

DEMOCRACY, PARTICIPATION AND CONVERGENT MEDIA: CASE STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY ONLINE NEWS JOURNALISM IN AUSTRALIA

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Abstract

The shift from 20th century mass communications media towards convergent media and Web 2.0 has raised the possibility of a renaissance of the public sphere, based around citizen journalism and participatory media culture. This paper will evaluate such claims both conceptually and empirically. At a conceptual level, it is noted that the question of whether media democratization is occurring depends in part upon how democracy is understood, with some critical differences in understandings of democracy, the public sphere and media citizenship. The empirical work in this paper draws upon various case studies of new developments in Australian media, including online-only newspapers, developments in public service media, and the rise of commercially based online alternative media. It is argued that participatory media culture is being expanded if understood in terms of media pluralism, but that implications for the public sphere depend in part upon how media democratization is defined.

Keywords

Media, citizenship, participation, public sphere, Internet, citizen journalism, public service media.

Introduction

It has become a part of the 21st century *zeitgeist* to observe a transformation from the one-to-many mass communications models that dominated the 20th century, towards various manifestations of social media and participatory media culture.¹ A plethora of terms exist for this emergent communications environment, including the network society (Castells, 1996, 2007), the networked information economy (Benkler, 2006), Wikinomics (Tapscott and Williams, 2006), and the creative economy (Howkins, 2001; Anheier and Isar, 2008). A key feature of this environment is the blurring of lines of authority and information flow between producers and consumers of media, as horizontal and many-to-many forms of communication are enabled on the global distributional scale of the Internet, leading to the rise of what Bruns (2008) terms the *producer*, or the media user that publishes and disseminates digital content as well as being a media consumer. This presents a challenge to industrial-era mass institutions generally, and those of the mass media in particular.

While none of this would be occurring without the Internet and networked personal computing, where the level of connectivity and individual ICT capacity grows as the costs of access and the barriers to participation in this networked environment continue to fall, the rise of the Internet is a necessary but not sufficient condition for explaining these changes. According to Yochai Benkler (2006: 4–5) at least three other factors need to be considered:

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1. The rise of *knowledge-intensive service industries* (media, information, communication and creative industries) moving to the centre of post-industrial economies — these have always needed to be more flexible and agile than traditional manufacturing industries;
2. The boost that the Internet gives to the *co-ordinate effects* of a multiplicity of individual activities and actions, or the *network multiplier* principle seen in the cumulative growth of available information online;
3. The rise of *peer production and sharing* of information, knowledge and culture through large-scale co-operative efforts, as one of the key trends associated with what is termed Web 2.0, social media and the participative web (OECD, 2007), is the general impetus given to *openness and mass collaboration* more generally.

In broad terms, the set of shifts from mass communications media to the emergent media environment in terms of media production, distribution, power, content and the producer/consumer relationship can be represented as follows:

Table 1

From Mass Communications Media to Convergent Media/Web 2.0

	MASS COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA (20TH CENTURY)	CONVERGENT MEDIA/ WEB 2.0 (21ST CENTURY)
Media distribution	Large-scale distribution; high barriers to entry for new entrants	Internet dramatically reduces barriers to entry based on distribution
Media production	Complex division of labour; critical role of media content gatekeepers and professionals	Easy-to-use Web 2.0 technologies give scope for individuals and small teams to be producers, editors and distributors of media content
Media power	Asymmetrical power relationship — one-way communication flow	Greater empowerment of users/audiences enabled through interactivity and greater choice of media outlets
Media content	Tendency towards standardized mass appeal content to maximize audience share — limited scope for market segmentation based on product differentiation	‘Long tail’ economics make much wider range of media content potentially profitable; demassification and segmentation of media content markets
Producer/consumer relationship	Mostly impersonal, anonymous and commoditised (audiences as target mass markets)	Potential to be more personalized and driven by user communities and user-created content (UCC)

Source: Own interpretation.

At the centre of many of these trends is news media and, with it, the professional field of journalism. Newspapers have been hit by a ‘perfect storm’ of threats surrounding their business models, including: declining print circulation (particularly among young people); the shift of classified advertising to the Internet; the rise of low-cost alternative online news outlets; the rise of citizen journalism, blogging and self-publishing; and fundamental shifts in user behaviour toward accessing news content. In countries such as the United States and Britain, this has led to leading newspapers either going bankrupt or online-only, and even threatens flagship publications such as the *New York Times* (Miel and Faris, 2008; Hirschorn, 2009; Deuze, 2009). In a recent overview, Todd Gitlin (2009) identified factors that constitute markers of a crisis in professional journalism, including:

1. A precipitous drop in newspaper circulation numbers and advertising revenues (both classified and print), that has been accentuated by economic downturn since the global financial crisis of 2008;
2. A dramatic fall in share prices for commercial media businesses, many of which acquired high levels of debt in the 2000s, and which appear to be struggling to develop new business models for the Internet economy;
3. A shift in the 'attention economy' of media users, who deal with media proliferation by seeking multi-media combinations, and spending less time consuming any single media product or service;
4. A crisis of authority for professional journalism arising from the shift from the 'high modernist' era of crusading investigative journalism and one-off features towards the 24-hour news cycle and the need to continuously reproduce news around familiar themes and formats;
5. A growing public distrust of journalists as increasingly being seen as the conduits for material provided to them by well-funded political, business and other special interests.

Media democratisation?

In order to assess claims being made about the convergent news media environment, it is helpful to locate positions within the debate along two axes. The first is what I would term the *maximalist/minimalist* axis. This relates to whether the changes are seen as transformative or incremental in nature or, put differently, whether they mark out qualitatively new developments in news journalism or whether they are changes that have parallels in previous periods and can largely be understood from within existing knowledge paradigms. The second axis is that of *optimism/pessimism*, and relates to whether those analysing such developments view their impact positively or negatively. Such an axis is consistent with wider trends in new media discourse, which are often characterized by what Woolgar (2002) terms *cyberbole*, where a dialectic emerges between hype about a new technology, product or service, which is met in turn by counter-hype, or the criticism that there is nothing really 'new' about all of this.

