Then and Now: How Journalism Has Changed

Tools of the Trade · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

Simon Townsend was a reporter in 1962. The typewriter on his desk was a Remington. Copy moved by pneumatic tube. The subeditors smoked. The phone directory was the main research tool. Stories were set in hot metal by men wearing aprons. If your intro was weak the subs fixed it without asking, and they were usually right.

He was still teaching journalism in 2024. The laptop on the desk was his own. Copy moved through email, Slack, CMSes with names like WordPress and Drupal and Ghost. Research came from Google and Trove and FactCheck.org. The subeditors, mostly, had been laid off. If your intro was weak, nobody was going to fix it. It was going to run the way you wrote it.

This page is a short tour of what has changed in sixty years of Australian journalism, and what has not. It is useful for young journalists who might assume the rules Simon wrote in the nineties and two-thousands belong to a different trade. Some of them do. Most of them don't.

What has changed

The business. News mastheads in 1979 could send a reporter to Antarctica and barely feel it. News mastheads in 2026 struggle to send a reporter to Canberra. The advertising revenue that sustained daily metropolitan papers has collapsed. Regional Australia has lost more than 100 mastheads in a decade. Bureaus have closed across Asia. Specialist rounds, from science to industrial relations, have thinned out or gone.

The tools. Shorthand is optional, not expected. Digital recorders are standard. Mobile phone video from journalists in the field runs on national bulletins. Photographers carry drones. A reporter in 2026 might file text, audio, video, and a social media push for the one story, all before lunch.

The audience. Your readers no longer come to you. Your stories compete against every other piece of content on a phone screen. Headlines are tested with A-B metrics. Social platforms determine reach. Editors watch dashboards instead of watching print runs.

The legal frame. Defamation law has sharpened. The 2021 reforms introduced a serious harm threshold. A public interest defence exists for the first time. But concurrent document discovery, costs orders, and reputational damage from aggrieved subjects make defamation a live problem for any Australian journalist who writes about a real person.

What has not changed

The job. Find out what happened. Find out who did it. Find out why. Ask the person responsible. Check the answer. Write it clearly. Get it published. File the clipping. Go again tomorrow.

The people. Sources still want to be heard. Some still want the credit, some still want the anonymity. Reporters still build careers on the strength of their contacts and the reliability of their notebook.

The writing. The rules of a good intro, a clean sentence, a useful quote, and a working caption have not changed in sixty years. Headlines that try too hard still fail. Adverbs still drag. Jargon still breaks the reader's trust.

The ethics. The Journalism Code of Ethics (the MEAA code) has been revised but its core rules remain: accuracy, fairness, attribution, independence, respect for vulnerable subjects. The temptation to cheat on any of those has not gone away, and the consequences when a reporter is caught are worse now, not better, because social media never forgets.

What the next generation has to handle that Simon did not

Artificial intelligence. Large language models can produce a thousand-word article about anything in under a minute. Most of it will be wrong in small ways and fluent enough to hide the errors. A working journalist in 2026 is expected to use AI tools without being used by them. That means verifying every fact, never quoting a model, never letting a generated sentence into a published piece without rewriting it, and understanding what your publication's AI policy actually requires.

Data. A modern reporter is expected to be able to read a spreadsheet, understand a distribution, and spot a dodgy average. Data journalism used to be a specialism. It is becoming a baseline skill.

Security. Sources need to be protected with more than a promise. Journalists who cover defence, corruption, or organised crime need to understand encrypted messaging, secure document drops, and the reality that their metadata is visible to police under Australian law.

The through line

Simon believed that the craft survives changes in technology. He worked on manual typewriters, electric typewriters, the first word processors, and the first laptops. He went from hot metal to DTP to web publishing. He presented live television and late-night radio and wrote books and ran classrooms.

Every time the technology changed, he said, the journalism stayed the same. You still needed curiosity. You still needed a notebook. You still needed people who would pick up the phone.

"Everything changes," he used to say. "Except the job. The job is what it always was. Tell the people what happened."

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.