Chapter 6 — Elite digital media and digital media elites

> Audiences know what to expect, and that is all they are prepared to believe in.
>
> — The Player, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (Stoppard, 1967)

Information is power and the 'mainstream media' in Australia — the established, commercial news organisations — are the most significant institutions in shaping public opinion. This occurs at two levels. The first is through the creation of information that forms the basis of democratic dialogue. While the classic model of the public sphere saw local information as filtering up to national elites, the modern public sphere requires news media to provide information upon which informed debate and deliberation can take place. In this, media organisations are often the origin of many of the issues that form the grist for the mill of public opinion, serving as engines in the generation of popular discourse in this country. The second, and equally important, level is through the framing and focusing of attention on particular issues. Media organisations act as both conduit for other's content (such as the material produced by campaigners in parties and social movements), and produce their own frames of preferred interpretation for the information they transmit (Young, 2011a: 102–03).

The political-economy model of news media

Under the liberal democratic model of Australian politics, a free market based media is essential to regulate the conduct of elite public institutions (the legislature and the executive) through providing a means by which the public observe the elite's behaviour. This formulation supposes a classic principal–agent problem, where the 'agents' of the public — politicians and bureaucrats — are difficult for voters to watch directly because of the complexity of their work, distance from their constituents, and the public's lack of specialist skills to oversight their behaviour. 'Solving' this problem, the private sector nature of the media is significant, because it provides this oversight of the governmental sphere *without* being dependent upon it for resources (Errington and Miragliotta, 2011: 4–11).

Through these resources, specialists (journalists) scrutinise the work of elected and salaried elites. This 'free press' provides voters and citizens with the information they need to make informed choices during elections, combined with the informational role of political parties and active citizens they form

part of the political system as an information system. The commercial basis of media does not simply insulate the media against government interference (as do political traditions that protect free speech and publication in democratic nations), but the need for media to make a profit calibrates the media towards the public's areas of concern: a competitive media acts thermostatically to sense and respond to the public's interest through 'market sensing'.

Stories of decline

Under this (idealised) view of the nature of democratic practice, the single biggest impact of the rise of electronic and digital media following World War II has been its erosion of the economic basis of journalism and the free press. This is because the arrival of radio, television and, most recently, the internet, have tended to undermine the financial viability of newspapers and news magazines, leading to the contraction of titles and consolidation of ownership (Figure 33). This has been driven by a significant reduction in the circulation of print titles (Figure 34) regardless of the rapid increase in the total adult population, combined with an inability of the print industry to adapt to new sustainable business models in the short term (Macnamara, 2010b).

In Australia's media–politics arena, Rodney Tiffen (in Jones, 2005) has argued that this led to the belief in 'the influence of ''media mates'' on coverage' by political elites, and the distortion of policy towards positions favouring media proprietors (Dyer, 2010). While this focused on a limited number of domestic news owners (the Murdoch and the Packer families) in the 1980s, over time the globalisation of News Limited (holding a 65 per cent share of national and metropolitan circulation in 2011; Finkelstein, 2012: 59) has shifted this down to the role of individual editors within consolidated media corporations (McKnight, 2012: 38–46; Josephi, 2011: 20).[1] In 2012, attempts by Gina Rinehart to assert editorial influence over a weakened Fairfax organisation rekindled the political interest in the role of individual proprietors in shaping the editorial focus of newspapers in Australia.

1 This is also the case in the electronic media, where reforms to cross-media ownership laws in the mid-2000s encouraged a shift from proprietors to corporate ownership (Pusey and McCutcheon, 2011).

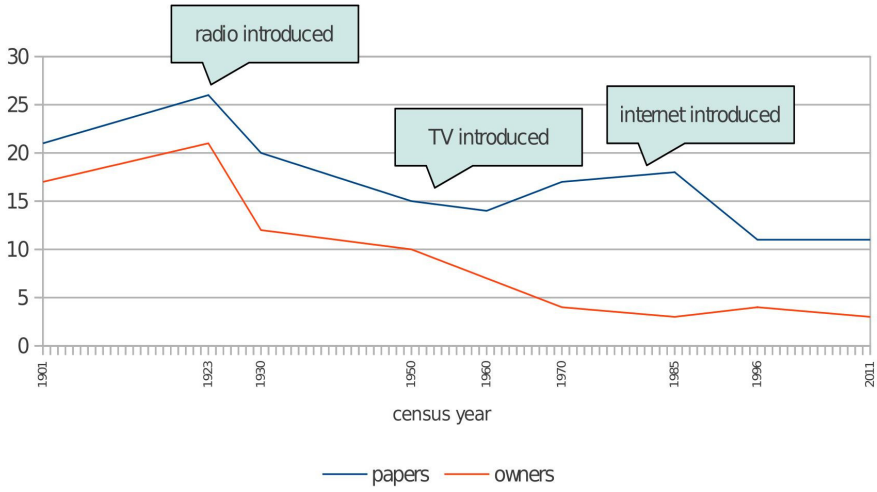

Figure 33: Changes in the metro and national newspaper industry, 1901–2011

Source: Finkelstein, 2012 (rescaled and annotated)

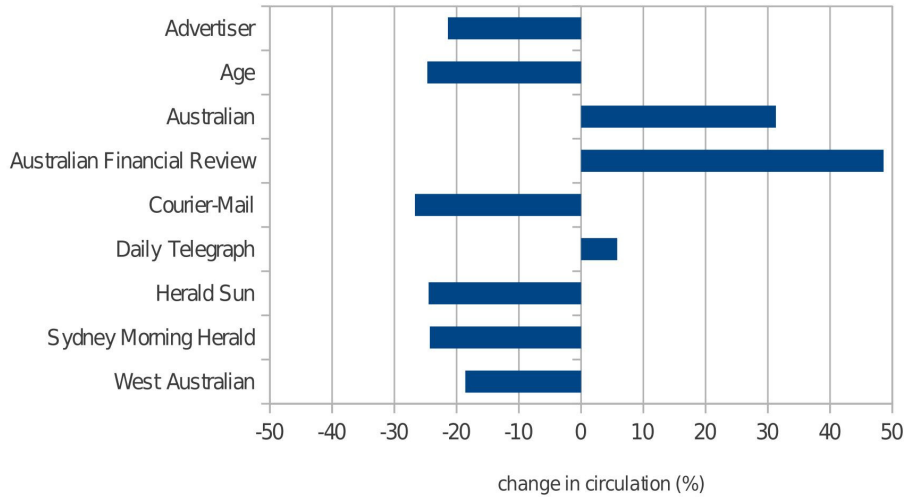

Figure 34: Percentage change in newspaper circulation 1977–2012

Source: Rosenbloom, 2012

This industry consolidation also has a direct impact on the work of journalists through the reduction of resources available to them, while also undermining the market-sensing model through a significant reduction in the level of competition. The importance of this particular industry has been highlighted because print, it has been argued, is the preserve of 'quality journalism' (Birnbauer, 2012: 83). The impact of this economic squeeze creates a negative cycle, because cost cutting sees a shift away from areas of news production that are seen as high-cost (specialist journalism, like investigative and technical analysis). Following the liberal-democratic media model presented above, this has a number of knock-on effects leading to concerns regarding the reduction in the quality of our democracy.

