

# LOOKING FOR NEW ANSWERS IN OLD METHODS: THE INDEPENDENT PRESS AND THE SOLUTIONS THEY OFFER TO THE 'CRISIS OF CONTENT'

---

DR SUSAN FORDE

(Refereed)

Centre for Public Culture and Ideas  
Griffith University, Nathan

## Abstract

An increasing number of researchers are investigating the growth of independent, alternative, community, and radical media globally – at a time when both the academy and practitioners are concerned about the changing nature of news, independent media outlets seems to be offering a return to a time when journalists were connected to their communities and less influenced by the powerful ‘spin doctors’ as is the trend in mainstream news rooms (Australian Press Council, 2006; Project for Excellence in Journalism USA 2006, 2007). As in the UK and the USA, we can also detect in Australia that local communities and organisations have been taking charge of their own forms of communication and delivering news and information to a growing audience. This paper is drawn from 10 years of research into the independent and community media sectors of the Australian media landscape, focusing specifically on definitions of journalism and the journalistic practises that operate within the independent newspaper and newsmagazine sector. This paper suggests a political economy model, proposed by McChesney (2003), for evaluating journalism and proposes a range of journalistic practises which mainstream news organisations need to adapt, at least in part, if the current rapid — and negative — trends in news content are to be addressed.

## Introduction

It feels a little hackneyed to be researching and writing about the ‘crisis of content’ that so many have identified in the news media systems of advanced democracies. We have almost arrived at a point where listing the numerous researchers investigating issues surrounding the current weaknesses and essential failings of mainstream news content is pointless — there are so many. But when recent events – such as Channel 7’s decision not to run a pro-Tibetan paid-for advertisement by the GetUp! Organisation during their Beijing Olympics coverage (GetUp! August 12, 2008) — emerge, it becomes clear that the crisis currently facing the mainstream news media needs to be highlighted and addressed. In this paper I seek to summarise the more recent concerns about news content in advanced democracies, and the impact the dearth of serious news content is having on civic participation, engagement with the political process and, by association, democracy itself. Importantly, this is done in the context of finding solutions to the crisis faced by journalism and journalists. This paper suggests that while there is much to be concerned about in mainstream news content — indeed, our media system must change if there is to be any improvement — there are many positive signs emanating from the journalism practises of independent and community media organisations. This paper is part of a larger work which is based on 10 years studying the independent press and community broadcasting sectors in the Australian media landscape. In this paper my focus is specifically drawn to the independent press sector, notably three diverse mastheads currently publishing — *The Monthly*, *Eureka Street*, and the lesser-known *Sydney City Hub*. These publications were chosen because they represent the ‘new breed’ of independent publications, all comfortably crossing the divide between traditional hard-copy and online versions. It is through the philosophies and journalistic practises of these Australian publications that we can begin to formulate new ways for our media to be structured.

This discussion importantly occurs within a framework offered by political economists. In particular, US scholar Robert McChesney (2003) offers some fairly simple but penetrating analyses

of the crisis of US journalism. Similarly, another US political economist James T. Hamilton (2004) provides a thorough economic analysis of news content which arrives at similar conclusions — primarily:

In my view, the US polity is enmeshed in a deep crisis and the collapse of a viable journalism is a significant factor — but by no means the only one — in explaining the shrivelled and dilapidated state of US democracy. A political economic analysis stresses that the reasons for lousy journalism stem not from morally bankrupt or untalented journalists, *but from a structure that makes such journalism the rational result of its operations* (my emphasis, McChesney, 2003: 299).

### **The news media in advanced democracies**

News journalism in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States — and among other societies as well — is facing a crisis of content (McChesney, 2003; Hamilton, 2004; Anderson & Ward, 2007) primarily due to commercial decisions made by major media companies to prioritise their increasing profit over any obligation to fulfil their democratic function as ‘the Fourth Estate’ (Trigoboff, 2002: 12; Walley, 2002: 1, 22; Westin, 2001: 35, among others). These decisions have had a significant impact on the quality of journalism in many democratic countries, and have contributed to — among many factors — the growing influence of public relations companies on the news agenda (Brumfield Bird & Sandford, 2007; Mackinnon, 2006; Reeds and Colbourne, 2000: 25; Schiller identified this growing trend almost 20 years ago, 1989: 21). McNair considers that technology, too, has played a role in the changing news culture, dissolving the boundary between truth and lies and leading to a hybridisation of journalism and entertainment — a blurring of lines between ‘journalism and not-journalism’ (2006: 11). A 2003 United States study found the majority of journalists were unhappy with the state of their profession, primarily because of the increasing impact of commercial pressures on their work. Two-thirds of journalists felt that increased bottom-line pressure was ‘seriously hurting’ the quality of news coverage (Pew Research Center, 2003).

The study addresses this contemporary problem by examining journalism in independent and alternative media contexts and developing evidence around the type of journalism practised by those organisations. Atton (2002), Howley (2005), Downing (2001) and Rodriguez (2002) have identified the different ways that many variously defined independent, alternative, community, citizens’, radical, and political media outlets cover news, engage with their audiences, and empower their audiences. A recent study of Australian community broadcasting audiences identified empowerment and engagement as one of the dominant themes arising in discussions with community media audiences (Meadows et al, 2006). Indeed, an annual national US study of the news media — aptly titled, *State of the News Media* — has found that independent and alternative media are the only growing sector of the global media landscape (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2004; more recent figures show growth has slowed, but the sector is still not in decline as most traditional news outlets are, Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2006; 2007). Deuze finds in 2006 that alternative news outlets produced specifically for particular ethnic groups — particularly print outlets — are experiencing ‘exponential growth’ in the United States and in European countries such as The Netherlands (2006: 262–63). And Deuze does not accept that the growth of this media is due to the growth of such ethnic populations in Western democracies such as the United States — more, it is consistent with the ‘worldwide emergence of all kinds of community, alternative, oppositional, participatory and collaborative media practices’ (Deuze 2006: 263). Atton & Couldry argue the increasing crises in Western democratic systems with decreasing voter turnouts, the growth in the global social justice movement and other worldwide trends are making the work of alternative media outlets more relevant than ever before to the agendas of media and communications research (2003: 579). The search for solutions to decreasing audiences for the mainstream media therefore continues (Pew Centre, 2003):