The popular media is full of prognoses of what this all means for the future of news and professional journalism that reflect the optimism/pessimism cycle. Apostles of the new era such as Charles Leadbeater (2008) have argued that this is leading to 'a period of unparalleled social creativity when we sought to devise new ways of working together to be more democratic, creative and innovative ... creating a collective intelligence on a scale never before possible' (Leadbeater, 2008: 3, 5). In a similar vein, Clay Shirky argues that 'we are living in the middle of a remarkable increase in our ability to share, to cooperate with one another, and to take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutions and organizations' (Shirky, 2008: 20–21). For Clay Shirky, the time has come to cast off the professional category of journalist, since everyone is now potentially both a media producer and a media outlet, and the 'gatekeeper' function has now become more about professional self-defence than about quality or standards, and 'what was once a service has become a bottleneck' (Shirky, 2008: 69). Andrew Keen (2007) has identified the trends that Shirky and Leadbeater celebrate as leading, not to democratization, but as 'undermining truth, souring civic discourse, and belittling expertise, experience and talent ... and threatening the very future of our cultural institutions ... the real consequence of the Web 2.0 revolution is less culture, less reliable news, and a chaos of useless information' (Keen, 2007: 15–16).

Minimalist positions tend to get less attention than maximalist ones, in part because they do not work within the 'hype cycle', but also because they tend to come more from academics than popular media and journalism. One example of an analysis that is both minimalist and pessimistic would be that of James Curran and Jean Seaton (2003), who argue that while the Internet and other new media are significant, what has been more influential has been the 'widespread belief that new communications technology is transforming ... media', and that 'this conviction ... is itself a powerful force for change' (Curran and Seaton, 2003: 291). In other words, the discourse of radical

change, and its influence upon public policy and upon ideas about the media, generates its own momentum, and has consequences such as undermining support for public service broadcasting or expectations around media professionalism. A position that is minimalist and optimistic — or more accurately assumes the *status quo* — is found in Knight (2008), who sees the Internet as being on a continuum of new media technologies, concluding that ‘journalists will adapt to the Internet, in the same way as they embraced the telephone, the telegraph and the printing press’ (Knight, 2008: 123).

The democratizing potential of new media practices in relation to news and journalism have been argued by McNair (2006), Hartley (2008, 2009) and Bruns (2008), among others. These positions tend to be both maximalist and optimistic, since they situate changes in news and journalism in a wider context of growing informational abundance and consumer power. McNair focuses upon how the move from information scarcity to information abundance requires a conceptual shift in thinking about the relationship between media and power from a ‘control’ paradigm to one derived from chaos theory, arguing that the latter opens up ‘the new possibilities provided by the emergent climate of communicative turbulence for demystifying, democratizing and decentralizing power in societies where ... it is still open to excessive accumulation and abuse’ (McNair, 2006: 170). McNair proposes that ‘In the era of cultural chaos, people have access to more information than ever before. If information is the prerequisite of knowledge, and if knowledge is power, other things remaining equal, this trend corresponds to a power-shift from the traditionally information-rich elite to the no longer so information-poor mass’ (McNair, 2006: 199).

Hartley (2008) proposes that the combination of new media technologies and globalization is generating ‘a society in which “everyone is a journalist” or can be’, as the right of everyone ‘not just to express but also to circulate information and opinions that they actually hold’ is an affordance that is increasingly enabled in this new socio-technical environment (Hartley, 2008: 48, 49). Interestingly, Hartley sees one obstacle to such a transition as being the professional ideology of journalists themselves, whose interests in preserving an insider/outsider distinction between journalists and the rest of society arises not only as a means of safeguarding jobs and professional standing, but also because, like Keen, they fear the consequences of the opening up of information circulation to the wider public. Bruns (2008) identifies in the rise of user-generated content and online social media the stirrings of what he terms *molecular democracy* that ‘no longer relies upon the large and ... relatively closed bodies of political parties’, but instead ‘decentralizes and distributes the process of development into a wider, broader, and deeper network of contributors’ (Bruns, 2008: 366). Such arguments are developed in the context of the rise of *participatory media culture*, defined by Jenkins as an environment where media producers and consumers are increasingly ‘participants who interact with each other according to a new set of rules’ (Jenkins, 2006: 3), and where consumers are increasingly powerful in relation to media corporations, ‘but only if they recognize and use that power as both consumers and citizens, as full participants in our culture’ (Jenkins, 2006: 260).

While claims about a shift in informational power towards media consumers and a renewal of the democratising mission of the media are associated with maximalist and optimistic arguments, they exist alongside the more pessimistic accounts of political economists, who also tend to question the extent of the change, and to argue that the industrial context in which digital media technologies are being introduced has been one where the hands of media corporations has been strengthened. Mosco (2009) argues that new forms of online and citizen journalism cannot substitute for professional journalism as ‘those telling the stories are not journalists ... [and] are not trained in the craft’ (Mosco, 2009: 350). McChesney (2007) argues that claims about the possibilities of Internet-based media to transform journalism are undercut by developments in the political economy of media where ‘the existing commercial system has lost interest in journalism, or has lost incentive to produce it; and what it does produce tends to have serious problems, owing to commercial pressures’ (McChesney, 2007: 214). Miller (2009) has dismissed the arguments of Hartley, Jenkins and others as ‘cybertarian mythology’, ignorant of the extent to which ‘the cultural industries remain under the control of media conglomerates’ (Miller, 2009: 194). In his overview of how

major newspapers developed their online news sites in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Scott (2005) concluded that the rise of online news 'did not produce a democratized media with decentralized news production and a more informed polity. Rather, it resulted in a hard-nosed set of business strategies that are rapidly handing greater control over public information to an ever-decreasing number of media corporations' (Scott, 2005: 121–122).

Democratisation, participation and the public sphere: Clarifying terms

What is notable in this discussion is that some key concepts, such as democratization, remain implicit in the discourse, and that there are some inherent difficulties in evaluating the relationship between media and democratization. One of the difficulties in these debates concerns the multi-faceted nature of terms such as democracy and democratization. Measures of democracy such as those developed by the U.S.-based Freedom House in its *Freedom in the World* reports (Freedom House, 2009) have their critics, who point to difficulties in equating democratic freedoms solely with the right to vote, and that electoral democracy is synonymous with the existence of other measures of democracy, such as a relative equality of opportunities to participate in the political process (for overviews, see Przeworski *et. al.*, 2000; Welzel, 2006). It is also notable that a minimalist definition of democracy as the right to vote in parliamentary elections without coercion or manipulation does not in itself point to any role for the media. It is only with more elaborated understandings of democracy and the democratic process, such as theories of public communication and the public sphere, that the appropriate roles of media in democratic societies come to be elaborated.

