

AUSTRALIAN MEDIA'S USE OF FACEBOOK POSTINGS TO REPORT EVENTS OF NATIONAL INTEREST

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Abstract

Online social networking sites such as Facebook have grown exponentially in recent times, yet little research has examined how the mainstream news media use the information available on these sites. This study explores how the Australian media used the social networking site Facebook in reporting three different news events: the disappearance of Australian backpacker Britt Laphorne; the death of 4-year-old Darcey Freeman; and the devastating 'Black Saturday' Victorian bushfires. Sixty-four articles from Australian newspapers were identified pertaining to these three case studies within a seven month period from August 2008 to February 2009. An inductive thematic approach was used to identify the way in which information from Facebook was utilised by journalists within these news stories. Three main methods of utilising information from Facebook were established: the reporting of group activity to gather information, discuss developments, and gauge general public sentiment; the use of profiles to report the lives of newsworthy individuals via their postings; and responses via Facebook groups and profiles of the specific reaction of families, friends and the general public to an event. The rise of social networking presents new challenges for journalists in relation to how they use information ethically and responsibly, and the privacy implications associated with media reporting of postings on social networking sites are discussed.

Introduction

Journalism and the media have changed rapidly and significantly over the past 10 years, creating new and varied ways in which news can be reported (Baume 2009). With the expansion of the

Internet and social media, the sources available to journalists have increased exponentially. Increasingly, an interplay has become evident between the function of news journalism as a 'storyteller' and the practice of 'digital storytelling' (Couldry 2008) by citizens, which is often shown in the form of posts and updates to social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, and also connects journalists to stories that may have taken days or weeks to surface almost instantly (McBride 2009). In this age of 24 hour news media, the pressure on journalists to quickly and efficiently turn out credible stories is bigger than ever. And while we know that news constructs rather than reflects events — reconstructing a 'real' reality into a 'media' reality — traditional investigative journalism is a process which is costly and in an environment which is becoming increasingly competitive news production has become progressively more reactive (Berrington & Jemphrey 2003).

Social networking sites provide journalists with access to material that may be difficult to obtain through other means and that can variously assist them in producing their stories. For example, after the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting in America, journalists were able to compile information about those who had died via Facebook before those names were officially released by authorities (Palen 2008). Another avenue for use includes drawing on social networking sites such as Facebook as a 'virtual background tool' that can offer colour, detail and depth to a piece, by allowing the reporter to look into the lives of those they are investigating and reporting on (Spencer 2007). Articles tracking troops in Iraq, tracking down leads in crimes, and investigating gang affiliations have been written with the help of social networking sites such as Facebook (Spencer 2007). While some discussion and debate has been conducted within the journalistic world around the ethics of using such material, limited research has looked at how journalists use Facebook postings in their reports, and what they seek to represent by doing so.

This paper focuses on the ways in which mainstream news journalism draws upon social networking sites in constructing news. In particular, it examines how Australian newspapers used the content of social networking site Facebook (see Box 1 for a description) in the reporting of three tragic events in Victoria during 2008–09. These events were selected because they garnered considerable public response and commentary, allowing social networking sites to become a source readily drawn upon in these stories. The three case studies drawn upon in this analysis include the disappearance of Australian backpacker Britt Laphorne, the death of Darcey Freeman, and the 'Black Saturday' Victorian Bushfires. We begin with a brief description of each case, taken from media coverage, and the Facebook activity that surrounded them. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the specific ways that Facebook appeared and was put to use in news coverage of the events.

Box 1: What is Facebook?

The initial aim of Facebook (www.facebook.com) was as a ‘social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and co-workers’ (Facebook 2008). At the time of writing, more than 500 million people across the world had joined Facebook, (Facebook 2009c), and more than 9.5 million Australians had profiles (Facebook 2009a) — accounting for almost half of the population of Australia.

The ‘profile’

A Facebook profile can incorporate many things, including a photo of the user, a list of their friends, a link to their photos, information such as employment and education, home town, date of birth, gender, likes and dislikes, contact information, links to any applications they may have installed onto their profile (such as the photos, groups and events), and a record of what that particular user has done recently. See Figure 1 for an example of a Facebook Profile.

The ‘feed’

Another innovative part of Facebook is the feed that is shown to each member upon log in, which is their ‘home base’. The Facebook feed is a constant update of their friends ‘status’ and shows recently uploaded comments, photos, usage of applications and attendance of events — just to name a few. A person’s status is a snapshot of ‘what’s on your mind’ at any given moment and can be as trivial or as meaningful as you like; it can go from ‘Author is eating toast!’ to ‘Author got admitted to her PhD!’ to ‘Author is back from Chicago!’. A private inbox is available for those messages that need to be undisclosed to your entire list of friends. Privacy settings are set by the user, and can range from only your ‘friends’ being able to see and search for you, to everyone including search engines such as Google and Yahoo!. See Figure 2 for an example of a Facebook Feed.