The only sectors seeing general audience growth today are online, ethnic and alternative media ... Without investing in building new audiences, the long-term outlook for many traditional news outlets seems problematic. Many traditional media are maintaining their profitability by focusing on costs, including cutting back in their newsrooms. Our study shows general increases in journalist workload, declines in numbers of reporters, shrinking space in newscasts to make more room for ads and promotions, and in various ways that are measurable, thinning the product.

## Using political economy to understand the news crisis

The analysis of McChesney (2003) and the economic theories of news offered by James T. Hamilton (2004) provide some answers as to why the current trends in mainstream news are occurring, and possible solutions to these trends which, it is broadly recognized, weaken and perhaps directly threaten democracy (Lloyd, 2004; McNair, 2006; Haas 2007; Anderson & Ward, 2007; Scheuer 2008). McChesney outlines three key factors which he says explain the ‘collapse of viable journalism’ (2003: 299). Firstly, he suggests the news media’s reliance on official and elite sources makes journalists essentially ‘stenographers’ for the government; secondly, the uniform news values used by mainstream media journalists force journalists to ‘avoid contextualisation like the plague’; and thirdly, these same ‘professional’ news values have enabled a subtle bias which sees media organisations represent the interests and aims of commercial owners and advertisers, and to support the political aims of the ‘owning class’ (2003: 302–305).

In support of McChesney’s political economy framework, James T. Hamilton suggests the economic factors affecting news output provide further evidence of the relevance of a political economy framework in explaining the trends — and subsequently in identifying some solutions. Hamilton’s central argument is that recent trends identified in the news media — such as the death of hard news, media bias, and the rise of celebrity — are usually attributed to poor ethical practice from journalists, failing news values, or ‘misplaced values’. But his argument is that these trends are more due to economic choices than the human failings of the journalists and news producers. Hamilton’s model suggests, for example, that the reason why US news programmes focus on issues of gun control so heavily is because this issue has been shown to be of interest and importance to women aged 18–49, a key demographic for advertisers due to their purchasing power and their position as the primary shopper in the household (2004: 97ff). He concludes that owners and managers of news organizations are explicitly making decisions about news content based on a range of questions about the profitability of their news content — journalists may think they are making decisions about news coverage based on the traditional ‘5 Ws’ but this is not the case.

What both McChesney’s and Hamilton’s frameworks suggest is that because of the heavily commercial nature of the mainstream media (and the importance of ratings to public service broadcasters has greatly increased in recent years – see O’Connor, 2006), journalism critics, scholars and educators need to stop *expecting* the news to improve or to be any different, and need to start looking for alternative models that may be able to exist or arise *alongside* the commercial media outlets. The frameworks offered by McChesney and Hamilton appropriately point to other forms of media, and other economic models for media organisations to ensure the needs of democracy and public life are properly served. Simply, major media corporations by their very nature will not place the public good and the needs of democracy ahead of their own commercial needs and goals. We can see evidence for both McChesney and Hamilton’s approaches in the Australian environment. The July 2008 death of Channel 9’s *Sunday* program in Australia, the only investigative journalism program on commercial television, and the closure of the 128-year-old news magazine *The Bulletin* six months earlier is evidence that commercial media organisations are regularly making economic decisions in favour of their commercial imperatives rather than their democratic responsibilities. The exit of *Sunday* essentially leaves one investigative news program on Australian television – the ABC’s *4 Corners*. If the Nine Network’s proprietors were not forced to make commercial decisions about important components of democracy — notably quality,

probing journalism — they would continue to support the *Sunday* program regardless of its ratings success. Their nature, however, as commercial organisations, warrants and legitimizes their decision. Even more recently, we have seen the abolition of 550 jobs from the Fairfax organization — which prompted near-nationwide journalists' strikes — as evidence of commercial decisions being made by news organizations without regard for the impact these decisions will have on news quality and the reality of a free press.

### The impetus for the rise of the alternatives

Despite Downey and Fenton's assertion that alternative media have been 'widely derided' in the fields of media communications and cultural studies due to their 'lack of audience, professionalism and finance' (2003: 196; also Harcup 2003: 356), there are a growing number of scholars who report positively on the practices and public sphere role of alternative, or citizens' media forms (for example, Atton 2002; Rodriguez 2001; Downing 1984 and 2001; Couldry 2002; Howley 2005; van Vuuren 2006; Forde, Foxwell and Meadows 2002; Meadows *et al* 2007; Harcup 2003, among others). Howley finds that street newspapers are attempting to fundamentally alter the relationship between readers and producers, and show a strong commitment to communicative democracy (2003: 288). He goes further and suggests that scholars interested in journalism theory, the public sphere and connections with democracy should be looking more to alternative and street publications as examples of the way the media can represent 'everyday lived experience' (2003: 288). Couldry also argues for the central place of the study of alternative and citizens' media forms in media and communications research fields, and identifies such alternative media forms as offering the opportunity 'to engage people more as citizens' which would appear to answer the wealth of concerns about the ability of the current mainstream news media to properly service the civic needs and rights of the population (Couldry 2002: 29). He extrapolates (2002: 29–30):

If media and communication studies as a subject is to contribute to our thinking beyond the current crisis of mediated politics, then it must reconnect with the full range of mediating practices in society ... not just those which pass for the mainstream ... Media research can no longer afford to keep the study of alternative media in the shadows.