The concept of citizenship is often invoked as a way of understanding democratization in ways that can explicitly incorporate a media dimension (Flew, 2006). To take one example, Golding and Murdock (1989) proposed a definition of media citizenship that emphasized the degree of access that individuals had to information concerning their rights, access to the widest possible range of information and opinion on issues, and the scope for people from all sections of society to recognize themselves in the range of representations offered in the media and to contribute to the shaping of those representations. But while citizenship is perhaps a less politically charged term than democracy or democratization, Kymlicka and Norman have noted that 'the scope for a "theory of citizenship" is potentially limitless [as] almost every problem in political philosophy involves relations among citizens or between citizens and the state' (Kymlicka and Norman 1994: 353). The concept of citizenship is also grounded in a duality that Held (2006) has drawn attention to, and which is found in the range of debates concerning new media and citizenship. There is on the one hand the tradition of *developmental republicanism*, which has stressed the intrinsic value of political participation and the equality of all citizens as a precondition of democratic self-determination, and on the other there is *protective republicanism*, which stresses the instrumental value of political participation and the importance of a pluralistic division of powers as the basic condition for the maintenance of personal liberty (Held, 2006: 36–49).

These difficulties are seen in debates surrounding the Internet as a new form of public sphere. McNair (2006: 135–140) is unequivocal in arguing that new developments in media, which include media globalization as well as those associated with the Internet and digital media, have strengthened democracy and the public sphere. His criteria for reaching this conclusion are: (1) opportunities to produce and distribute media have become more readily available to a wider range of people; (2) the opportunities for a 'diversity of bias, and a balance of critical opinion' have increased (McNair, 2006: 139); and (3) greater media competition and 24-hour news cycles have acted to stimulate critical scrutiny of political elites. McNair's optimism about the Internet's implications for a more democratic public sphere is shared by Gimmler (2001), who argues that the Internet can strengthen the public sphere and deliberative democracy as it promotes more equal access to information, interaction among citizens, and 'a more ambitious practice of discourse' among citizens, through a medium which active promotes 'a pluralistically constituted public realm' as it is 'rhizomatically constituted and not segmented or organized hierarchically' (Gimmler 2001:

31, 33). Dahlgren (2005) also identifies the positive contribution of the Internet to facilitating democratic discourse and civic culture to a wider range of citizens, even if one of its consequences is the break-up of a singular, integrated public sphere into multiple, heterogeneous communicative forums and practices.

In reaching these conclusions, McNair observes that two aspects of Habermas's original formulation of the public sphere need to be qualified. The first concerns the question of whether media can be expected to 'form the foundation for the rational political decision-making required by liberal democratic theory' (McNair, 2006: 137), given that media have always been divided by factors such as demography, political viewpoint, lifestyle appeal and ethnicity, among others. The second, and related point is that there has never historically been a singular public sphere, but rather 'a virtual, cognitive multiverse of ... cultural institutions serving overlapping, intersecting, interconnected communities of readers/listeners/viewers who are linked by their shared consumption of the information contained in particular media. These communities of interest — publics — are then linked to wider communities by their media's shared agenda of reportage, analysis and discussion' (McNair, 2006: 137).

In terms of Held's distinction between theories of democratic citizenship noted above, these are advances in terms of protective republicanism. The Internet enables citizens to have access to a wider range of information sources, to produce and distribute their own media in greater numbers, and to have greater autonomy from agencies of the state or large-scale commercial media enterprises in doing so. But in terms of the Habermasian vision of the public sphere, this is only a partial gain, as it cannot demonstrate advances at the level of what Held terms developmental republicanism. Habermas has emphasized the deliberative dimension of democracy, and finds contemporary media lacking in this respect on the basis of:

the lack of face-to-face interaction between present participants in a shared practice of collective decision making ... the lack of reciprocity between the roles of speakers and addressees in an egalitarian exchange of claims and opinions ... [and] the power of the media to select, and shape the presentation of, messages and by the strategic use of political and social power to influence the agendas as well as the triggering and framing of public issues (Habermas, 2006: 414–415).

While recognizing the contribution of the Internet to communication free of political censorship, Habermas is nonetheless dismissive of its wider contribution to deliberative democracy, as he believes it leads to 'the fragmentation of ... mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics' (Habermas, 2006: 423). It thus promotes a more representative public sphere, but at the potential cost of a reasoning public seen as essential for deliberative democracy, and as the mobilizing capacity of mass media are in decline as communications media fragment into 'public sphericles' (Rasmussen, 2009). It could be, therefore, that Internet-based communication could be both expanding the range of voices available on issues in public life and the political sphere, while also pointing to the barriers to participation presented by inequalities of access to digital media technologies and capacities to participate in a digital public sphere, as well as the capacity of political elites to manage the new media environment to their own ends (Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Sparks 2001; Golding and Murdock 2004).

I have argued elsewhere (Flew, 2009a) that a different way of thinking about participation and media citizenship is enabled by drawing upon Albert Hirschman's distinction between exit, voice and loyalty. The important category in terms of public sphere theory is that of voice, which points in various ways to the opportunity to participate in public discourse, the capacity to use communications media to persuade others and shift public opinion (what Hirschman termed the 'art of voice'), and the ability to use such media to achieve influence over politics and public affairs. I believe that such a framework is enabling for these debates in three ways. First, it provides some means of benchmarking the contribution of Internet-based and digital media communication to democratization and participation that avoids what Garry Rawnsley has described as a 'revolution

of rising expectations' (2005: 183) concerning the relationship of the Internet to political democracy. Finding that the Internet does not promote deliberative democracy and a reasoning public along Habermasian lines is not necessarily evidence of a lapse from a once vibrant and unified public sphere in some unspecified 'golden age' of political communication, but may in fact reflect the extent to which our expectations of such communicative domains have become more sophisticated over time as processes of democratization become more mature in more places worldwide.

Second, it points to the need to recognize that in actually existing liberal democracies, the demand for further democratization as put forward by sections of the intelligentsia does not have widespread public support since, as Paul Hirst observed 'the dominant political idiom identifies democracy with the prevailing forms of representative government ... the popular experience of dictatorships and single-party states makes the identification of democracy with representative government and multi-party elections credible' (Hirst, 19990: 163). By contrast, demands for greater media diversity do have greater political purchase, particularly when combined with tangible evidence of the opportunities enabled by more open communications systems and the emergence of new voices (McChesney, 2007).

