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How to break into journalism

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Journalism requires passion and a willingness to be a news junkie, reports Elizabeth Allen

BEN Hawke, executive producer of the ABC's *730 Report*, lives life in the fast lane of daily journalism.

"It's good; it's the last show standing in a way," he says of the quality current affairs show produced out of Sydney.

Hawke is speaking from the ABC's Brisbane studio, where he is filling in as executive producer of *Australian Story* while also producing the *730 Report*.

Between taking calls for the night's edition, Hawke describes the daily routine: "We do a couple of conference calls in the morning – interstate hook-ups – to plan what we are going to do that day. Then it's basically get in there, work our way through it, go to air and finish about 8 o'clock."

Hawke, 55, makes it sound deceptively simple. And wearing two hats obviously doesn't faze him.

Hawke has worn a lot of different hats since beginning his journalism career straight from school with a cadetship at *The Australian* newspaper in 1973.

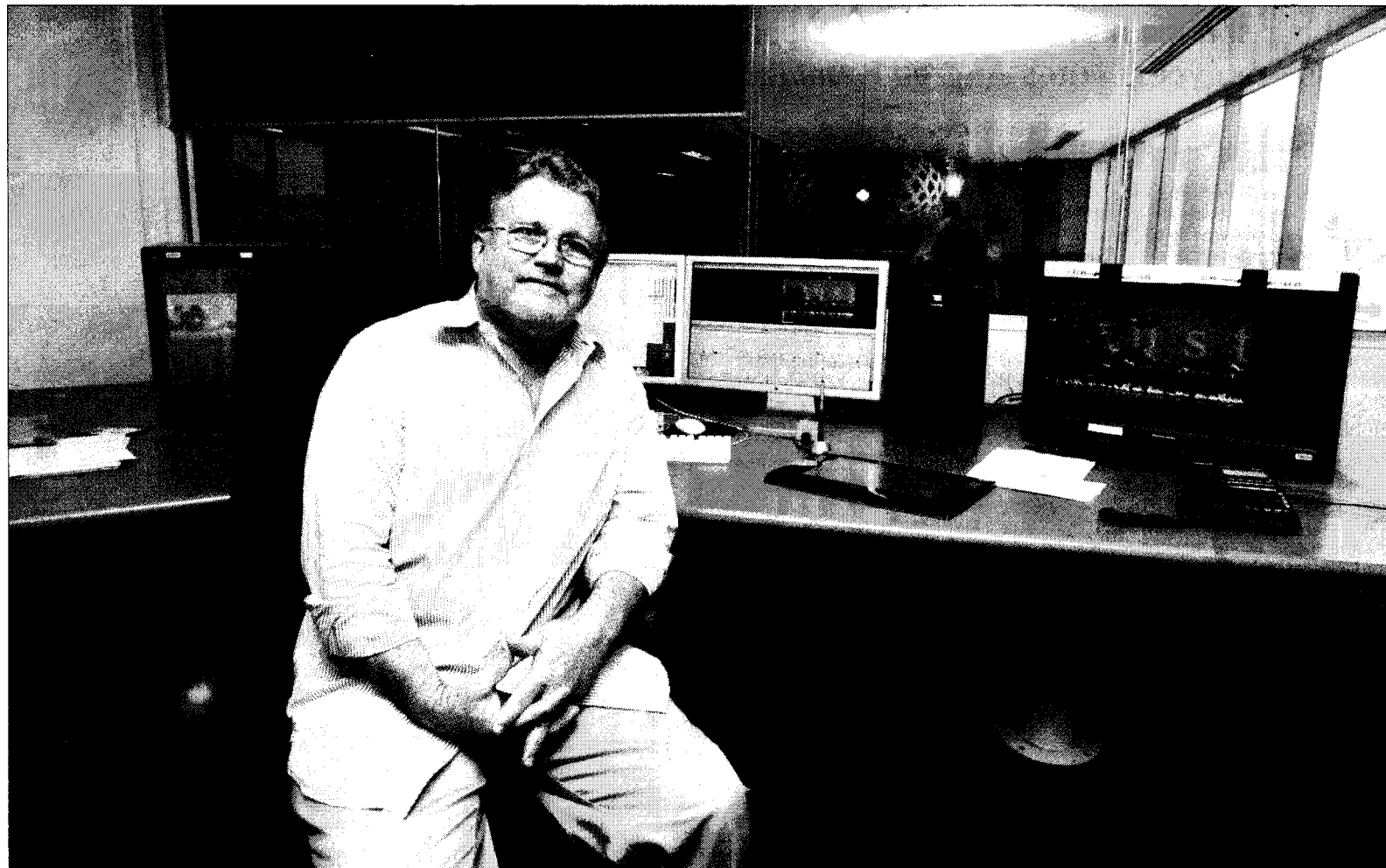
From there, he moved to the ABC, then to Channel Nine's *Sixty Minutes*, on to Sky television in the UK and back to Nine. Along the way he worked for the ABC's *Nationwide*, had a stint with Nine's *A Current Affair* and *Sunday*, spent five years with *Australian Story* in Brisbane and has been with the *730 Report* for the past three years.

Hawke says he has "liked moving around a bit".

"I counted up the other day that I've been in and out of the ABC 10 times," he says.

With such varied industry experience, he is well-placed to advise the many young people who aspire to a journalism career despite tough times in the industry.

Hawke describes himself as "not much of a fan of the university



GOOD NIGHT, GOOD LUCK: TV producer Ben Hawke cautions future journalists that while the profession is deeply satisfying, it is not a path to riches.

journalism school" and says he wants to see evidence of published articles, previous jobs or work experience when assessing hundreds of job applications each year.

"Just doing a degree is not enough," he says. "Don't just say, 'I've got a journalism degree'.

"So do 3000 other people. There's a limited number of jobs."

He advises young aspirants to write articles for community papers or magazines while at uni and, after graduation, to take any job they can – be it on a small rural paper or a regional radio or television station.

"Get the job, any job," Hawke says.

"If someone's had a job, I'm going to look at them much more to hire them than someone who's just been to UQ (University of Queensland)."

When enrolling at university, Hawke advises against doing a straight journalism degree – although he says some journalism subjects taken as part of another degree can be useful.

"If people are going to get a degree, get a good degree. Get a law degree, a history degree," he says.

"You've either got it in you to be a good journalist or you don't. Yes, you can learn (journalism at university) but unless you have done some

writing at uni or worked on a small paper, and are prepared to read the papers and be a news junkie, forget it.

"Do internships. Get your foot in the door. You have to show you have get up and go and have a passion for it."

Hawke is, however, an "unashamed" fan of Brisbane's Jscool, founded by former UQ academic and journalist Dr John Henningham.

He admires the 10-month HECS-supported course's emphasis on real-life exercises – covering police rounds, courts, council and doing arts reviews – complemented by internships.

"I liked it (the school) so much I sent my own son there," he says.

As for his own career, Hawke says he moved from newspaper to television reporting because he "liked the visual side of things", then switched to producing.

"I was a better producer than reporter but I think it's handy to be on the other side of the camera to know what's required when you are producing," he says.

Hawke obviously finds his profession deeply satisfying but he cautions that journalism is not a path to (financial) riches.

"The money (at the ABC) is very average," he says.

"But the work is lovely."