Howley and Couldry – among many others – are picking up on a tendency for scholarly research to focus almost exclusively on the failures of mainstream news outputs, media conglomerations and so on without recognising that there are legitimate media forms existing that might provide some of the solutions to the crisis of Western media systems. More than a decade ago, Daniel Hallin identified that journalism no longer played the 'mobilizing' role it once did and confirmed that mainstream journalism 'can and must play a more active role in advocating and encouraging an active political life' (1994: 11). Carey argues:

Journalism is another name for democracy or, better, you cannot have journalism without democracy. The practices of journalism are not self-justifying; rather, they are justified in terms of the social consequences they engender, namely the constitution of a democratic social order (Carey 1996).

It is in response to these concerns that Australian titles such as *The Monthly*, *Eureka Street*, *Sydney City Hub*, *New Matilda* and internationally, the Indymedia movement (Platon & Deuze, 2003) — among many others — have emerged. Attempting to establish an alternative editorial structure, and content driven by non-commercial imperatives quite different to that of the mainstream news organisations is the focus of most alternative, community, independent, and radical news organisations. Many independent and alternative media outlets arise on the premise of the contribution they will make to invigorating public debate and this claim has continued since the early days of the 'alternative' and 'radical' press outlets (Turner 1969; Walker 1976; Ross 1982; Forde, 1998; Warhaft 2006). The alternative and independent publications examined for this study are those which offer news and information content — quite separate from fanzines, alternative music street press etc — because of the notion that the content they provide will not only invigorate

public debate, but that they will also motivate for social change (for example, Shepherd 2006). There has been considerable debate in the literature about how to ‘define’ such outlets which have been variously termed independent, alternative, community, and radical media (Carpentier, Lie and Servaes, 2003: 51). What we can say, without revisiting these discussions within the limits of this paper, is that the community/ alternative/ independent/ radical media sector internationally and in Australia is extremely diverse, and that this paper provides case studies from publications that we might safely categorise as either alternative or independent within our media industry.

## Research Method

The three publications that have been chosen for this case study represent the diversity of the alternative and independent *press* sector, which also contains a great deal of diversity in itself. However, the publications have been chosen because they variously represent: commercial and non-commercial models; print-based and online outputs; a structured ‘professional’ organizational framework vs a more inclusive framework; and general national and international news content vs localised community content. In choosing these publications to be considered, this paper endeavours to provide a broad perspective on what various aspects of the alternative press industry are currently doing, particularly in light of their overarching declared charter to offer something different to the mainstream; and to contribute to the re-engagement of a disengaged public (i.e. the reinvigoration of the public sphere). Importantly to this discussion, they achieve this outside the standard commercial model of the media, often placing their independence and dedication to democracy and the public sphere ahead of significant commercial success. The three case studies examined in this study are the national online magazine *Eureka Street*, the print-copy based national and international magazine *The Monthly* (now also available for online subscription), and the monthly alternative community-newspaper *Sydney City Hub*.

In-depth qualitative interviews based on an open-ended structured questionnaire used in previous studies (Forde 1997; Forde, Meadows, Foxwell 2002 and 2003) were conducted with key people at each publication — Tom Cranitch, who at the time of interview was Chief Executive of Jesuit Communications which publishes *Eureka Street*<sup>1</sup>; Lawrence Gibbons, owner and publisher of the Alternative Media Group and founding editor of the group’s flagship newspaper *Sydney City Hub*; and Sally Warhaft, editor of *The Monthly*. Further consideration was given to the content of the publications, with the interviewees’ descriptions of content and aims examined by surveying recent issues from each title.

## Background to the publications

*Eureka Street* was, until April 2006, a monthly glossy news magazine published by Jesuit Publications Australia. The Jesuits, a Catholic social-justice oriented group, have published the magazine since March 1991. While they do not expect to make significant profits from the publication, they do expect that losses are minimised as much as possible. According to the former managing editor, the publishers will be content if the publication has an impact on the Australian public sphere and is contributing to diversity of ideas — provided it is not ‘leaking money’ at any great rate (Cranitch 2006). In April 2006, after changes the previous year which saw *Eureka Street* reduced to a bi-monthly rather than a monthly in an effort to stem the losses, the magazine went entirely online. This saved a huge amount in printing costs although it did mean the publication immediately lost about one-third of its 2500 subscribers. The publication now claims to have more than 20,000 website readers per month (based on Google Analytic statistics), with 7500 readers subscribing to their weekly and daily e-newsletter. Still, to be publishing entirely online, with no hard copy, has placed the publication in a better financial position. Since moving online, *Eureka*

---

<sup>1</sup> Cranitch now works as a Brisbane-based consultant and writer, and contributes guest editorials and features regularly to *Eureka Street*

*Street* has increased its frequency of publication to fortnightly, with a minimum of 24 issues produced each year.

*Sydney City Hub* was launched in 1995 by Lawrence Gibbons, who had come straight from the large and successful United States alternative newsweekly the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. *City Hub* launched as a weekly newspaper in the tradition of the US alternative newsweeklies, featuring alternative and progressive news. The newspaper survived for five years as a weekly, but at this time Gibbons decided the publication was ‘bleeding money’ that could not be sustained – he shut it down, and relaunched in late 2001 as a monthly newspaper with the same content brief. This, as with *Eureka Street*, placed the newspaper (which is in any case far more economical to publish than a glossy magazine) in a more sustainable financial situation. Indeed, when the opportunity arose for Gibbons to purchase two nearby independent community newspapers – *City News* and *Bondi View* – he was able to do so and now publishes a trio of small independent and community-based newspapers under the general banner of the Alternative Media Group. *Sydney City Hub* is marketed as:

The alternative publication for urban readers. The quintessential guide to non-mainstream entertainment. Thriving with political issues, fringe theatre and underground funk (Alternative Media Group, 2008).

