

JERAA statement about UniPollWatch 2016

Tuesday Dec 8, 2015

Dear colleagues,

The JERAA Executive met today and unanimously decided that the association would be the publisher of the UniPollWatch website for the 2016 federal election.

The Executive's meeting followed a proposal from the floor at a session on UniPollWatch at last week's annual JERAA conference, in Bathurst, NSW.

Around 25 university journalism or journalism major programs have already expressed interest in participating. This would mean that each program would be allocated a designated number of electorates for which its students would prepare a template of basic information profiling the electorate and candidates. There is then scope for individual programs to develop more ambitious stories in the lead-up to the election.

Those of you at the conference will know that I asked for a non-binding "soft" show of hands from members when the proposal was made. There was unanimous support at that time, too.

The Executive considered potential risks, such as defamation suits, and checked the association's legal insurance which is already in place to cover material in *Australian Journalism Review* and *Australian Journalism Monograph* and which is sufficient to cover any prospective suits arising from work published on UniPollWatch.

As a precaution, the Executive agreed to extend its legal insurance coverage next year, for minimal additional cost. In any case, as you can see from the proposed editorial structure for UniPollWatch below, there are several layers of fact and legal checking built in.

Proposed structure:



In addition there will be a legal advice team comprising media law experts from within our ranks who can be contacted by campus editors, state editors and the editorial board to check any risky stories.

An Editorial Assistant will be appointed to upload the material. This person will liaise with, and be answerable to, Andrew Dodd, the proposed editor-in-chief of UniPollWatch, and the

Editorial Board. As many of you will know, Andrew runs the Journalism program at Swinburne University. He brought the UniPollWatch idea to the JERAA conference.

The JERAA website will specify that JERAA is the publisher and that the editorial board takes responsibility for publishing decisions, in order to protect Andrew Dodd and other individuals from legal risk.

Andrew Dodd took part in our Executive meeting today and outlined the legal checking protocol for UniPollWatch:

1. Each student will be asked to flag whether there are any defamatory imputations in their stories;
2. All stories will be checked by tutors and/or campus editors prior to submission to the Editorial Assistant/s, who will do the uploading work;
3. Campus editors should flag legally risky stories with their state editor, and/or the legal advice team, who will report to the editorial board. The editorial board will make the final call on whether the story should be published.

Editorial board

The editorial board will be comprised of an editor/coordinator representing each state or territory (there may need to be two representatives for NSW and Victoria) and Andrew Dodd. The board will make decisions by consensus. Where consensus fails, decisions will be made by a vote.

Financial control

The editorial board will have discretion to make decisions about how the funds raised by UniPollWatch (from universities and sponsors) will be spent, in terms of payment to the editorial assistant/s, website builder, website hosts and the like. Money left over at the conclusion of the project will be held by JERAA.

The editorial assistant will be:

1. Employed using the \$37,000 or so yielded by charging participating universities \$1500 each, and some possible sponsorship money;
2. Responsible for uploading the 1500 or so stories the project will generate.

JERAA Executive oversight:

UniPollWatch updates to be added to JERAA Executive meeting agendas as a standing item for 2016. According to section 12.6 of our constitution (2014), the Executive may appoint standing committees for projects and activities. The UniPollWatch Editorial Board fits this description.

Advertising and advertorial

No advertorials. We will not seek advertising but will develop a policy about what kind of ads we will accept, if we are approached. We will protect our editorial independence, even with the Australian Electoral Commission (which is keen to engage with young voters through the project), as we may need to be critical of how the election is run.

Industry partners

None are on board yet. We will not enter into EXCLUSIVE arrangements that could prevent us publishing stories that news organisations reject and/or that would prevent university news publications from running stories by their own students. We will co-publish with university news publications. With these guiding principles (to be drafted by Andrew Dodd) we will seek media sponsorship through which media organisations can pay a fee upfront to be able to use whatever material they like, as long as students are given bylines on their stories.

Early election kill switch

In the event of the election being called for a date before Anzac Day 2016 the project will be abandoned on this occasion, as we will not be able to do the project justice so early in first semester.

Agreement letter and invoice

An agreement letter and invoice is being drafted by Andrew and me and will be sent to participating universities explaining the project. We aim to send the letter before the Christmas shutdown.

The future

I hope you agree that UniPollWatch 2016 is an exciting opportunity not only for JERAA but

also for our students and for our members, many of whom have worked in the industry. This project is a pilot for others, as it establishes a platform and protocol for the publication of cross-campus journalism. It also enables us as an association to make a real contribution to extending and expanding the diversity of news, views and other forms of storytelling in this country.

I would like to thank Andrew Dodd very much for the idea he brought to the conference and for his vision in seeking to enlarge the scope of possibilities for journalism schools.

Cheers, Matthew Ricketson
JERAA President