Finally, there is a need to give some tangibility to the concept of media citizenship and some evaluative criteria through which its achievement can be determined or obstacles recognized and addressed. Too often, citizenship is simply presented as a 'good thing', countered as a bad other that is consumerism, the market or neo-liberalism, with little attention to its institutional specifics, or a default setting that associates it with state-run or non-commercial media (Jacka, 2004; Flew and Cunningham, 2009). As the Internet, and the new forms of media associated with it, have developed across the market/state and commercial/non-commercial continuums, there is a need to develop ways of evaluating the significance of such trends that do not simply replay dichotomies of the broadcast era that were in part the product of a limited-channel media environment.

Thinking across media types

One issue that we need to be aware of in these debates is that different issues arise across different media and they should not be conflated into a singular outcome for the media generally. In particular, the future of newspapers can be constituted as a stand in for the future of news media generally. As noted above, newspapers are facing a 'perfect storm' of threats that is bringing down major titles throughout the United States in particular, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. At the same time, there are dangers in extending such arguments across the full spectrum of media.² There is limited evidence in Australia of a fundamental shift away from mass media such as television and radio. Rather, what appears to have primarily occurred is a substitution effect between print media (newspapers and magazines) and the Internet. Moreover, the decline in newspaper circulation has not been as sharp in Australia as in the United States, and major news sites such as ninemsn.com.au, smh.com.au, theage.com.au, news.com.au and abc.net.au all feature among Australia's 25 most accessed news sites based on Alexa data (Alexa, 2009). It has been observed that spending on online advertising grew from 2.2% of total advertising expenditure in 2002 to 10.3% in 2007, but much of this expenditure is moving to the online sites of established media outlets, with online-only sites such as *Crikey*, *On Line Opinion* and *New Matilda* attracting about 5–10% of the readership of online sites such as theaustralian.com.au (Flew, 2009b).

The issue that faces all traditional 20th century mass media is whether a basic paradigm shift has occurred in how people are expecting media content to be accessed, distributed and consumed. Consumer expectations of the unbundling of content apparent across all media formats, from music

² The evidence supporting these arguments is presented in Flew, 2009.

to news to television. As researchers at The Berkman Centre for the Internet and Society at Harvard University have noted, it is the *disaggregation of media content* that is in many ways more of a threat to established media than new online-only competitors:

It is the loss of control over the format and timing of the distribution of information that poses the true challenge to the traditional media ... the value created by traditional media models is based on scarcity, but the Internet supports an environment of information abundance. Audiences are able to access the same professionally produced news, information and entertainment that they previously obtained from traditional media, but on their own terms ... furthermore, they are able to separate stories from the advertising sold by the publisher or broadcaster (Miel and Faris, 2008: 5).

At one level, the idea that there is not a strong ‘news habit’ among young people has existed for a long time. As Young (2008) notes, there has long been a view in the media industry that people under 40 pursue various other media enthusiasms until they settle down to a comfortable middle age when an enthusiasm for news, talk radio, current affairs and documentaries emerges. But one factor that is crucially different in the current environment is the demand for *participation*, and the expectation that users can comment on and contribute to the media that they consume, and will not maintain a passive and deferential orientation towards media and information content. Deuze (2006) identifies participation as one of the core elements of digital media culture, that is now central to the process of constructing social reality for those who are deeply embedded in new media culture. Regular Internet users not only expect to be active agents in the process of meaning-making (participation), but to be able to re-use, modify and manipulate the material through which social reality is constructed (remediation), and re-assemble media content into their own particular versions of this reality (bricolage) (Deuze, 2006: 66). The expectations of such a participatory media culture are not easily addressed through online add-ons to a core media product, and they are inconsistent with long-held assumptions about journalists and other media professionals having a monopoly over the means of information dissemination.

The remainder of this paper will develop a case study approach to understanding trends and implications in the Australian context. Given the propensity for speculative accounts and meta-theory around the social impact of new media, a case can be made for more empirical accounts that aim to develop a snapshot of developments around one medium in one location, and to seek to extrapolate from that towards understanding wider trends. Moreover, there are some dangers in drawing an overall account from too close a study of one particular medium. There is a strong propensity at present to tie accounts of the future of journalism to the future of newspapers, and to the experience of particular countries, most notably the United States. Print is, however, just one vehicle for delivering news content, and it is also the case that newspaper circulation is growing in other parts of the world, most notably India and China (McNair, 2009; Thussu, 2009). Most importantly, we need to document as wide a range of developments as possible in a media landscape that is experiencing transformative and not merely incremental change. This is partly to guard against tendencies towards ‘rebuttal by counter-factual’, where particular case studies are used to stand in for whole propositions e.g. evidence of unethical behaviour by bloggers or participants in online sites is proof that bloggers are inherently less trustworthy than journalists, or that the online domain is inherently unmanageable (on this, see Flew and Wilson, 2009).

The three case studies to be considered in this paper are:

1. The development of online-only newspapers by commercial media, particularly Fairfax Media’s brisbanetimes.com.au site;
2. Opportunities to expand user-generated content at the ABC and SBS online sites, as part of an expanded social innovation remit for the two national public broadcasters in the online environment;
3. The development of commercially viable independent online media.

Transformations in commercial media

There has been a flurry of disruptions to the established business models of Australian commercial news media over the last decade, which have been most sharply felt in newspapers, and contribute to what Tiffen has described as ‘a much deeper pessimism pervading Australian journalism now than there was a decade ago’ (Tiffen, 2009: 384). The array of technological, economic, and socio-cultural forces underlying this sense of crisis have been discussed above. In identifying how the major media players have responded, we can identify competitive strategies based upon the following:

1. *Building brand advantage.* It has been observed that as the Internet presents a plethora of news choices for consumers, questions of trust and reputation become increasingly central, and that this can work to the advantage of globally recognized news brands. The success of British online news sites such as *The Guardian*, *TimesOnline* and the BBC in the United States, particularly after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, indicates how perceptions of brand credibility can link with significant shifts in media consumption patterns in an age of the global Internet (Bicket and Wall, 2009). In Australia, News has significantly invested in *The Australian* on this basis, while Fairfax has retained *AFR.com* (the online site of the *Australian Financial Review*) as a pay-access-only site;
2. *Cost reductions.* Although it is difficult to get reliable data on this, there is substantial evidence that news organizations are either cutting back on the number of staff and other resources (e.g. foreign bureaus) and/or asking journalists to do more. The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance estimated that the number of full-time Australian journalists fell by 13 per cent from 2001 to 2007, and this was before the impact of the global economic downturn (MEAA, 2008: 9). This is in line with international trends, particularly in the United States, where it is estimated that one in four media jobs disappeared between 2000 and 2007 (Deuze, 2009), and where the number of journalist employed by newspapers fell by 4.4 per cent in 2007 (Mosco, 2009);
3. *Brand extension/diversification.* One consequence of dramatically reduced barriers to establishing a publication in the online environment is that news organizations have experimented with online-only sites targeting particular geographical regions, demographic segments and readership types. Both News and Fairfax established online-only sites for the West Australian market (*Perth Now* and *WA Today*), and Fairfax developed *Brisbane Times* as an online-only competitor in South-East Queensland to News’s long-established *Courier-Mail*. Fairfax has also developed *The Vine* as an online site targeted at a 14–29 age demographic, while News has developed *The Punch* as an online opinion and commentary site and Fairfax has renovated the *National Times* brand for a similar site.

