JOURNALISTS AND ONLINE MEDIA:

The engagement of journalists in creating new forms of media content, presentation and service to publics; a case study approach and reflection on practice.

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Synopsis

The paper examines the translation of journalism as it has been known into new media forms, principally its contribution to content-making for online services. It rests on the significance of content: what media are available to carry certain content; what content is being provided by certain media? The paper is in two parts: First, it reviews an explosion of activity in the online journalism field; it notes adaptation and innovation which this has produced, and considers future possibilities. Second, it provides a case study based on an online service launched by the author, in the context of findings made by the above review, illustrating aspects of it.

A movement has taken hold among journalists internationally to exploit the possibilities of online publishing. News organisations have come forward to position themselves among leading providers of online services, and apart from that, practising journalists as individuals and in groups have taken up the new medium in novel ways. The article refers to work under way, on craft issues (developments in how to write, illustrate, represent using this medium); on economics and resources of online publishing; adaptation to different types of online media; and reporting practices. Content issues arise: Online media through making new markets generate more specialised and creative journalistic work, both in terms of what information appears and how that information is worked into the fabric of the presentation.

In a case study the author recounts setting up an online service that provides specialised international news, as a reflection on practice. The case study traces conceptualisation of the service, funding, and construction of a website using modified “blog” software. It recounts the development of a journalistic modus operandi and style, experience of ten months’ operations, and accumulation of an audience. It will describe the project as being in various essentials, an example of independent journalistic exercises around the world. It will especially look at content issues – surveillance, selection of material, writing, matters of presentation and illustration.

Taking a segmented approach to proliferating new media, by looking at the contribution of journalism-in-place, narrows down the field of inquiry and makes it manageable. It may help with an understanding of certain central questions: what is the relationship between media formats and content; what familiar contents material is being accommodated; what new content is being induced by the nature of the media? It should add to understanding of new media in mass communication generally.

Introduction

This began with a niche, an expertise, a reporting base, and a platform now available which, at last, could be afforded. The niche was provision of news for Australia from Europe.
unimpeded by having to go through usual media channels via London, i.e. news more narrowly based and direct, from the European Union emanating mainly from Brussels. Having worked from Brussels as a correspondent for Australian broadcast media the writer had seen this news theatre yield headline news and much information related to Australian industry and trade, drawing substantial audience attention, and had confidence in being able to maintain a good flow of reportage from the particular area of activity. It could be covered using media facilities available in the city which provided reporters with authoritative, free, well researched daily information as a reliable staple. A resident media corps of some 1600 journalists and buoyant mass media outlets keeping up with agendas provided a supportive environment. There was no competition from other Australian news media. The World Wide Web offered the opportunity to publish. The outcome has been a simple yet well-stocked online publication called EUAustralia Online (referred to as EUAustralia), a site built on modified web log (“blog”) software, but published as an edited newsletter with limited interactivity at this time. It offers compact, easy-to-access text with thumbnail pictures as emblems or illustrations for each one, dispensing on average 1.2 stories per day and, after ten months, drawing average site visits of over 220 p.d. It thus has potential to earn money and equally can be continued indefinitely as an independent private-professional undertaking without earning anything.

**Definitions and descriptions of online publications**

More will be told about this product as a case study to help illustrate practices and issues in online journalism. The treatment of these begins here as a search to find a context and definition for the EUAustralia project -- the better to explain it. Amid much recent writing on the explosion of online publication, Mark Deuze has produced typologies or models that show the relationship among the relevant concerns -- media contents, platforms, production styles, relations with and among audiences. His 2001 typology (2001) Model 1, (Model 2 looks at the four types of news site in relation to their use of “hypertextuality, interactivity and multimedia”), sets up two axes: an horizontal axis between concentration on news content and concentration on audience “connectivity” (acting on people’s desire to connect with others as a prime motivation in using the Internet), and a vertical axis between closed participatory communication and open participatory communication.

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**Diagram: Model 1: Online Journalisms**
In this scheme mainstream news sites (e.g. CNN, MSNBC) offer a selection of editorial content, both recycled and original, and limited, often moderated participatory communication. (More recent times have seen this participation cultivated by the large media providers and made to flourish, e.g. BBC.com). Index and category sites (Yahoo, Newsindex) often associated with search engines or marketers have journalists providing tips and links. They can offer forums and will critique sites that people post. Meta and comment sites tend to be sites about sites, frequently to review media and publicise or debate media issues (Freedomforum, Poynter’s Mediawire), calling in a variety of journalists and other contributors to review online media and discuss their underlying production processes. Share and discussion sites are heavily towards the connectivity dimension and provide platforms for the exchange of ideas and stories. This category has a background providing political forums (e.g. “Indymedia” sites) or computer news (e.g. Slashdot). It stands to develop into a powerful set of providers of general news by virtue of the collective force of the great numbers of people contributing -- adjusted for whatever system of filtering and management of volume comes to be used.

Deuze’s model for a “good online journalism”, quoted by Balnaves et al, in Rao (ed.) (2003:132), saw online media providing a full range of services. It stands for the kind of cross-media offerings being constructed, as platforms (the sites and services offered from them) become more complex and users better equipped and adept at exploiting them. The range of offerings: publication of news, with a rich field of original content; photojournalism; a searchable archive; audience participation through online reader discussions and conferencing; layering of content; easy-to-use navigation; an electronic message board; thence media convergence, and also customisation. “Production” issues, as opposed to matters of content, get due emphasis in this model: the site itself should be useful and efficient in design; easily accessible for users, and amenable to users finding what they are looking for once they have obtained access.