While the internet is often cited as *the* source of the decline (Finkelstein, 2012: 55), in Australia there was significant consolidation of media ownership during the 1960s, with a contraction in titles in the 1970s. This reflected the impact of radio and television on the consumption habits of Australians, which led to a weakening of the economic position of print, through increased competition for consumers and advertising revenue (Radio Adelaide, 2004). The rise of the internet has further reduced the profitability of print publications, and narrowed their economic base (fundamentally in subscriptions and advertising). This significantly changes the political economy of the news media as more media compete for declining audiences and advertising revenue.

Media in an age of 'attention' economics

Following a neo-institutional reading of the impact of structures on social institutions, scholars of media politics have long speculated as to the reasons commercial media organisations diverge in practice from the purist view of them as democratic institutions. The most famous of these perspectives is the 'propaganda model' proposed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky (1988). The propaganda model argues that a series of 'filters' shape what is produced by commercial media organisations by nature of the capitalist system of production in which they are embedded. The profit motive, the need to appeal to large audiences, reliance on advertising, and the relationship with other social elites for access to information (journalist–source relations; Tiffen, 1989: 95–124) narrows the type of news that is likely to be covered by the media, with a preference towards market-friendly, advertiser-friendly, and reader-friendly copy that is unlikely to significantly challenge the status quo. Thus, rather than capitalist production producing a neutral press, this model sees the media as having a specific, in-built, conservative and pro-market bias. For Paul Taylor, this means that the mainstream media's watchdog role is constrained by its

desire to retain its relationships with existing elites: 'Even at its most critical, the media commentariat who purport to hold power to account are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the corporate apparatchiks' (2011: xi).

Given the time distance between today's visualised media organisations and the research of Herman and Chomsky, it is important to ask if the new business environment undermines these tendencies. Indeed, there is a trend for digital media entrepreneurs to argue that they represent a new type of business enterprise that is fundamentally different from pre-existing ones. This has a range of dimensions, from the purely technical, to a basic shift away from the need for capital to be invested in plant towards its investment in intellectual property. At the political level, arguing basic difference has been useful in seeking regulatory advantages from governments, such as exemptions from taxation for online transactions (Winn and Wright, 2001: 18.2) and exclusion from existing content regulations (Chen, 2003). Tarleton Gillespie (2010) argues, however, that this overdraws the basic truth that as businesses, these digital-media organisations are more like their forebears in their commercial orientation and desire to develop sustainable business models based on mass appeal. Indeed, while the notion of the 'free press' independent from government influence is commonly seen as a core democratic principle, authors like Eric Louw (2010) argue that this is more reflective of the same type of 'hands-off arguments' made by an emerging enlightenment media class against the old power elites of the aristocracy. Cyber-separatism, it seems, is a longer and more complex history than our previous discussions may have indicated.

This leads us to consider to what extent the political economy of contemporary media reflects practices aligned with Herman and Chomsky's model, and ultimately the 'pressures [that] mount to strike a different balance between safe and controversial, between socially and financially valuable, between niche and wide appeal' (259).

The 'googlearchy'

In the attention economy, being noticed amongst a blizzard of competing media is fundamental. For all the openness of the digital environment to new publications and voices, discoverability is a function of the impact any media voice will have. In a provocative analysis of the 'myth' of a democratic digital environment, Matthew Hindman talks about the importance of search engines as key drivers of online visibility (2008: 54). On one level this is not controversial. While the core role of search engines in finding information online has declined relative to social search functions through social networking services (SNSs) and other social media, since Hindman published his book, search engines represent the most common 'kicking-off point' for attempts to obtain information online.

In Australia this process is most commonly represented by Google. Australia, in line with its long and ineffective policy attempts to limit media consolidation, has seen Google take an impressive 85 to 95 per cent of the market share for internet searching (Stafford, 2010; Cowling, 2011a). If you search online in Australia, you 'google it'.

The implications of this are not simply in the capacity for Google to represent a new 'super gatekeeper' over online information, but, as Hindman points out, how search engines like Google operate to deliver the results of search requests. Rather than simply matching results to the content of the pages found, Google uses a range of measures including cross-linking and site popularity to rank results (their trademarked 'pagerank' algorithm). This means that popular pages have an advantage in remaining popular, and that larger media organisations with a higher level of intra-organisational cross-linking are more likely to dominate search outputs. The commercial nature of mainstream online content providers combines with the commercial objectives of Google (who seek to provide results against which advertising placements will be matched) to reinforce the dominance of a small number of media organisations.

Importantly, this is not simply an outcome for causal consumers of political media, but is also true of the smaller number of highly motivated and interested political news 'junkies'. Using our 2010 election study data introduced in Chapter 2, Figure 35 shows the origin of news content (political, non-political and mixed). While public media (particularly the ABC) contains a comparatively strong market share for mixed content (predominantly homepage visits, which contain political and non-political headlines and summaries) the considerable shift in consumption between the pre-election and election period reflects the impact of search results in directing consumers towards commercial content over public broadcasters. Over the last decade we have seen the ABC moving into the provision of textual news stories, reflecting the comparatively low cost of the organisation to 'repurpose' material and create quasi newspapers off its news site (www.abc.net.au/news). What the googlearchy demonstrates, however, is how commercial media have advantages in discoverability over their public cousins.

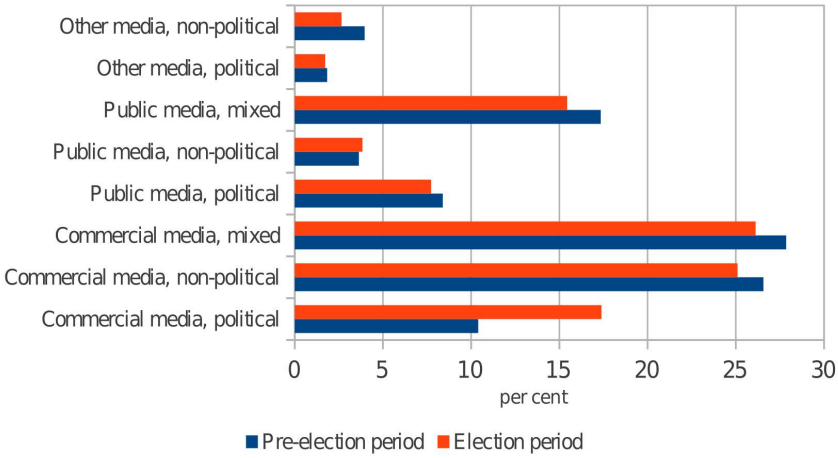

Figure 35: Online news media source, 2010 election

Source: Author's research, with Ariadne Vromen

Cooking the golden goose/biting the hand that feeds

While the googlarchy funnels large numbers of views to news homepages belonging to corporations, media proprietors have not necessarily seen this as a cause of celebration. Speaking of the way search engine companies like Google place advertising against search results and news extracts, Rupert Murdoch has attacked these organisations as being engaged in little more than online 'piracy' and theft of the profits of his intellectual property (Levine, 2011: 114). The upshot of this has been that media organisations have been forced to experiment in new ways to pay for online content (such as the use of 'paywalls' around content in the online version of the *Australian*, the value of which remains unclear at this time; Browne, 2012: 187), and increasing use of low-cost, syndicated content focused on lifestyle and celebrity. The former removes the content from the wider readership towards a narrower economic elite; the latter has eroded the quality of newspapers, particularly, in their online form.