*The Monthly* was launched in May 2005 by publisher Morry Schwarz, the owner of independent publishing house Black Inc. With a brief to publish ‘only Australia’s best writers’, *The Monthly* is notable for its inclusion of reviews and longer essays by well-known names such as Helen Garner, Don Watson, Gideon Haigh, Judith Brett, John Birmingham, Mungo MacCallum, Robert Manne, and Clive James among others. In December 2005, its original editor, Chris Ryan, resigned and was replaced by Sydney anthropologist Sally Warhaft who had previously published the book, ‘Well May We Say: The Speeches that Made Australia’ with Schwarz’s Black Inc. With its focus on politics, social issues, and the arts, *The Monthly* differs significantly from *Sydney City Hub* because of the major contrast in magazine versus newspaper styles – but is quite similar to *Eureka Street* in its aims and general target audience. *The Monthly* is available to subscribers as a glossy hard-copy or in online format.

## Motivations and perceived public sphere ‘role’

The editors and publishers had a clear perspective on the democratic role of their publications. Both *Eureka Street* and *The Monthly* were prompted by a perceived need from the publishers for the ‘conversations’ occurring in the Australian public sphere to be broader, and more informed than they currently were. Cranitch said *Eureka Street* was trying to create something that was ‘a crucial part of the Australian independent media and Australian public life’:

We really believe that if we can show we’re a relevant entity in Australian public life then that will be a sign of our success ... if we can minimise the losses that will help a great deal but our overall aim is to make *Eureka Street* a central part of public life.

Warhaft similarly indicates the aim of *The Monthly* is to publish ‘the best writing’ that can contribute to a larger bank of ideas emanating from public discussion and public life (Warhaft 2006). She argues this is particularly important at a time when mainstream media outlets ‘seem to be dumbing down and shortening the length of their pieces’:

Journalism is important to *The Monthly* – really good journalism – but it’s also the ideas that makes *The Monthly* ... the main thing about us is that we can write about anything, absolutely anything. There’s nothing we can’t look at. Very few journals or newspaper journalists can say that and can be so independent.

Gibbons simply states that the aim of *City Hub* is to publish alternative and progressive news, and what he terms ‘agenda-driven journalism’ (2006). The Hub rejects notions of objectivity in

reporting and more overtly states its allegiances to progressive and, probably, more left-wing political issues:

Most people who go through journalism schools have this idea that they can achieve ‘neutral truth’. I don’t buy that ... at the *City Hub* we pride ourselves on our opinion ... Generally there’s lots of arty-farty café culture about these parts, and those people are looking for alternative experiences. *The Hub* gives them an urban perspective on issues.

So while *The Monthly* and *Eureka Street* are aiming more broadly to provide quality and in-depth commentary and analysis of issues, *City Hub* is providing more immediate, shorter pieces reflecting a generally progressive news agenda. Even though it is a monthly publication, *City Hub* rarely runs more than 28 pages and most of it contains short news pieces of 300–500 words. There are two longer features in the newspaper, usually comprised of Gibbons’ editorial on p3 or p5 and one other profile or discussion of a current social issue. It contains about 50 percent advertising, a much higher proportion than both *The Monthly* or *Eureka Street*. In contrast to the fairly short progressive news style offered by *City Hub*, *The Monthly* runs long essays of between 3000–8000 words in each issue, followed by shorter pieces which appear in sections variously titled, ‘The Nation Reviewed’, and ‘Arts & Letters’. As a high-quality glossy magazine which also spends a great deal of time on the look of the publication, *The Monthly* also often features multiple-page photo essays and large colour photographs to accompany most of the content. In recent times, *The Monthly*’s long essays have strongly reflected a comprehensive consideration of issues already on the Australian public agenda – a consideration of the nation’s approach to Indigenous affairs in an article titled ‘Is Pearson Right?’; a piece by ‘Generation X’ author John Birmingham on climate change and future energy options; a profile of controversial conservative talk-back host Alan Jones by writer David Salter; an expose on the Howard government’s increasing interference in Australian Research Council grants; a consideration by Robert Manne of Australia’s willingness to follow the United States in all foreign policy matters; and the decision confronted by many lower-middle class Australians about whether to choose private or public education for their children. Editor Sally Warhaft explains the principles behind the use of the long essay:

Our writing is independent and has more ideas, we can do that in greater length with our 8000-word essays. You’re not going to find independent profiles of a whole bunch of people in much of the media now. The Good Weekend (the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s weekly news magazine) doesn’t allow the same amount of space or time that we can allow ... we have to look for ideas in this country about why it is the way it is. There’s simplicity in that notion. I think we should be more courageous and more independent in the way we think about things.

*Eureka Street*’s focus is more international than the generally national focus of *The Monthly*, and it regularly contains articles about the Middle East, activities of developed nations such as the US, Australia and the UK in Africa and other undeveloped nations, analyses of the Israel/Palestinian conflict, Chinese politics, and so on. Its connections to the Jesuits and theology generally are also clear with regular pieces focusing on the church’s approach to current issues, challenges to faith, the future of the church, and extensive coverage of the Pope’s Australian visit and World Youth Day. While the articles in *Eureka Street* are lengthy, they rarely approach the 8000 words regularly commissioned for *The Monthly*. *Eureka Street* is a fairly classic Australian independent publication that might reject – or at least, not fit into – the definition of an ‘alternative’ publication but would quite happily accept the tag of an ‘independent’ publication. *Eureka Street* has also taken the noble step of commending another independent online publication, *New Matilda*, for its attempts to broaden Australian policy making through the release of its ‘Our Commonwealth’ policy document which is heavily tied to the weekly content of *New Matilda*. *Eureka Street*’s editorial on June 27, 2006 reads:

The online magazine *New Matilda* may be *Eureka Street*’s competition, but it shares with us the conviction that better public policy is the key to achieving a fairer and more sustainable future. The long-term good of the nation is at the heart of *New Matilda*’s recently-launched *Reclaiming*

*our Common Wealth*. It's a campaign that aims to inject into a regime of policy development, a degree of rigour, and values such as good citizenship and ethical responsibility.