The ‘group’

A Facebook group is a page that can be created by anyone on Facebook. It can be about anything you choose, from ‘Vegemite — the misunderstood and unfairly persecuted spread!!’ (more than 7,000 members) to Alumni Pages (for university, high school and primary schools), to ‘Step Back. Think’ (over 4,000 members), which aims to get young people to step back and think about engaging in violence when they are out on the town. Groups allow people to express their opinions and create awareness on whatever topics they deem important, and creating groups is a way of gathering people around your cause, opinion, or organisation. See Figure 3 for an example of a Facebook Group.

The ‘causes’

A cause is an ‘online campaign for collective action that can be started by any Facebook user’ (Facebook 2009b), which can be used to generate awareness and donations. Causes vary from global ones such as ‘Stop Global Warming’ (3,599,723 members, US\$42,085 donated) and ‘Animal Rights’ (3,833,741 members, US\$80,188 donated), to the local, such as Guide Dogs Victoria (935 members), and ‘Save St Brigid’s Church and Hall in Crossley’ (243 members).

Figure 1: Example of a Facebook profile



Source: http://creative.ak.facebook.com/ads3/creative/pressroom/jpg/n_1228425684_mark_zuckerberg_profile.jpg

Figure 2: Example of a Facebook feed



Source: http://creative.ak.facebook.com/ads3/creative/pressroom/jpg/n_1236804795_Home%20Page.jpg

Figure 3: Example of a Facebook group



Source: <http://www.facebook.com/home.php#/group.php?gid=50892276570&ref=search>

The disappearance of Australian backpacker Britt Laphorne

On the 18 September 2008, 21-year-old Victorian backpacker Britt Laphorne went missing in Dubrovnik, Croatia ('Melbourne woman lost' 2008). Media reports such as 'Strangers share family's tears for a loved girl lost', and 'Family to sell all to find Dubrovnik daughter' focused on the controversy about the efforts of the Dubrovnik Police and the Australian Federal Police in the

search for Britt (Lawson 2008; Murray 2008c; Rintoul 2008; Rout 2008; Totaro 2008a, 2008b; Totaro & Milovanovic 2008a; Wilson 2008). Facebook became a prominent force in creating awareness and gathering information in the desperate attempt to find her alive. Britt's body was eventually found in a bay near where she was staying on the 6 October 2008. Within a week of her disappearance Facebook was being used within media reporting as a source of and way to gather more information about Britt Lapthorne.

While journalists used her personal Facebook profile and other Facebook groups as their sources, one group was mentioned in the majority of articles written about Britt. The group, called 'MISSING BRITT LAPTHORNE — Here is to answers!' was set up by her friend, Tara Reynolds, and at its peak had more than 18,000 members and was endorsed by her parents Elke and Dale. This group was used predominantly to gather information about Britt while she was missing through the use discussion boards and updates of media coverage about her disappearance and the discovery of her body. It also became a place for people to gather and mourn after her death.

The death of 4-year-old Darcey Freeman

On the 29 January 2009, 4-year-old Darcey Freeman, her two brothers Benjamin and Jack, and her father Arthur returned from their beach house to their home in Melbourne. Almost at the apex of the Westgate Bridge, Arthur allegedly stopped the family car, took Darcey out, and walked over to the edge of the bridge, where he lifted her over the railing — and let go. She fell 58 metres into the water below. Darcey was pulled out of the shallow waters of the Yarra River by police, but died less than five hours later (Petrie, Silvester & Kissane 2009).

Three types of Facebook groups emerged in response to Darcey's death. The first — and most utilised within the press coverage — were those mourning her death, which included '♥ RIP 4yo Darcey Iris Freeman ♥ Westgate Bridge Tragedy 29.1.09' (110,000 members) and '~ RIP Darcey Iris Freeman 2004–09~ A Nation Mourns Together ~' (89,000 members). More than 219,000 members joined these groups in the days, weeks and months following her death. The second type of group was those calling for vengeance and social justice in relation to her father. Groups such as 'Bring back CAPITAL Punishment! In Memory of little Darcey Iris Freeman', 'HANG ARTHUR FREEMAN', 'The bastard that threw his child off the west gate bridge should be hanged', 'The Family Court Killed Darcy Freeman' and 'What kind of F___wit throws a child from the Westgate Bridge' sprung up on Facebook, and gathered momentum. Over 45,000 members joined these groups, some of which used images of the electric chair or a hanging noose to highlight their cause. The final set of groups called for calm: 'Against the West Gate Bridge vigilantes calling for the accused to be hung' and 'Support for Arthur Phillip Freeman (father of Darcey Freeman)', which gathered less than 90 members between them.