As advertising has moved from newspapers to other forms of media, this narrows the diversity of advertisers who fund news, and rebalances the economic basis of newspapers away from a large number of small advertisers (particularly via classifieds) to a much smaller array of larger buyers (Finkelstein, 2012: 77). Following the propaganda model, this has made commercial media even more sensitive to the concerns of its advertisers in the way that the 'wrapper' surrounding advertising (journalism) impacts on the substance of the media: ads. A recent example of the impact of the contraction of the advertising market was

highlighted by the ABC's *Media Watch* program in September 2011. Following a feature story in the *Sunday Times* (WA) real estate section about people who sell their homes without the aid of an agent, the paper faced an advertiser backlash. With the loss of classified advertising, real estate sections have become major economic earners for newspapers. This increased the power of those advertisers relative to that of the paper's editorial. For the *Sunday Times*, then, the threat of a boycott (or worse – threats of shifting to an industry-owned online real estate website) saw the management of the paper offer the industry both an apology, but also, the following week, an in-depth feature on the benefits of agents in the sale process was published. The political implications of this are not clear, nor was the impact of housing costs on the living standards of Australians considered in this interaction between the industry and a media sector it sees as a cheerleader for its business activities.

Garbage in, garbage out

As the economic basis of journalism contracts, proprietors and owners are under increased pressure to raise the productivity of their remaining staff. While some aspects of the digital-media environment allow for substantially increased productivity of equal (or higher) quality (expanded access to online information (Tiffen, 2012: 25–26), reduced cost of telecommunications, electronic word processing, greater ability to produce graphics and illustrations, etc.) at some point the ongoing push for productivity impacts upon journalistic standards. In many areas this is seen in the additional reduction in diversity of reporting: such as the use of identical reports from news services in the few remaining 'competing' media markets (Johnston and Forde, 2009), or the sharing of television footage ('vision') by all free-to-air broadcasters in a particular market. Other examples simply mean increasing staff output through reducing quality of the product. Commonly referred to as 'churnalism' (Mann, 2008: 5.2–25.3), high productivity news production has reduced the time spent in the critical investigation of the issues being reported.[2] At times this is reflected in the application of 'standard operating procedure' (SOP) forms of reporting (the use of routine heuristics and writing practices to 'churn out' a story to a journalistic-writing formula), at others in the significant reprinting of material provided by the most well-funded or organised source in a story.

Information subsidies and the growth of PR

For sources wanting to shape the way their issues and concerns are presented, the effective use of public relations (PR) training and material has been a growth

2 In an admission of hypocrisy, however, it's important to acknowledge that productivity formulae, such as that used to determine forced redundancies at my university in 2012, equally encourage churn in the academic setting. Let's hope this isn't representative of it.

area under the current media political economy. This practice represents the use of 'information subsidies': lowering the cost of media production through the provision of pre-packaged material that can be slotted directly into a story (or, in extreme examples, as whole stories). While the classic example of this practice is the well-written press release (a document that is written and structured in a way that it requires minimal changes for republicaiton as a news story), these practices have developed over time into increasingly sophisticated use of multimedia (such as the provision of video 'packages' for television broadcast), and the use of dubious corporate surveys to provide the hook for stories (Zoch and Molleda, 2009: 254). These latter techniques can be effective as the demands of churnalism reduce the time journalists have to investigate the source, veracity and reliability of the data presented therein.

Information subsidies are effective when designed around the needs of media organisations and professionals. As staff productivity has been driven up, these needs are simply the ability to produce acceptable copy in the quickest time possible. While the use of information subsidies is not new (indeed, the use of such material is a journalistic norm and expected practice; Stanyer, 2001: 162), there is evidence that the impact of PR material on the content of news output has increased in recent years. Through the use of content analysis Bacon, et al. (2010) identified that 55 per cent of the content of 10 of Australia's major newspapers[3] was based on PR material (media releases or some other form of information subsidy). These findings are matched by survey data where journalists report an increased reliance on PR material in the production of stories: 55 per cent relied on PR material for the generation of a 'majority' of stories in 2008, up from 20 per cent in 2006 (Johnston and Forde, 2009).

While this has significant implications for the way that organisations outside of the media can employ information subsidies to have a substantive impact on the content and framing of journalistic reports, we must recognise that this is often focused on areas of commercial activity, rather than the political sphere. Unsurprisingly, it is the consumer-driven technology reporting about new products and services that is the most likely to be driven by PR (77 per cent of stories). Of the 11 news categories studied, politics was the least likely to be driven by this type of material (37 per cent of stories).[4]

The logic of the 'PR state'

While 'only' one third of stories containing or driven by PR material may look considerable, the high watermark set by the information and communications technology (ICT) industry may simply serve as a target for some in the political

3 The *Australian Financial Review*, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), *Daily Telegraph*, *Herald Sun*, *Mercury* (Hobart), *Australian*, *Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *West Australian*.

4 Information technology was the most likely to be driven by PR.

world. Over the last 40 years, governments have been increasingly employing media professionals to manage their relations with journalists (Barnes, 2005: 20–22).[5] This is a deliberate process of creating capacity in government to generate information subsidies to achieve favourable press coverage and the nature of the reporting of government affairs. At one end of the spectrum this is a purely political act: attempting to control public opinion through shaping what is (and is not) reported in the media. At the other this represents the appropriate use of public resources: shaping communication to ensure effective communication of government initiatives, or realise policies that are informational in nature (such as social-marketing campaigns aimed at achieving specific policy outcomes).

With the decline in employment opportunities for journalists in the news media, it is unsurprising that more journalists and media professionals work for government than in the private media (Pearson and Patching, 2008: 6). The specialisation of media liaisons and officers, communications planners and writers in the public sector reflects a growing sophistication of government management of information, combined with more instrumental desire to maintain good coverage of the work of elites. While exact numbers are difficult to determine (as these professionals operate under a wide variety of job titles), we can estimate this by looking at a range of indicators. By 2009, about 20 per cent of the members of the Public Relations Institute of Australia worked for government (PRIA, 2011) with survey research pushing PR employment in the public sector as high as 30 per cent (De Bussy and Wolf, 2009).[6] Looking at other measures of the increased use of professional communications techniques in government, Young (2007a) provides an indication through estimates of the increase in advertising expenditure by the Commonwealth. This expenditure has increased in real terms by a factor of three over the last 20 years.

This has led some theorists to see the development of a far more problematic outcome: the rise of the 'PR state'. This term was coined by Oscar Gandy (1982) to identity the trend towards the expanding number of information specialists in the US government. Importantly, however, the PR state is more than simply 'spin', but also reflects the expanding role of communication professions in the 'formulation and implementation of public policy'. This has been seen in the Australian context, with Ian Ward (2003) arguing that Australian governments have adopted the type of pro-active media-management approach which sees the formation of good public policy placed secondary to questions about the ability of policy to be 'sold' to the public. This leads governments to the adoption of policies that are more easily communicated (and therefore are likely

5 Whitlam's 'It's time' campaign is often seen as a good example of the introduction of modern campaigning techniques in Australia, as discussed in Chapter 2.

