**JACQUELINE MALEY transcript S1 EP5.mp3**

**Speaker 1 is Jane** [00:00:10] Hi, and welcome to ‘Talking Teachers’. I'm Jane Hunter. This is an Australian Education podcast series wherein each episode will be exploring what is working and what isn't in our schools. We'll be talking to some of the most informed people in the field and asking questions about the big issues in education. We also want to investigate if it's at all possible to find new solutions to the current challenges in school based education. I'm co-hosting this series with my colleague Don Carter, and we're both teacher education academics at UT's.

**Speaker 2 is Don** [00:00:54] Hi, Jane. Another episode in our podcast and this one is a little different.

**Speaker 1** [00:00:58] Yes, Don, And I'm really looking forward to this interview. I've always wondered how journalists went about their daily work, and today we're lucky to have a renowned Australian journo with us.

**Speaker 2** [00:01:10] And it's my pleasure to welcome Jacqueline Maley to the studio. Just so our listeners know, Jacqueline is a columnist and senior writer for the Sydney Morning Herald and Age newspapers. She's worked on staff at The Guardian in London and at the Australian Financial Review, and she's also been a contributing also for publications including Gourmet Traveler and Marie Claire.

**Speaker 1** [00:01:32] In 2016, Jacqueline won the Kennedy Award for Outstanding Columnist and in 2020 she won a Walkley Award. She's also the recipient of the New South Wales Council of Liberty's Journalism Award.

**Speaker 2** [00:01:46] So let's get started. Jacqueline The last part of the interview is what we call a 30 second rant. This is where you get to rave on for a whole half a minute on any topic of your choosing. And we won't interrupt, but let's move to the first question. Jane, would you like to begin?

**Speaker 1** [00:02:03] Jacqueline, you write about a range of social issues and they've always very current. How do you decide which one to write on and why would you focus on that one and not something else? Do you have a set of criteria?

**Speaker 3 is Jacqueline** [00:02:21] When I was thinking about these questions, it forced me to think about my process in a way that was more scientific perhaps. And the process itself actually is, I guess, very much these days. I'm just guided by my own interests and the things that, yeah, the things that piqued my interest and the things that I feel curious about or perhaps I'm trying to work out for myself. It's often guided by conversations that I'm having with my friends or my colleagues, where obviously old people who have our heads in the news cycle all the time and are reading very widely all the time. And it tends to be the things that people are talking about, people are arguing about that are preoccupying people that will make the most interesting columns. Often it's tied to politics, although I do get bored of politics and I write about popular culture or I don't know, just current events, I suppose. You know, you find as a columnist there are certain subjects that you become preoccupied with or that you return to again and again. And then, you know, sometimes, particularly when the news has been really heavy, you don't always want to write about heavy stuff. Sometimes I'll deliberately look for something that's light or fun or that can be a little bit more humorous. I read widely like I read and I read overseas publications as well as the Australian newspapers, obviously. I try to take in as wide and as various sort of media diet as I can and just trust that that will sort of work its way into my own journalism. Yeah, it's not very scientific at all. And there's I often think that there are subjects that I neglect or that I should write about more or that are worthy. And sometimes it's also just driven by deadlines. Some subjects will require a day's research or at least a few phone calls and other things you can dash off more quickly before you have to pick up your kid from school. And that's the reality.

**Speaker 2** [00:04:12] So I'm assuming, Jacqueline, that you don't have an editor looking over your shoulder directing the topics you actually write about. You've got a bit of a roving commission, but can I ask if you see an issue that's covered in another media outlet or platform, do you then avoid it and look for some other issue?