The 'Black Saturday' Victorian bushfires

On the 7 February 2009 the bushfires, collectively termed as 'Black Saturday' by national and international media roared through the state of Victoria. They took place on the day that had the 'worst fire conditions in the history of the state [of Victoria]' (ABC News 2009), with temperatures reaching 46.4°C (115.5°F), and wind speeds over 83km an hour (51.6mi/h) (Bureau of Meteorology 2009). On that day, 173 people in 26 different municipalities and regions were killed (Victoria Police 2009), more than 450,000 hectares (1,100,000 acres) were burnt, and 3,500 structures — comprising of over 2,000 houses — destroyed. The bushfires lead to a mass outpouring of grief and support from individuals both throughout Australia, and internationally.

Soon after the disaster, over 240 Facebook groups such as 'Wear a YELLOW RIBBON on Facebook in memory of the bushfire victims' (66,000 members), 'Thoughts for those affected by the Black Saturday Bushfires' (22,000 members) and "'Black Saturday" — Support our

Firefighters' (14,000 members) could be found on Facebook about the Bushfires, which contained over 335,000 members overall.

Methods

The aim of our analysis was to explore the ways in which Facebook postings were used by selected Australian newspapers in the reporting of each of these events. Articles were identified using the Factiva news database. The key word 'Facebook' was used in conjunction with 'Britt Laphorne', 'Victorian Bushfires', 'Black Saturday' and 'Darcey Freeman' to search for relevant articles. The following Australian newspapers were included within the search criteria: *Herald Sun*, *The Age*, *The Australian*, and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The articles were identified from a 7-month period between the 1 August 2008 (the first reports of the disappearance of Britt Laphorne) and 28 February 2009 (when reporting about the immediate aftermath of the Victorian Bushfires slowed considerably).

An inductive thematic approach informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) was used to analyse data within this study. NVivo was used to analyse each article, identifying similarities and differences in how Facebook was used in newspaper reporting of tragic news stories. As broad thematic areas sub-themes emerged, discussions were held, where examination of interpretations, coding, and sorting of each theme took place. These themes were then compared and contrasted to ascertain how the reporting of Facebook was utilised, as well as the similarities and differences both within and across each event.

Results

A total of 64 stories that made reference to Facebook were identified with the three case studies; Britt Laphorne (n=38), the 'Black Saturday' Bushfires (n=22), and Darcey Freeman (n=4) (see Table 1). Articles generally originated from the News section, however some articles were from Opinion, Local, Editorial, and Special Edition Sections (e.g. ones based on the 'Black Saturday' Bushfires). Three utilisations of Facebook information were identified; reporting Facebook group activity as an indicator of public concern, reporting from Facebook profiles as a way to create a character profile, and the use of Facebook postings to convey public sentiment.

Table 1: Frequency of articles by theme and newspaper

Paper	Kind of paper	Britt Laphorne	Darcey Freeman	The Bushfires	Total
<i>The Australian</i>	Broadsheet	7	0	10	17
<i>The Age</i>	Broadsheet	9	0	5	14
<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	Broadsheet	3	1	2	6
<i>Sunday Age</i>	Broadsheet	1	0	1	2
<i>Herald-Sun</i>	Tabloid	12	2	3	17
<i>Sunday Herald Sun</i>	Tabloid	6	1	1	8
TOTAL		38	4	22	64

Indicators of public concern — reporting of Facebook 'group' activity

Generally, there were three distinct themes that emerged in the way Facebook groups were used and depicted in the reporting of these three case studies in Australian newspapers: as an information hub, an avenue for support and expression of grief, and as criticism and call for justice.

a) Groups as information hubs

The use of Facebook groups as an avenue to appeal for information was best demonstrated by the 'Missing Person — Britt Laphorne' group, initially seized on by the media after she disappeared. The group was variously portrayed by journalists as a '*cyber detective agency, throwing out more clues than the police even dreamed of*' (Totaro 2008b) and a '*crucial point of contact for travellers who may have seen her before she disappeared*' (Wilson & Rout 2008). The group was also portrayed as a forum for creating media interest for Britt's disappearance, which journalists reported '*translated into Australian government pressure*' (Wilson & Rout 2008). It was also presented as a source of comfort for her family, with one story reporting a comment made by Elke Laphorne on the group's page: '*It has been a great comfort ... Each time I log on and I see the number of messages of support we have from concerned people who want to help ... it has been fantastic*' (Wilson & Rout 2008).