More recent developments have put greater emphasis on calling in sound and especially moving images, with implications for how reporting is conceived and crafted. An important example is provided by Ted Anthony (Junnankar, 2007), founding editor of the very large Associated Press (AP) news portal Asap. Investigating demand among younger users (18-34), he determined it was “much more about the way media was being consumed than it was about the subject matter chosen”, prompting him to work on “reconceiving storytelling” by the AP, with greater use of cross-media forms and implementation of a “multimedia litmus test” for reports, especially those intended for the younger market. These writings provide a frame for developers of online services which can be built up over time on the lines indicated, e.g. extension of services into more amenable and extensive archiving, or progressively the creation of more active, diverse multi-media artefacts to tell stories.

Journalistic thinking in the new media settings

New media formats already accommodate a large range of types of operation, as indicated in the observations and typologising exercises referred to above. This article is concerned with the application of received journalistic practices to new media. It considers the detailed case of EUAustralia in particular as an adaptation of the way that conventionally recognised news values can be used as the guiding principle for a new publication in a new field of mass communication. “News values” amongst other things focus on tidings; establishing facts about what is new and interesting. This does not say all new types of publications should adapt to existing practices. The burgeoning interest in online publishing as evidenced by debate about it in online forums, includes demand for ongoing innovation with art work and
design; also demand for entirely new forms of publication, even new forms of communication exchange, to accommodate emergent very big numbers of active participants. The innovation can be seen both under the aegis of main media providers and in the independent sector.

A survey by Bruns (2005) is concerned with developments in the independent sector, identifying fresh models of journalism which in the Deuze typology would mostly reside in the “share and discussion” category: a participatory journalism model exploiting open source software, centrally brokered or coordinated to some degree; an open submission but closed editing model; peer to peer models; metablog sites which aggregate individual blogs on specific topics; and more libertarian schemes where many bloggers, “rather than contributing to the collaborative news coverage of open news sites … prefer to provide their own idiosyncratic coverage of events they feel are of interest; if what they do can be called journalism at all it is a form of many-to-many journalism” (6).

In that kind of analysis developments are seen as driven by the possibilities of the technology and by a very prevalent, evident desire among the public for expression and communication over an almost limitless range: “Digital storage and transmission has massively expanded space and time available for media content, to a point where from the producer’s point of view bandwidth restrictions become irrelevant, while at the same time greater access to the means of media production has significantly enabled more users to become producers and publishers of media content”(13). This may lead to a “multi-faceted, multi-perspectival coverage of news events”, with “a lasting impact on our understanding of, our engagement with our ownership of the news that affects us.” If such developments might come to “limit or eliminate the need for journalistically trained staff” (3-8), they are seen also as a way for journalism theorists like Gans (70) to realise on liberal concepts of mainstream media, to provide “fact and opinion reflecting all possible perspectives.”

This writer has argued previously that as well, all participants in new media should be able to profit from using standard journalistic practices and ways of thinking. The idea was put forward that proliferation and democratisation of the supply of information had created intense demands on individuals needing to cope -- introducing the proposition that everybody could do well to become a journalist:

“Here it is proposed that learning to be journalists is a key life skill for private citizens this century. Principally, coping with vast floods of information, like a journalist, is first base for coping with workaday and private life. Information may well be, and is, continuously catalogued, indexed, edited, illustrated and served in manageable proportions, for example by commercial databases; yet coping will demand more. It will demand habits, skills and intuition for using the information with effect. Put another way, information handling alone will not do. … What is required for life in this world is to have also the different intellectual faculty of retentive knowing, and knowing how to use. After that, the requirement becomes to craft something new out of what you have been finding out. At issue is finding a mechanism for coping with copious information through actively using it, by publishing and communicating with it.” (Duffield and Cokley, 2006:5-6)

Media debate on services and publics – which way to go

While “journalistic ways of thinking” can be highly serviceable to all, professional practitioners especially, in the new era are having to think innovatively about their products and services. Conventional news outlets notably newspapers are experimenting on a large
scale with their online offshoots in the face of weakening sales for the traditional product. There is concern especially that younger people, being already attached to electronic forms of communication media outside of the mainstream, may never “mature into” ordinary media use as they would in the past.

A wide-ranging debate in the journalistic community, global and on line, has brought in company representatives, individuals, professional organisations and academic contributors, (see some main Websites, Appendix 1). Leaders in the discussion such as Rich Gordon (2007), a journalism academic on the heavily used Online Journalism Review site, characterise the present as a time of crisis marked by excitement, danger and opportunity:

“This explosion of choice is good for consumers but bad for the companies that thrived during the mass-media era. There’s probably nothing that can reverse the trend of shrinking audiences for TV news and newspapers … We’re seeing these companies maintain their profitability by cutting expenses. But they can’t do this indefinitely without harming quality, reducing the appeal of their products and thereby accelerating the decline in the size of the audience. All of this is why many of the most successful media companies now have a multiplatform strategy – newspapers, Web, TV, cable, magazines and more.”.