6 This excludes the number of PR professionals who work for government through private sector consultancies.

to be simplistic) and to avoid those that are seen as complex, have aspects that are easily exploited by the Opposition or other opponents of the policy or government, or that require significant framing to communicate effectively and are therefore innovative in nature. KISS — keep it simple, stupid — rules this type of communicative and policy-making logic.

One of the problems here is that PR is often seen purely in terms of propaganda: in this case the use of government resources to convince the public of a particular point of view. While this is clearly the point of high-profile expenditures of public resources around policy issues (the GST, WorkChoices, mining and carbon taxation), these high-visibility activities do not define the range of government communication practices. To some extent, there is ambiguity in the way in which political elites and practitioners see the role of PR. Glenny's (2008: 164–65) review of policy documents surrounding public sector communications has identified that these directive documents commonly frame PR in terms of one-way communication between government and stakeholder publics. This is at odds with conventional industry definitions of the practice, which focus more on information exchange and the facilitation of dialogue towards shared understanding and adjustment between key stakeholders (the 'mutual satisfaction' model of PR; Moffit, 1994).

While the use of PR as propaganda in this way is widely condemned (the politics of 'spin'), contemporary political and media logic reinforces its use, even reluctantly. This was a problem for the former prime minister Kevin Rudd, who famously talked about restricting the level of partisan and propagandistic government advertising declaring it a 'cancer' on democratic practice because it disproportionately favoured incumbent administrations (Griffiths, 2010). While this may have been a position of principle, the limitations of governments denying themselves the use of government advertising and PR came to the fore in the public debate over the Resource Super Profits Tax (RSPT). Following the announcement of this taxation package, mining-industry advertising quickly framed the debate, leading the government to concede that their failure to promote the policy allowed opposition to build and dominate the media (AAP, 2010b). By the time the government changed its position and introduced a propaganda campaign of its own, the damage to the RSPT policy (and Rudd's leadership) had been done. Under the prime ministership of Julia Gillard, the policy had to be significantly re-negotiated and the origins of the policy in the detailed and methodical review of taxation (the Henry Tax Review) was significantly lost to the pressures of policy-making on the run.

This explains the political logic of moving from reactive to proactive media management strategies. Allowing oppositional voices to dominate the use of advertising and PR early in the proposal or implementation of a policy critically allows them time to define the nature of the issue and frame its interpretation.

Framing, once embedded in the way a policy is discussed, is difficult (and more expensive) to dislodge. Regardless, therefore, of the good intentions of any government (the most recent to talk about restricting public advertising being the then incoming Coalition government of Barry O'Farrell in NSW; AAP, 2009), ensuring that issues are framed in the favour of the government of the day becomes a normal process (SOP) of risk avoidance. One experienced public servant clearly articulates this shift :

> The older defensive approach was largely response-based … preparation of question time briefs or briefs to respond to critical media stories. The proactive work … Over the last decade the requirement to manage risk in the public sector has become more obvious and this requires a forward-looking approach — one that anticipates problems. (Andrew Podger, cited in Australian Government, 2005)

This is not simply a reflection of the professionalisation of issues management in government to provide for the type of 'rapid response' model honed in the United Kingdom by New Labour under Tony Blair (which aimed to 'shut down' negative stories before they could develop; Beech, 2006: 109), or a reflection of the way in which PR has moved up the organisational chain to become part of the strategic-planning process (Allen, 2012). This reflects the perception of the news cycle as so rapid as to require constant attention by press officers and media minders. Lose control of a story early, as in the case of the RSPT, and you might just lose government.

Now, now, now!

The diversification of media over the last century has also impacted on the way Australians define what is relevant political news and information. By the 1980s consolidation led to a contraction in titles through the end of morning and afternoon editions, leaving the evening news largely the domain of afternoon 'drive-time' radio and evening news broadcasts. This positioned newspapers at the start of the day's news distribution cycle (and, therein, they set the day's media agenda for radio and television). Where newspapers were once the key 'breakers' of news, their position in the temporal flow of the daily news cycle has changed with the rise of more immediate sources for breaking news: first the electronic broadcast media, then newspapers themselves, reborn through their online editions, attempting to increase the frequency of viewership through continually updating their homepages throughout the day and night.

For many commentators, this reflects the acceleration of the news cycle. This acceleration reflects a popular understanding that the definition of 'news' is in terms of what is most immediate and up-to-date (Macnamara, 2010a: 214), as opposed to what might be most important. As electronic and digital media

increasingly allow for a constant flow of information, this shortens the time for professional journalists to produce content seen as relevant to their consuming public. While this is commonly decried as part of the decline in the quality of journalistic output, due to the lack of time for reflection, a disproportionate emphasis on immediate events over careful evaluation of what may be relevant in the wider content of the story, or through requiring political elites to respond to events in real time (Blair, 2007) are also contributors to the decline. This, however, is not a new tendency. The regularisation of news production in line with the need for commercial media to produce a reliable revenue stream creates the notion of news as a continual flow of events — as opposed to irregular and ad hoc happenings. For the same reasons, media organisations invented and have honed opinion polling over the last 100 years: allowing them to control the flow of news through creating 'reportable' events on a regular basis.

New audiences, new partners

While the digital-media environment has exerted pressure on conventional media organisations to produce more at lower cost, the economic basis of media production is not the sole determinant of the output of these organisations. Constructivists understand structures of economic incentive as being moderated by social norms and expectations. In the case of journalism, a strong professional tradition and a 'noble' self-perception as public advocates and watchdogs (Simons, 2007: 245) tussles with managerial imperatives to drive down standards for increased output (Edy and Snidow, 2011: 830). Thus journalists, as professionals with a sense of a coherent set of skills and norms of behaviour, have not simply responded through 'churnalism', but also by attempts to develop new methods of news production that retain quality. This includes the use of social media to assist in the generation of leads, verification of facts, and greater inclusion of readers in the production of news (Robinson, 2011: 40). In this, way social media allows readers to become Axel Brun's 'producers' (as discussed in Chapter 1) through micro-participation in media production.

This has begun to filter up. Recently, the Fairfax organisation attempted to make routine this method of participation from sources through the establishment of Newso (www.newso.com.au), an institutional source management website that allows invited contributors to provide quotes, suggestions and input into an organisation-wide sourcing tool (Jamieson, 2012). The purpose of this experiment is to trial ways that working journalists can access 'banks' of content for incorporation in their stories. Outside the walls of the established media, the idea that information subsidies need not be the preserve of parties, government and large corporations is demonstrated by the way in which WikiLeaks has become more adroit (although not without some friction at the personal level;

Lundberg, 2011: 2) at working with journalists to ensure that their release of raw material is timed and co-ordinated with mainstream, respected news organisations in a way to give the material (and the organisation) maximum impact and exposure. This follows a number of years in which the organisation assumed that simply 'dumping' material would lead to it being picked up by a hungry media (3–4). In this way, organisations like WikiLeaks have adjusted their media strategy to maximise the value of their material for the mainstream media, assuming their logics of news production processes and expectations at the same time.