Facebook groups were also used as a way to disseminate information. Articles referred to the way in which social networking, including Facebook had been used to spread information during the Black Saturday bushfires, joining the '*bushfire telegraph*' (Clayfield 2009), a play on the Australian slang phrase 'bush telegraph' — to describe the way in which news spreads through bush and outback communities through word of mouth quickly and unofficially. The content that was produced through social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter resulted in a large volume of information which was sustained by the activity of hundreds — an amount that traditional media was reportedly struggling to effectively manage (Clayfield 2009; Young 2009).

b) Groups as avenues for support and expression of grief

The utilisation of Facebook groups as an avenue for users to express support and grief for those caught up in these events was widespread and pervasive. From Britt, whose Facebook group reportedly '*transformed into a tearful, electronic eulogy*' (Totaro 2008b), to the Bushfires where groups were reported as a way to express support and to thank those who had fought the fires (such as 'Applaud the CFA heroes & empathise with the victims of the 09 Vic bushfires' and 'To all the CFA and MFB firefighters and everyone involved we salute you') (Money & Carbone 2009; Young 2009) and in support of the families of those who were killed (including 'RIP Penny and Melanie Chambers') (Protyniak & Ife 2009).

Articles reporting the death of Darcey Freeman focused heavily on the number of groups that were set up in response to her death: '*Within hours of Darcey's death, tributes spread across the internet. Facebook groups started. Membership of some grew to several thousand. Posts numbered in the hundreds.*' (Jensen 2009). Articles emphasised the international response from Facebook members, with groups from as far away as Reading in the UK collecting hundreds of members: '*None had met Darcy freeman. Twelve posted tributes. Forty-seven lit virtual candles. They grieved online*' (Jensen 2009). The *Sunday Herald Sun* reported that 27,000 had exchanged messages on Facebook about her death (Hewitt, Drill & Cox 2009), while fund-raising events were being organised and advertised through the sites — a carnival which children would enjoy attending as well (Hudson 2009). This type of quantification illustrates the way in which Facebook activity itself can be drawn upon in news coverage and depicted as a measure of community grief.

c) Groups as sources of criticism and calls for justice

Newspapers variously drew upon Facebook postings to illustrate discontent among those involved in a news event. News stories used Facebook to criticise the efforts of the Dubrovnik Police and the Australian Federal Police in the search for Britt Laphorne. For example, 16 articles in 5 different papers (*The Australian, the Herald Sun, The Age, The Sydney Morning Herald, and the Sunday Herald Sun*) stated that whilst many individuals had provided eye witness accounts and information on Facebook groups, the police had '*interviewed almost no one*' (Murray 2008c). Articles often pointed out that these individuals had already provided accounts through multiple channels such as

the media, Facebook groups and even other law enforcement agencies such as Scotland Yard — but had yet to be contacted by Dubrovnik Police (Murray 2008a, 2008b, 2008c; Totaro & Mann 2008; Wilson & Rout 2008). Only one article — an editorial piece by conservative *Herald Sun* columnist Andrew Bolt — defended the police, stating that: ‘*Croatian police weren’t stupid for failing to talk to some witnesses before reporters did. Reporters aren’t bound by evidentiary rules, and simply interviewed some alleged witnesses through Facebook.*’ (Bolt 2008).

In relation to the Black Saturday Bushfires, newspapers used Facebook to report about individuals accused of lighting some of the bushfires, and the Churchill bushfires in particular. Just as Facebook postings were portrayed as a measure of the grief in the community around the death of Darcy Freeman, in the case of the bushfires articles focussed on the number of individuals who had joined groups that incited violence or aggression towards the individual believed to be responsible. At least five different groups were reported to have sprung up, containing more than 3,500 members (Milovanovic 2009), with many of the members threatening or inciting violence towards the accused (‘Arson charges don’t wipe out the right to a fair trial’ 2009; Collins & Gregory 2009; Hagan, Gray, Moses & AAP 2009; Milovanovic 2009). When a suppression order was taken out by the Victorian Courts prohibiting his name or photo be released to the public, two articles reported that Facebook had been contacted and any posts relating to the individual had been removed, stating that these Facebook postings had violated the individual’s right to a fair trial (‘Arson charges don’t wipe out the right to a fair trial’ 2009; Hagan et al. 2009). One article in *The Age*, however, counter-framed this with the perspective that it was unlikely that most individuals within the small community of Churchill did not know who the individual concerned, despite the suppression order on his identity (Collins & Gregory 2009).