Niles (2007) in the same debate has challenged media managers to know audiences better; to develop intricate measures of audience use of new media, asserting the abandonment of simple data on page views or hits, in favour of information on “time spent on a website”, would still not tell enough of what they needed to know about online users: “What good is advertising on a site where readers will spend an hour, if none of these readers care about what you sell? Audience composition is, and always will be, the metric of primary importance to advertisers”. A Stanford-Poynter study, Project Eyetrack, analysed online users, finding they “read shallow but wide, at the same time pursuing selected topics in depth; they’re using both mainstream general news sources, and multiple news sites, but in recent times changing to more of the latter and less of the former” (Balnaves 126). A marketing site (emarketer, 2007) reported on a Harris Interactive study of news sources used by the public, describing the relationship between media and audiences in now familiar terms; it shows support for mainstream media, but that support is being withdrawn in favour of maturing online options:

“TV Network news is the biggest news source in five European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK), Australia and the United States … The lowest percentage of adults who said that major daily newspapers would be their source for news and information in five years was in the UK and Italy (4%) each, while the highest percentage was among German adults (12%). Reasons given for not reading the newspaper included lack of time, biased publications and the ease of going online for news and information. In the next five years, online news and information web sites will become the Number One source of news and information for adults in the US, France, Italy, Spain and Australia… Half of adults in Germany and Australia, as well as more than half of French, US and Spanish adults, access online news and information sites at least once a day.. . Less than a third of UK adults do not access online news sites with any regularity …”

In such a context editing a pilot publication like EUAustralia is a promising experience in probing the enduring riddle of journalists’ relationship with audiences. Work in journalism proceeds with an intention to keep everything “interesting”, for which there are no set rules,
and even in the present era sparse investigation of potential audiences and their ways. Yet interest is sparked; mass media are taken up by publics. What will happen once mass media develop closer contact, and a closer appreciation of the minds of their audiences; once they can interact with them routinely in manageable, adequately moderated ways? This is important in a discussion where news values are invoked, since by convention “newsworthiness” must include interest value -- along with newness, a notion of importance of the event or process being reported, and informativeness. Change stands to enhance the quality of the interest factor as we can better find out from audiences what interests them.

Concentration on content; news values and verification

The conventions of “news values” and “newsworthiness” are mentioned also because as the object of discussion in this article, the pilot publication EUAustralia opts to function as an adaptation of standing journalistic practice in a new media environment. It initiates its material, finding the information and posting it, here not experimenting with new paths like subsisting on contributions from users, exploiting “connectedness”. It is based on content, for which definitions can be broad; two for mention here: firstly content in terms of the audio-visual presentation of the artefact to users, and secondly content as the text – the editorial content, what the words say and the pictures show.

In the first case, the amenity of products to consumers, as with the presentation of information on a news website, can be called content; not to be confused with Deuze’s (2003, above) “production” issues, like range of effects that can be generated, or accessibility of the site. With websites then; “content” can be considered as many variant layouts and design features on offer, for instance:- A “puk-ah-pu ticket” look mixing attention-getting devices rather randomly on the same page – flashing panels, moving images, colour; e.g. commercial sites aimed at selling; a “tabloid” page, following design principles from compact newspapers; e.g. many corporate home pages, small enterprises; conservative formatting focused on one main message but bordered by images, break-outs and pointers to other pages; most online outlets of major media organisations – and chosen in a very reduced form for EUAustralia; text-based sites with lists of titles and links, focused on words with very sparse illustration; e.g. the appearance of directories, metablog sites.

As has been mentioned the presentational aspect was secondary for the online product under review here, EUAustralia, set up as an adaptation of the practices of mainstream professional journalism to a new field of media, with different purposes. That consideration brings the discussion back to content as the text, and journalistic ways of thinking and operation. The initiation of news and information, as the content, is achieved through a standard journalistic practice; application of news values, as with the reporter’s reflexive questioning of their material: is this new? is it true? where did it come from? who is it for? The matching of working practices and habits of mind, the immediate juxtaposition of skills and thinking, is well recognised. It was expressed most recently by a UNESCO panel on professional preparation in journalism, which saw in journalistic thinking the same immediate concurrency of investigative thought and crafting of words and artefacts: “The professional skills of journalism involve methods of knowing and thinking as well as recording and representing”; ideally, practitioners are “in command of the complex skills marking the craft and are also in command of the knowledge and thought to support the reporting and analysis called for in a beat.” (UNESCO: 7-9) In the present case of EUAustralia the “beat” or reporting “round” is defined as a key sector of activity in Europe and the proposition is being made that a scaled-down professional journalistic model, involving a smaller and more identifiable audience, is one good way to take up the possibilities of online media.
The deployment of news values as the chief means to determine content and inveigle potential audience members into using the service also demands an idea of truth; establishing facts is at the centre of it. EUAustralia works on the premise that users want factual accounts, making verification a foundational concern. Most frequently this will be a naïve empiricism well known to media users; its most positive aspect being transparency and readiness to correct transient errors. Finding facts indeed sets the agenda for the publication. If it can be demonstrated that something new has occurred in the European theatre, which Australian audiences may find interesting, and which may be important to them in some way, and which includes information for them; it stands to be reported.