Thus we see how performance expectations are not just internalised in the journalistic community, but also across the various stakeholder publics who produce and consume news content. The clearest way this can be expressed directly is by readers, rather than the indirect market-sensing approach of consumer demand. One area where the public has been increasingly active in defending standards and quality in the commercial press (as discussed in Chapter 3's consideration of the role of bloggers as critics of journalistic practice) is through direct interaction between audiences, journalists and editors. This takes two forms. First, just as public institutions have become the subject of more visible popular discussion and criticism, the media industry itself is actively discussed in these new public spheres. This takes the form of commentary within the context of particular issues or stories (e.g. Illustration 15), as well as the formation of oversight communities made up of monitorial citizens (see The long form opinionistas: The Australian 'blogosphere', Chapter 3) who are interested in the exercise of influence in private as well as public institutions. Examples of the latter can be seen in specialist media blogs and news services like Pure Poison (http://blogs.crikey.com.au/purepoison) and mUmBRELLA (http://mumbrella.com.au), as well as less sympathetic critics like Australian's Worst Journalist (www.australiasworstjournalist.com.au).

The extent to which this form of oversight impacts upon the behaviour of media organisations is unclear. In talking about proposals for statutory regulation (thus, subject to a strong motivation to defend self-regulation) the former editor-in-chief of the *Sydney Morning Herald* recently argued that this form of scrutiny is an increasingly important external constraint on the behaviour of media (2012), and acts as a powerful regulator of media standards in Australia.[7] Certainly, powerful media organisations have been sensitive to online criticism about their conduct and professional standards (Neighbour, 2011). But this has not always led to media organisations taking on criticism in productive ways.

7 Peter Fray was talking in the context of the report of the Independent Media Inquiry's recommendations that a new, more powerful regulator of news media be introduced in Australia.

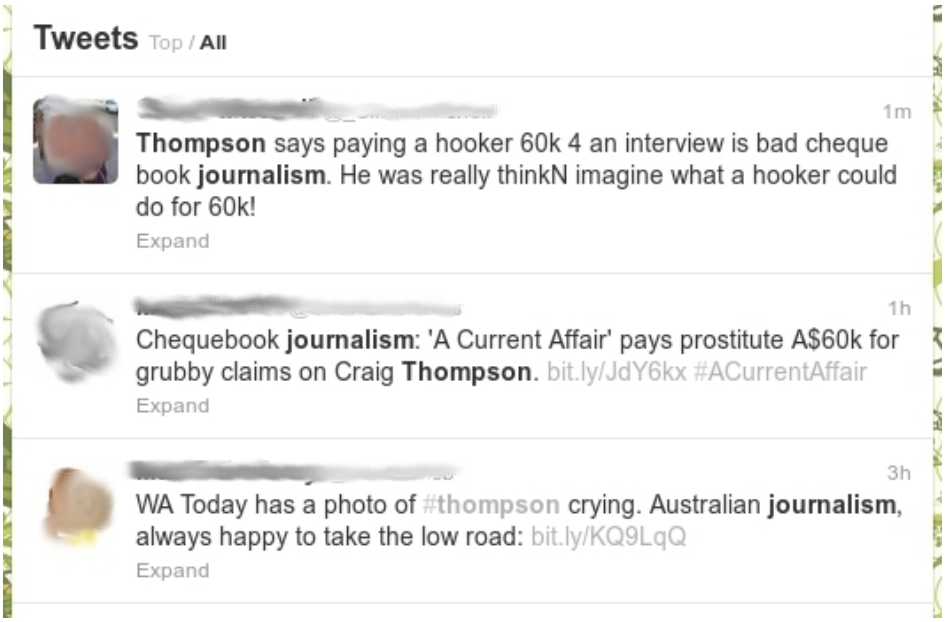

Illustration 15: Story commentary on Twitter regarding the Craig Thomson affair (24 May 2012) (user tags obscured)

Source: Twitter

Examples of this include tweeted accusations that the editorial position of the *Australian* newspaper was hostile to coverage of mainstream climate change science, which led to threats of litigation against the tweeter: journalist and academic Julie Posetti in 2010 (ABC, 2010). Similar criticism by academic and commentator Robert Manne that the *Australian* is a campaigning paper which follows a strong political agenda on issues like the environment and attacks on the Australian Greens (2011) was rebutted in a succession of articles and editorials (Hamilton, 2012), escalating to legal action (Crook, 2012). More broadly, the mismatch between the Canberra press gallery's interpretation of Gillard's criticism of the Leader of the Opposition's views of women in public and that of the widespread social-media praise for her 9 October 2012 speech demonstrated how out of touch these 'insiders' could be (Dunlop, 2012).[8] Rather than recalibration of their interpretation of the social impact of this speech, the media elites reacted churlishly to accusations they were in a bubble (Maley, 2012). It is questionable if established media are responding as much as

8 Following a move by the Opposition to censure the then speaker of the House of Representatives, the Prime Minister engaged in a wideranging attack against the Leader of the Opposition regarding views on the status of women.

reacting (Flew and Wilson, 2010: 137), with media organisations resorting to defensiveness and litigation, techniques that were once employed against them by older, entrenched elites.

Another question we need to ask is the extent to which this form of participation expands or narrows the substantive content of media. While material sourced by journalists from social media has been important in elaborating breaking news (Murthy, 2010), the relatively narrow democratic base of politically interested social-media users (see Chapter 3) highlights the enduring problem of the digital divide. Interestingly, this reaffirms the core of the propaganda model: that the economic base that supports middle-class consumption of new products and services creates a charmed circle of media content and journalism produced by, and aimed at, the needs and expectations of this class. Chris Nash, however, argues that the advantage that some bloggers have is their separation from the 'hothouse' environment of the Canberra press gallery (2008). Citing the way the work of Possum Comitatus (Possum Pollytics; http://blogs.crikey.com.au/pollytics) moved from 'external critic' to respected analyst in the eyes of some members of the mainstream media, he sees the power of anonymity and externality in shaking off constraints of journalist–source relations (fear of being 'punished' by sources of coverage).

Who's following whom?

One of the more interesting outcomes of the changing economic model for news media has been how journalists have seen opportunities to strengthen their organisational and economic positions through the use of digital media. Social media, in particular, has become a popular way that individual journalists have built (and demonstrate) strong personal followings. Examples of this include Latika Bourke, who won a Walkley Young Journalist of the Year award in 2010, in part for her innovative use of social media in reporting. In addition to the development of a personal audience, Bourke has established a reputation for online interaction with her readers and political elites. This example represents not simply an example of innovation in the adoption of technology (over the last two years, political journalists of all types have been rapid adopters of the medium), but also the use of personal branding strategies to protect and enhance employment prospects by journalists in an age of increasing uncertainty. Personal branding in this case is a deliberate and planned approach to promoting the attributes and characteristics of an individual to a market, using known techniques developed for the sale of conventional products (product development, communication and advertising, market analysis; Lair, et al., 2005: 209).