*Eureka Street*, then, confirms its place as part of a *general* group of publications in Australia attempting to broaden Australian public life and policy debate – while it identifies *New Matilda* as a competitor (and it truly is given *Eureka Street* and *New Matilda* are both entirely online and competing for both subscribers and web advertisers), its primary concern is that *Eureka Street* readers are aware of the breadth of debate and information that they can access, rather than ensuring that *Eureka Street* is the *only* source of independent information for their readers. This more closely resembles the alternative news networks and cooperatives that operated during the 1970s (Cock, 1977) and in the Indigenous alternative press (Burrows, 2008) which saw strong cooperation and cross-promotion among independent newspapers.

According to Warhaft, it is an important aim of the publication to 'get people thinking', to have an impact on public debate and to provide information to the public that *The Monthly* feels is being omitted from mainstream news outlets. Interestingly, though, they do not contain the 'participatory' media forms that we so often see in true community media outlets – there is no blurred line between producers and audiences with any of these publications. They are providing alternative news content which is designed to inform, mobilise and engage their readers in public life – but they do not to any great extent provide the opportunity for readers to become journalists/producers for the publication (see Meadows *et al* 2007 for an analysis of how this participatory media model is in action in the Australian community broadcasting sector).

## The political economy of contemporary independent publishing

Simon Collins and Jeremy Rose, two former editors of a Wellington alternative newspaper *City Voice*, reported the demise of their eight-year publication and the financial difficulties faced by the newspaper from its inception in 1993 to its closure in 2001 (Collins & Rose, 2004). Despite initial capital of \$165,000 and an agreement from the small team of editorial and advertising staff to accept lower wages until the publication was established and began turning profit, there was never a time in the publication's eight-year life that it was able to earn more than it spent (Collins & Rose 2004: 36ff). The paper, which started out with a mission to present independent and alternative news to the people of Wellington and to cover important social and political issues in great depth, found it more and more necessary to run advertising features to ensure greater advertising sales – this, in turn, naturally turned away much of their audience who were looking for something different. In hindsight, they considered their decision to acquiesce to pressure from sales staff, and to run more and more advertising features and advertorials, was a major cause of the publication's demise (2004: 42):

Gradually, nearly all the elements of the paper apart from politics and the arts became subverted by the drive to sell advertising. Too often features were written reluctantly to sell ads around, rather than with humour and passion.

This New Zealand experience mirrors that of the *Sydney City Hub* when it was attempting to publish weekly — simply, high print costs of a hard copy newspaper cannot be met without running substantial proportions of advertising, and that cannot be gained without attracting very large audiences with high-disposable income that will appeal to business advertisers. *City Hub* editor and publisher Lawrence Gibbons recounts that the increasingly high costs of commercial printers in Australia makes weekly publishing almost impossible for independent operators. With most printers in all states owned by major chains (Rural Press in Gibbons' case in New South Wales), small print runs such as the 30,000 printed by *City Hub* are expensive in terms of per-copy costs. On top of that, the independents also have to confront attempts by larger operators in the market to close them down to protect their own advertising market, an experience also shared with Wellington's *City Voice*. Gibbons believes *City Hub*'s main competitor, a primarily advertising-based local newspaper called the *Wentworth Courier*, is deliberately attempting to put *City Hub* out of business:

Until you're in the trenches you don't realise the incredible market clout that the large organisations have ... [the Wentworth Courier] has gone from publishing a couple of small inner-city newspapers a few years ago to acquiring everything around us<sup>2</sup>. They'll do anything to wreck any independent publication that's out there ...

Since moving to monthly publication, *City Hub* is now covering costs and paying a modest wage for Gibbons, an advertising representative, an office manager, a freelance news editor, and pays small fees to contributors. Gibbons outsources the production of the newspaper to save money on in-house production costs — the capital costs of establishing high-end computers and employing production people is not economical, he believes. *City Hub* is currently covering costs and since moving to monthly production Gibbons says he no longer loses sleep 'worrying whether we can pay the printer or not ... That's the big lesson I've learned from doing the weekly newspaper — you can't cover the costs of a weekly but you can cover the costs of a monthly'.

*Eureka Street*, which as a hard-copy publication ran much smaller proportions of advertising than *City Hub* (more like 10 percent as opposed to *City Hub*'s 50 percent), and which also had much higher printing costs due to its mostly colour, glossy stock, was going backwards fast until the online version was launched. Tom Cranitch, who was employed as Chief Executive of Jesuit Publications in October 2005 to stem the flow of money from the publication, was confronted with declining subscriptions and declining advertising revenue, an entrenched pattern since the late 1990s. Jesuit Publications had indicated to *Eureka Street* that they wanted to continue to publish the magazine, but simply could not afford to keep losing the volumes of money the publications was costing each month:

They always knew this wasn't a magazine that was going to turn profits for them, and they didn't expect it to. But it was costing too much ... we had to do something different or else the magazine would have gone out of business.