The habit of establishing facts manifests itself at all levels such as multiple sourcing for stories on EUAustralia where issues may be in doubt, and regular reviews of reports to check for errors. The idea of a journalistic truth obviously warrants discussion beyond the scope of this article. The departure point might be that in the journalists’ view a process of discovery must be engaged in. Where standards or definitions of truth are in dispute, the quality of examples taken from news media as a whole will be mixed, much journalism by definition being hurried and improvised. In this connection, Bromley (2007) considers journalistic work has to be recognised at its different levels. Any descriptive paradigm for journalism must valorise processing of inquiry and discovery, “making a claim to a certain sort of truth”. Longer-term research employing journalistic styles of inquiry would be seen as the main currency separated from the dross:

“This may be no less (or no more) shaky than any other form of truth, but the distinction between it and the kind of truth which is produced by routine journalistic practice lies in application of the research process… It seems to me that journalism cannot be described without central reference to inquiry, discovery and the formation of new knowledge. Of course journalism can exist without any of these things … just as chemistry, engineering, the law and even medicine can exist without any inquiry, discovery or formation of new knowledge …”

Kinds of online enterprises

Adjustment to change needs to be learned. The mobilisation and trading of ideas and information within the media industry and professions contributes to responses being made. The corporate response to the advent of online technology has seen the major media organisations -- all major newspapers most notably -- continuing to strive to establish their brands as chief portals; the trusted places to go for whatever media can provide. While a vast trade exists in copy and images being “repositioned” or “repurposed” on independent sites, principal outlets like websites of the major newspapers are resisting trends to proliferation and open exchange. The majority give out news piecemeal, as alerts or just for the day, locking away the full story, and archives, for paying subscribers. Likewise copyright and intellectual property rights are more jealously guarded by the day. (In parallel, these news organisations continue to solicit and now respond to mass feedback in their publications, and will coordinate thriving blogging exercises). Corporate strength is being applied to developing customised, “push” services, i.e. interrogation of customers and electronic delivery to them of services they have requested, no browsing or logging-on required. Where it was orthodox to see Web-mounted services as appropriately global in outlook; market-driven services are now often heavily concentrated on local, especially where these are tie-ins of large regional newspapers.
Yet as corporate consolidation goes on, independents thrive. The technological revolution has made new markets, such that there looks to be enough for everybody, at least for now, in what is still a transitional phase. For instance the listing of individual favourite Websites for a regular daily check is a common habit that extends into the ranks of younger citizens, 18-24, previously not so widely engaged with information media. Further; through digitisation, availability of networks and affordable production equipment, everybody can be a producer and many are trying it. The environment encourages new small businesses, and journalists are included in the trend, finding greater scope for stand-alone enterprises on a stronger footing than older models of freelancing or small print publications.

Journalists and new online outlets

Journalists are engaged in all forms of response to change in the online field; as corporate employees working on their new products, or as independents of various kinds, including those building the “share and discussion” operations, more technology-driven, which facilitate a flow of information and ideas through connectivity rather than content. Among small projects proliferating in the online field, EUAustralia, the online news service, forms part of a distinct sub-set where the drive for the project comes from the producers being journalists who are focused on content. A perusal of journalist discussion forums turns up descriptions of other small operations trading viably, with subscriptions, advertisement columns and the like, on a base of as little as 45000 site visits per month, with some group operations running a number of sites totalling 250000 site visits per month. For an example, Geoff Rynex in OJR (2007) reported on the creation of the dramatically named Daily News:

“Geoff Dougherty had had enough… No more bosses. No more corporate interests getting in the way of solid investigative journalism. No more Chicago Tribune. After more than a decade in the mainstream media, Dougherty decided to call it quits at the Tribune last November and start up his own news organisation. The website he created took the name of a legendary Chicago paper: the Daily News. With the Chi-Town Daily News Dougherty saw an opportunity to do everything he thought the mainstream media was failing to do, especially in the realm of the Internet … So how will the daily News revive and innovate the news? Along with a non-profit corporate model run by PublicMedia Inc., of which Dougherty is CEO, his plan is to include hyper-local coverage reported by citizen-journalists and to spark discussion about local issues on blogs…. But Dougherty’s website takes advantage of more than just citizen journalism and news blogs. The Daily News hyper-local coverage includes podcasts about Chicago sports teams and the local music scene, RSS feeds [“really simple syndication” technology], and plans are in the works for a cooking blog …”

A similar report, on emerging business models for the Web, identified one case where “individual journalists are using the Web to market themselves”, that of Dan Washburn and his “Shanghai Diaries” blog: “Washburn is a former newspaper journalist who covers China as a freelancer and is working on a book. With no book contract yet, he solicits donations via PayPal. In doing so, he’s taking a cue from Chris Allbritton, a freelancer whose blog readers ponied up $15000 in 2003 so he could cover the Iraq war. Allbritton is now based in Iraq and being paid by several media outlets.” (Gordon, 2007)

These enterprises are mentioned because of the similarities with the present Australian case study. For all such exercises we can refer again to Balnave et al (2003: 135-6), who identify online reporting, as with web logs, as a break from content “passively received or ignored”, to a situation where journalists can demand interactivity from audiences, and “at the very least
may involve a niche market segment of the audience”. The journalist can publish new developments in a story instantaneously, and encourage audience members to return for more timely news. However these writers in their review of online media practices, also subscribe to the view that online journalism is an evolving process, moving from stage to stage:

“If this is the sole level of interactivity, the advantages conferred by weblogs would be only marginally more than those to be found in the offerings of popular columnists in ‘traditional’ media, where writer and audience members develop a rapport that can develop into a devoted following. But weblogs offer at least two more things, apart from their timeliness: the potential for content that would not find its way into ‘traditional’ publications and, in their ultimate form, an authoring partnership between journalists and audience members …”

They have quoted Deuze, setting up a process of elaboration of services, to make a site “good”; and they draw on Pavlik (1997), identifying stages in the evolution of news content on the Internet, which individual publications might themselves follow:

1. Online journalists mostly re-purpose content from their mother ship, print newspaper and such news content still dominates most news sites.