It is the last development in particular that raises interesting issues about online news media and the public sphere. If we accept the proposition that concentration of media ownership has a negative impact upon the scope to present a diversity of ideas and opinions (Entman and Wildman, 1992), should we be welcoming these new online-only titles as opening up more opportunities for diversity by challenging long-established regional media monopolies? The evidence of the Fairfax online site brisbanetimes.com.au suggests that such optimism may be misplaced, and that we need to think more laterally about how to expand diversity of media opinion.

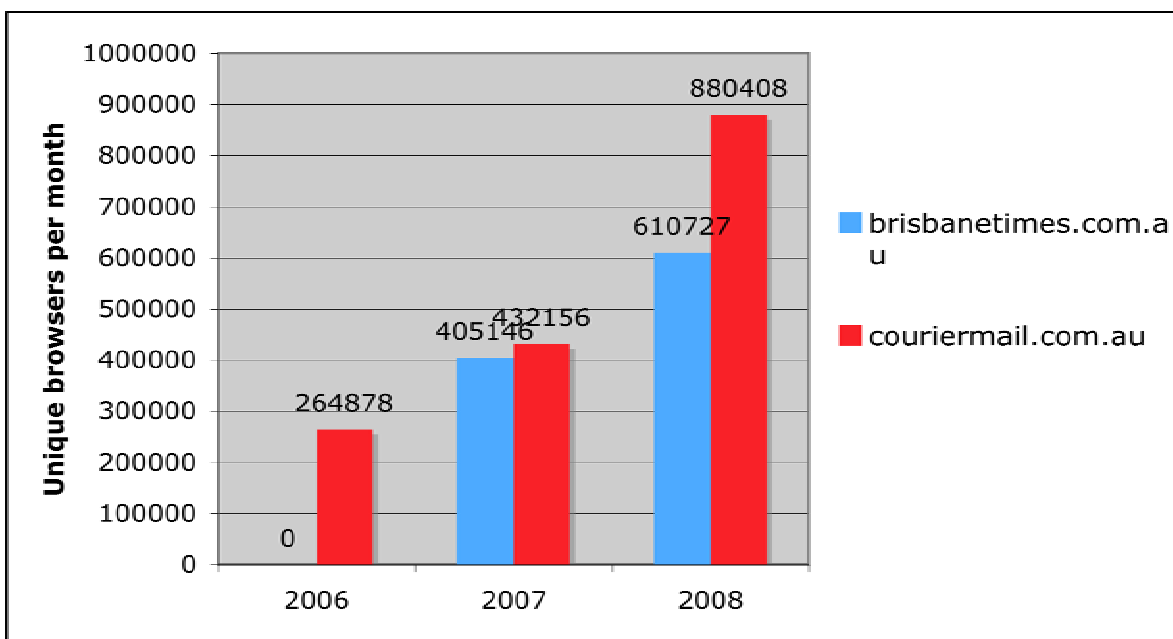
Brisbanetimes.com.au was launched into the South-East Queensland market by then-Fairfax CEO David Kirk in March 2007. It was Fairfax’s response to how to enter the lucrative South-East Queensland market and extend beyond its heartland cities of Sydney and Melbourne. Centred on Brisbane, but including the Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast, South-East Queensland is Australia’s largest population growth centre, growing from a population of 1.5 million in 1981 to 2.5 million in 2001, and estimated to grow to 4 million by 2026. The print market has been dominated by a single newspaper, *The Courier-Mail* (published by News Limited), which has held a monopoly status in Brisbane since the late 1980s. Interestingly, *The Courier-Mail*’s circulation figures have declined in

spite of regional population growth, and the performance of its online site couriermail.com.au had been desultory, with only 264,878 UBs per month in June 2006 (12.4% of those going to smh.com.au). *Brisbanetimes.com.au* commenced with a staff of 14 journalists, who were mostly recruited from the Ipswich-based *Queensland Times* newspaper, and they were accompanied by some high-profile bloggers, including the Brisbane-based ‘gonzo’ journalist and author John Birmingham, whose ‘Blunt Instrument’ site was likely to appeal to males aged 18–39 in particular.

The *brisbanetimes.com.au* site attracted substantial use in the first months of its launch, with over 400,000 UB visits per month by June 2007. As shown below, this compared very favourably with its principal local competitor *couriermail.com.au*, but figures for 2008 saw *couriermail.com.au* increase its lead over *brisbanetimes.com.au*.

Figure 1

Unique site visits per month, *couriermail.com.au* and *brisbanetimes.com.au*, 2006–2008



Source: Nielsen Online Market Intelligence, cited in APC, 2008: 18, 34.

Brisbanetimes.com.au site was the first attempt in Australia by a major media proprietor to establish an online-only news publication that was targeted at a particular geographical market. Print newspapers in Australia have traditionally served a particular city, region or state, with there only being two national newspapers (News’s *The Australian* and Fairfax’s *Australian Financial Review*). Since the launch of *brisbanetimes.com.au*, both News and Fairfax have developed online-only publications for Perth — *Perth Now* (News) and *WAToday.com.au* (Fairfax) — and News’s *Adelaide Now* site is differently branded to its print-based stable-mate *The Adelaide Advertiser*. The rise of geographically targeted online-only news sites indicates that the barriers to entry for new news outlets in particular markets have fallen dramatically, and that the economies of scope and scale that an incumbent print newspaper has in those markets no longer present a major barrier to disruptive innovators that choose to operate only in the online space.

At the same time, the ability of couriermail.com.au to claw back market share from brisbanetimes.com.au points to continuing advantages that accrue to the incumbent from its ability to cross-promote its online site through its print media outlet and its large-scale distribution network, as well as a range of intangible factors that arise from a long-established presence in the local market. While *brisbanetimes.com.au* is considered a success within Fairfax, showing that an

online-only publication can achieve significant geographical market penetration in a short time at a fraction of the staffing and infrastructure costs of its incumbent competitor which operates in both print and online formats, this has not led to substantial new investments in staff or other resources for the publication.