Initially, a decision was made to reduce the magazine from a monthly to a bi-monthly, producing only six rather than 10 copies per year. It became clear, however, that despite saving some money the magazine would still be faced with the same issues – declining circulation and declining advertising. Cranitch presented the Jesuit Publications board with an option to continue with the bi-annual publication, and the expected losses resulting from that; and a second option to go entirely online. In April 2006 the fully online version was launched, with the majority of the magazine's subscribers continuing their subscriptions to the online version. Cranitch says the editorial staff of the new online *Eureka Street* have gone to great lengths to translate the 'core values' of *Eureka Street* to the online version, but with efforts to remove some of the 'old bad habits' of previous years which Cranitch believed saw the publication becoming 'overly intellectual' and somewhat clique in its use of language. Financially, *Eureka Street* is losing less money due to reduced (nil) printing costs, but Cranitch says the focus is not as much on subscription levels but on the number of visitors to the website.

The move to online is now about people accessing *you*. The number of people accessing the site affects the internet advertising we can attract. Online ads will be a significant issue for us in the coming months and years.

Non-subscribers can access a limited amount of copy from the *Eureka Street* website, while subscribers only will have access to all the 'locked' articles also featured. But while the elimination of printing costs has extended the life of *Eureka Street*, Cranitch believes the funding pool is not endless:

---

<sup>2</sup> The Wentworth's Courier's publishing company, FPC, now owns about 12 newspapers in the inner-Sydney and North Shore areas, along with two newspapers on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. The Hannan Family, which owns FPC, joined with the Weston Family in January 2006 to add three regional titles to their stable (see <http://www.fpc.com.au/page/fpccourier.php?pg=31>)

To be honest, I think we've probably got about two years. In saying that, it's also true that we're not under pressure to build a financially responsible or successful magazine, but more on building something that people will access and use. We're trying to create a crucial part of the Australian independent media and Australian public life. If we can cut production costs in the process that's great, but that's not the focus. We've got to show that we're relevant and that will be enough.

Launched as an online version in April 2006, *Eureka Street* is still publishing strongly two-and-a-half years later and, as reported earlier, claims a website readership of 20,000 with 7500 subscribing to their weekly and daily e-newsletter. Moving to fortnightly rather than monthly online publication also suggests the publication has strengthened, rather than weakened, since launching entirely online in 2006.

The experiences of *City Hub* and *Eureka Street*, in attempting to survive in a very difficult market for independent publications, mirrors the experience of independent media around the globe, both past and present. The British independent publishing group Comedia reported in 1984 that its member publications were continually wrestling with the difficulties of 'reconciling the contradictory demands of economic survival and political ambition' (1984: 96). However Comedia argued that the ability to juggle the contradictions between commercial necessity and the political ideology or ambitions of the publication was a paramount to the success of any independent publisher (1984: 96). Collins & Rose reflected three years after their independent Wellington newspaper closed that the only viable way for the publication to survive was to have a guaranteed funding source from groups like unions, non-profit community organisations, environmental groups and so on and for the newspaper to have taken an overt stance on such progressive issues (2004: 44).

Atton and Couldry note that the Indymedia movement — the online, interactive news media website prompted by the 1999 World Trade Center demonstrations in Seattle — appears to have overcome the long-term economic and 'economies of scale' financial issues that have always plagued alternative print publications (2003: 584). Certainly, the use of the internet and email as the primary method of distribution for *New Matilda* has enabled it to maintain its status as a weekly, rather than a monthly, publication for as long as it has and *Eureka Street's* move to online and increased frequency as a fortnightly publication would suggest the online media environment is providing enhanced opportunities for quality independent publications.

The atmosphere surrounding *The Monthly* is far more upbeat in financial terms. Verified Australian Bureau of Circulations paid circulation figures in 2008 sat at 19,216, with readership increasing by 83 percent between March 2007 and March 2008. *The Monthly's* marketing material suggests a readership of around 56,000 and claims *The Monthly* is Australia's fastest growing magazine (*The Monthly*, August 2008). This indicates healthy readership figures indeed, particularly as *The Monthly* is paying contributors AUD\$1 per word for their stories. Warhaft says despite the rates being paid to contributors, they are expected to work 'bloody hard' for their \$1 per word and to produce high-quality copy which is packed with ideas, thorough research and original thought. While *The Monthly* markets itself on publishing the best Australian writers, Warhaft says they are attempting to find as many new and emerging writers as possible to publish but the task is not easy. She has found some journalists who wish to write for the publication to be 'incredibly lazy', beginning to work on lengthy stories with little time to spare and without due care. And she believes not a great deal of 'thought' goes into much of the journalists' work. At the same time, she has found academics who are thinking, and who have great ideas but who cannot write for a general audience. So the task of identifying great writers who deserve the high rates of pay — \$2000 for a 2000-word article, for example (and therefore \$8000 for the longer 8000-word essays) — has been a constant battle for the publication.

We do aim to publish the best writers in Australia, and some of them are already well-known and that's for good reason — they're bloody good at what they do. You get other people that can articulate the best pitch, the most wonderful idea, but they can't write. I have 20 essays I'd love

to commission right now but I can't find good writers to write them. That's a real challenge, to find a writer who is thinking.