2. In most of the better news sites, online journalists create original news content and augment it with additives such as hyperlinks, interactive features and a degree of customisation.

3. Stage 3 is characterised by original news content designed specifically for the Web as a new medium of communication. Online journalism; willingness to experiment with new forms of storytelling allows the readers to enter and navigate through news reports in ways different from just reading them and this is usually done through new technology.

Case study -- EUAustralia Online

The task of making the news service EUAustralia and keeping it going is conceived as a process – always dynamic, leading somewhere else. That is because of its inner characteristic in being a work of journalism in a world of changing events (on the sources and audience side), and its environment of changing possibilities in mass communication (on the format, production and technology side of the operation). A fact of life of this production is that very simply while the service keeps going, and the site is supplied with its average 1.2 stories a day, its audience keeps attending, and to date keeps accumulating; whereas if it is neglected the audience falls off quickly. This suggests audiences have a repeat-visit and accumulating character, more than just a casual once-off browse-and-find one; and so the journalistic work must always keep going. Changing and developing the product is also natural to what it is as a website, since more possibilities are always available for enhancing the story-telling. It began as a text product, randomly providing ten stories on the front page, with read-more tags, soon to be reduced to seven, one-per-day-a-week, and the pictures have already moved from nominal thumbnails to a little more adventurous photo coverage using different sizes, where possible to indicate engagement by time and place – to show us being there. Regular use of the Urchin monitor system was adopted after the first five months as a guide to audience responses. Here, while audiences keep growing, there is another “process” element: it must be assumed somebody new is always being introduced to the service, its offering and styles.
Other changes can be installed, such as a blog for inter-activity, moving images and sound, graphics with the text, and in the editorial field some compartmentalisation to accommodate an interviews section to further exploit access to newsworthy people, and opinion sections. The exploratory character of the operation makes it a process; the foundation in daily news also makes it a process. The changing-about and adding-on leads towards a kind of presentational product that can be imagined because of the larger online sites which exist, as models. Expansion of the “journalistic” service -- the editorial content -- is more problematic, harder to imagine, more demanding to work at. The exercise is described chronologically in the following four categories: the purpose and plan; resources and logistics; operation and design – the pilot project; development, continuity and futures.

**Purpose and plan**

As mentioned above EUAustralia was seen as a way to fill a niche, with a pool of news in Europe and a prospective market in Australia. Anecdotally users of EUAustralia say they don’t get the same offering elsewhere in Australian media; they would be unlikely to get it all in the same place, as easily. It grew out of an old notion to supply business or trade information to Australian industries with any kind of interest in the EU. As a correspondent in the area the writer knew about disputes over trade, worth covering, and indications that Australian enterprises were missing out on a large market by not paying attention to it. The service therefore would be set up on the model of a business news letter, but well and truly embellished with an eclectic choice of stories for wider interest. There was an idea of playing on Australian codes, e.g. by selection of the cockatoo motif, to keep a watch on Europe and screech out if something came up that would concern us. The news coverage could be kept to a manageable agenda, not too much for one good reporter. On the “supply side” of news production, focus on a core of potential business or economic news, government news or diplomacy, would mean obtaining access to information provided by professionals with authority, difficult to grasp and translate but materially easy to access, so it would be a viable core for the service. Colour material, human interest, commentary and the like would be extra. Even when the idea first came up, in 1991, it was proposed to offer a service on line, but the advent of the World Wide Web and associated developments made it cheaper to set up by 2006, by a factor of more than 10.