Building a character profile — media reporting from Facebook profiles

As coverage of Britt Laphorne and the Victorian Bushfires progressed, Facebook postings were used to contextualise the lives of individuals before the events occurred. On one level the insertion of quotes taken directly from the profile pages of those who were involved functioned to convey a sense of what their life was like leading up to the event — as presented through their Facebook postings. These posts generally were presented in two ways; as a snapshot of their character and personality, and as a source to make judgements about those involved.

a) The profile as a character snapshot

The profile of individuals involved in media events was often used as background tool for journalists to ‘recreate’ their lives before the event. Britt Laphorne’s profile especially was drawn on in much of the coverage. For example, *The Age* in the article ‘Searching for Britt’ (Totaro & Milovanovic 2008c) took readers through her last status updates to portray a girl excited about travelling (‘*Britt’s in Viennnaaaaa!*’ September 4), who was adventurous and enjoying new experiences (‘*Drinking yummy coffee and never eating brains again*’ — September 14) and thoroughly enjoying herself (‘*Britt had the best day. Jumping off cliffs into water, swimming under waterfalls and getting soaked in the rain*’ — September 15). Her last status update to her Facebook page was at 7.06pm on September 17 — ‘*Britt is in Dubrovnik, Croatia!*’ (Totaro & Milovanovic 2008c). Other articles explained the information available through her Facebook profile, giving readers unique insight into Britt’s own world before she died — a regular Aussie backpacker having the time of her life exploring places she had never been. An article in *The Age* reported how her Facebook ‘profile’ was ‘*littered with photographs, short notes, exclamation marks, loving messages to friends and family, Britt Laphorne’s Facebook travelogue [was] a heartbreaker*’ (Totaro & Milovanovic 2008c).

The media also reported directly from the Facebook profile page of the individual accused of lighting the Churchill bushfires, variously using it to characterise him. Articles framed the individual as a lonely and slightly perverted individual. They reported posts from him on an

American social networking site, which stated that *'no one love him'* (sic), and that he had more than 1009 friends, who were mostly women in seductive poses and his *'groupies'* (Hastie, Hewitt & Whinnett 2009). An article in the *Sunday Herald Sun* also showed that he had a 'humane' side by reporting the list of causes that he supported, including helping the homeless and animals (Hastie et al. 2009).

Two days after the Bushfires, articles emerged about the lives of those who had been lost and postings taken from Facebook were used to provide in-depth descriptions of these individuals' lives leading up to the Bushfires. Postings from Facebook were used in conjunction with information and quotations taken from traditional sources to provide juxtapositions between the normality of daily summer life and the chaos that ensued afterwards. Two separate articles in *The Australian* reported how those living in the bushfire areas dealt with the heat in the days leading up to the fires; Dalton Fisk wrote two days before the fires that he was *'sick of the heat ... if the temperature dropped five degrees, it would be better'* (Rout 2009), and Glen said that it would be *'43 degrees on Saturday — better get the sunscreen out'* (Stewart, Protyniak, Rout & Wilson 2009a, 2009b), while Penelope Chambers — who perished with her sister — said that she was *'... determined to purchase a pool for the backyard this weekend!'* (Stewart, Protyniak et al. 2009a, 2009b). None of these young people were to survive the bushfires to come. These comments were particularly haunting because they spoke of common Australian struggles with the heat, and highlighted how they were unaware of the destruction and devastation that would follow less than a week later. They also reflected the often 'mundane' nature of updates that are posted to sites like Facebook. Another article from *The Australian* emphasised the difference between the beauty of the places devastated by the fires, and the images of the burnt out towns afterwards, as Lucie O'Meara wrote on the morning of Black Saturday; *'I am so enjoying the view from my desk, Marysville is beautiful'* (Stewart, Perkin et al. 2009a 2009b). This is particularly poignant as Marysville was one of the towns hit hardest by the fires with a more than 34 people losing their lives (Victoria Police 2009), and 80% of the town's structures collapsing (AAP 2009). This ensured that it was a high profile place for the media images and reports that followed, potentially making these quotes poignant and emotive for readers. These snapshots of peoples' lives provided a strong human interest frame for articles which were in stark contrast to the devastation and destruction that was felt on that day that was widely reflected in media coverage.

b) The profile as a source to judge

With all the information available through the profile, some media reports used it as a source to cast doubt and dispersions on the characters of persons involved. This was especially evident within articles pertaining to Britt Laphorne, where information from her profile was used by journalists to report incidents of promiscuity. For example, one story wrote that others who had travelled with her had ascertained that she was *'that kind of person ... you don't need to worry if she didn't turn up in the morning'* (Totaro 2008a), a girl who *'got so drunk that she didn't know what she was doing'*, and was in the habit of *'disappearing once in a while'* (Totaro 2008a). There was then substantial media debate about this issue, with other articles and opinion pieces defending her behaviour and actions. For example, in the article *'This real tragedy is blurred by innuendo'*, the journalist defended Britt against these accusations and pointed out the implications of these degrading statements: *'Suddenly this apparently sunny-natured, seasoned traveller was "promiscuous and a known drunk" ... The implication was unmistakable. Whatever had happened to her, she had brought it on herself'* (Hutchison 2008). In another article *'Searching for Britt'*, journalists called attention to the fact that *'The photographs may show long nights of revelry, but that's the life of a twentysomething (sic) backpacker from any nation. Clubs, new friendships, late nights, booze. Yes, it's all there ... But the days were something entirely different. They were full days, energetic days'* (Totaro & Milovanovic 2008c), bringing the debate of Britt's character back to the life expected of a young person backpacking through Europe, and away from judgements on her character.

