience to properly understand it. It was not patronising or elitist to acknowledge that large sections of the public had been significantly manipulated and undermined.

Saffron Howdon, spoke to the theme of teaching kids to be information detectives from her book [Kid Reporter as 'news detective' skills](#). Saffron says she did not think we are ever too young to be given the tools to help verify information, learn how to tell the difference between reliable and unreliable sources, and check the influence of your own perspective. That extension of critical thinking skills was, what she calls, being an information detective. Saffron outlined the issue of the growth of disinformation and said it was really important to ensure an engaged and informed citizenry, and a healthy functioning democracy, by learning how to combat this scourge of misinformation. She said the traditional journalist skills of curiosity and scepticism, asking lots of questions and striving for accuracy were great tools for teaching people to verify information themselves and to improve their media literacy.

Masato Kajimoto, from the Hong Kong University, spoke about his work teaching fact checking at his university and specifically the [Annie Lab](#) a student driven fact-checking project. He said his course was essentially a half fact checking, and half news literacy class. He said he did not approach his classes as vocational training courses. He said he was trying to train the future news audience rather than just future journalists in logical reasoning, analytical skills and effective writing. He argued that it did not matter what students do after graduation, they will always consume news.

Anne Kruger, from [First Draft](#), spoke about delivering professional practitioner-level verification courses to university students. First Draft is a not-for-profit organisation based in New York, focused on the communities that have been targeted by misinformation and disinformation. In Australia, First Draft has a large focus on the diverse and ethnic communities that have been targeted by disinformation campaigns. Her work was centred on trying to protect the communities and empower the communities from dangerous narratives.

Gordon Farrer, who established the [Fact Checking and Verification course](#) at RMIT University spoke about the Importance of Creative Thinking in FCnV. He said it was crucial for journalism graduates to go into a newsroom with these skills. He said fact checking and verification required observation, organisation, and persistence, which were skills that students could practice in class. He also said the work required imagination, left-field and creative thinking.

Syed Nazakat, from [DataLEADS](#), discussed best approaches and practices in teaching fact-checking in India. He noted that the information landscape had fundamentally changed in the space of 20 years. He said there was so much information available, that it was a global challenge to make sense of it. Syed said the misinformation tsunami had put unprecedented pressure on every segment of the society. It was not just journalists who had to deal with the misinformation during the COVID-19 but healthcare organisations. He noted that only half of India's population currently had access to the internet, but that it would soon be the entire population. That means 1 billion people on Facebook, on Whatsapp, etc dealing with the misinformation. He noted that during Covid doctors were attacked, shops were burned. He spoke about his training work with doctors, helping them to work with journalists to fact check and correct health information.

Ash Rahmani, from the Cal State University system in the US spoke about What are facts?: the politics of fact-checking (examples from US-based Spanish language mis-information). He noted the demographics in the United States and specifically that Latinos make up the largest single ethnic racial group in California at 39%. In the US, after English, Spanish was the most commonly used language on social media and Spanish language misinformation campaigns had exploded on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp. He also noted that some attention had been paid to Spanish-language misinformation but there were many other languages that had not attracted the same amount of attention.

Sushi Das is from the ABC RMIT Fact Check Unit which is a collaboration by RMIT University and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Sushi spoke about her [fact check micro credential](#) that she created for RMIT University students regardless of their disciplinary background. Her essential fact checking 101 course takes 90-minutes online and gives the students a digital badge that they can attach to their social media accounts so that prospective employers know that they have practical fact checking skills gained at a university with the endorsement of the national broadcaster. Sushi said employers, not just employers in journalism, wanted to hire people with fact checking skills who could navigate the Internet, particularly social media, and be able to distinguish between reliable, accurate sources of information and harmful misleading false information is an important life skill for everyone.

Jay Daniel Thompson, RMIT University, spoke about his new book [Fake News in Digital Cultures](#) and asked what ethical online communication might look like in an era of digital hostility, and network disinformation. He outlined how conspiracy theories have become particularly widespread in the era of networked media. He said the greatest challenge was how to verify the information produced and disseminated by certain movements as ethically and as irreversibly as possible.

Tito Ambyo, from RMIT University, spoke about Fact Checking and Otherness and challenged the audience to consider, what do we mean when we say facts? Some journalists think reality is an objective thing, that can be reported upon. But if you look at the history, the notion of the objective journalists (understood as detachment and neutrality) might be inconsistent with democracy. Tito said, we need to train our students to ask the question, whose fact is this? Where is it coming from? And who produced this fact? And who decides that this? In a complex society, he argued, a three year undergraduate degree made sense, because students needed to have the time to be able to think about these critical issues.

Speakers and Bios:



Tito Ambyo

Tito is an Indonesian/Australian journalist, lecturer and researcher. He teaches data and digital journalism courses at RMIT and is a PhD candidate with the Digital Ethnographic Research Centre at RMIT with a thesis on digital storytelling in Indonesia.



Sushi Das

Sushi is an award-winning journalist and chief of staff at RMIT ABC Fact Check. She has worked as a journalist for nearly 30 years and is currently involved in expanding her unit's fact-checking capacity to include training and research. She is also collaborating with the US-based International Fact-Checking Network to expand fact-checking into the Pacific region. Before joining the Fact Check team, Das worked as a journalist with The Age newspaper, where she held a number of senior positions, including state political reporter, news editor, columnist and Op-Ed editor. Her work has been recognised with two Melbourne Press Club Quill Awards. Das is the author of *Deranged Marriage*, an east-meets-west memoir about arranged marriage and is currently studying for a PhD in fact-checking.