Herein lies the problem in terms of expanding the public sphere for online-only spin-off sites such as *brisbanetimes.com.au*. In order to build a local profile that is genuinely competitive with the incumbents, such sites to invest additional resources into news production and distribution in the geographical region, in order to build its longer-term profile as a news provider focused upon the region. But this would undercut the premise on which they were established as low-cost competitors. An alternative path could be for sites such as *brisbanetimes.com.au* to make more use of user-created content and citizen journalism to enable it to develop a lower-cost strategy for embedding 'hyperlocal' content into its news site than is the case with more established competitor, which has a considerably larger paid journalism staff. In the case of these sites, however, this would appear to go against the prevailing editorial ethos, which is that only paid journalists produce news for the site, and contributions from other sources must be kept at the margins of the site, if indeed they are permitted at all. While the rise of online-only sites such as *brisbanetimes.com.au* raises the question of whether incumbent print newspapers can continue to maintain their considerably larger staffing profiles in the face of challenges from lower-cost online-only news providers, and online sites more generally 'cannibalize' their print newspaper market, they possess significant structural limitations in terms of making a significant contribution to revitalizing the public sphere.³

Public service media

In many respects, public service broadcasters have taken to the digital media environment in a more effective way than their commercial counterparts. Public service broadcasters such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) established an online presence early, and were able to deploy arguments around citizenship and the development of national culture in a globalised media environment to enlist government support for online initiatives, at a time when the traditional rationales for public service broadcasting were being challenged by the rise of multi-channel commercial broadcasting (Jacka, 2004). In her account of the early years of *ABC Online*, Burns (2008) observes that this often challenged the public broadcaster's historical role as 'ethical exemplar' and the voice of expertise, exposing a 'disjunction between the hierarchical top-down interaction of the public service broadcasting idea, and the more lateral networked interaction of the Internet idea' (Burns, 2008: 396). Such relationships have evolved over time, to the point where Richard Sambrook, Director of Global News at the BBC, argues that the participatory and interactive dimensions of the BBC's online news site have enabled users worldwide to become co-producers of news, and allowed BBC journalists to become networked journalists who routinely tap into the expertise of their audience (Sambrook, 2008; c.f. Beckett, 2008 on networked journalism). At the same time, it has been argued that journalists within the BBC are most comfortable of those forms of user-created media content that complement their own professional roles and standing, while remaining resistant to the notion that amateur citizen journalists have an equivalent standing in terms of the capacity to generate new stories (Wardle *et. al.*, 2009).

A case can be made that 20th century public service broadcasters should be repositioning themselves for the 21st century as *public service media organizations*. At its first and most obvious level, this

³ The degree of overlap between readerships of print and online versions of the same publication is an important research question on which information is scarce at present. It has been estimated that the overlap between print and online readerships for smh.com.au and theage.com.au is as low as 15–20%, and evidence is growing of a disjunction between the material featured on the 'front page' of online versions of a publication and their print newspaper versions (Morison, 2007).

entails a recognition that the media services provided by such organizations should not be platform-specific, and that ‘the public service remit is not confined to a specific technology (like radio or broadcasting) ... [and] PSB therefore has to follow the audience to where they would access such services’ (Trappel, 2008: 320). Public service broadcasters have long been adjusting their organisational profiles for media convergence, and developing media content for cross-media platforms, and it has been argued that online public service media continue to play a vital role as institutional guarantors of media citizenship principles such as provision of accurate and unbiased information, distribution of social knowledge, providers of opportunities for deliberation, and outlets committed to diversity of representation and maximization of participation and pluralism (see e.g. Coleman, 2005; Murdock, 2005; Moe, 2008). But there is a second sense in which the public service remit can be understood, which involves actively promoting greater participation from outside of the organization in the creation and distribution of media content, and building content communities based on factors such as geography, demography, identity and common interests.⁴

The basis for arguing that public service media should be opened up to greater user contributions arises not only from its relationship to participatory democracy and media citizenship, but also to the changing nature of social innovation. Murray, Mulgan and Caulier-Grice (2008) have observed that social innovation may arise from conscious institutional design or from multiple, unconscious and uncoordinated processes. Public service broadcasting (PSB) is a good example of social innovation generated by conscious design. In the classic formulation of PSB developed by Lord Reith as the first Governor of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the aim was to deliberately harness the power of the new mass media for purposes of nation-building, mass education, strengthening of the informational base of liberal democracy, and broadly based cultural improvement. Similar principles have informed the Charter of the ABC, and include universality of access, localism, Australian content, comprehensive and diverse programming, diversity of news and information, education, and innovation and quality. The social innovation remit embedded in the Charter of the SBS is a unique one internationally. Established in the 1970s as a response to the challenges of an increasingly multicultural Australian society, and the lack of responsiveness of Australian media to the growing cultural diversity of society, SBS has become a distinctively Australian initiative ‘to bring Australians of different backgrounds together in a constantly evolving multicultural society that values social inclusiveness and cultural democracy’ (Ang *et. al.*, 2008: 25).

If public broadcasters such as the ABC and SBS have constituted forms of social innovation through conscious institutional design, the rise of the Internet, the World Wide Web and social media in its various manifestations represent social innovation arising from the uncoordinated actions of millions of users of online media, harnessed through a networked information and communications infrastructure designed for quite different purposes to those for which many round the globe utilize it. As Yochai Benkler puts it, the rise of the Internet has fundamentally changed the nature of media from a one-to-many system of mass communication, to a system that is increasingly driven by ‘non-market production in the information and cultural production sector, organised in a radically more decentralized system than was true for this sector in the 20th century’ (Benkler, 2006: 3). As networks are based around complex, decentralized and distributed systems, it is increasingly the case that ***innovation comes from the margins rather than the centre***. This turns traditional innovation systems thinking on its head, as it points to the need for a different role for the state to that of promoting R&D activities in large, centralised public and private sector institutions.

⁴ The specifics of such a change are discussed in the Australian context in Flew *et. al.*, 2008, as part of the Review of National Broadcasting (ABC and SBS) undertaken by the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy.

