



## OPINION

# Journalists need to diversify, but that doesn't mean selling your soul

*As publication after publication began to close around her, freelance writer Nicole Madigan realised it was time to diversify. What she discovered was the comms world didn't suck the life out of her. Instead, it breathed life back into her career.*

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by [NICOLE MADIGAN](#)



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Although I'm a relatively young journalist – just scraping in as a member of Gen Y – my career was born in a time before digital domination, when traditional media was king. The internet was emerging, yes, but it still played second fiddle in terms of news and information delivery.

I entered the profession with a thirst for knowledge and information, a love of the written word and a desire to share both – in those days, via newspapers, magazines, television or radio.

At the core of journalism was (and is), in my view, accuracy, authenticity, impartiality and, of course, ethical reporting. Its purpose, to share the information that the public either needed or wanted.

So that's what I set about doing, establishing my career as a newspaper journalist, followed by several years in television, before returning to print as a freelance journalist, to work around my growing family.

It began a prosperous experience, an abundance of pure journalistic work, primarily writing for magazines and newspapers, along with a steadily growing number of online outlets, which were popping up at a rapid rate. The work was diverse, the subject matter varied.

Slowly, but ever-so surely, many of the magazines for which I frequently wrote began dropping off the shelves – for good – as digital technology began to permanently and fundamentally change the nature of the media.

Though I had no plans to leave journalism, as a freelance professional, it was already becoming clear that I'd need to pick up the slack. My first response was to dip my toe into the so-called dark side: public relations.



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When I switched back to my well-loved journo's hat, I felt a touch of the guilts. To be honest, I felt a little dirty.

Around the same time, blogging and branded content were gaining fast momentum.

So, feeling conflicted by the combination of the two roles, I ditched the PR helmet altogether and set about launching my business, Stella Communications, with the intent to focus on branded content, blog supply and copywriting, all the while maintaining my role as an active journalist.

Though I was no longer pitching stories, those early days venturing into what I then viewed as “non-journalism”, saw me fall into the same soul-destroying trap. I'd remove the journo's hat and pop on a commercial visor, leaving me feeling like a smooth-talking salesperson, lacking authenticity.

There were cliches, buzzwords and overused phrases aplenty... at times I made myself cringe.

The clients were happy of course, the writing doing its job. But I felt like a bit of a fraud, like I was letting the team – my real team – down.

And each time I prepared to work on an actual story, I felt like I needed to take a long, hot shower first.

But as the media landscape continued its dramatic shift, it became clear that diversification remained a must – but did I have to sell my soul? The short answer is no.

So, I changed my approach. From then on, I kept my journalist's hat firmly in place – regardless of the reason for my words.

Forget the sales pitch, simply report and write the information that the end-user would want to read – be it the news, a blog, a website or an advertorial – in the style required by the client. (Granted my tertiary qualifications in marketing aided the process, and that additional training is a worthwhile endeavour.)

That shift in mindset empowered me to fully focus on my business, without feeling as though I was sacrificing my journalistic values.

I'm not for a moment trying to imply that journalists take some sort of idealistic moral high ground or refuse clients that don't sit perfectly within their self-defined personal identity... on the contrary.

We all need to make a living after all, and few of us are in the fortunate position of being able to knock back work.

You can, however, take those values and journalistic processes you hold so dear, and apply them elsewhere – be it public relations, content creation, copywriting or advisory services.



Identify your area of specialisation, hone your niche and become a multi-faceted writer in your field, maintaining your standards, whilst being able to adapt to the fluid state of the media landscape.

And don't forget the traditional roots of our profession. Old media may be changing, but it does still have its place in this constantly expanding media marketplace.

The very essence of journalism – true journalistic principles – are more important than ever, as consumers grapple with the influx of bias output, often lacking in both accuracy and authenticity, and the increasingly blurred lines between commercial and editorial content.

That said, there'll be no returning to the days of old, and the rate of change continues its rapid increase, leaving little doubt that many journalists will be forced to diversify, shift gears or completely change course.

Keep thinking like a journalist though, and you won't have to sell your soul in the process.



*Nicole Madigan is a journalist, writer and content specialist at [Stella Communications](#). Follow her on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#) or connect via [LinkedIn](#).*

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