Like blogs before it (*Media Report*, 2007; Murphy and Burgess, 2004), journalists have found Twitter to be an attractive digital-media channel because of its neat fit with their tempo of work (journalists have been quick to substitute Twitter posts for 'vox pop' interviews and quote tweets directly in stories, as well as using Twitter traffic to source interview questions and story ideas; Sheales, 2012):[9] an emphasis on timeliness and novelty that come in-built into the channel; and, its compact format (excellent for both short-form journalism and conventional television screen resolution). The use of short messaging services (internet and mobile telephone) can also be seen, however, as reinforcing a perception of closeness between media and political elites. While tweets are performed 'in public', the ability for particular journalists to solicit responses from elites serves to demonstrate their 'currency' and standing in the media community. That this is done in the wider view of an enlarged online community shows how contemporary politics is friendly to the 'media dramaturgy' of the age (Bard and Soderqvist, 2002: 204). In acting the role of 'insiders' (which they are not), journalists perform their importance to their stakeholders (peers, publics and elites). Joe Atkinson identifies this as the:

> … self-serving 'watchdog' fantasies some political journalists hold about themselves: as a fearless posse of 'inside dopesters', guardians of truth and justice, infallible spin-detectors, and duty-bound to intervene in the political process against politicians and spin doctors on behalf of an easily hoodwinked public. (2005: 17)

This becomes a circular process as journalists and politicians 'must' also perform their significance through the adoption of these technologies, even if they are sceptical of their value (Gillard, for example, has expressed concern at the medium's triviality and limited value, while maintaining an active Twitter account through her office).

Looking at the dynamics of this relationship, Peter Brent (2011) undertook a lengthy participant observation of the use of digital media by journalists and politicians in the Australian federal parliament. This study was well timed, taking place during the period in which this medium came to be salient in the Australian context, driven by minute-by-minute coverage of two leadership #spills (Rudd and Turnbull) which represent the apex of the notion of insider politics (knowledge about the machinations of the 'machine men' of politics). He observes:

> Who do politicians and their staff follow on Twitter? The same as everyone else interested in politics: the journalist, particularly the

9 Or as stories, in May 2012 the Government Whip, Joel Fitzgibbon, became the subject of a story based on accusations of 'treason' against the prime minister, accusations he refuted with a tweet of support for the PM (Maiden, 2012).

> Canberra press gallery. In the chamber in question time, MPs can be seen spending a lot of time reading their internet-enabled mobile phones … From enquiries I have determined that at least some of the time is spent on Twitter. The parliamentarians are not tuning to the #QT [question time] hashtag, but are watching those tweeters they follow. And the most frenetic activity, at this time, comes from the press gallery. (58)

Through the use of private and public micro-messaging, politicians and journalists maintain and sustain their professional–personal relationships (see Illustration 16). Journalists report unsourced messages during key 'crisis' events as being from key insider 'sources', demonstrating their special access to the political class (sometimes through literally comparing SMS messages on television; *Media Watch*, 2010). Similarly, politicians rely on reciprocal exchanges to keep them informed about other political goings on from outside of their immediate party/circle/faction/clique (Davis, 2010: 80).

Illustration 16: Politician–journalist social interactions on Twitter

Source: Twitter

The question, therefore, is the extent to which the visibility of this relationship by 'outsiders' alters the nature of this relationship. In many ways these interactions are nothing new: journalist–source relations have long been a complex 'game'

of dominance and trust that has been played out by these two groups of 'frenemies'. Politicians need journalists to distribute and collect information, and journalists need politicians for content (Tiffen, 1989). The shift from private relationships to include more publicly performed ones does increase journalistic standing, but also presents the opportunity for interventions by non-elite voices in these conversational threads. There is evidence that some of the discursive environments online provide counterweights to the notion of digital media as reinforcing the existing media visibility of entrenched elites.

In an analysis of the Australian political use of Twitter, minor party figures, like the Greens, are identified as more highly represented than major parties (Grant, et al., 2010: 597). This is because they are more likely to engage in conversational (as opposed to broadcast) posts through this medium. This tendency for diversification needs to be tempered, however, in that their representation is 'higher' only to the extent that their representation in posts closely matches their primary vote, rather than being significantly under-represented in conventional media. This is another representation of how institutionalised journalism's emphasis on 'horse race' reporting tends to focus excessively on the parties of government, a tendency that becomes problematic where elections produce more complex outcomes (such as the 2010 election), or where the election outcome is determined well in advance.[10]

Corporate tolerance of personal twitter profiles by working journalists may be short lived. In the United Kingdom, a number of media organisations have attempted to regulate these channels (placing restrictions on content, exerting 'ownership' of profiles; Halliday, 2012). News organisations, therefore, have a mixed response to the rise of personal branding. On one level, the use of high-profile writers and columnists are institutional selling points, with their headshots featuring on key pages of the paper to demonstrate the quality of their prose.

On another level, these 'star' writers are more expensive, demanding and autonomous than suits the modern corporate media. Martin Gilens and Craig Hertzman (2000) argue that the rise of media corporations shifts the focus of news bias towards corporate over individual proprietor's political interests. Organisational initiatives like Newso, therefore, can also be seen as a challenge to the capacity of journalists to control their sources and maintain their personal brands. If source relations become institutionalised, this will serve to make the production of news routine, and reduce the expertise required to produce copy, further eroding the professional basis of journalism in Australia.

10 Thus, for example, there was a tendency for media to cover the 2011 New South Wales election as a competitive race, regardless of the implausibility of the return of the ALP to power. In both cases, limited scrutiny of minor parties and independents can be seen as a failure of journalism when using the 'functionalist' measure of media as a significant contributor to electors' understanding of relevant candidates and parties.

The development of news stories written by computer has also been viewed internationally with concern because of this. To date this has been limited to formulaic reporting in sports and business (Lohr, 2011).

Media [from/on] the margins

While robo-journalism and institutional source management have relevance to the fordisation of media production, the economic model of media in the digital environment is not simple. One of the interesting products of the rise of online commerce has been the rebirth of craft culture and small-scale production that is often of marginal commercial viability, but driven by motivations other than profit (cost-recovery, gift economics, propaganda and political purposes). Online communities of artists (such as www.deviantart.com) and craft workers (such as www.etsy.com) have demonstrated that the massification of the online environment also has room for select markets and small audiences to be serviced, while the imperishability and discoverability of online content allows for the reuse and resale of material over longer product lifecycles than would have traditionally been envisaged (the so-called 'long tail' phenomena that allows economic value from back catalogues and electronic data; Shirky, 2008).

This is also the case in the political-media space in Australia, with a wide range of small publications that seek to service select communities and work with modest budgets. The popularity of increasingly powerful free, content-management systems (CMS) simplifies the establishment of these ventures, as one person can host a wide range of different sites using the same installation and host. Additionally, through the use of a mix of original and syndicated content, a few individuals can compile unique offerings to their readerships through careful customisation to their target audiences.

Recent start-ups of this kind can be found across the political spectrum, including the conservative news, commentary and opinion website *Australian Conservative* (http://australianconservative.com) and the progressive online journal *Independent Australia* (www.independentaustralia.net). The wide variety of these publications (from think tank spin-off like *New Matilda* (http://newmatilda.com) to personal newspapers published by individuals, as seen in Illustration 17) make the simple characterisation of these publications impossible, but they collectively show a willingness to engage with media production practices as primary producers, as well as the difficulties in sustaining (if not establishing) new online-media ventures.