## Summary and conclusions

The three publications under discussion here exhibit similar characteristics to a range of alternative publications around the world — simply, they are attempting to provide news and information to audiences which they feel are ill-served by existing mainstream news outlets. Importantly, they see it as a key role to engage their readers in public life or more specifically, to provide in-depth information which will enable their readers to participate more fully in public life. This has a great deal in common with the aims of the popular 1990s concept of public journalism (Merritt 1995; Rosen 1995), although as Howley has pointed out these independent and alternative publications are far-better placed than their mainstream counterparts to deliver on the principles of public journalism (Howley 2003: 274ff; also Forde 1997). *Eureka Street*, *The Monthly* and *Sydney City Hub* are indicative of the rise of alternative and independent media forms around the world — or perhaps they are becoming increasingly recognised and important because of the growing scholarly discussion surrounding these outlets. While McChesney outlines the very professional norms of journalism that have led to the crisis of content in the Western mainstream news media, *The Monthly* takes the innovative step of ensuring their editor is a non-journalist<sup>3</sup>, untrained in 'professional norms' to ensure an unpredictable and diverse take on current news and social issues. And when mainstream news organisations *must* primarily concern themselves with commercial realities, and with the need to appeal to (and not offend) a primarily affluent audience (see Hamilton 2004; and as an example the *Wentworth Courier's* focus on their 'high affluent readership', <http://www.fpc.com.au/page/couriersite.php?pageid=1>), the independent *Eureka Street* is content to commit some of its publisher's funds to the continuation of the magazine if it will mean an improvement in public debate and discussion within the Australian public sphere. Atton succinctly describes the over-reaching aims of independent and alternative media outlets which are acutely relevant to the three case studies under discussion here (2002: 12):

In a media culture that appears less and less interested in in-depth investigative reporting, alternative media provide information about and interpretations of the world which we might not otherwise see and information about the world that we simply will not find anywhere else. Alternative publications are at bottom more interested in the free flow of ideas than profit.

In summary, the alternative and independent publications examined here reflect global trends already identified by others, and are characterised by three simple overarching goals:

- A commitment to providing alternative content above their commitment to commercial success
- A content brief to cover news and issues that are not covered, or are inadequately covered, by mainstream news outlets
- An over-arching aim to provide information to their readers which will enable readers to more fully engage in public life and to be more vitally interested in the democratic/political process

The 2008 US State of the News Media report finds the trend towards under-funded mainstream news rooms continues with major staff cuts, particularly across the newspaper and magazine sectors. Still, these reduced numbers of journalists are being asked to produce even more material by adapting their content to be suitable for multimedia delivery (online, audio, video):

... the basic trend seems clear enough. In print, broadcast and elsewhere, more effort is moving to packaging and repurposing material, making it more interactive and multimedia and

---

<sup>3</sup> Warhaft's background as a lecturer in politics, and as an anthropologist working in the slums of Mumbai in India had placed her in the realm of someone involved in, and interested in, political and social issues but without the journalistic training which might provide more predictable editorial outcomes. Employment of a non-journalist editor was, according to Warhaft, a deliberate tactic by publisher Morry Schwarz.

extending its reach. But less is being devoted to original newsgathering, especially the bearing witness and monitoring of basic news (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2008).

In a media world that is increasingly acknowledged as providing thin, under-resourced and under-researched journalism, emanating from organisations primarily focused on entertaining (rather than informing) a broadly disengaged public, it must be time for journalism and media scholars — and journalism educators — to turn even further to these independent and alternative forms of journalism to accurately gauge exactly what it is we have lost from mainstream news in the past half-century, and to find solutions. The models of journalism and editorial behaviour demonstrated by the independent press suggest a strengthening of this sector of our media landscape — perhaps through arms-length subsidies provided by an independent statutory body to a broad range of publications — would lead to significant democratic gains and revitalisation of quality journalism.

## REFERENCES

---

- Alternative Media Group (2008). 'Sydney City Hub', accessed at [www.alternativemediagroup.com.au/AboutUs](http://www.alternativemediagroup.com.au/AboutUs), August 13 2008.
- Atton, C (2002), *Alternative Media*, London: Sage Publications.
- Atton, C and N. Couldry (2003), 'Introduction to special issue', *Media, Culture and Society*, 25: 579–586.
- Anderson, P and G. Ward (2007). 'Introduction', in *The Future of Journalism in the Advanced Democracies*, Peter Anderson and Geoff Ward (eds), Ashgate: London.
- Australian Press Council . *State of the News Print Media Report, 2006*, <http://www.presscouncil.org.au/snpma/ch02.html>, Australian Press Council: Sydney.
- Brumfield, Bird and Sandford (2007). *Media Report, 2008*, Brumfield Bird and Sandford: Brisbane, Australia.
- Burrows, E (2008), *The Australian Indigenous Public Sphere*, unpublished PhD Thesis, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- Carey, James (1996), 'Where journalism education went wrong', Paper presented at the 1996 Seigenthaler Conference, Middle Tennessee State University, USA. Accessed August 2006 from <http://www.mtsu.edu/~masscomm/seig96/carey/carey.htm>
- Carpentier, N.; Lie, R.; Servaes, J. (2003) Community Media: Muting the Democratic Media Discourse Continuum: *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 17 (1), pp 51–68.
- Cock, P.H (1977). 'Australia's alternative media', *Media Information Australia*, 6: 4–9.
- Collins, S and J. Rose (2004), 'City Voice: An alternative to the corporate model', *Pacific Journalism Review*, 10(2): 32–45.
- Couldry, N (2002), 'Mediation and alternative media, or relocating the centre of media and communication studies', *Media International Australia incorporating Culture & Policy*, 103: 24–31.
- Cranitch, Tom (2006), *Personal interview with the author*, recorded June 6, 2006.
- Deuze, M (2006), 'Ethnic media, community media and participatory culture', *Journalism*, 7(3): 262–280.
- Downey, J and N.Fenton (2003), 'New media, counter publicity and the public sphere', *New Media & Society*, 5(2): 185–202.
- Downing, John, T. Villarreal Ford, G. Gil and L. Stein (eds) (2001), *Radical Media: Rebellious Communication and Social Movements*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Downing, J (1984), *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication*, Boston, MA: South End Press.