**Speaker 3** [00:04:31] I think a lot of the time, you know, I write for a Sunday newspaper, so pretty much everything I write will have been turned over or thought about by other people. Well, a lot of things that I write will have been in the news maybe all week, maybe for several weeks. You're always trying to look for something that's timely and something that has a news hook. You know, people have got to understand why they're writing about this. Now, why do I want to write about this on a Sunday morning, this week? You've got to give them a sort of timely news, basically, to be reading about it now. But no, it doesn't scare me off. If other people have been writing about stuff per say, it just means that I need to think about a way that I can attack it in a fresh way or a different way, or come at it from a slightly different angle. Or sometimes I'll link an issue to another issue in a way that I think is creative or different. If I feel like something's been around a week and there's nothing new to say on it that's particularly fresh or unpredictable, then I will generally steer away.

**Speaker 2** [00:05:30] And I'm thinking of listeners who are English teachers or students who are engaged in writing. What is it that you do? How do you get started?

**Speaker 3** [00:05:38] I mean, now you're getting into something quite mysterious. I often don't even, you know, when I was sort of learning about writing essay writing and constructing argument when I was at university, we used to talk about topic sentences and all that kind of thing. And, you know, you'd have a general thrust of the. And you might even have a sort of hypothesis that you were testing something quite formal. I don't really write like that anymore. I. Think I read about an issue. I think of a whole bunch of different interesting things that I want to say about it. I generally have to come up with some sort of pitch or some sort of germ of an idea that I give to my editors. You know, I want to write about I don't know Harry and Meghan like I did last week, or I want to write about electoral trust in our politicians. I don't know whatever the topic might be. I might think of a sort of question or some particular aspect of it that I want to explore. And then honestly, I just kind of write. I mean, I will sometimes have an idea or a turn of phrase and I'll sort of that will be what I'll write first, and then I might go back and do the beginning later. Sometimes I find it hard to do beginnings. You know, opening sentences or opening paragraphs can be quite tricky because you've got to capture people's attention so immediately. sometimes, yes, I'll write from the bottom. Sometimes I'll write bits and pieces and then thread it all together. It's pretty rare that I would write something from beginning to end, but a column. Yes, but it takes me, you know, a day to write. I mean, when I say a day, maybe 5 hours working on it, but then I would have done a lot of reading and thinking and talking possibly beforehand.

**Speaker 1** [00:07:17] Absolutely fascinating to hear it sort of straight, straight from you as such. Are there any current issues in education that you'd be tempted to write about?

**Speaker 3** [00:07:30] Well, I mean, I'm aware that I'm not an expert, but I'm also aware that I have a daughter in school. She's in a public primary school. And I love her teachers. I love the school. I think it's a great school. I am actually aware now when I broach things about school or I don't know anything to do with education or the curriculum or whatever, I suppose it's culture wars over the curriculum and stuff. I'm a bit aware that like I don't want to offend any teachers at her school. And I know that teachers have strong opinions about a whole bunch of things and teachers are a heavily unionized workforce. There are culture wars and differences of opinion that are quite strong and strident within the teaching profession, from what I gather. So I guess, yes, I'm a little bit aware of my personal circumstances. If I was to write about, I don't know, phonics or something like that, which I do take an interest in and I do read about and I do I suppose, have opinions on, but I suppose it would be one area, would I be sort of worried about offending people, like my daughter's teacher.

**Speaker 2** [00:08:34] Yes. You mentioned phonics, Jacqueline. I think that is a is a trigger term for many people. And I think if you wrote something on phonics, you get some responses. Which leads me to ask about do you ever get hate mail, for example, you're nodding your head.

**Speaker 3** [00:08:52] Yeah, you get a lot of blowback. I don't think I cop it nearly as badly as a lot of people, and particularly women in the media do. But yes, I've copped it. You cop it a bit on social media, certain topics and I get emails, I get a lot of emails that are lovely and most probably most emails are lovely. I get some that are not so nice, that are kind of quite hateful and then you get some in the middle which are quite funny. And I quite like, I quite enjoy and it's usually a certain type of male reader who will write in and say, you know, I really enjoy, you know, you're a good writer. They'll give you a bit of a compliment. You're obviously quite intelligent, but here are a number of mistakes that you've made in your piece, and here's a number of corrections that you might want to think about this sort of ‘mansplaining emails’. And I mean, they're coming from a good place and they're quite sweet, but they always make me chuckle a little bit.