Illustration 17: Personal newspaper drawn from political content, published using paper.li

Source: Paper.li. Used with permission

Movement media: Indymedia

One way to maintain a digital media venture is through the use of platform, rather than editorially driven, models of production: rather than use a hierarchical model of production, allow open access to the publishing engine and encourage interested parties to post their content and allow social filtering to determine what is of value to the readership. The most famous example of this in Australia would be the left-wing alternative media service Indymedia (www.indymedia.org.au), which now has collectives in Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney. Initially established in the United States and arising from the Global Social Justice protests of the late 1990s, Indymedia Melbourne was founded in 2000 as part of the S11 (11 September) anti-globalisation protests focused on the World Economic Forum (Gibson, et al., 2004: 188). The focus of Indymedia's establishment in Australia is also informed by the type of concern that drives the propaganda model: that corporate media, by nature of ownership, production processes and orientation towards the private sector, is unable and unwilling to report on anti-corporate protests and events in a fair manner (Bruns, 2005: 82–84).

The non-commercial nature of outlets like Indymedia often give them a wider scope of issue coverage than the mainstream media. As a media form embedded within activist networks, this tends to be focused on political content of interest to movement organisers and members, rather than 'general news'. Thus, for example, Indymedia and Socialist Alliance's *Green Left Weekly* (which has a significant online edition; www.greenleft.org.au) provided the Australian and international Occupy movements with more serious coverage than that afforded by commercial media, which displayed a familiar hostility to physical protest movements (Crawford, 2006: 237–40) and largely adopted the view that the comparatively good economic performance of Australia made the movement an example of self-indulgent youth protest (Devine, 2011).

From margins to mainstream: Crikey

While pessimism about the future of commercial news media in Australia abounds, the online news site Crikey demonstrates that specialist, online, commercial, media ventures are possible. Formed in 2000 by Stephen Mayne following his high-profile falling out with the Liberal Victorian state government under Jeff Kennett (for which he worked as a PR staffer), the site has origins in a mix Australia's tradition of 'larrikin' journalism (independent, disrespectful of authority, and humorous; Vine, 2009: 109–12) and a willingness to experiment with uncertain practices, including use of reader contributions and the publication of anonymous 'insider' stories. Significantly, using the paid-subscription model, Crikey has demonstrated it is possible for paywalls around content to be effective in building wholly digital-media ventures.

Over time, Crikey has developed into a mainstream and journalistic enterprise. With increasing numbers of staff, the venture has changed hands (showing, unlike single- and multiple-author blogs, its ability to survive transition from the status of a founders' hobby). In doing so, however, greater commercial-management rigour has come into place. Crikey has shed some of its 'publish and be damned'[11] attitude and become a more conventional journalistic enterprise (Morieson, 2011). Interestingly, as Crikey has moved out of the insider-gossip-oriented space, new ventures like Vexnews (founded by Andrew Landeryou; www.vexnews.com) have taken its place.

In recent years, Crikey has expanded to carry more detailed reporting, some of which was undertaken through unconventional and innovative arrangements. The organisation has begun collaborating with a range of academics to provide investigative and other forms of journalism on specific topics. Examples include:

11 Mayne had to sell his home to pay for defamation in 2003 (Shiel, 2003).

- Collaboration with Professor Wendy Bacon and the Australian Centre for Independent Journalism on research into the practices of media organisations in the use of PR material (Foreign Aid, Spinning the Media, 2010; www.crikey.com.au/spinning-the-media, www.crikey.com.au/topic/who-profits-from-our-foreign-aid).
- Collaboration with staff and students at Swinburne University to undertake a detailed analysis of Victorian Government annual reports (the then Labor government 'dumped' over 200 annual reports in one day in an attempt to bury negative news by overwhelming state journalists; www.crikey.com.au/the-brumby-dump) (Swinburne University of Technology, 2010).
- Sponsorship of a research and writing project headed by the well-known ex-blogger Dr Mark Bahnisch on the politics of coal seam gas (CSG) extraction in Queensland in the lead-up to the 2012 state election (FAQ Research; http://faqresearch.com). This initiative is interesting in that, rather than drawing on institutional resources, the FAQ Research project[12] was funded largely by requests for readers' donations.

In addition to these partnerships, Crikey has attempted to employ 'crowd sourcing' techniques in the production of articles (for example, asking readers to examine political donation reports; Young, Sally, 2011: 228).[13]

This demonstrates how some Australian news-media organisations are attempting to experiment with alternative business models in the production of expensive news content. To date, these experiments and projects have been limited, and their ability to substitute for established, predictable and reliable news production practices (staffing and syndication) may be limited. The lethargic time frame of academic work is not always well suited to news-production requirements and (as discussed with regards to *The Conversation* below), there is evidence that academic institutions are looking to pull more journalistic content 'in house'.

The ability for independent ventures to raise substantial funds from readers is also questionable. For FAQ Research's CSG project, initial donations from Crikey and the organisers' social networks were substantial. This level of donation, however, particularly from new readers drawn into the project through the process of fieldwork, did not carry through the life of the project. Additional difficulties come from the multiplicity of roles that project participants have to take on. Combining the interpersonal process of fundraising with the more disinterested one of the neutral journalist can create tensions, particularly where the political positions of donors is not matched with the eventual content being

12 This coincided with the closure of the long-running blog Larvatus Prodeo, a decision associated with the authors' view of the rise of alternative spaces for debate like Facebook and Twitter (Bahnisch, 2012).

13 A strategy that was employed with some success by the *Guardian* in the United Kingdom parliamentary expenses scandal (http://mps-expenses.guardian.co.uk).

produced. This was a problem in reporting of CSG, which has brought together an unusual coalition between urban Greens and rural farming communities (personal interview: Pandora Karavan, FAQ Research, 18 March 2012).

Never pick a fight with someone who …: On Line Opinion

Like Crikey, the political opinion website *On Line Opinion* (www.onlineopinion.com.au) was an early entry into the alternative media space. Started by businessman and former Queensland Liberal Party official Graham Young in 1999 as a not-for-profit organisation, the site provides a space for the publication of opinion articles and associated discussion on a range of political, social and scientific issues of the day. Young's motivation was in response to the observation that 'Australia lacked an open forum where people from all sides of a political point of view could come and express themselves'. In addition, Young saw the site in terms of the modern public sphere: correcting perceived problems in the coverage of science by newspapers (he has a personal scepticism towards mainstream climate science, for example), and the formation of public opinion through commissioning and reporting on online focus groups. His choice of opinion column writing was both pragmatic and political. Pragmatically it allowed for the generation of content without paying writers.[14] Politically, the model is inclusive, allowing individuals with public standing and those who are comparatively unknown to participate, but retaining editorial oversight of the content produced (Young and Brown, 2003).

