Project Workshop on the State of the News Media in Selected Australian Regions: Conceptual Framework

The advent of the network society and the rapid influx of digital media technologies are redefining the ways individuals and communities obtain information as well as the operations and structures of media organisations. The American Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently released a report entitled *The Information Needs of Communities: The Changing Media Landscape in a Broadband Age* (Waldman, 2011). The report details that while the current media landscape offers an abundance of communicative possibilities, this is coupled with a decline in local investigative and accountability journalism. This decline is partially due to the impact of digital technologies as well as changing business models. As a result, the watchdog role of local news media outlets is undermined and communities are often deprived of receiving vital information, a gap that digital technologies are yet to fill (Waldman, 2011). However, this report examines each media format independently, overlooking the interrelationship between various media both for journalistic practices and the subsequent impact on how communities use multiple means to become informed. It also focuses on what the FCC deems to be ‘typical communities’ (Waldman, 2011), neglecting the myriad of ways that community formation occurs in the digital age.

The concept of ‘community’ is strongly contested (see Bauman, 2001) and rarely adequately described (Holmes, 2005). Yet it frames many aspects of everyday life. Traditionally, communities were defined around geographical locations, population centres, divisions of labour and race, or common interests, with no requisite sizing to inclusion (see Bell and Newby, 1974). Anderson’s (1983) *Imagined Communities* highlights the influence of narratives and discourses on the social construction of community. These narratives and discourses run deeply through broadcast media, which facilitate a fixed sharing of events and information. Subsequent ritualised forms of association and representations of shared beliefs provide media publics with a connection to the wider social world (Couldry, 2003; Carey, 1992). In contrast, communities formed through the aid of computer mediated communication are primarily shaped by common interests (Rheingold, 1993). Regardless of form, each understanding of community requires human participation, with social bonds formed through interaction (Dahlgren, 1995; Bell and Newby, 1974). Both the media industry and digital media play substantial roles in facilitating contemporary social interaction and participation.

Recent changes to news media have been attributed to the increasing role and influence of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Such changes include differing and competing news agendas, reductions in circulation and readership figures, decreasing advertising revenue, and shifting production to centralised areas (see, for example, Ewart, 2003; Fenton, 2010; Hess, forthcoming 2013). Journalism is being reconfigured, with broad implications for the relationship between news, public interest and democracy (see Fenton, 2010). ICTs, market economics and government policy undoubtedly effect institutional changes to news media. The economic survival of smaller outlets, for example, is increasingly reliant upon their connection to larger conglomerates where stories can be distributed through national networks and global contexts (Hess, forthcoming 2013), an advantage not held by many localised, independent news media organisations.

However, larger companies are unable to publicise community information and contextual issues when inundated with national and global news flows, and faced with rapid news cycles (Hutchins, 2004). Newer business models for local newspapers have subsequently often emphasised ‘hyper-local’ news by focusing their reporting on the information relevant to smaller communities, which is overlooked by larger corporations (Glaser, 2010; see also Hess, forthcoming 2013). Hutchins (2004) highlights that studies of news media inaccurately assume that changes to structures, operations and practices produce similar
results in capital cities and regional areas. His empirical examination of two Australian regional newspapers found that the demand for local news and information is persistent, despite the dramatic increase in online opportunities to access news from throughout the country and around the world. Moreover, his interviews with regional newspaper editors and reporters revealed that localism is seen as an advantage for small media outlets, and that ICTs are viewed as aiding the gathering and collating of news and information (from local and wider sources) for readers to access in one place. These observations suggest that local news media will continue to hold a key position in addressing the information needs of communities, both in terms of their responsibility to engage and interpret state, national and global information flows and localise stories for their readers, as well as embedding local issues within wider frameworks (Hutchins, 2004).

In this context, proximity appears to remain an important news value, with continued citizen demand for local news and information. The fourth estate role of local news media is therefore critical to adequately inform citizens. This is particularly important as citizens perceive participation in a democratic society to primarily exist in terms of local involvement (Couldry and Langer, 2005). Geographical places and the issues surrounding them frequently provide the basis for the communication and interaction that form the social bonds of community, whether on or offline (Graham and Aurigi, 1997). Members of a community, however, no longer necessarily occupy particular physical locales, with dispersed audiences able to obtain a sense of place without physical presence (Couldry and Langer, 2005). This means that news media must focus both on geographic location and the broader information flows in which newspapers operate, and offer print and online editions. Hess (forthcoming 2013) deems this ‘geo-social’, a term to acknowledge both newspapers’ connection to geographical areas and the broader social space in which they exist.

Similarly, one of the more significant aspects of community is the relationships between people and social networks (Hess, forthcoming 2013). Local news is a key means through which individuals gather and interpret the information that drives this relationship and community connection (Richards, 2012). In the midst of the current paradigm shift in journalistic practices, it is difficult to determine whether the information needs of communities are significantly changing, and if these needs are being met by local news media. What is evident, however, is that individuals are now provided with new mechanisms to become informed, interact and participate in order to form communal social bonds. This means that online and offline communities are not always separate entities but often exist in an intertwined relationship, partially facilitated by shared information obtained through local news media.

In the networked society (Castells, 2000), it is no longer suitable to characterise communities through their use of distinct media formats or geographical location alone. Instead, there is a need to investigate and evaluate how the interplay between ICTs and offline media shape community formation and individuals’ perspectives, experiences and understandings. Moreover, as media structures, operations, and the influential role of journalism (Schudson, 2000) in informing communities are being redefined in the digital age, examination of changing news media practices is required to evaluate their continuing contributions to communities’ information needs.

The pervasiveness of digital technologies impacts the production, distribution and reception of news. Regional news media are increasingly facing pressures from the changes that ICTs bring to political and economic powers as well as social and cultural activities. Social media tools like Twitter and Facebook, for example, have had a considerable effect on the way businesses, including the news media, operate. There is, therefore, an ongoing need to examine the impact of digital technologies on local news media production and consumption practices. Key questions to be considered include whether the information needs of communities are being met, and how local news media contribute to understandings of local places, the wider world, and the interactions that occur in between.
References