**Speaker 2** [00:09:46] Do you reply to those emails?

**Speaker 3** [00:09:48] I try to always reply to anyone who has written to me in good faith in a polite way, engaging with my work. I will always try to reply to those if it's just rude or abusive. No.

**Speaker 1** [00:10:01] That's a very sensible, wise words here. Are there any topics that are absolutely off limits for you?

**Speaker 3** [00:10:10] Look, I would say there are certain topics that, you know, are going to get a lot of blowback. And I would be lying if I said that sometimes you make your you make an assessment as to whether or not you've got the stomach for it that week, whether or not it's worth it. And it's a fine line as a columnist, because I don't think I'm a particularly controversial columnist and I don't think I'm a particularly sort of reactionary columnist. And that's not my style. So but at the same time, you know, you have to have strong opinions and you have to have one. What I always think of this sort of certitude when you're a columnist and. Readers want that and people respond to that in columns. But I don't always feel a lot of certitude in my personal life, and my personality is not particularly one of great certitude. So I sort of struggle with that tension internally. I guess. Like sometimes you think, who am I to tell people what I think? Likewise, my opinion particularly important. So yeah, in the sense of things that I avoid, there are certain issues that are very, very sensitive and will always offend people. The two that I can think of, like Israel-Palestine, whatever you write about, that you're going to piss someone off probably really badly and someone's going to hate what you've written and tell you that you're wrong. And also there is no correct position on that. I would say, if there is a correct position on anything. And also I would say trans issues at this point in time are very difficult to write about with sensitivity because there are so it's such a vulnerable community and. It's also an area where people have such strong opinions, where there's a lot of bigotry and then there's a lot of backlash as well. I find this sort of so-called turf versus trans rights line, a very difficult one to tread. And I think that a lot of people have fallen into that abyss, like female journalists, not unlike me, have fallen foul of that issue. I find that one yet tricky to write about.

**Speaker 2** [00:12:11] Do you have any agendas that you push?

**Speaker 3** [00:12:13] I would like to think, no. I mean, now we're getting into sort of murky areas of subconscious bias and, you know, unconscious bias and stuff, which of which I'm sure I'm, you know, totally guilty as the next person. But no, I don't consciously push any agendas at all. I believe that I'm quite ethical and quite punctilious in terms of not having not driving any ulterior interests or motives in my work. Like I would like to think I'm quite transparent. I have things that I feel strongly about, and I suppose anyone who rates my work would know that I'm really I'm sort of preoccupied with gender equality and feminist issues, so I don't know if that means that I'm pushing an agenda, but I'm always coming at things from, I suppose, that perspective or that lens. But then I don't think I always have predictable kind of views on issues of gender equality either. And I'm actually quite interested, you know, in the flip side of feminism in the sort of the role of men in 21st century society, this is a big issue in education. Boys who underperform in school. I think that's kind of a really interesting aspect of advances that we've seen in gender equality. So no, I don't think I push an agenda. I I'm the same as you. I am not particularly interested in reading columnists who I feel like I know what they're going to say or I know that they're always going to have the same sort of take on an issue. And I would hope to not be one of those columnists. And that's sometimes why you avoid certain topics, I suppose, because you think, Well, I know what I think about this. Probably everyone knows what I think about this. I don't have anything new to say on this. Like, of course, I think Donald Trump's terrible. There's no new ground to plough in that field.

**Speaker 1** [00:13:54] Do you think there is an issue around the quality of journalism in this country at this present moment?