Facebook postings used to convey community sentiment

a) Grief

In the days after each of the events, reporters often used Facebook to gather quotes from those responding to the event. Approximately half of all stories (46.2%) used quotes from Facebook as their primary source of information (i.e. that was the only source of information within the article), with the remainder using quotes as a supplement to other information given within the article (53.8%). These responses came in many forms including grief, sadness, anger and hate. They came not only from those who knew the people involved, but included strangers from around the globe. These messages were sourced from one of two different places — on the personal profiles of those who had been lost, or on group pages set up as a response to the event. See Box 2 for more examples of the quotes reported from the response to Britt Laphorne's disappearance and death, the Black Saturday bushfires, and the death of Darcey Freeman.

Disbelief was one of the expressions often portrayed in media reports of each of the three events, with one person reportedly writing to Britt Laphorne:

Britty I can't comprehend that you're not coming home ... all my thoughts and prayers are with your amazing and strong family. You are so loved.
Megan Rowland on Britt Laphorne's Facebook Page (Rolfe, Murray, Toy, Deery & Houlihan 2008).

Often, the quotes taken from Facebook pages and quoted in news stories expressed feelings about those who had been lost, such as Greg Lloyd, who died on Black Saturday:

Greg was 'an awesome bloke ... You will be forever missed and loved. I shall never forgot the joy and happiness that you brought into this world'. (Johnston 2009)

And Danny Shepherd, a man who lived more than 150 kilometres away from the bushfires who died helping family members that lived in the Bushfire zone:

One friend describes Danny as 'one of life's gentlemen'. She feels 'blessed to have known such an amazing person'. ('Portraits of Grief' 2009)

These quotes create a striking contrast between the people involved, and the horrific nature in which they were lost. Facebook provided a novel, quick and easy source for journalists to paint a picture of those involved in news stories, allowing the reader to empathise with those left behind. This was also illustrated in a quote reported in *The Australian* on the Strathewen Cricket Club Facebook page, from Glen:

Well boys the clubrooms are gone. The ground is burnt. There are only seven houses left standing in Strathewen ... [that] I know of. But more tragically are the lives that have been lost in this more unfortunate incident. One of the truly most saddest, darkest days in the town's history.' (Stewart, Protyniak et al. 2009a, 2009b)

Others wanted to be able to 'say goodbye' to those who had been lost, with one unnamed person reported to have written to Britt that '*I'll put a candle in my window for the night: stop by in my dreams to say bye, yeah?*' (Rolfe et al. 2008), allowing readers to see that — for Britt especially — there was no way of saying goodbye before she was taken, and that writing on her wall gave a sense of communication and closure.

One particular quote was especially emotive — Tom Paulka's understated post on his Facebook profile reported in *The Australian* after the death of his parents in the Black Saturday Bushfires. The post simply said '*Rest in peace, Mum and Dad. I love you*' (Rout & Hall 2009). This heartbreaking farewell allows the audience to experience what those loved ones left behind are facing, and creates a poignant tribute for those lost.

Yet others looked at what had happened and lamented the life lost; '*For Darcey, a little girl taken far too soon*' (Hewitt et al. 2009). This sentiment was reiterated many times on the group page set up after her death and was often echoed by those who did not know the deceased, apart from news coverage and internet postings, such as this post reportedly left by a girl from New Zealand:

I heard this on the news, such tragedy ... RIP wee one. Gone but never forgotten. You went in such a tragic way. How could someone harm such an innocent wee girl? (Jensen 2009).

These postings via Facebook groups and profiles were framed as ways for individuals to paint portraits of those lost, in addition to paying tribute and honouring their lives. People from around the globe engaged in this behaviour, ranging from those who knew the individual involved to complete strangers moved to contribute to the growing number of tributes online.

b) Anger

During a catastrophic event a great deal of anger and hatred can be directed to those who are deemed to be responsible and Facebook postings can be used to convey this in news coverage. All of the articles that deal with anger and hate within this sample relate to Brendan James Sokaluk who was accused of lighting the Churchill fires on Black Saturday. None were reported about Darcey Freeman's father, Arthur, although many such groups did exist — demonstrating that the use of Facebook postings by journalists did have its limits. Many articles did not quote directly from Facebook pages, but mentioned 'vicious' comments (Hagan et al. 2009), 'vigilantes', 'lynch mobs' ('Arson charges don't wipe out the right to a fair trial' 2009), hate-filled messages (Collins & Moses 2009) and calls for Mr Sokaluk to be tortured and killed ('Arson charges don't wipe out the right to a fair trial' 2009; Hagan et al. 2009). These posts were made after the identity of the alleged arsonist was leaked online, with thousands of vigilantes defying a ban by publishing his photo and address on Facebook (Hagan et al. 2009).