Gordon Farrer

Gordon was a journalist for more than two decades before moving into tertiary education. His teaching obsession is fact checking and verification – also the field of his doctoral research – and OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) tools. To promote and build on this new field of journalism practice he set up RMIT Journalism's Fact Checking & Verification course, the first of its kind in Australia. Gordon believes fact checking, verification and research using OSINT are the future of journalism in a post-fact world and that Facebook is destroying democracy.



Masato Kajimoto

Masato is an associate professor of practice at HKU Journalism at the University of Hong Kong. He specializes in news literacy education and misinformation ecosystem research in Asia. He also founded a region-focused education NPO called ANNIE (Asian Network of News and Information Educators) and leads a student-driven fact-checking project called Annie Lab (<https://annielab.org>) at the university. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSQUkPnx_5Y



Syed Nazakat

Founder and CEO www.dataleads.co.in
Syed Nazakat is an award-winning Indian journalist, media entrepreneur, founder and Editor-In-Chief of DataLEADS, a digital media company he founded to promote open data and democratization of information at scale. He leads DataLEADS in New Delhi, as well as oversees its outreach across Asia with different partners, including with Google, IFCN and Internews.



Saffron Howden

Journalist, author and media literacy advocate. Saffron founded and edited the national newspaper for young people, *Crinkling News*, and co-authored *Kid Reporter: The Secret to Breaking News*. Saffron was a Google News Initiative Teaching Fellow and has worked as a reporter for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Northern Star* and Australian Associated Press (AAP). She is currently the national editorial trainer for Australian Community Media, responsible for training journalists across dozens of regional newsrooms.



Anne Kruger

First Draft APAC Director. Anne launched First Draft in Sydney in 2019 and soon expanded operations into APAC. In 2020 Anne was co-chief investigator at the Centre for Media Transition UTS, for DIGI's draft Disinformation Code which was later accepted by the ACMA. In 2021 Anne was appointed to the Code's independent Complaints Sub-Committee.



Kieran McGuinness

Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the News & Media Research Centre at the University of Canberra.

He is a co-author of the *Digital News Report: Australia* project and specialises in longitudinal research on digital media users and news consumption. His recent research focuses on mixed method approaches to news consumption, misinformation, journalistic role performance, and defence journalism.



Tanya Notley

Tanya is Associate Professor at the School of Humanities and Communication Arts and member of the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. She has 20 years of experience working with NGOs, public institutions, universities, and the United Nations in the areas of digital inclusion, community media and media literacy. Tanya is the Deputy Chair of the Australian Media Literacy Alliance (AMLA).



Ashiyan Ian Rahmani

Ash is a faculty member in the Communications Depts. of 3 campuses in the California State University system in the San Francisco Bay Area.. He completed his Ph.D. in the interdisciplinary Communication and Information Sciences program at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (UHM), looking at women leader's community radio and mobile devices in Fiji, for gender-equal government and climate change resiliency. Born and raised in the UK, of Persian ancestry, and new US citizen Ash has lived and worked for extended periods, teaching and in the non-profit and publishing sector in China, Mexico, the UK & Europe. His wife is from Mexico City,

where he is currently based. Ash is also in the initial stages of an international research collaboration documenting the learning of local knowledge and media systems' innovations in the COVID19 pandemic.



Verica Rugar

Verica is a professor at the School of Communication Studies, AUT, New Zealand, and the Chair of the World Journalism Education Council. Her research focuses on journalism's contribution to democratic society, and how journalism relates to a wider social, political, and cultural change.

of the forthcoming Fake News in Digital Cultures (Emerald Publishing, 2022).



Eoghan Sweeney

Eoghan is an online media specialist and trainer who has helped establish, develop, and support digital verification and fact-checking operations at media worldwide. Based on a decade of specialisation in digital verification and fact-checking, he designs, creates and delivers materials and workshops. In 2018, he created OSINT Essentials, which provides resources and expertise for open-source investigations and media literacy. A focus on digital verification and fact-checking began at news agency Storyful, where he was instrumental in developing the techniques and workflows that transformed it from a small start-up to a recognised global industry leader and innovator.

Now an independent consultant, he continues to develop and update training materials and practices to reflect the rapidly changing world of digital media and information.



Jay Daniel Thompson

Jay Daniel is a Lecturer, Professional Communication in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University. His research explores ways of cultivating ethical online communication in an era of digital hostility and networked disinformation. He is co-author (with Rob Cover and Ashleigh Haw)



Alexandra Wake

Alex is the President of the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia and the Programs Manager for Journalism at RMIT University in Melbourne Australia. Her research focuses on journalism education, press freedom, international journalism, journalism and trauma and gender.



Jane Wardell

Jane is a Global Desk Editor at Reuters, based in Sydney, managing breaking news and feature stories from around the world, particularly the Asia region. She is also Co-Curator of Reuters Next, the agency's flagship virtual global event. Jane was previously Pacific Bureau Chief at Reuters, overseeing a team of reporters covering general, political, economic and business news across the region. Prior to joining Reuters, Jane was based in London for the Associated Press for more than 10 years, during which time she decoded numerous G20 summits, travelled with several prime ministers and reported on the start of the global financial crisis from Iceland. Her earlier career included stints at The Financial Times, Complinet and Australian Associated Press. She has a Masters in International Relations and a Bachelor of Communications (Economics).