**Speaker 3** [00:14:01] I mean, it's impossible for me to give an answer to that. That's not bias, because, of course, I mean to say, yes, I, I look at my newsroom and I look at the quality of stories that we've put out and the exclusives, the investigations, the great analysis, the great political coverage. You know, the life changing and agenda setting journalism that my newsroom has done over the last year. And I'm talking about stories like the Star Casino, the Crown Casino, the Ben Roberts-Smith Afghanistan alleged war crimes work. My colleague Kate McClymont’s work on Charlie Teo recently, Adele Ferguson basically sparked a banking royal commission. You know, there are countless examples. So I feel really proud of the journalism that my newsroom puts out. And obviously I have views about some of the journalism that we see in other outlets. I'm quite democratic about it, though, I suppose. I feel like. Every newsroom serves a market. And if there is a market for that journalism, then that's its job to produce that kind of work. And I'm not particularly snobbish about the tabloids. I read the tabloids every day. I read The Australian every day. I mean, I read all the papers every day. I'm not answering your question, really. Australia is a small market. It's a concentrated market, and we have some very loud voices within that market. I do think we're quite parochial. I think we're quite polite. I look at the press in the UK and even though it has its excesses, I do think they have a culture of fearlessness and. Yeah, a culture of fearlessness that we perhaps lack in Australia. And I look at the US and I think they do so much creative, innovative, interesting, funny, particularly in the pop culture area, which is what I read a lot of, and sort of more like I long form journalism. They just have a lot of money, they have a lot of resources and they have really, really interesting, diverse voices. It's lively and sort of antic in a way that the Australian media is. And maybe yet it just isn't.

**Speaker 2** [00:16:03] Is the Australian media bias or are there sections of the media that you feel is biased in some way?

**Speaker 3** [00:16:10] Absolutely. There's bias within the Australian media. I mean, we see it and it's obvious that certain sections of the media, for example, were rooting very hard for Coalition government over the last, you could probably say over the last ten years. Yeah, I think there is bias. I think wherever you have human beings you'll have bias, but I suppose it's more systemic in some parts of the media than others.

**Speaker 1** [00:16:32] Yeah, something that concerns Don and I is what we see as a lot of negative stories about education and about teachers, about teacher quality and so on. And that's been documented more recently in a book by a colleague of ours at Sydney University. Why has that happened?

**Speaker 3** [00:16:56] Think, just in the same way that you wouldn't be able to answer for what they're doing at Sydney University or at UNSW? I can't answer for what they're doing in ‘The Daily Telegraph’ or like - you're saying that there's a there's a lot of negative stories about teachers. You know, you're probably studying it more closely than I am. I think that there's a structural bias within any kind of news, which is that nobody as a rule, there's no there's nothing new in reading and there's nothing fresh and there's nothing kind of newsworthy or in the public interest about reading good news stories all the time. Okay. People want to read about when things aren't working out, where reforms need to be made and the things that need to be exposed. And that's what some us are looking for. In a way we are kind of vampires, and this is another one of the things that sort of bothers me a little bit. Why don't we write more good news stories? Well, people do want to read about, you know, I don't know the Cranbrook Board falling apart. I take your point that there is so much good stuff that's happening in education that, you know, needs to be celebrated and written about. And I do think we write those stories. I wrote a story about Fairfield Primary School years ago in The Good Weekend, which is one of my favorite stories that I ever did because I takes in so many refugee children. It was all about how they sort of manage their refugee population. It was fascinating and I loved working on that story and it actually got a really, really good reception. I do think people do want to read about those stories, but I also think it's our duty as journalists to write about problems, resourcing structural inequalities within the education system. And if that's negative, then so be it.

**Speaker 2** [00:18:26] Good news story for you would be the quality pre-service teachers that we're churning out here at UTS. If there are any careers advisors or school students listening to this podcast who want to consider journalism as a career, what advice.

