

Experiment in community-funded professional journalism

Sally Jackson | December 01, 2008

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THE nation's first large-scale experiment in community-funded professional journalism will start next year with the planned launch of the Foundation for Public Interest Journalism.

The project is being run by the Institute for Social Research at Melbourne's Swinburne University of Technology, modelled on overseas initiatives such as Newassignment.net, Spot.us and ProPublica.org.

It was born out of a conversation earlier this year between Margaret Simons and Melissa Sweet, both freelance journalists and authors.

"The idea is that we will explore new ways of commissioning and organising journalism using new media," Simons said.

"The idea is to develop a more interactive relationship between potential audiences and journalists so that audiences can directly commission the journalism that they want."

For example, a community group wanting to see some serious journalistic digging into a local health issue would approach the foundation and be matched with a suitable reporter and, eventually, potential publishers, whether they be print, digital or broadcast.

The group would be expected to contribute financing, but that would not buy it any say in the final story, Simons said.

"One of the key, hot issues is independence and it would be absolutely foundational in our documents that while you might sponsor journalism, you're not going to be controlling the results of that journalism," she said.

The foundation had already begun assembling journalist and publisher partners. Those approached included Private Media Partners, the publisher of Crikey.com.au, and Griffith University's Griffith Review. The project would require seed money in the tens of thousands of dollars to get off the ground, Simons said.

If all went to plan, it would be producing its first stories by the end of 2009.

"My ultimate aspiration would be to have a ... team of senior and professional journalists in ongoing interactive relationships with audiences doing ground-breaking journalism," she said.

The project was intended to shed light on what the future of journalism might look like and how it might be paid for, said Julian Thomas, director of the Institute for Social Research.

In August, Fairfax Media triggered intense debate on the future of quality privately owned media when it announced job cuts across its Australian and New Zealand operations.

Mr Thomas said Fairfax's cost-cutting was a sign of much larger changes going on in the economics of the media.

"In the past, time-consuming, high-value-added journalistic activity has been produced particularly in the broadsheet print media and to some extent on TV and elsewhere," he said.

"But we're seeing business models change dramatically and the serious erosion of the economic base of the broadsheet press. That has raised the question in Australia and all over the world: how do we support that sort of activity if we think there is a public good attached to it?"

The foundation would occupy new ground between traditional "big media" and the new online "citizen journalism" of the bloggers, Simons said.

"While citizen journalism ... will continue to be of growing importance, I do think there are skills that professional journalists have at their best which ... we have to try and find ways of carrying forward into the new media age."

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