**Resources and logistics**

The three main resources were: the editor with his skills, time and money; the website; and the media services of the European institutions. The key decision at the start was to keep the scale of the product small enough for it to be done by one person. Could it then be “big” enough to make worthwhile impact with potential audiences? The productivity potential of a 21st Century online outlet suggested it could. A judgment was made that as necessary, where possible, guest contributors, part-time editors and other occasional staff could be used; but beyond that no thought has yet been given to making it a full-time operation. As the auteur, and prime resource, the editor would have motivation and command of the concept, good background in the European news field, knowledge of journalistic processes, and advanced reporting and production skills (drawn from radio and television) -- and a job as an academic which fortunately linked with the project. There would be applied research opportunities and Journalism students could work on the service as part of their learning. There was time, ten months of extended leave of different kinds obtained after a moderately difficult negotiation with the university management. The partners of an excellent small IT company understood the plan quite well enough to design a very suitable site and package including the domain name, training and an ongoing help-desk and marketing assistance program; costing less than $6000.
The third major resource was the Spokesperson’s Service of the European Commission at Brussels. Journalists accredited with the Commission can work at its media centre, at the Commission headquarters building, with security, free desk accommodation, online and telephone, ready physical access to media staff and other officials, the daily mid-day briefing for an open feed of announcements, periodic media conferences on the premises, subsidised cafeterias and other facilities. This was important because of the special character of the information they provide, averaging twenty governmental decisions per day. Also, the Commission is the executive and it initiates governmental action, so its announcements are authoritative and they are the first outing for any decision in a process of implementation. They are a good source of both headline news and new information for features or commentary. The EU has an expressly liberal policy on media and so while it is a communication management system journalists working from there write freely and choose from a smorgasbord of offerings. The large number of journalists present provides a work community for isolated freelance journalists. It is difficult to get initial access; quite rightly it became necessary to exploit journalistic reputation and contacts to convince the relevant professional committee to grant accreditation. The well-known yellow accreditation card is recognised by the other EU institutions, and for many general purposes, e.g. getting into political rallies, crossing police lines and the like. NATO headquarters is the second important media centre at Brussels relevant in this case because of the Australian military commitment in Afghanistan.

Operation and design – pilot project

The ten months plan allowed for the enterprise to be conducted as a pilot and a testing run for an editor new to the online medium. After the ten months it might be operated from “offshore” for extended periods with the help of informants and colleagues in the field, in the EU. It was set up as a news operation, for a freelance correspondent, governed by availability of information and time differences between Europe and Australia. “Being there” entailed going to local jobs, e.g. Anzac Day commemorations in Flanders, and a trip to another European country once a month, e.g. EU Berlin summit March 2007. There would be interruptions to routines based on the EC mid-day briefing, e.g. outside events occurring at odd hours. All this activity permitted a full briefing over time on current news agendas and creation of a good contacts book. There were concurrent projects: university work including some research, and freelance journalism for Australian radio, the latter possibly helpful for publicising the byline used in the online publication. The equipment pack -- computers, recorders, cables, telephone, camera and stock -- was about 15 kilograms, reducible with more miniaturised gear. The kit was not too difficult to transport and adequate for a home office; of course less had to be carried on short jobs. Costs for this independent media operation, travel included while the days of budget airlines continued, were not exorbitant; the online option has made low-cost overseas operations more viable.

Choice of material for reports was tested by news values, e.g. newness of the story to its audience, or notions of its social importance and interest value, but adjusted for the blurring of distinctions among types of item -- news report, feature, documentary or other form -- which the online medium permits. Also, mentions of Australia were picked up for inclusion and news was sought on matters of known interest to Australian people (e.g. Anzac Day in Flanders) or Australian industry (e.g. ending sugar industry subsidies). Otherwise the selection could be unclassified, (though not arbitrary), and this might be called a virtue where it produced interesting variety. For reasons already given, information processed by the European Commission provided bread and butter, but even this could be supplemented amply by more on-the-ground material (e.g. from a NATO summit), especially resulting from travel,
e.g. a report on the Broncos playing St Helens Rugby League at Boulton in England, a traveller’s tale dug out of the file, on Belfast, to catch a ride on the political reconciliation story there, Paisley and McGinnis; or coverage of the Presidential election campaign in France, such as material got at a major rally during a visit there. Governed by availability of resources as with all news operations, and being a niche operator, this service could make a strong point out of not having to cover everything, instead looking for user interest at every turn. The approach was: to be there, and be well backgrounded; to give attention to main headline stories, enough to ensure credibility, hence attendance at the EU summits; otherwise to find angles, points of colour, or openings for a comment that might strike a chord. Since this was international news for Australia each report needed to include enough background for it to stand alone without need for further explanation. A brief selection is given in Appendix 2 to indicate the range and flavour of contents.

The actual website was built to order with a simple and accessible look, based on a front page dominated by a broad central column with a short queue of stories displayed chronologically. These could be split with full text available in a second layer; past stories would be available in an easy archive; each report would have one picture to mark it and maybe illustrate it. Categories would be provided for subscribers, so material could be placed on exclusive pages for particular, individual subscribers – looking ahead to possible commercial applications. Since the product would promote itself just on the content of stories posted on most days, it seemed sensible to feature those and not have a crowded and bitty layout. This would be easier to manage as well. There were some requirements on art work, well met, e.g. use of the cockatoo design, and a few management or executive pages, with some important material, e.g. journalism code of ethics. A mailing list of ninety Australian companies and organisations with presumed commercial or other interest in European affairs was compiled and used for emailed alerts on coming reports; beyond that the exercise has been promoted only through its own resources, with as yet no use of interactivity / dialogues or forums to generate traffic. It does not build on social networks like a blog, though users obviously can see clearly what work is being done and can easily communicate with the editor. It has an RSS feed and demonstrably it is being found by search engines on a busy day for a particular story, e.g. when there was a lot of inquiry about the “doctors’ plot” to set off bombs in London and Glasgow. With the time available and given remoteness from the preferred market, in Australia, it has not been possible to do more to draw users, without sacrificing time to be spent on content. It was thought that generating attention without offering a substantial product must fail. In its trial the service showed good potential to build a large following once it does come to be promoted systematically.