What this might look like would differ between the ABC and SBS. The ABC has made significant advances in this area with user-driven content sites such as *Pool* and *Unleashed*, but they do operate at the margins of the ABC's operations at this point in time. Significant developments are emerging in terms of localism, with the 2009 Federal Budget providing funding to support regional content hubs where user-created content would play a key role. SBS could harness its extensive links into Australia's ethnic communities to develop network of informal specialist 'reporters' in the community by creating user-created content opportunities around identified countries and topic areas where the users with the appropriate expertise or knowledge areas could respond to an identifiable need. An issue-based, international network could both tap into existing ethnic communities to gather cultural insights, and provide audiences with an opportunity to present their experiences of newsworthy overseas events (Flew *et. al.*, 2008).

News blogging and citizen journalism: Towards sustainable business models?

The literature on what are variously referred to as citizen journalism, alternative journalism and political/news blogging is extensive (see e.g. Bruns, 2008; Bruns and Jacobs, 2006; Atton and Hamilton, 2008; Rettberg, 2008; Priya, 2009), and the claims that it may reinvigorate the public sphere and the democratic process, reversing the tendency towards decline of the modernist public sphere identified by Habermas and others (e.g. Hallin, 1994), have been widespread. Early contributions to this literature emphasised the horizontal, many-to-many and dialogic components of these new online media forms, contrasting them to the top-down, one-to-many and closed communications practices associated with 'Big Media' and traditional mainstream journalism. Dan Gillmor proposed that whereas 'Big Media ... treated the news as a lecture', the new models of citizen journalism enabled by Web 2.0 technologies were part of an evolution towards 'journalism as a conversation or seminar' (Gillmor, 2006: xxiv). Deuze (2003) contrasted web-based journalism between those forms developed by the traditional media, which largely repurposed existing content for the online space while maintaining closed journalistic and editorial cultures, and the newer and more dialogical forms that were opening up new models for news production, collaborative editing, and user participation in site development.

Bruns (2005) identified a transition pushed forward by digital media technologies from traditional 'gatekeeping' models of journalism, where the process of newsgathering is highly centralized and controlled, authority is exclusively held by credentialed professional journalists, and public input is restricted to token measures such as the Letters to the Editor page, towards more open, collaborative and fluid models where the number of published authors increases exponentially and where users increasingly become participants in news-making processes. Bruns saw this as challenging the two-tier dichotomy between 'mainstream' and 'alternative' news and journalism, and Couldry (2003) identified a similar possibility, noting that the rise of user-generated media challenged the bases of media power arising from monopoly control over resources and infrastructure, generating alternative sources of influence, different ways of producing and distributing stories, and 'new hybrid forms of media consumption-production ... [that] would challenge precisely the entrenched division of labour (producers of stories versus consumers of stories) that is the essence of media power' (Couldry, 2003: 45).

One limitation of this literature is the relative absence of case studies of actual media projects. Very often, what occurs is what could be described as a form of *gap analysis*, where a gap is identified between the normative ideals of the public sphere and the actual conduct of mainstream media outlets, and new online media are evaluated in terms of whether they fulfill this gap. Alternatively, new forms of online news media are evaluated as tactical media, on the basis of whether they advance an anti-corporate struggle or opposition to existing power centres and dominant ideologies (e.g. Dean, 2008). Bruns (2008) identifies two problems with analysis of citizen journalism and new forms of online media couched at this level of abstraction and political calculation. First, it is a

vanguardist perspective that views the development of relations with mainstream media primarily through the lens of political incorporation and loss of radical intensity. An alternative perspective, which Bruns identifies with, would see the dichotomy between mainstream and alternative as itself an artefact of particular ways of constructing news and journalism, and that the possibility of more collaborative, discursive and deliberative forms of mainstream media is in itself a significant contribution of these new models to the development of a democratic public sphere. The decline of *Indymedia* sites from alternative reportage of events to becoming ‘a mere clearinghouse for activist press releases’ (Bruns, 2008b: 250), and losing much of their audience in the process, is a cautionary tale in this regard.⁵ The second issue is that of sustainability. As with all alternative and community-based media forms, questions of how to employ and retain staff, harness resources, build audiences, distribute material more effectively and influence not only the mainstream media but, in many cases, the media policy process, remain vitally important in the online environment. They are longstanding questions about the political economy of alternative media, and the issue of ‘moving beyond the temporary gains available from tactical action and into the establishment of permanent bases for new ideas and approaches’ (Bruns, 2008b: 257; c.f. Atton and Hamilton, 2008).

One lesson from citizen journalism projects is that they need to have a starting point, whether it is based around an event, an issue, a community or a movement. One early experiment in citizen journalism was the *Assignment Zero* project, developed by Jay Rosen from New York University in conjunction with *WIRED* magazine and crowdsourcing guru Jeff Howe, and it revealed, among other things, that simply seeking volunteers to report on things without clear guidelines as to what they should report on or how it should be done led to confusion, dissipation of energies and desertion from the project (Howe, 2007). The *Off the Bus* project, developed by Rosen with the liberal online news publication *The Huffington Post*, was more successful in this regard, as it explicitly incorporated a role for trained media professionals to manage content and contributions, around the identified theme of the 2008 U.S. Presidential election. In her review of involvement in *Off the Bus*, Amanda Michel has observed that while such initiatives ‘can quickly aggregate and grow the ranks of citizen journalists, they must take much more seriously the professional side of the equation — the reporting and editing and verification’ (Michel, 2009). They can draw on networks of specialist expertise to aggregate and verify stories in ways that many traditional media outlets are reluctant to do, but this is not the same as indiscriminate crowdsourcing.

An Australian citizen journalism project, *You Decide*, had more success in this regard, as the project was focused around the 2007 Australian Federal election, as an event which provided both a sufficiently focused topic around which to promote and manage citizen engagement, and the opportunity to promote locally sourced and locally focused reporting that can disappear in the ‘national narratives’ which dominate election coverage in nationally-based media. At the same time, it was observed that citizen journalism or ‘pro-am’ online journalism requires an ongoing role for small team of trained professionals to manage not only the recruitment of citizen journalists, but also the nature of how they contribute and participate in such sites. In the case of this project, the maintenance of such a team was enabled by funding from the Australian Research Council and by industry partners, but it is clear that ‘crowdsourcing’ is the wrong metaphor for such initiatives and that there is a need to avoid conflating the professional skills associated with journalism, editing and news reporting and journalism as a professional ideology that creates we/they dichotomies between accredited journalists and the wider public. It was also apparent that while the mainstream media or attains the status of a folk devil with some bloggers and citizen journalists, mainstream journalism remains the best way of getting information to potential readers and users through its continuing capacity to reach large and diverse audiences. The mainstream media can help citizen journalism

⁵ There is also the assumption that being alternative is synonymous with supporting the ideas and principles of the political left. Aside from the problems this presents in understanding such practices in states that are at least notionally left-wing, it also ignores the quite sizeable range of right-wing alternative media outlets, which derive their ‘outsider’ ethos from perceptions of ‘liberal bias’ in the mainstream media (Atton, 2004: 61–90).

services survive and prosper, and it can be argued that rather than viewing them with suspicion, it is incumbent on the managers of citizen journalism sites to make and cultivate contacts among professional journalists (Flew and Wilson, 2009 (forthcoming)).