Just over a week after the bushfires, at least five different Facebook groups were reported to have been set up that were against Mr Sokaluk that attracted more than 3500 members, and who were inciting or threatening violence towards him (Hagan et al. 2009; Milovanovic 2009). There was only one article (Milovanovic 2009) that reported quotes from groups and pages on Facebook, which included; '*Burn him like he burned those innocent people ... just a lot slower*', '*[he] deserves to suffer*' and that '*He should die in a fire in his home*'. The last quote was written by a woman who claimed that she had lost family members in the fires Mr Sokaluk was accused of lighting, illustrating how Facebook was used as a way for those involved within the news story to provide emotional release and condemnation for those who were allegedly involved.

Box 2: Quotes used in news articles from Facebook pages**Disbelief**

‘I really felt I’d still see you again’ — a friend on Britt Laphorne’s Facebook page (Rolfe et al. 2008).

‘Lil buddy, still can’t believe it ... RIP with your gorgeous mum ... will miss you both’ — a friend on Dalton Fiske’s Facebook page (Rout 2009).

‘Still can’t believe the news ... your family was the first to befriend us when we moved into town’ — a friend on Dalton Fiske’s Facebook page (Rout 2009).

I’ll miss you

Britt was ‘already missed by so many’ (Rolfe et al. 2008).

‘We will never forget you all. Thanks for being a part of our lives’ — a friend of Dalton Fiske on his Facebook page (Rout 2009).

‘Spider, you were such a sweet boy. We love you and will miss you. Together forever with you beautiful mother and Papa. RIP.’ — a friend of Dalton Fiske’s on his Facebook page (Rout 2009).

Rest in peace

‘Rest in Peace, Britt. You were a beautiful person.’ — left on Britt Laphorne’s Facebook page (Rolfe et al. 2008).

‘Rest in peace, Darcey, my heart goes out to the family’ — a message left on the Facebook page dedicated to Darcey Freeman (Hewitt et al. 2009).

My heart will never be the same

The ‘world is a little darker without your constant smile’, about Greg Lloyd, who died on Black Saturday. (Johnston 2009).

‘My two beautiful daughters (have been) taken by fire’, Mr Chambers wrote of the sisters just a year apart in age. ‘And so many losses to so very many others.’ (Ferrari, Lunn, Coster, Clayfield & Wilson 2009a, 2009b; Lunn & Coster 2009)

‘[Darcey], you have touched many hearts’ (Jensen 2009).

Another close friend wrote how Dalton was taken ‘too young, too soon’ and that he would never be forgotten (Rout 2009).

Support from strangers

‘Even though I am no relation, I want you to know you have touched our Nation’ — the end of a tribute from Reading, England for Darcey Freeman (Jensen 2009).

Discussion

This paper examined the way in which selected Australian newspapers drew upon social networking sites — namely Facebook — in constructing the news stories of three tragedies: Britt Laphorne; Darcey Freeman; and the ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires. The study identified three narrative functions that Facebook postings were used to fulfil: to provide an indicator of public concern, to provide a character profile from the profiles of those involved, and to convey community sentiment. In the three cases quotes from social network profiles and groups were used by journalists as primary and secondary sources in the production of news stories.

This analysis supports the view that the process of news reporting has now become circular — as the media report on issues high within the public interest, reactions are recorded via Facebook,

which, in turn, is reported back to the public, creating a cycle in which public and journalist feed off each other for information and response. For example, in the case of Britt Lapthorne, media reported her disappearance and the existence of the Facebook group, where people flocked to provide information and support. This was then indicated within further news reports relating to Britt's disappearance, and eventual murder investigation, which then perpetuated the news cycle further. Additionally, this can be highlighted by the involvement of Facebook users who did not know the newsworthy individual personally — who only knew the individual through the news stories that they had been exposed to, as can be seen in the reporting of Darcey Freeman. It is important to note, however, that this cycle must not be confused with citizen journalism, as professional journalists — as opposed to the informed lay person — are the ones reporting within the media within this cycle (see Bardoel & Deuze 2001; Beckett & Mansell 2008; Deuze, Bruns & Neuberger 2007).

The depth and breadth of information available through these social networking sites, especially in the aftermath of a disaster or tragedy, can lead to considerable amounts of information, communication and reports to come through, faster often than traditional media can keep up with. These sites can become a hub for information to come — either in or out — quicker than reports can reach the general public through traditional media. This, especially in the wake of wide-spread disaster such as the 'Black Saturday' Bushfires, can also become a hub for people to gather virtually and raise their voices to be heard, in criticism, anger and grief.