**Speaker 3** [00:18:40] They have to be extremely multimedia sort of. They can do graphics, they can do Tik Tok like it that need to be able to work in all sorts of media. That's really important. And I mean, in terms of more general skills, you know, an incredible curiosity and outward looking aspect is integral for a journalist, I think a really strong work ethic and an ability to think laterally when you're looking at a story. An example recently that a friend of mine who's about my age working on a story with a younger colleague and the younger colleague was sort of looking in there trying to find some people in the younger colleagues looking exclusively online at social media and so forth. And my colleague was like, well, I'll just, you know, like, I know when this person leaves, I'll just ring every business in that town and ask people on the phone. And it didn't occur to the younger journalists to just pick up the phone and call people – plus door knocking actually yields results.

**Speaker 1** [00:19:37] We want to ask you to rant for 30 seconds. If you think about a topic that's dear to your heart, we're not going to interrupt you. Jacqueline what would you like to rant about?

**Speaker 3** [00:19:50] Education seems so averse to any kind of ranking or anything like that. It's like they're so worried about hurting people's feelings. I'm a bit more old fashioned and conservative in that sense, I think. And you know, I do believe that children respond well to being not exactly pushed, but like having high expectations placed on them. I just don't understand why ranking is problematic.

**Speaker 2** [00:20:11] Well, Jacqueline, that was fantastic. And there you have Sunday's column All ready, worked out well done. It was enlightening. Very enjoyable. We'd love to have you back.

**Speaker 1** [00:20:22] Thank you so much, Jacqueline. It was excellent. I've been a great admirer, if I can just say that, of your beautiful writing and to have you here with us has given insight into the media – it makes more sense to me now. I know you said it wasn't necessarily scientific, but I think you've given some aspirational detail to young people who are thinking of careers in journalism and certainly to English teachers and careers advisors. Thank you so much.

**Speaker 3** [00:20:46] Thank you so much for having me. It's been a real pleasure.

**Speaker 2** [00:20:56] I really enjoyed that, Jane. It gave me quite a few insights into how a journalist might approach their work, choosing topics, for example. But I was very interested in how Jacqueline approaches the writing process. She said it’s a mysterious process, and I think that's about right.

**Speaker 1** [00:21:13] Yes. Don, you and I have been English teachers, head teachers, and there's been a lot of conversation in recent times about writing and just having a few insights from Jacqueline around that was important. Writing is not easy. And so it was really terrific to hear that even as a very experienced writer, she also finds the process challenging. And sometimes I think we underestimate our expectations for the young people and adolescents we teach who can’t just write. It's difficult.

**Speaker 2** [00:21:48] It certainly is. And I loved her comments about school reports. I think all of us who are parents have experienced this. And look at some of the reports and wonder what they're about. And you and I are in a bit stronger position to interpret the reports, but really the reports need to speak to parents - it sounds like sometimes they don't.

**Speaker 1** [00:22:09] I agree. Don't get me started on school reports. Thank you, Don. I think it was a terrific conversation to have a real journalist in the studio and to hear her perspectives. She doesn't necessarily always write on education, but just having her insight and float the idea that there should be more good news stories about education, but maybe that's not newsworthy and that's why we get this sort of bias. But the bias has arisen over many stories over weeks, over months, over years, I guess, the negativity has really undermined the position of teachers in our schools. We need to be mindful and think about ways we can turn that around.

**Speaker 2** [00:22:56] Most definitely, Jane, worthy of more conversations. And I can tell you I'm looking forward to our next interview. Thanks, Jane.

**Speaker 1** [00:23:03] Thanks, Don. Thank you for listening to this episode of Talking Teachers. If you'd like to know more about Don and me, you can look at the UTS website, simply Google UTS Teacher Education, where you'll also find show notes for this podcast. The podcast was produced by William Verity for Impact Studios at UTS, which specializes in turning research into quality audio. We wish to acknowledge that the series is being recorded on Gadigal Land of the Aurora Nation. We thank and pay our respects to elders past, present and emerging.