One of the striking features of emergent online news media sites is the extent to which they are founded upon commercial business models. The world's most famous citizen journalism site, South Korea's *OhMyNews*, combines the high use of citizen reporter contributions and a participatory model of news development with an advertiser-financed revenue model as a for-profit business that employed about 55 professional staff in 2008 (Atton and Hamilton, 2008: 40–41; 100–101; Bruns, 2008). *The Huffington Post* in the United States is similarly primarily financed through advertising and capital raising, and employed about 35 staff in 2009. Both *OhMyNews* and *The Huffington Post* were established by high-profile individuals who were independently wealthy (Oh Yeon-Ho in Korea, Arianna Huffington in the U.S.), and who identified an opportunity to develop an online publication to the left of the established media that could draw upon pro-am contributions, while building a strong readership base among a tech-savvy left-liberal constituency. In the U.S., *The Atlantic* has been repositioning itself from a long-established literary and cultural magazine to a magazine with strong political commentary, on the basis of recruiting high profile bloggers such as Andrew Sullivan and Marc Ambinder, who contribute to the magazine while blogging on a daily basis, and whose blogs are aggregated at *TheAtlantic.com*.

Among the online news and opinion sites operating in Australia, the largest is *Crikey*. Founded by shareholder-activist and former Liberal Party staffer Stephen Mayne, *Crikey* is funded through a mix of subscriptions and advertising, and was bought by Eric Beecher's Private Media Partners for \$A1 million in 2005. Like other online sites such as *On Line Opinion* and *New Matilda*, *Crikey* is essentially a commercial media operation, albeit one where there are significant personal investments being made in continuing the site, that are motivated by a desire to see greater diversity in Australian media as much as by commercial considerations.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that trends towards convergent media, Web 2.0 and participatory media culture can be seen as promoting a greater degree of media democratization, as long as it is also recognized that this term presents its own difficulties. In particular, the theories of media citizenship that have drawn upon notions of democratic participation have needed to better understand that a commitment to pluralism and freedom from the exercise of arbitrary power (protective republicanism) is only one strand within democratic discourse, with an alternative tradition of developmental or civic republicanism stressing the need for deliberative democracy and substantive equality among citizens as a pre-condition of a democratic society. As a result of these differences, very different interpretations of the significance of the rise of the Internet and digital media technologies can emerge between those who focus primarily upon new opportunities for voice — which the new media have enabled — and those who draw from the Habermasian tradition of public sphere research, who continue to see audience fragmentation as the primary outcome of the expansion of media sources.

It also needs to be noted that while 'the media' is useful shorthand, we are in fact referring here to a diverse range of institutions, operating across different sectors and according to different funding and governance models. There is a need not to conflate the crisis of newspapers with a more general crisis of news or of media; in Australia, the major online news sites are among the most accessed Internet sites, and consumption trends differ considerably between print media (newspapers and magazines) and broadcast media (television and radio), with the latter not experiencing a significant

decline in audience share.⁶ What has been changing is the renewed expectation of participation as a component of media consumption, and the right to access media in a range of ways and to re-use, re-purpose, modify and manipulate it according to one's own wishes. This component of participatory media culture bumps up against the professional ideology of journalism as it developed over the 20th century, where the expectation was that a small, self-defined professional cadre of journalists produced news according to established industrial techniques, on behalf of a mass public. It is very notable that online-only newspaper ventures such as Fairfax's brisbanetimes.com.au have not been able to broach that assumption that news is something exclusively produced by its staff journalists. As a result, the scope for these new forms of brand extension/ diversification by the major commercial media proprietors in the online space have little scope to contribute to an expanded and more dynamic public sphere.

By contrast, the online media environment is potentially very propitious for public service media organizations, as long as there is a significant conceptual rethink of what the public service remit entails occurring alongside the changes in content and organisational structure associated with media convergence. This paper has pointed to three elements of that repositioning of public service media. First, there needs to be an understanding that the context in which these organisations provide media content and services is not platform-specific, and that they should be understood as public service media organisations rather than as public service broadcasters (PSB). In the case of Australian public broadcasters such as the ABC and the SBS, this requires amendment to their Charters, as well as revised public funding models. Second, to capture the opportunities for leadership in social innovation, which has always been a core component of the PSB mission, they need to be considerably more open to user-created content, and to greater participation from outside of the organization in the production and distribution of media content and the building of content communities. Third, this does entail a changed understanding of the audience from those who media services are provided for by trained media professionals, to those who are co-creators of media content who are actively engaged with by those within the organization.

Much of the talk about new participatory opportunities in 21st century digital media has been based around the rise of blogging, citizen journalism and other forms of alternative media, but it is notable that a decade after the rise of sites such as *Indymedia*, we are now in a better position to empirically evaluate what has been working and what has atrophied or declined. In their work on alternative journalism, Atton and Hamilton (2008) make the point that there has been an over-emphasis in the academic literature upon participation at the expense of understanding audiences, and on seeing the alternative and mainstream media as polar opposites. A further point that can be added to this is to consider the conditions for sustainability of such media, and in particular the extent to which this rests upon the development of successful commercial business models. In terms of public sphere literature, this requires a rethink of the radical dichotomy that is often drawn between commercial media, which are equated solely with consumerism, the market and neo-liberal ideology, and non-commercial media, seen as the sole repositories of citizenship values and radical political rectitude. What is emerging, and can be seen with publications as diverse as *OhMyNews* in South Korea, *Huffington Post* in the United States, and *Crikey* in Australia, is the rise of independent online media that are appealing to relatively affluent niche audiences that have a degree of discontent with both the political and media mainstream. This can be seen as making a contribution to a more vibrant public sphere, but it does not necessarily meet the ambitions and aspirations of civic republicans towards a democratic media.

⁶ There is, however, audience shift, particularly in television, with the growing audience for subscription television services (pay TV). This is referred to in other countries as the crisis of broadcast television, or services that are almost exclusively advertiser-financed, such as the traditional television networks in the U.S. and services such as ITV in Britain.

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