This editorial model made *On Line Opinion* different to the anarchic model of Indymedia, and the more risky strategy of Crikey with regard to litigation. The low-cost nature of the site's business model has, however, meant that it has been susceptible to the capricious nature of online-advertising revenue (personal correspondence: Graham Young, 4 January 2012), and the risk presented by advertiser boycotts. In early 2011, *On Line Opinion* published an article hostile to same-sex marriage.[15] This led to the withdrawal of advertising by a number of major corporations, considerably reducing the advertising income (Young, Graham, 2011). While this led to debate about the merits of having published the offending article, and the moderation process on *On Line Opinion* (Kim, 2011), the case demonstrates how susceptible small and alternative online publishers can be. While the low-cost business model may allow ease of entry into the marketplace, the correspondingly limited revenue stream means these publications can be at continual risk of closure. This problem was demonstrated

14 The journal has published an average of over 1000 articles per year (*National Forum*, 2011).

15 Muehlenberg, Bill, 2010, 'Dismantling a homosexual marriage myth', *On Line Opinion*, 25 November, www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=11268&page=0/ accessed: 3 January 2012.

with the closure and re-establishment of *New Matilda*,[16] which struggled with readership numbers (Bass, 2010) and the ability to convert readers into paying subscribers for a free product (Jamieson, 2010). While the use of 'angel' investors to support these ventures has been one way that significant new money can be found, the willingness of individuals to support loss-making ventures in the medium (let alone the short-term) is questionable.

I'm figgering on biggering

The political economy of online media presents a complex picture. While large media organisations are under pressure to cut costs and discover new ways to 'monetise' their online content (a technical term for 'make a profit'), disaggregation into smaller units aimed at specialist audiences, and the nimbleness required to develop new publishing and production models, appears no less fraught with problems. While the mainstream commercial media is often dismissive of their small rivals, the larger organisations do watch for developments in the alternative media and blogger communities. Indeed, if political bloggers were really the sad, parental-basement-dwelling losers they are often presented as being (during hostilities between psephologists and the *Australian* over the interpretation of NewsPoll data, it editorialised in 2007: 'The self appointed experts online come instead from the extreme Left, populated as many sites are by sheltered academics and failed journalists who would not get a job on a real newspaper'), it would not behove the quality media to respond to their criticisms. In 2010 the *Australian* employed one of the more high profile psephological bloggers it had singled out for criticism in 2007: Dr Peter Brent, formally of http://mumble.com.au.

This demonstrates how the institutional media has responded to the development of user-generated content and digital-media ventures: moving from outward hostility to alternative publishers who are critics or competitors, to cherry picking talent and emulating platforms. An example of the latter has been the proliferation of 'commentariat'-type websites developed by institutional media organisations — *Unleashed* (later *The Drum*; ABC), *The Punch* (News Corporation), and *National Times* (Fairfax). Recently, even the higher education sector has become a direct publisher, through the establishment of *The Conversation* (http://theconversation.edu.au), a site for the publication of popular press articles by academics. The implications of this are varied, but

16 While a left-wing publication that spun off its policy wing to become The Centre for Policy Development think tank, the founder John Menadue AO shared similar motivations to Young in its establishment (Cordell, 2010). On its takeover by Duncan Turpie in 2007, the publication moved from a subscription to advertising model (Simons, 2010), and moved to a subscription drive model on restart in 2011. This shows the uncertain state of the business models sustaining these publications in Australia and internationally.

have been largely negative for some of the smaller and non-profit publishers who see their markets and business models targeted by large institutional players with considerable resources and exposure. *On Line Opinion* is an illustration of this tendency. Having reached a high-water mark of about 170,000 unique visitors in late 2006 (source: Google Analytics, courtesy of Graham Young),[17] the introduction of competition from the national broadcaster and two major newspaper companies in 2007[18] and 2009[19] align with a slow and steady decline in traffic for the site (losing more than half its traffic, and correspondingly, attention to its advertisers). This competition for attention is matched with competition for authors, who now have a far wider range of online publications for which to provide content.

The new public ownership problem

The power problem of the relative size of digital-media ventures is not limited to the commercial world. Eric Beecher, publisher of Crikey, has been critical of the ABC becoming involved in online opinion publishing, citing this as an area of active commercial competition from a range of non-government companies, large and small and with different editorial positions (Sinclair, 2010). This argument, that public broadcasters should concentrate on areas of clear market failure, has been seen in recent debates in the United Kingdom about the scale of operations of the ABC's role-model, the BBC (BBC, 2009) by executives of News Corporation. This revisits an old debate about public provision of media in a democracy: that these media organisations run the risk of distorting democratic practice through providing a state-centric media company (state propaganda), undermining the economic basis of commercial news production, and distorting the capacity for market-sensing as a result (Janda, et al., 2008: 182). The problem that this view has always presented is that it is difficult for public broadcasters to determine where market failure may be (particularly if it requires divestment in the assumption that its activities are commercially viable), and the political pressure on these organisations to match their cultural charter obligations with 'popularity' to justify their impost on the public purse. A rational public-media policy would automatically spin off any successful program or venture into the public sector, but this is not always organisationally or politically viable.

On this front, *The Conversation* is a troubling development, not because there is no need for quality reporting of the work of Australian researchers and scholars (which, we can see includes areas of market failure), but in the way it draws content away from mainstream and alternative media with established readerships. *The Conversation* is a non-profit company owned by a range of

17 This includes unique visitors for both the *On Line Opinion* articles and the separate forums sub-domain.
18 ABC's *Unleashed* in late 2007, later to be expanded and relaunched as *The Drum* in late 2009.
19 News Corporation's *The Punch* in mid 2009, and Fairfax's *National Times* in late 2009.

Australian universities.[20] It employs editorial staff to maintain its website and help academics produce news stories in plain language. While the editorial staff of *The Conversation* see the importance of its work in attempting to stem the decline in the quality of public-sphere debate (*The Science Show*, 2012) it is interesting that, rather than provide information subsidies to existing media (and therein reduce the cost of quality content in self-sustaining ventures), *The Conversation* possesses a number of years of subsidised funding to create a new site for quality content aimed at educated and elite audiences. In this way *The Conversation* has implications for the partnership models that exist between the academy and private providers (as discussed in From margins to mainstream: Crikey, this chapter), demonstrating that new, publicly funded ventures are not just a threat to the established interests of the media barons, but play in the creative space of the start-ups as well. That *The Conversation* stems from a perception of market failure, then, makes its potential impact on small and start-up commercial online media more ironic.

Elites and e-lites

The political economy of the news media is in flux, shifting between old and new business models. In expanding the capacity for members of the public to engage in oversight of their actions, social media has eroded the costs of principle oversight of distant institutional agents, allowing for enhanced social regulation of the behaviour of elites. At the same time, these forces have further reduced the capacity of some elite groups: particularly in shifting the political economy of media away from those organisations and proprietors who traditionally engaged in the production of costly political content. This has 'trickled down' to make the workplaces of the content makers more insecure, with flow-on effects on how they position themselves in this uncertain environment through building protections around their professional standing and relationships with other elites.

The upshot of this has been a more pluralistic, faster-paced political environment where political resources are no longer contained in specific institutions as much as in temporary alignments of actors and organisations. The use of new technology serves to drive these dynamics, as well as being involved in making them precarious in the first place. In all of this, one, final elite set of institutions requires investigation, the one that has been able to largely resist the impacts of this digital-media economy and retain its financial and power base over the last decade through the old tools of authority and law. In Chapter 7, therefore, we will examine the public sector in this new environment.

20 This does not include the University of Sydney, my employer.