- Forde, S, M. Meadows and K. Foxwell (2003), 'Through the lens of the local: Public arena journalism in the Australian community broadcasting sector', *Journalism*, 4(3): 317–342., Sage: London.
- Forde, Susan; Meadows, Michael; and Foxwell, Kerrie (2002), *Culture, Commitment, Community: The Australian community radio sector*, Brisbane, Griffith University, available at <http://www.cbonline.org.au/index.cfm?pageId=14,40,3,835>
- Forde, S (1998). 'Monitoring the establishment: The development of the alternative press in Australia,' *Media International Australia*, 87: 114–133.
- Forde, S (1997), 'A descriptive look at the public role of the Australian independent alternative press,' *AsiaPacific Media Educator*, 3: 118–130.
- GetUp!, Email to Members, August 12, 2008.
- Gibbons, Lawrence (2006), *Personal interview with the author*, recorded June 15, 2006.
- Haas, T (200&), *The Pursuit of Public Journalism*, Routledge: New York.
- Hallin, D.C (1994), *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and the Public Sphere*, Routledge: New York.
- Hamilton, J (2004), *All the News That's Fit to Sell: How the Market Transforms Information into News*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey.
- Harcup, T (2003), 'The unspoken – said: The journalism of alternative media', *Journalism*, 4(3): 356–376.
- Howley, K (2005), *Community Media: People, Places and Communication Technologies*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Howley, K (2003), 'A poverty of voices', *Journalism*, 4(3): 273–292.
- Lloyd, J (2004), *What the Media Are Doing to Our Politics*, Constable: London.
- McChesney, R (2003), 'The Problem of Journalism: a political economic contribution to an explanation of the crisis in contemporary US journalism', *Journalism Studies*, 4 (3): 299–329.
- McNair, B (2006), *Cultural Chaos: Journalism, News and Power in a Global World*, Routledge: London.
- Meadows, Michael; Susan Forde; Jacqui Ewart; and Kerrie Foxwell (2007). *Community Media Matters: An audience study of the Australian community broadcasting sector*, Brisbane, Griffith University.
- Meadows, M, S. Forde, J. Ewart, K. Foxwell (2006), 'Creating an Australian community public sphere: the role of community radio', *The Radio Journal*, 3(3): 171–187.
- Media Watch (August 11, 2008). 'The Mystery of the Missing Ad', accessed 13/08/08, <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/>
- Merritt, D (1995), *Imagining Public Journalism: An Editor and Scholar Reflect on the Birth of an Idea*, Roy W. Howard Public Lecture No. 5, School of Journalism: Indiana University.
- O'Connor, M (2006). 'Friends of the ABC say no to advertising', Media Release, March 15, 2006, accessed October 31 2006, <http://friendsoftheabc.org/Members/darce/sayno>
- Pew Research Center for People and the Press (2003), 'Press going too easy on Bush: Bottom-line pressures now hurting coverage, say journalists', *National Survey of Journalists*, Washington DC: Pew Research Center.
- Platon, S and M. Deuze (2003), 'Indymedia journalism: A radical way of making, selecting and sharing news?' *Journalism*, , 4(3): 336–355.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism (2004), *State of the News Media, 2004*. Available at [stateofthenewsmedia.com/2004](http://stateofthenewsmedia.com/2004), accessed 10/08/04.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005), *State of the News Media, 2005*. Available at [stateofthenewsmedia.org](http://stateofthenewsmedia.org), accessed 8/11/05.

- Project for Excellence in Journalism (2006), *State of the News Media, 2006*. Available at [stateofthenewsmedia.org](http://stateofthenewsmedia.org), accessed 31/07/08.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism (2007), *State of the News Media, 2007*. Available at [stateofthenewsmedia.org](http://stateofthenewsmedia.org), accessed 31/07/08.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism (2008), 'News Investment', in *State of the News Media 2008*, available at [stateofthenewsmedia.org](http://stateofthenewsmedia.org), accessed 18/09/08.
- Reeds, N and F. Colbourne (2000), 'Fewer Gatekeepers, More Open Gates', *Strategy Magazine*, 6 November, p. 25.
- Rodriguez, D (2001), *Fissures in the Mediascape: An International Study of Citizen's Media*, Hampton Press: New Jersey.
- Rosen, J (1999). *What Are Journalists For?* Yale University Press: Connecticut.
- Rosen, J (1995), *Imagining Public Journalism: An Editor and Scholar Reflect on the Birth of an Idea*, Roy W. Howard Public Lecture No. 5, School of Journalism: Indiana University.
- Ross, E (1982). *Of Storm and Struggle: Pages from Labour History*, Alternative Publishing Co-operative for New Age Publishers: Sydney.
- Scheur, J (2008), *The Big Picture: Why Democracies Need Journalistic Excellence*, Routledge: New York.
- Schiller, Herbert I. 1989. *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shepherd, P (2006). 'CMA and BBC English Regions Reach Landmark Agreement', Media Release, November 3 2006, see [www.commedia.org.uk](http://www.commedia.org.uk)
- The Monthly (2008). 'Media Kit', accessed August 13, 2008, [http://www.themonthly.com.au/tm/files/Media\\_Kit\\_Jul08.pdf](http://www.themonthly.com.au/tm/files/Media_Kit_Jul08.pdf)
- Trigoboff, D (2002) 'No Good News for Local News', *Broadcasting & Cable*, 18 November, p. 12.
- Turner, I (1969). *Sydney's Burning*, Alpha Books: Sydney.
- Van Vuuren K. (2006), 'Community broadcasting and the enclosure of the public sphere', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, pp. 379–392.
- Walker, R (1976). *The Newspaper Press in New South Wales, 1803–1920*, Sydney University Press: Sydney.
- Walley, W (2002) 'Fox News Sweeps to TV Marketer of Year', *Advertising Age*, 4 November, pp. 1, 22.
- Warhaft, Sally (2006), *Personal interview with the author*, recorded August 3, 2006.
- Westin, A (2001) 'Minutes' Master Misses Mark', *Variety*, 16–22 April, p. 35.