

Practice-Based PhD in Journalism: The British Way

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A bit of context



In the UK, doctoral students work for three (or more) years under the tutelage of a **supervisor**. They may or may not take any classes Periodically, the supervisor assesses whether the student is making acceptable progress. If all is well ...

- ✓ **End of first year:** 'Upgrade' to PhD candidacy (or not).
- ✓ **Second year:** Gather data.
- ✓ **Third year:** 'Writing up' of the thesis (doctoral diss).

When the thesis is finished to the supervisor's satisfaction, two fresh people are enlisted to serve as **examiners**, one internal and one external. When they are ready, a '**viva**' (oral defence) is held. They usually request changes. The student makes the changes.

The examiners have another go, and it's ...



Alternatively ...

There are other routes to the PhD, however. One is the 'PhD by Prior Publication' (or '... by Published Works'). Here's what the official UK higher ed guidelines say about it:

- ✓ 'Normally awarded' on the basis of a thesis containing a set of peer-reviewed academic work.
- ✓ ... Along with a 'substantial commentary' outlining the 'coherence and significance' of this work.
- ✓ And there's a viva at the end.



In our field, though, the body of work need not be 'academic' work. It can be **journalistic** in nature. The candidate reflects critically on his or her own work, situating it in a broader context and connecting it to relevant conceptual material.

City, for example, says:

The body of published work must ‘demonstrate an original and significant contribution to knowledge’:

- ✓ Critical appraisal of previous work.
- ✓ Design and methodology for investigation(s).
- ✓ Conduct/execution of research.
- ✓ Analysis of data evidence or outcomes.
- ✓ Theoretical interpretations.

A 20,000-word critical analysis then places the work in context, shows its ‘coherence and contemporary relevance’, describes its implications for future research, and critically evaluates its strengths and weaknesses.

At City, the PhD by Prior Pub option is available only to existing members of academic staff (aka faculty members).

Elsewhere around Britain

The option for experienced journalists to obtain this sort of non-traditional PhD is widely offered by UK universities. Some offer it only to staff members. Others are open to non-university employees. Examples (Google for more!):

- ✓ **Goldsmiths, University of London:** ‘An option for academics who may have [entered higher education mid-career](#) and have a body of work not more than 10 years old that can be submitted.’
- ✓ **Kingston University London:** For [demonstrating ‘a quantity, quality and level of research equivalent to that of a traditional PhD student ... \(at start of\) writing-up stage.’](#)
Example: [Debora Wenger](#).
- ✓ **University of Lincoln:** ‘Offers experienced journalists the opportunity to [reflect on and critique their professional work](#) in an academic setting.’

Want more background? Try this open-access article: ‘[The PhD by Publication](#)’ (Peacock, *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 2017).

Alternatively, too

City no longer offers this option in Journalism. But in some fields, such as Engineering or Nursing, the UK offers a third way: The **professional (or 'practice-based') doctorate**. (Elsewhere in Europe, this may be called an 'Industrial PhD' rather than a doctorate.)

This degree is intended to ...

'Provide an opportunity for individuals to situate professional knowledge developed over time in a theoretical academic framework.'

Although 'rooted in an academic discipline', the degree is awarded based on **outputs 'normally located within a candidate's profession or practice.'**

A designer might show a portfolio of work; a psychologist might draw on clinical trials. Written material primarily is used to provide context.

What does it look like IRL?



In Journalism, the PhD by Prior Publication can take various forms.

Three examples that I've encountered:

Example A (City):

Body of academic publications

Example B (also City):

Body of traditional (print) journalistic work

Example C (not City):

Body of non-traditional (digital) journalistic work, including work in newsroom management

A: Body of academic publications

Condensed Abstract:

‘The purpose of this dissertation is **to present and reflect on seven years of research into the form of online news, its production, and consumption**, at national and local websites. ... The general methodological approach was inductive and exploratory, with the work based mainly on semi-structured research interviews ...

(Findings) ‘cover the Internet's globalizing and localizing potentials, technological and media industry convergence, changes in social relations between professional journalists and their audiences, and the adaption – or personalization – of news to individual readers' explicitly registered and / or implicitly determined preferences. The research **reveals evidence of cyclical patterns** of organizational and social behaviour, **records evolutionary changes** in online news output and professional attitudes, and **demonstrates how technology's consequences are often unexpected.**

‘The research has **practical implications for online newspapers'** attempts to court international readers, serve local communities, integrate user-generated and multimedia content, develop business models, adapt to online-only delivery, and design and deploy forms of news personalization.’

B: Body of printed journalistic work

Abstract:

‘The purpose of this dissertation is to **reflect on the author’s published work in the field of complementary and alternative medicine**, specifically that produced between 1996 and 2005.

‘It examines how **the production of this work was influenced by the author’s previous and concurrent experience as a medical journalist** and the methodological challenges arising from sourcing complementary and alternative medicine and framing for audiences of broadsheet newspapers and two books – *The Which? Guide to Complementary Medicine* and *Alternative Answers to Asthma & Allergies*.

‘It explores how this work **relates to scholarship in three key areas: the theory of sourcing, the theory of framing and the study of erroneous beliefs**. The author demonstrates that a **“perfect storm” – sociologically, culturally and economically – created a narrative that suited the new consumer-driven cult of the empowered individual**, which in turn led to most sectors of the print media becoming impervious to any real investigation of the subject.’

C: Body of digital journalistic work

Condensed Abstract:

‘The beginning of the twenty-first century can be viewed as **a critical period for the UK’s local and regional press**. Many newspapers, faced with falling circulations and increasing competition due to the emergence of the internet, began converging their print and digital news operations in an attempt to halt the long-term decline by exploring new ways of growing their readership and attracting more income.

‘This thesis examines the **published outputs of a senior journalist who played a leading role in managing the transition to a convergent newsroom** at the [*Newspaper*]. ... The innovative content produced by the author, and the new editorial processes which he and fellow managers implemented, are critically analysed through the application of key insights from academic literature on media management and multimedia.

‘It is argued that **editorial innovation can help boost website traffic and increase audience engagement**, while not necessarily damaging newspaper circulation figures. ... However, this research also demonstrates that these [factors] alone are **unlikely to generate sufficient digital advertising revenue to help reverse the steep decline** being experienced by the industry.’



But ... is it a '*real*' PhD?

Well, that's the question, isn't it? The answer depends on whom you ask ... and whether you're asking lightly over a latte or pointedly over a pint. Done well, a PhD by Prior Publication is a rigorous intellectual exercise. That said:

- ✓ It's easier, in my view, than a research-based PhD to do poorly. Honest critical assessment of one's own life work is inherently ... a fraught exercise, let's just say.
- ✓ Knowledge is both iterative and cumulative, but it's difficult to build on work that is so thoroughly self-reflective. With some exceptions – my City Example A is a notable one – 'prior pub' degrees tend to be one-offs.
- ✓ The new PhD comes away little or no understanding of theory or method. His or her ability to contribute meaningfully to the scholarly community can be limited.



Thanks for listening!

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