The online platform proved flexible and amenable to experiment with different treatments of news and feature material. It is always advantageous to publish very early, but this medium is patient, as it allows stories to be put up rapidly (and directly by the reporter if need be), then holds them on show for a long time, with even an open archive; so in the absence of ready competition things can be posted a little later than an ordinary news deadline would require. Accordingly stories can be batched, three of four going up at once, which economies on the editor / reporter’s time. The range for expression is good as it is a transparent medium. If a story invited a reasoned opinion treatment where the writer had good knowledge, in this rather personalised medium it would only need tagging as “opinion” to rate as honest communication. Likewise the same page would accommodate a short 100-word piece held just on the front page, or a print-style feature, 600-1000 words. The conventional, expedient news narrative form was adopted, though the medium can easily be made to accommodate other ways of writing and forms of presentation. Many possibilities for illustration presented
themselves, and at times pictures might dominate, leading the story; e.g. a rare snow scene for a report on the failed Winter and climate change. Conventions and packaged style guides come easily to hand with the online medium, for example URLs are universally recognised if attributing a source or offering further reading.

**Development and continuity, and futures**

The exercise has matured to the point where it now calls for more thorough attention to users, about whom information can be inferred from daily data provided by the monitoring software installed on the site. The site was populated slowly from the date of the first posting 13.10.06 through to mid-January 2007, after which it was stocked more aggressively. Numbers responding rose correspondingly:

**EUAustralia: Postings and site visits by month**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Calendar Month</th>
<th>Postings</th>
<th>Site visits per day</th>
<th>Site visits per month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 2006</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19.65</td>
<td>609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2006</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>41.90</td>
<td>1257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2006</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 2007</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>97.84</td>
<td>3033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2007</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>128.43</td>
<td>3596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2007</td>
<td>41 (45)</td>
<td>147.23</td>
<td>4564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2007</td>
<td>43 (46)</td>
<td>158.53</td>
<td>4755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2007</td>
<td>41 (47)</td>
<td>154.68</td>
<td>4795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2007</td>
<td>41 (44)</td>
<td>194.60</td>
<td>5838</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 2007</td>
<td>38 (52)</td>
<td>221.26</td>
<td>6859</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some postings carry multiple reports, represented e.g. 41 (45)

Growth in usage appears cumulative not overall too sensitive to the number of postings over a month, though performance lifted sharply with the doubling of postings from early March, setting a platform of sustainable activity that looked like a viable standard for the product’s growth. Day by day there is a clear relationship between inputs and responses, though it is not wholly direct or simple. Tracking shows that sometimes an expected rush of visits will arrive immediately, sometimes some days after postings. Visits are usually reduced on Sundays and Public Holidays, provoking the thought that users are located in both Australia and the EU, and possibly America, as “down days” match Public Holidays in all those places. Usage directly follows a group message. This has been observed when an alert or preview has been sent out to the EUAustralia mailing list, and happens particularly in response to trusted third-party recommendations. On 7.6.07 when the service reported on both the speech given at an Australian business lunch in Brussels, and completion of the Australia-EU wine agreement the same day, the business organisation ABIE (Australian Business In Europe) circulated the URL among its subscribers, and site visits rose (then subsided) as follows: Wednesday 6.6.07 182 site visits, 7.6.07- 249, 8.6.07 -234, 9.6.07- 173. (Table for Week Beginning 5.6.07).
Similarly a sharp turn-on followed posting of a report quoting European participants at a world sugar growers’ conference in Brisbane (11.7.07) and then a report on Australia-EU trade taken from a speech by a senior Australian trade official (12.7.07), two cases where an alert would be sent out by third parties to a large group address: Tuesday 10.7.07- 208, 11.7.07- 148, 12.7.07- 196 … 15.7.07- 238, 16.7.07- 298. A spike to 443 occurred on 18.7.07 during coverage of the UK-Australian “doctors’ plot”. It is driven by news flow not sedentary day-by-day habits of users. (Table for WB 9.7.07 and 16.7.07).
Additional statistics indicate users visiting for average periods of 7-10 minutes, with most often four page-openings per session. Given reports are often posted in batches the pattern is consistent with users checking the site, opening pages to read or peruse new stories, then often returning to finish the read; hence with such repeat visits a turn-on effect and surge of site visits when new postings are made.

The policy followed to date has been not to excite expectations through advertising, but to develop the product and let it take hold incrementally. However, since promotion does seem to bring appreciable shifts, more should be done to build a crowd now, through generating blog traffic; possibly also through expansion and more frequent use of the EUAustralia group address, and posting of messages to more controllers of mailing lists.

Possibilities for developing the product are limited on the editorial contents front because of the difficulty of finding or posting journalists on the ground in Europe for any extended periods. There are sound options however for extending interview pages or backgrounders. Possibilities for developing the structure and presentation of EUAustralia are much stronger, for instance with ample capacity to make “multi-media” reports. On the question of revenue raising, the operation may extend to syndicated advertising, e.g. Google ads, at some point; or find sponsors; or follow through on an existing subscriptions plan: an offer to organisations to provide additional services and intelligence, posted to a private page, which would involve hiring researchers and journalists for deep digging. The latter would resemble public affairs services though stopping short of providing representation on behalf of clients. Growth of the operation is unforced as it does not need to operate commercially. It faces no threats, save the routine threats to security of journalists in 2007, as it continues on the present basis and appears to succeed in providing a service that is favoured by a growing clientele, currently at over 6800 site visits per month. In the field of intangibles it is an interesting and rewarding outlet for continuing professional work, in scholarship and journalism.

