

Scholastic Journalism Division
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SCHOLASTIC Source

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MY TURN

(Up)start from scratch

Program blog offers platform for portfolio development

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Melbourne, which is Australia's second-largest city with a metropolitan area of around four million, has a relatively buoyant media environment. Yes, print is feeling the stress of declining advertising revenue, but it boasts two daily papers (one broadsheet, one tabloid), a large community and suburban press, three commercial television stations all broadcasting local news programs, and an array of innovative online titles that mix free and subscription business models.

Meanwhile our national public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (www.abc.net.au), is a substantial employer of Melbourne-based journalists for its expanding array of TV, radio and online outlets. La Trobe University, where I teach, is one of five universities in Melbourne that offers journalism degrees.

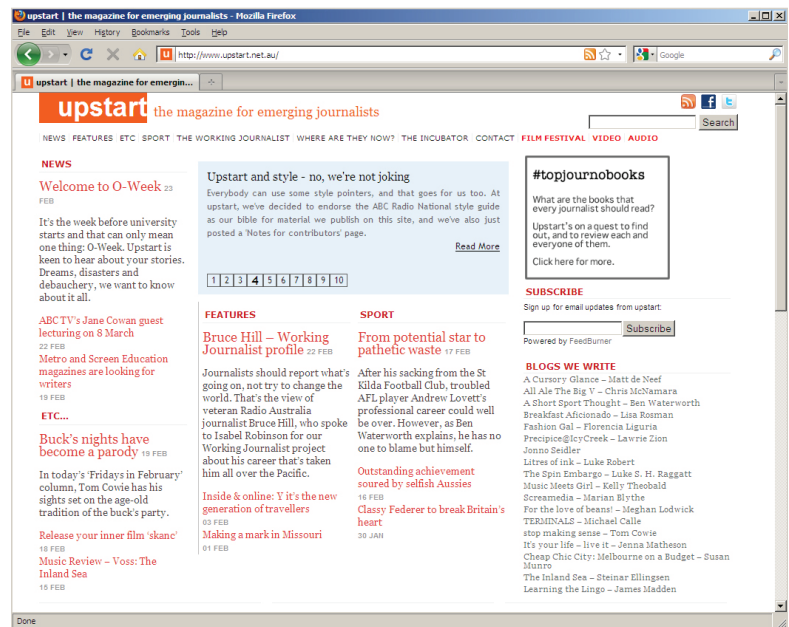
Yet as elsewhere, and now more than ever, when it comes to getting that first journalism job, a degree simply isn't enough. As one editor put it to a graduating class during a guest lecture last year, at a time when blogs are omnipotent, there's now "no excuse" for a job candidate to say they haven't had anything published. With student media playing a declining role as an incubator for fresh talent, it is increasingly important for journalism programs to address how they might facilitate developing a publishing habit for their student cohort.

But how do you pull that off?

While we've long been encouraging students to blog while studying online journalism, something else was obviously needed to stimulate publication and the development of individual portfolios. We needed to embed this idea deep into the curriculum. We needed something that would be more than a "student showcase." We needed something that would facilitate the use of social media. We needed to ensure that student work was part of a site that functions as a niche publication

for emerging journalists. We needed the publication to be multiplatform. And we needed to be able to give students academic credit for working in editorial roles. To realize this we needed a platform that was inexpensive to establish, easy to use, outrageously inexpensive to maintain, and that would deliver a site that would appeal to an audience beyond students and academics.

The result of all this neediness is *upstart* (www.upstart.net.au), which is best described as a web-based publishing platform for emerging journalists, writers and film-makers, a playground for experiments in digital journalism, and a platform for teaching and research. My



upstart Web site, powered by WordPress, serves as the portal to a wide range of student work. (For a higher resolution graphic, download newsletter from aejmc.net/scholastic)



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colleague Christopher Scanlon developed the site on a relatively simple interface built on WordPress, and in June we launched, with a team that included a final-student who opted to take his internship as founding editor.

More than 300 posts later – that's around two a day – the site harbors a mix of news, features, reviews, commentary, and short films, and the Working Journalist project, which houses profiles of journalists from a wide array of media outlets written by students studying a subject of the same name that explores changes in journalism practice.

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My Turn

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To integrate *upstart* into our curriculum, we've adjusted the specifications of assignments in several of our subjects. Instead of designing that feature for a local daily paper, the remit is now to make sure it could work on *upstart*. This

has already proved to be a strong motivational tool, with students realising that there's more than good grades to gain from going that bit further. And all contributors have their own tags, which means that as their *upstart* portfolios develop, they can link to all their work on a single URL (mine is www.upstart.net.au/tag/lawrie-zion).

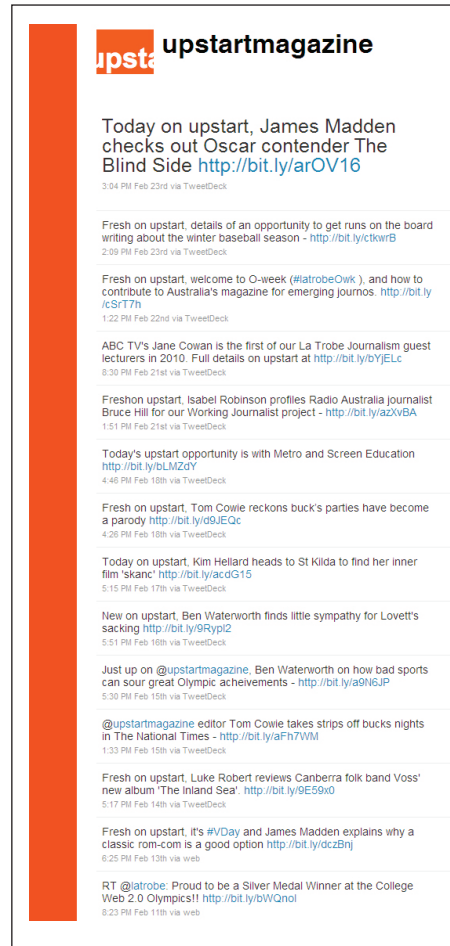
The site is already helping forge the beginnings of journalism careers. Two of *upstart*'s sports writers, both freshmen, have been commissioned to contribute to sports publications on the strength of their portfolios. More importantly, perhaps, it has provided a sizable cohort of motivated students with a sense that they can have an audience for what they do. For students and other contributors who already have blogs, we arrange to rerun posts and link their blog to the site which cross-promotes their best material.

But perhaps one of the most surprising dimensions to the *upstart* journey so far has been how we have built an audience of several hundred hits a day using social media – and that's even during the long

torpor of the Australian summer, which is just about to give way to a new academic year.

Through our presence on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/#!/upstartmagazine?ref=ts>) and Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com/upstartmagazine>), we post and tweet links to our friends and followers. Through our site stats we can see in forensic details how this is shaping the development of our own following. And through social media and user comments we're hearing from a range of readers far more diverse than that of most university publications. When one student posted a story about setting up her own blog and being a barista, the piece was retweeted by the Managing Director of the aforementioned ABC, who just happened to like her quoting Mark Twain's definition of an expert as "an ordinary fellow from another town". How did he find the article? He follows us, like around 600 other people, on Twitter.

This is just one promising sign that as we evolve, we're doing so as part of the new media ecology. As 2010 unravels we're planning to develop a range of projects through *upstart*, including a hub for research undertaken by graduate students, and a digital ethics project that involves a range of industry partners. As journalism professors we're also planning to continue enjoying ourselves. And why wouldn't we? Our students have become our collaborators, not just people we teach. And we're learning too.



More than 700 now follow the *upstart* Twitter feed.

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