Quotes from the newsworthy individuals on their Facebook pages were most often used to create an insight into that particular individual (for example, Britt Lapthorne's final status updates, and those of the lives caught in the 'Black Saturday' Bushfires). Posts written before the event were often mundane and ordinary, documenting everyday life as was experienced by the individual, which is then contrasted starkly against those posts written after the event displaying the grief, love and loss experienced by others — whether they knew the individual or not.

Within this sample, it can be seen that journalists are using Facebook as a 'virtual background tool' to investigate and create a character profile of those individuals involved within the news stories on which they are reporting. While this can be an invaluable tool for a journalist into the lives of those on which they are reporting, it must be said that all Facebook postings should be understood with a measure of scepticism. Each post is a 'performance', mediated by Facebook and written specifically to the audience that they perceive to be reading their profile or status update (i.e. their online friends) (see Liu 2008; Liu, Maes & Davenport 2006). However, as the majority of Facebook interactions are anchored in 'real life' (i.e. offline relationships), it is more likely that these Facebook postings represent a slightly altered 'desired' image of users, than one that is fundamentally incongruous with their offline selves (see Larsen 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008). The media is using Facebook to report a wide range of individual responses to events; using users own perceptions and perspectives, which leads to a unique — if not slightly voyeuristic — insight into peoples' lives, attitudes and opinions. This can be seen most keenly within the posts made and reported by Britt Lapthorne — as a young woman travelling alone, this profile was not only a way to connect and share with those loved ones at home, but a way to record her journeys and adventures for herself.

Privacy is one very important issue pertaining to the use of information and quotes from social network sites such as Facebook. Facebook contains over 40 pieces of recognisably personal information ranging from sexual preference, relationship status and offline contact information (Grimmelmann 2008). There is conflicting information about whether members of the public understand the privacy limitations of social networking sites such as Facebook, and the expectations members of the public have about online privacy. Some studies show that teenagers in particular were aware of the limitations of privacy settings (Lenhart & Madden 2007a), whilst others show that a significant minority of Facebook users underestimate the 'openness' of their profile (Acquisti & Gross 2006). Other studies have found that individuals employ tactics such as misrepresentation

(of information such as location, age, and name) to ensure that their privacy stays intact (boyd & Ellison 2008; Dwyer 2007; Lenhart & Madden 2007b). Many social network users, however, live by ‘security through obscurity’. This means that many assume that because they are not important within the public eye, that no one will be interested in their profile (boyd 2007), or that the chance that a media outlet will use profile information for a story is insignificant (Grimmelmann 2008).

While many of the posts reported by journalists were on group pages — essentially a ‘public’ statement — others were from the profile pages of those involved in the tragedy (especially in the case of Britt Laphorne). The use of quotes from Facebook profiles may give a voice to those who have died, but it then becomes the responsibility of the journalists to use the information and insights that they have gathered in an ethical, sensitive and responsible way. The dissection of Britt Laphorne’s life and the assaults on her character based on the information available in her profile is one example of how this information needs to be handled carefully, especially as it is unknown if permission was sought to use information from these profile pages, as this information was not reported. This also raises questions about the extent to which individuals know that their Facebook postings may be accessed and used by the media. Whilst Facebook has privacy settings, there is no guarantee that others will not be able to access the online content of an individual’s Facebook page. As boyd comments, many individuals believe that their daily postings on Facebook are ‘un-newsworthy’ (boyd 2007, 2008), and it is not until someone is placed in the public eye that privacy issues may become more concerning for individuals. Further research examining perceived and actual privacy settings in light of this development in news journalism would benefit users of social network sites and their families.

While Facebook was often the source for topic and insights for articles, sometimes Facebook itself would become the story. Whether it was a source of information in a crime, a way for people to access information or a way for masses of people to react to an event, these reactions made Facebook a topic unto itself. This allows the news cycle around each of the events to renew and refresh, and puts Facebook in the centre of creating and generating news in its own right rather than being solely a source for comments and reactions.

Conclusion

This study provides some insights into the various ways in which postings to Facebook can be used by journalists in constructing news stories. The study’s findings suggest that Facebook provides journalists with readily accessible content which can provide the primary source for news stories or supplementary information through which they can emphasise particular aspects of a news story. The news media’s use of information from Facebook in reporting on Britt Laphorne, Darcey Freeman and the ‘Black Saturday’ bushfires had the potential to broaden readers’ understandings of these events. Various aspects of Facebook, such as profiles and groups, enable journalists to tap into and reproduce a type of content that may otherwise be difficult to obtain. How the news media chooses to frame news events and the actors involved is clearly influenced by a range of factors. This study shows that Facebook content and activity can contribute to the way in which stories are told by Australian print journalists. In addition to providing journalists with new sources of information Facebook and other social networking sites also present new challenges for journalists in relation to how they use such information ethically and responsibly.

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