Observations and conclusions

In terms of the Deuze formulae this operation is at the “contents” end of the spectrum favoured by the mainstream news sites, though the direct responses being received by groups of almost-identifiable users indicate a degree of intimacy may be established with them by this small operation. Because small and transparent, it is better positioned than any mainstream media to establish actual communication with users – more towards a
connectivity model. In terms of the Pavlik stages, it has always definitely operated beyond the Stage 1 level of a publicist for existing, hence fairly old news or commentary. It is a Stage 2 operation on the essential criterion of creating original news content, while demonstrating potential to augment that with “additives”, i.e. hyperlinks, interactive features and the like. It is a candidate to experiment with Stage 3 “new forms of storytelling”, as a demonstrator perhaps; but too small and too strong in terms of received journalistic values, for which it gets rewards, to venture far into experimentation.

It is a “good” online service when checked against the Deuze list, offering in its modest but hopefully most competent way, original reportage, key elements like the young and accessible archive, easy-to-follow navigation, or options for customisation (for users willing to pay). Its model offers ample potential for the other favoured features like audience participation. The high productivity provided by the software and the structure of the product, alone the capacity for illustration and for involvement of various contributors over time, will permit it to proceed beyond the conventional limits of common rapport between a columnist and readers (Balnaves et al, Rao:135-6).

It is also part of a movement where the tools of publishing are available virtually to all. When it is suggested in this paper that “everybody can be a journalist”, that means everybody may publish, and everybody, if they choose, may find it viable to undertake the task by engaging in the kind of journalistic practice – the professional model – employed by EUAustralia, as a case in point. Furthermore all publishers may expect to find that their users are also producers, or at least people versed in production, who know how it is done, and so are likely to make interesting respondents. With the entry of journalists into small scale online publishing, along with many others, a “pro-am” movement can be imagined getting under way that must bring together a formidable array of resources for mass communication in the coming years.

APPENDIX 1

Publishing and discussion sites on online journalism consulted.

Emarketer … http://www.emarketer.com


International Symposium of Online Journalism, University of Texas (Austin), http://journalism.utexas.edu/onlinejournalism/

Journalism Education Association (Australia), email syndicate, jeanet@mailman.uow.edu.au


Online Journalism, University of Florida, Mindy McAdams, (how-to guides) http://www.macloo.com.journalism/


The Online News Association, http://www.journalists.org/
APPENDIX 2

Selection of reports, most followed up more than once as running stories, e.g. process of restructuring EU wine industry. Total postings 1.10.06 – 1.7.07: 321 (351 reports).

Study shows Europeans are heaviest drinkers (first story on EUAustralia Online); Sir Nicholas Stern’s climate change warning; restructure plans for Common Agricultural Policy (CAP); state sponsored EU wine marketing drive; retrospective, Hungary 1956; Iceland criticised on whaling; high-tech anti-terrorism measures; EU summit confronts Putin on energy supply; report from NATO summit in Latvia on Afghan war; Australian Trade Minister in Brussels; EU sugar industry changes struggling; Africa-EU talks on migration crises; PNG at world forest meeting; EU bans cat and dog fur; Australian states to join EU carbon trading, bypassing Commonwealth; Australians in Afghanistan come under NATO command, (later story, Australia shows “backbone” making commitments, says NATO); WWF calls Australia US poodle on climate; Kon-tiki feature from Oslo; EU December summit at Brussels, plan on immigration; Christmas stories – reindeer, gingerbread, spending; Fiji coup, EU threatens aid cuts; tension before EU and China / India meet on dumping cheap goods; Galileo space program; NZ settles a trade dispute over butter; children support anti-HIV campaign; personalities visit: Aga Khan, Ban Ki-Moon; NZ Minister visits; dealings with Indonesia to regulate forest product imports; Bulgaria and Romania join EU, amid job seekers trouble; karneval in Germany…

Internet protection for children; new CO2 rule for cars; Members of European Parliament probe US “rendition” of prisoners; butter mountain sold off; consumer protection of hair dye; Berlin 50th anniversary summit of EU, climate change marked as main policy; hot Winter in Europe; ASEAN / EU aid and trade assembly in Nuremburg; traveller’s tale on new Berlin; Australian films on tour; football crowd trouble; Copenhagen youth riots; mobile roam charges capped throughout Europe; Fiji Ministers at Brussels; Antwerp fashion; Beethoven museum now hi-tech in Bonn; Easter season traditions; bike racing starts for Summer; aid to Aceh; Dutch TV kidney hoax; sports and anti-obesity campaign by European Commission; Polish Minister attacks Teletubbies; EC says wants to avoid Tampa incidents with immigration; Sarkozy elected in France; Tintin anniversary in Belgium; coordinated moves against computer crime; uneasy Samara summit; Cannes films; Chuppa Chups firm in Spain averts bankruptcy; Wolfowicz in Brussels, eve of resignation; Tony Blair gets new job; America’s Cup races of Spain, NZ versus Swiss; bird flu; EU Brussels summit plans “new Europe”, reviving “constitution”; EU monitors east Timor vote; high speed train record; controlling African “conflict diamonds”; reports on beach pollution, new sunscreen standards for Summer.

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