

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

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Delivered at the UTS graduation ceremony
for graduates from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Institute of International Studies and Institute for Sustainable Futures
Great Hall, City campus, Wednesday 7 May 2008, 10.30am

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Deputy Vice Chancellor, Presiding Deans, Deputy
Chair of the Academic Board, new graduates, family and friends.

I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Guring-gai people of the Eora
Nation, the traditional owners of the various pieces of land on which the
University stands.

Graduates congratulations! This is your day. Today you rightfully take centre
stage, to accept and acknowledge the praise for a job well done. For many it is
probably the most important day in your life so far, so I am honored the
University has invited me to share this special occasion with you and those who
love and care about you most.

Like a 21st birthday, today signifies a coming of age. No longer will you wear
the moniker of STUDENT. From now on you will be recognized as a qualified
professional in whatever walk of life your journey takes you.

At milestones like this it is appropriate to stop, take a deep breath and reflect on
what you have achieved so far, consider the options your hard-earned
qualifications offer, and plan for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

The world of public communication you are entering is becoming increasingly
complex. It will be exciting and it will be challenging. And certainly over the
course of your careers it will evolve to look totally different to the traditional
communication structures we know today.

Before exploring in more detail this exciting era you are about to enter, I want to
take a minute to reflect on how you got to this important time in your life.

I am child of the sixties. My background is Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's classic
Australian working family. Both my parents worked hard long hours to give their

children greater opportunity than they had. In our family achievement wasn't optional, it was mandatory!

Now while my background may or may not reflect yours, I'm pretty certain somewhere in your past a deal of the credit for your success we are celebrating today can be sheeted back to the support, urging, cajoling and love of those nearest and dearest to you – you parents, family and extended family, some or all of whom have invested considerable time and effort in getting you this far.

No one in this Great Hall today will deny you have earned your degree. You have worked hard for it and that is great credit to you. But I am certain that when you reflect back over your learning years you will recognise the importance of the nurturing and guidance you received from your families in getting you to this point in time.

Similarly, you should not discount the dedicated contribution of the academic staff of this fine University and the teachers from your school years past, all of whom have provided the sign posts for you to follow on this journey of achievement. I hope that in time as you become successful in your chosen field, you will look back with affection on those who helped guide you along the path of enlightenment. For them, your success is their reward.

For many of you, the journey to today's graduation was not on a road well travelled. Many have left your home country, some exchanged rural life for the city, and most will have been exposed to a totally new learning experience. This experience will be repeated in so many ways within the ever-changing landscape of your future careers.

Now let's pause for a minute on today and the careers you are embarking upon.

Your 2008 workplace is vastly different from my first tentative steps into a career back in the early 1960s. My enduring recollections of that time as a young aspiring journalist were of the clatter of manual typewriters, the chatter of the telex machines and the constant cry of "Copy Boy!"

It was a time when PR people didn't exist. Journalists were a cynical bunch of Runyonesque characters who did it their way, shunning academic knowledge for the knowledge they learned on the streets, and who considered themselves more as artisans than career professionals.

Back then you had five days to investigate and write a major story, not write five articles in a shift like today. Back then it was expected you would literally pound the pavements chasing news leads, with the pub an important source of contacts.

Then newspapers dominated. It was the community's primary source of information and I still vividly remember the crowds that would gather outside the office of the Melbourne Herald each Saturday waiting for the Final Edition to hit the streets at 7pm because the Stop Press gave them the results of the last race at Flemington and the final footy scores.

Compare that with what now awaits you. Newsrooms are by degrees becoming virtual. Technology has replaced the typewriter which means a journo just needs a laptop or Blackberry and they can file their copy from home, from the scene of a story or from half way round the world.

The convergence of technology in the communicating professions means that news is now 24/7, instantaneous, multi-platformed and global. It also means it is less controlled, less accurate, aggressive and potentially more damaging.

The traditional sources of our information, newspapers, magazines, radio and television are under threat from online news, podcasts, videocasts and blogs. Almost certainly during your careers, be it journalism, communication or marketing the evolution of technology will see the computer and the mobile phone as the primary source of community information.

Perhaps the greatest potential influence of technology on our professions – both journalism and communication – is the emergence of citizen journalism and social networking. Now everyone with a mobile telephone or a video camera is potentially a journalist. TV news now advertises during its bulletins for people to send in vision of car wrecks, fires or any suitably sensational footage of local news event.

The influence of PR professionals in the news cycle, editorial direction and the development of broader government, business and community policy has become so intertwined it sometimes becomes difficult to determine where the roles of the PR professional ends and the journalist begins.

The PR profession has entered the world of blogs as a way of securing information and driving community thinking on behalf of its clients. Community networks such as MySpace and FaceBook are now getting client messages directly into specific demographics, bypassing the more traditional media channels.

As one of the old school, still committed to the importance of press freedom I sometimes struggle to accept the influence we communication professionals have in directing what does and doesn't appear in print and electronic media.

So if that's the environment you are entering today, what will it look like in 2020 as part of Mr Rudd's vision for the future?

I read an interesting piece in the SMH last week by Roy Greenslade, professor of journalism at London's City University who was in Australia speaking at a Future of Journalism conference. His op-ed piece was primarily about the death of newspapers as we know them and the emergence of blogging as the new journalism.

As a blogger for The Guardian, Greenslade sees himself as a digital revolutionary, with the internet as the future primary information distribution channel and multi-platform journalism as the media model you will inherit.

Personally I think he is right. While I admit to being an internet dinosaur, I listen to enough discussions taking place around my office to know the importance and value these technology driven tools can provide in gathering and distributing information to interested stakeholder communities around the world.

I say CAN because the caveat is whether we can keep pace with the rate of technological change to achieve some order, discipline and governance to this free-wheeling communication form.

Just last week I was asked at a PR industry workshop if I had a corporate policy for consultants inviting journalists onto their FaceBook sites and did we allow our people to use their social network sites during office hours. For business generally, governance issues like these are yet to be considered let alone part of the policy manual.

During your careers the code of ethical behaviour that has allowed journalism and public relations to co-exist for 40-50 years will be challenged as enthusiastic amateurs and vested interest groups push the boundaries of this new found democratic press freedom.

As Greenslade points out, net journalism offers a purer form of public service journalism, and a new form of participatory journalism, where interested communities can create their own user generated content.

For me, all this is exciting stuff and overwhelmingly in the public good so long as somewhere in the process there are the necessary checks and balances to ensure the line between public information and propaganda is not overstepped.

In this new communication environment it will be up to you to set the standards; to be the diligent disciples of the Code of Ethics that is the cornerstone of press freedom in our society. Honesty, accuracy, fairness, independence,

compassion and respect for the rights of others will now come under greater scrutiny as fact is threatened by personal and often biased opinion.

Whether your future takes you to journalism, public relations, marketing or for that matter, any area of business it will be up to you to develop and defend an acceptable code of conduct to bring order to this new complex world of public information. I think you're in for a very exciting time.

Thank you